

National Identities and Empathy

By Fanny Yayi Bondje

I think one of the biggest challenges of being in Buenos Aires, Argentina these last couple of months has been in terms of politics regarding race and identity. Not only having to witness the differences in terms of those three categories, but having to live through it as a Black woman. You can't talk about race without interjecting politics and identity, especially as there are policies in place that target certain groups of people. But what has been really unique to see has been the discussion on identity – who is 'Argentine'. Since the early 20th century, Argentina has associated itself with a strong white identity, clear in the large scale European immigration and its neglect of the Indigenous and afro population at the time. There was a clear idea of what they wanted society to look like and it did not involve either of those groups. "The view is that the Afro-Argentine population disappeared by the twentieth century, the result of Argentina's nineteenth-century wars and the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1871" (Cottrol, 140). On top of the push to physically "clean" the society, there was also a huge attempt to erase the influence of Afro-Argentine in the country's history. Tango, a dance that is recognized as part of the country's culture, has African roots in the dance and music itself that is often whitened out. Argentina's first president, Bernardino Rivadavia, was an afro descendent but one would never know by the images portrayed of him. I have lost count of the amount of times I've been asked if I was Brazilian, as if there was no possible way for me to be Argentine. The country's history is still following itself today, especially as Senegalese people and immigrants from surrounding countries are constantly discriminated against, with the help of the last president's policies.

In terms of empathy, there's a clear absence of it in politics. People choosing only what will benefit them but disregarding humanity. I had a conversation with a navy officer I met outside the Buenos Aires museum of immigration on the country's current state. When I asked him his thoughts on the current president, Alberto Fernandez, and his stance on immigration, the officer started off with "you're not going to like what I am about to say". He talked about the tax increase and when he mentioned immigrants the first thing he brought up was violence. Choosing to see people with a history, culture, and family only through violence, completely disregarding their existence as human beings. Empathy challenges us to see people for who they

are – people. Regardless of their race or identity, politics should be about something bigger than the individual. "But I think what comes down to it is also power. By creating a world with different class citizens, we have been able to place ourselves above another person or group of people. However, true empathy seeks for equality, through humility, and pushes us to not depend on power and hierarchy to thrive and survive." One more thing, there's a lack of empathy in education and the history taught to kids. The narratives we choose to share stick with people and their perspective on the world around them. I wonder if more Argentines had been taught about their first president's family and other Afro Argentine descendants if people today would be able to empathize differently.