WHO IS POPULAR IN POPULAR CULTURE?
A QUALITATIVE STUDY ABOUT CHILDREN, TELEVISION, AND RACE IN ARGENTINA

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DISSERTATION
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Communications in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2020

Urbana, Illinois

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ABSTRACT

The following is a theoretical, qualitative study on children’s interpretations of representations of race in television based on my role as participant observant. Specifically, in this analysis I explore children’s perspectives on the lack of heterogeneity in television programs in Argentina as of today, as well as the possible consequences that this homogeneity brings as a result. When looking at how children interact with popular culture, it is my argument that the normative power of these representations –while very much present in the children’s accounts of who belongs in television and why– is actively challenged when the narrative turns from “them” (other children) to “me”.

At the same time that I study the interaction between children, popular culture, and race, I am very much aware of how children’s lives can never be fully divorced from the inevitable relations they share with adults. In this dissertation, thus, the power dynamics between children and the different adults with which they interrelate are deeply investigated. Moreover, my own position as researcher and the resulting negotiations between both the children and the adults present in my study are as much a part of the focus of this dissertation as the topic of children’s perceptions regarding issues of racial hierarchies and dynamics.

This study is based on a regular series of observations conducted during the course of four months in an elementary school in Buenos Aires, Argentina, from April to July of 2009. These observations are complemented by two workshops carried out with the class during two different mornings, as well as by several different visual materials in the form of magazines, online pictures, and text as graphic. These visual aids are all supportive of my claim of a general disregard for racial diversity in television in Argentina, especially –and, most importantly– in
locally produced content. The high rate of success of locally produced shows, even when competing with equally successful imported programs, speaks of the importance of analyzing the local content in all its complexity.

The biggest contribution this work makes is twofold. First, it explores how children’s constructions of a narrative regarding who is allowed to have a role in television and why are very much tied in with the normative racial discourses that these shows are perpetuating. However, when the focus to the question of who could participate in television shifts from “others” to “me”, this study unmarks and brings to the forefront a change in perceptions that points towards a series of tensions very much embedded in the specific ways in which children re-interpret popular culture representations.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It would be unfair to start this section without recognizing that, first and foremost, this study could not have materialized were it not for the kindness and welcoming nature of the people within the school that acted as my host for four months. It is for obvious reasons that the name cannot appear here, yet you know who you are. Everyone, including the principal, the teachers and the children, received me with open arms and trusted me with closed eyes since the very beginning. I shared lunches with the children and coffees with the teachers. I arrived as a graduate student, and I left as a friend. I miss you all.

I would never have made it this far without the mentorship of Dr. Daniel T. Cook. Against all pieces of advice – very sensible, it seemed- that had been given to me when we first arrived at the US, I went ahead and knocked on his door to ask for help, freshly arrived from Argentina and without even being a graduate student yet. A week later, I was working for him. I believe in myself because he believed in me first. Mainly -but not only- for that, thank you.

I feel blessed by the guidance and support that I have always received from my adviser, Dr. Isabel Molina-Guzmán. I don’t think I could have asked for better leadership and supervision, and she deserves the biggest compliment an adviser can get: if the Ph.D. Comics creator had met her, the strip would not exist today.

I have the utmost admiration for Dr. Norman Denzin and Dr. Anne Haas Dyson. I can only aspire to someday achieve the same quality of work that they produce. And yet, it is not just their scholarly success but their kindness, generosity and good humor that I admire the most. While not part of my committee, Dr. Amy Aidman has been an instrumental piece in the path to my degree. Her assistance in focusing and directing my research, as well as her words of
encouragement, have improved my work and have made the research process much more enjoyable.

My life as a graduate student was greatly enriched by all the friends and colleagues I encountered in the way. While I am lucky that they are too many to name individually, Carolina Calviño and Federico Teruel have earned a special mention in this category. With them we shared countless happy times, many fond memories, and a never-ending friendship. They are not just friends anymore, but family. I hope there are many more adventures to come.

This work took years. Many more than it should have, and it was no one’s fault but mine. Life got in the way. It has a habit of doing that. But life didn’t count on Dr. Angharad Valdivia, who is bigger than life itself. She is the reason my doctorate is complete. I can’t properly express my gratitude for her unwavering support.

Finally, I dedicate this work to my dad, Blas, my children, Nicolás and Benjamín, and my brother, Leandro, who have always been, and continue to be, my pillars. To them, I say: let this be proof that continuous effort and a tribe to support you will take you anywhere. Thank you for always believing in me.
- To everyone who has helped me along the way. And to Owen Kulemeka. –
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Situating the Research – Framework and Questions

There is (and there has been, for a long time) a lack of racial representations in Argentine-produced television. The lack of racial diversity in television characters goes beyond adult programming and extends to children shows as well, and this is easily confirmed just by looking at any regular cast of any regular ongoing television show produced in Argentina (for further confirmation see figures at the end of the chapter). Light skin is the norm, and any character that differs racially from the norm carries with it a set of class assumptions that adhere to the stereotypical “dark skin = lower class” axiom. Many children watch television. Many children understand about racial hierarchies at play in the society they belong to. Many children use elements of popular culture to either reinforce or contest these hierarchies, depending on their own perceived role in the racial structures in question. But how? That is the question that my work attempts to provide an explanation for: how do children make sense of the racial hierarchies at play in the Argentine society through the use of elements of popular culture?

Through my research I explore how a group of children from an elementary school in Buenos Aires, Argentina interpret the lack of diversity in racial representations in television today. My work is situated within a critical framework, in which children’s use of normative discourses on race and racial homogeneity present in the media are explored. Moreover, I am interested in those instances during which these normative discourses are challenged and reversed.

I focused my research on the school setting due to the relative easiness of accessing such a space and the possibility it provided of observing a big group of children regularly and
systematically. The power relations and dynamics present in such a space, as well as my own negotiations with children and adults present at the school, are as integral to this analysis as any interactions between children and elements of popular culture I was able to detect. The nature of a classroom allowed me as a researcher to be a participant in the regularity of the same group of children’s interactions for long periods of time, which would have been impossible to achieve had I chosen to participate as an observant in their home settings, not to mention the difficulty of gaining access to the living conditions of children (and adults) that may have felt reluctant to open their doors to such an intimate setting. Any interaction between children and the adults in their lives (except for the teachers) is absent from my research, not for lack of interest but because these interactions were not readily available to be directly observed in the classroom. Only when children were willing to give oral accounts of their exchanges with the adults present in their lives were these instances made available.

My interest in conducting such a study lied, mainly, in the need to understand the conflicting and problematic nature of the dynamics between children’s perceptions of race and the racial representations found in popular culture, since any challenges to the homogeneity of racial representations are hardly ever present in Argentina, particularly from people with light skin, and media characterizations of race do nothing to defy any notions of racial homogeneity.

The interactions between children, media, and popular culture are essentially important to understand since popular texts and the conflicting discourses around them contribute to children’s growing understanding of themselves as gendered, racialized, socially connected members of a network of linked communities, and to their emerging perception of their own position and potential empowerment within a changing global public sphere (Kinder, 1999). Keeping in mind that, as D. Cook explains, children’s consumption—of popular culture, in this
case- cannot fruitfully be engaged with as an either/or proposition and that it has to be recognized that both commercially imposed meaning and personal identity creation blend together at the level of practice (Cook, 2004), this work is an attempt at explaining how both of those processes are interrelated in the world of popular culture and its intersection with race, as seen by a group of 3rd grade children from Buenos Aires, Argentina.

With this work I attempt to answer the following questions: How are racial hierarchies in Argentina today perceived by these children? More importantly, what is the role of popular culture in mediating this interpretation? Finally, how are normative discourses present in television actually challenged and reinterpreted by children? When, and under what conditions?

Since children from different social classes switch on the television to watch the same program yet do not necessarily interpret the same message with uniformity and conformity, I am also interested in the similarities and commonalities that can be perceived in children of different backgrounds and their interaction with media contents (Morduchowicz, R. 2002). As such, my work challenges established research on “mainstreaming”, a concept rooted in cultivation theory which is explained as the process by which television cultivates homogeneity among otherwise divergent groups (Bryant, J. 2009; Morgan, M. 2009; Gerbner, G. 1994).

Children’s perceptions of existing representations in popular culture today, among other elements, inform their knowledge of the world. While these representations exist across all areas of mediated spaces, television in particular is, by far, the most popular media in Argentina with the majority of the population (calculated at about 75%)\(^1\) having access to cable. Berry and Mitchell-Kernan offer their view on the interaction between media and socialization, stating that “in a society that relies increasingly on mass media for communicating, television has assumed

\(^1\) http://www.ibope.com.ar/faq/tygba.htm#13
increasing importance in the transmission of meaning, ideas, information and values and its impact on the socialization process cannot be ignored”(Berry & Mitchell-Kernan, 1982).

As opposed to adhering to the cultivation theories perspective, my work is situated within a critical and cultural framework which focuses on the analysis, interpretation, and criticism of cultural artifacts as well as on how these texts help us shape, understand, interpret and, sometimes, contest both our image of the world and of our place in it (Kellner, D. 2010). Cultivation theories acknowledge that the term cultivation does not equal the term “effects”, nor does it represent a one-way, monolithic process but, rather, assumes an interaction between television and its audiences in which social, personal, and cultural contexts are part of this interaction. However, they still emphasize the social aspect of media interaction at the level of the individual. Studies based on this perspective, for the most part, consist of an initial quantitative measurement of content analysis (survey), followed by a questionnaire attempting to measure variables such as beliefs, opinions, attitudes, or behaviors. What these studies lack, thus, is a step that, instead of measuring “exposure” and its “effects” on different audiences, looks at how these individual respondents interpret the media content available to them. My own work is an attempt at such a task. To this extent, how a specific mediatic text is used, interpreted, or functions needs to be studied as inextricably connected to children’s need to make sense of the world.

The cultivation perspective, within the theory of media effects, explains television in terms of how it provides a continual repetition of patterns –myths, ideologies, “facts”, relationships, etc. – that possess a social function, helping define the world around us and legitimizing the existing social order (Gerbner, G. 1994). The basic hypothesis guiding cultivation analysis is that the more time one spends watching television (that is, the more
television dominates one’s sources of information, entertainment and consciousness), the more likely one is to hold conceptions of reality that are congruent with television’s most recurrent portrayals of life and society (Gerbner, G. 2002).

By investigating the instances in which popular culture is consumed, recreated, and challenged we can begin to understand the role they play in children’s interpretation and re-interpretation of media content, and the tensions present within this process. I believe it is particularly relevant to pay special attention to these interactions in the context of Argentina given the unique constructions of race and racial hierarchies at play in this country, which have both similarities and differences from the racial constructions and formations within the USA.

In Argentina, there is a particular racial context that differs from the one at play in the US. According to the last census figure, 97% of the population in Argentina self-identifies as white; however, there certainly exists a hierarchy of race in which darker skinned people are read in a particular way. Given the history of Argentina and its colonization, there is a phenotypical diversity within the spectrum of skin color that carries with it the remnants of the country’s original racial structure, previous to the racial erasure that aimed at “cleansing” Argentina from natives and Africans. Aníbal Quijano analyzes, in several of his works, the historical development of “social classification” and the power relations involved in that process (Quijano, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2014) and claims that “with the formation of América a new mental category is established, the idea of ‘race’” (Quijano, 2014).

As a result of this historical process, people with darker skin are assumed to be of lower class, less educated, etc, much like what happens in the US with certain minority groups. However, what makes this situation different is that in Argentina there are no “official” ethnic categories in which to place Argentine citizens, unless they self-identify as belonging to a
specific native population (see Census figures at the end of the chapter). As of 2001, the only other existing option available in the census form is to complete the country of origin, if different than Argentina.

Race, in Argentina, thus, is –apparently- uniform. Yet, I argue that what Emanuela Guano explains in “A Color for the Modern Nation” as the double dichotomy at play in the 19th century in Argentina –the porteños/European vs. the mestizo population, the peons, the indígenas- (Guano, 2003) is still taking place today, although in a much more covert way. I argue that this process is covert precisely because nowhere in the racial discourses perpetuated in Argentina (by the media, the government, and the general population) is this racial hierarchy explicitly acknowledged.

In Argentina, the grand narrative about the lack of racism is grounded, essentially, in the fact that Argentina has always welcomed -in fact, it has very much stimulated- immigration. For more than 70 years, 60% of the population in Capital Federal and almost 30% in the provinces of Buenos Aires, Córdoba and Santa Fe, were immigrants. How can –the discourse goes– a nation composed primarily of immigrants be racist? The answer lies in the fact that the racism at play in Argentina is not directed towards immigrants, since they are, for the most part, the White European Immigrants that helped civilize the nation. Racism in Argentina, on the contrary, is directed towards those with darker skin, the remaining survivors of the natives, those who were perceived as ignorant, low-class, and in need of civilizing. Racism in Argentina, then, is not equal to xenophobia. On the contrary, it is directed towards the people that carry a phenotypical resemblance with the natives and African immigrants that were considered “uncivilized” by the Spanish colonizers, and even by some of Argentina’s “founding fathers”.

In order to understand the contemporary – and “unofficial” - racial structure at play in Argentina, it is important to look back at the history of the colonization of this country. Explaining a portion of Argentina’s history related to the formation of racial and class divisions, Emanuela Guano argues:

“Between 1871 and 1914, 5.9 million immigrants — mostly Italians, but also Spaniards, Ottomans, French, and Portuguese — flooded Argentina. About 3.1 million of them became permanent residents (Rock 1985:141). Prior to this immigration, Argentine society had been formed by a white Creole Spanish elite and a nonwhite (Indian, mestizo, African Argentine) lower class. As a result of the demographic shift and the budding capitalist economy, in Buenos Aires a rising middle class of European origin filled the gap between the Spanish elite and the nonwhite lower classes (Rock 1985; Germani 1964).

What this meant and still means for the contemporary racial construction of identities — or, more importantly, the racial perceptions - of the Argentine population is that, according to the new forming social structure, “whiteness and membership in the urban middle class tacitly establish(ed) who has the right to speak for the Argentine nation” (Guano, 2003). As Guano states, “The middle-class pride for Buenos Aires’ mythic Europeanness is sustained through a tangle of social and cultural representations (i.e., the presence of the largest and whitest middle class in Latin America and a widespread “European” taste for high culture) laced with a discourse on the racial qualities that are essential to both the desire to learn and the determination to succeed.” (Guano, 2003). And television, I argue, plays a fundamental part in this dynamic. In other words, the wide-spread existence of mainly “white” characters in television and popular culture is essentially important to understand as a factor that plays an
integral part in how children interpret the racial structures at play in the media—particularly, in television—and how these representations inform their perceptions of the world around them.

This lack of diversity is made even more salient by the fact that it only extends to the broad range of phenotypical variety present in the Argentine society. It does not, however, extend to the array of social classes/socio economic statuses that Argentina’s population can be divided into. Characters involved and participating in different jobs, activities and backgrounds are, in fact, almost invariably represented in the media. In shows made with a younger audience in mind, however, the specificities of adult characters are in most cases left purposefully undetermined. Social class differences are present in television, and yet they are hardly ever accompanied by racial differences such as the ones that take place in everyday life. In the very few cases in which racial diversity is present, furthermore, it is almost invariably enacted by a male character.

I want to make clear that I am not arguing that all lower-class children and adults belong to a certain, phenotypically distinguishable—darker skinned, racial category. I do believe, however, that representations of darker skinned children in Argentina are, almost without failure, read as entangled in a web of assumptions that include ideas of lower class, lack of proper education, and a certain location within the hierarchical social structure. Since cognition can act as an equalizer and can blind researchers to real structural inequalities (such as institutional racism) that television has never—or rarely—challenged (Hendershot, 1999), it becomes significant to understand and, moreover, challenge these inequalities, as well as the role of the media in children’s interpretations of such unbalanced representations.

I agree, thus, with Marie Messenger Davies’ explanation that the issue is not whether or not children are unjustly denied access to representations of working-class life. The issue is the
presumed power of broadcasting to normalize certain kinds of cultural values and standards and to ‘make’ working-class children (or other groups, such as ethnic minorities, or girls) feel marginalized and excluded from the mainstream of society (Davies, 2001). I argue that, in the context of Argentine television, it is not a lack of representation of working-class life that is absent, since it seems that most of the programs targeting children do present them with the binary high class-low class (as could be seen in “Chiquititas”, “Cebollitas” and “Floricienta” in the past, and can be seen in “Patito Feo” today) but, rather, that the lack of racial heterogeneity in the characters portrayed helps perpetuate the notion of Argentina as “European”, involving racial and class assumptions as to what “European” means. Namely, belonging to the sectors of society considered to be “educated” and belonging to a “high class”, among other characteristics of the same tenor.

Emanuela Guano seems to be the only argentine scholar that analyzes race in Argentina in a way that resonates with my own perspectives. She does not, however, extend her argument to include the participation of media in the reproduction and perpetuation of the existing racial discourses, social ideologies, and hierarchies. On the other hand, Roxana Morduchowicz, an argentine scholar who explores children’s uses of media and popular culture, does not include race in her arguments as a relevant factor that influences children’s interpretations. My research, then, is an attempt to bring these two analyses together and bridge the existing gap between how children’s perspectives on media are explored and how racial hierarchies in Argentina are talked about and distinguished.

One of the practices through which children participate in the process of socialization is by their interaction with media. By socialization I am referring to the interactive processes by which we learn and adapt to the ways of a given society or social group, so as to be adequately and
actively involved in it (Handel, G., Cahill, S. E. and Elkin, F., 2007). When children interact with media they learn about existing representations of race, class, gender, and the interaction between them. As various authors recognize, popular images appeal to children by featuring dominant desires and pleasures about issues such as power, wealth, and beauty, intersecting with other social constructions such as race, age, gender, and class (Buckingham, 1993; Dyson, 1997; Dyson, 2003; Fisherkeller, 2002). Children, however, will not just incorporate this input without further processing it, but will interpret it and transform it based on their own experiences, past and present.

For some years now, there have been very few options in Argentina of locally produced TV shows directly targeted to children. However, the very few available options have been wildly successful among, mainly, elementary school girls. *Cebollitas*, *Chiquititas*, *Floricienta*, and *Patito Feo* are some of the titles of TV shows following these premises. In this work, I explore this popular culture format, its apparent gendered reaction, and one of its probable causes for success: the fact that most of these shows follow the format of *telenovelas* -open ended, weekly transmissions, and containing several different concurrent story threads, among other characteristics-. In other words, considering how children in Argentina are mostly exposed to a homogeneous set of characters in today’s television shows –in which representations of racial minorities and/or racial diversity, both for adult characters and for children characters, are lacking- I analyze how these children reconcile this reality with their everyday lives, when these contrasting perceptions might be conflictive and in tension with each other.

Any media is a space, among others, where race is performed. By this I mean that in any media content and space -be it theatre, cinema, television, print media, online media, etc- we will find representations and performances of race that communicate, sometimes in a more overt way
and sometimes more subtly, certain hierarchies and politics behind it. Sotiropoulos explains how many African American performers at the beginning of the 20th century were able to use that space, and the characters they would give form to, as a site of contestation and challenge to the existing racial stereotypes (Sotiropoulos, 2006). In today’s television, however, the characters are developed not by actors themselves but by someone else (writers, directors) in charge of deciding how each performance should be conducted, thus leaving the performers without much agency to move outside these parameters. The process of producing a television program, thus, makes it much more constrained and limited for actors to challenge predominant notions of how race should be interpreted. If a certain actor/actress does not follow the guidelines that were specified for his/her specific character, the scene will be shot again or the character will be written off the show. The kinds of TV shows I have been describing, then, do not offer, I argue, a site for resistance for actresses/actors. The text and/or characters themselves may not necessarily challenge the dominant racial portrayals. That, however, does not mean that children themselves will not appropriate that content and transform it so as to make it so. To study and understand the extent of this transformation and the processes behind it is, in fact, the purpose of my research.

In order to connect these ideas, certain questions guide my argument: How do children first learn about the concept of ‘race’? How is this concept, for them, related to the idea of ‘difference’ (Other)? How—or if—do these issues intersect with notions of class and gender? And, more importantly, how does all of this relate to their interaction with media? More

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3 As an example, see actor Harold Perrineau’s (who plays Mike in the TV series “Lost”) complaint regarding his character’s storyline in the series: http://blog.seattlepi.nwsoure.com/spi/archives/140107.asp. Or, more recently, the controversy regarding Brooke Smith’s character (Dr. Erica Hahn in Grey’s Anatomy), who played a gay doctor and was recently fired by the network (ABC).
specifically, what is the role of media in children’s interpretation of the social world around them?

In Argentina, research on children and media, and on media education, has often ignored social differences. Thus, even when a few studies on how children from low-income families make use of and receive media contents exist, such studies remain rare (Morduchowicz, 2001). There is also, as explained before, a definite homogeneity and lack of racial diversity that can be observed in the characters from locally produced TV programs. Since domestic programs actively compete with foreign productions within popular genres, including variety shows (“Showmatch”), sitcoms and telenovelas (“Sos mi vida”, “Por amor a vos”, “Los exitosos Pell$”), sport programs (“Futbol de Primera”) and children’s programs, this lack of racial/ethnic diversity perpetuates and supports national discourses and beliefs regarding Argentina’s apparent Europeanness.

It is estimated that about 75% of the population in Argentina has access to cable⁴, which means that children do watch globally recognized TV shows (“Hanna Montana”, “Wizards of Waverly Place”, “Ben 10” and “Icarly” being one of the most salient examples). However, added to the imported tv content available, there has always existed a variety of locally produced children’s shows that have been widely successful, enough so as to compete with other equally successful imported programs. I can trace this practice as far back as my own childhood, from which I remember regularly watching not only globally distributed shows such as “Get Smart” and “The A Team” and cartoons such as “Speedracer” and “Tom and Jerry” but also locally produced shows such as “Señorita Maestra”, “Pelito” and “Clave de Sol”, among others. These kinds of shows are still produced today, following much the same format. I am referring to the

format of telenovelas, with an overall story-arc, concurring story threads, portraits of lower-class vs. upper-class characters, etc. Also, these types of shows provide a fascinating opportunity to understand children’s perceptions of the interaction of race, class, and gender. In the words of Geertz, ethnographers try to analyze or make sense of the ‘structures of signification’ which inform people’s actions (Geertz, 1983). It is these ‘structures of signification’ as interpreted by children in their interaction with media that rest at the core of my research.

While I am framing my research within Argentina, I will focus specifically on the case of one group of children belonging to an elementary class in a school in Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina. Such a distinction is fundamentally important, since Argentina has been historically divided between Buenos Aires –as the metropolis with all the possibilities, best jobs, cultural options, etc. – and the rest of the country. As of 2001, Argentina’s population was calculated as 36,260,130. Of this total, 10,247,695 were people between the ages of 0 to 14. And more than half of this last figure belonged to residents of the province of Buenos Aires. It is important to remember, then, that certainly the experiences of children living in Buenos Aires would have to be contrasted with the experiences of children living in the interior of the country in order to establish their similarities and differences.

A Brief History of Television and Popular Culture in Argentina

The local, the global and the glocal

Argentine television started its transmission at the beginning of the 1950’s, when the owners of one of the largest radio stations in Buenos Aires, Radio Belgrano, were authorized to start transmitting on Channel 7, now the only remaining state-owned television channel. As of
2010, Argentina has five open (or air-broadcasted) television channels. During the military dictatorship (1976-1983) all five of these channels were state-owned; however, since democracy returned in 1984, four of these channels have gradually become privatized, with only one remaining public.

From its inception until 1968, when the devaluation of the local currency made it extremely difficult to import new programs, Argentine television was largely composed by foreign –mainly USA-imported- material. Due to the inability to keep importing foreign programs because of the associated cost, from 1968 to 1972 Argentina became largely self-sufficient in terms of its programming. In 1973, and as a result of a series of economic measures taken by the new government, a new period of massive imports started. Such a period continues to this day. In this chapter I argue, however, that continuing the trend that started with the above mentioned earlier situation in which Argentina’s programming had to be locally produced, the popularity of these programs became instituted in the argentine society, with the result of locally produced TV shows competing in ratings and being as successful as (if not more than) other imported TV programs. This situation remains stable as of today.

In the arena of popular culture, Argentina is well known for the transnational flow of its products. Not only does Argentine television broadcast imported shows and/or formats but, more importantly, it has become a valuable source of locally produced shows and/or formats itself. According to a report published by the Format Recognition and Protection Association (FRAPA) in 2009, Argentina has become the fourth biggest exporter of TV formats, behind the UK, the Netherlands and the US. In 1994, Argentina exported the equivalent of 2400 hours of TV programming. In 2010, this number jumped to almost 40000, and approximately 80 countries

5 http://www.frapa.org/?page_id=406&preview=true
are nowadays transmitting content generated in Argentina, especially fiction formats and, more specifically, telenovelas.

The breakthrough for the transnational flow of television formats originated in Argentina first took place in the 90’s, with the export of “Muñeca Brava”, a telenovela that was first sold to the neighboring countries and Eastern Europe and which ended up being sold to more than 80 countries, breaking cultural barriers and being broadcasted in places such as Israel, Greece, Lithuania and Russia, among many others. In 1996, this same process, and its resulting success, repeated itself in the realm of children’s programs, when Telefē –one of the five broadcasting television networks- sold the format of “Chiquititas” to Brazil. Since then, the market for exporting television formats in Argentina has taken a leap of continuous growth.

The transnational dissemination of TV content does not, however, necessarily indicate “a standardization of content”, as argued by S. Waisbord (Waisbord, 2004). While the popularity of certain tv formats results in a definite globalization of contents, the resulting products are not mindlessly reproduced but adapted to the hosting national cultures. Equating this process with the “glocalization” (Robertson, 1992) that McDonald’s uses as an entry strategy when inserting itself in new markets, Waisbord calls the process of imported TV formats being adapted to local cultures “McTV”. Waisbord defines “McTelevision” as “the selling of programming ideas with a track record that are sufficiently flexible to accommodate local cultures to maximize profitability” (Waisbord, 2004), and he expands this concept with the notions that, in McTelevision, formats represent the disconnection between culture, geography, and social spaces. In the transnational flow of TV formats, then, signs of cultural territories are removed, and domestic producers are free to incorporate local cultural elements, as long as these variations do not alter the basic show concept. Locality is, thus, first removed and then reintroduced.
The benefits of importing such contents, Waisbord explains, are both lower costs—since it eliminates some of the highest fixed costs associated with producing such programming—and a certain measure of predictability—since producers can look at past performances in other countries and expect the same level of success. The fact that companies can make additional revenues by increasing the show’s presence with advertising tie-ins (in the form of magazines, sticker albums, candy, etc) is not unimportant, and Argentina has definitely used this strategy to great success in all of the shows mentioned before. As a matter of fact, I was able to observe and make use of materials such as these while conducting my fieldwork. The children in the classroom I interacted with were all quite aware of magazines from “Patito Feo” and “Casi Angeles”, and they awaited eagerly the opportunity to browse any new editions. (See Figures at the end of the chapter for scanned images). Also important is the fact that ratings have consistently demonstrated that audiences prefer domestic and regional content to foreign programs (Waisbord, 2000), which explains the success of the locally produced shows listed in the Figures section.

As for what has constituted the most successful format of Argentine television, since only 10 years after the first televised transmission in Argentina—in 1951—the telenovelas have been a predominant genre, a success that continues up to this day. Originally popularized by Alberto Migré, and given its hugely popular success across a broad spectrum of social classes, it made sense for television producers to replicate this format with a youthful audience in mind. Thus, it is possible to trace the broadcasting of these kinds of TV shows since the beginning of the 1980’s until today. For a list of very successful TV shows following the telenovelas format targeted towards a younger audience, see the Figures section at the end of this chapter.
The unifying elements in all of these programs are several; however, the most important one seems to be the fact that all of them were produced in order to reach the viewership of the younger segment of the population. These shows were intended to be watched by children and, in order to do so, the main characters in all of them were children themselves. Of course, there are always adult characters accompanying the storyline, but the adults’ importance in these programs is always secondary and their stories only relevant in their interaction with the children’s own stories. Waisbord argues that, since metropolitan markets capture the lion’s share of audience ratings and advertising revenues, it is not unusual that telenovelas reflect the local culture of the big cities, where production companies are usually based (Waisbord, 2004).

In the case of “Patito Feo” and several of the other shows listed above, however, there has been an unmistakable attempt to sort this obstacle. “Patito Feo” turned out to be the show that the children in the class were most aware of. Most of the girls would act out its choreographies and songs during recesses, and elements representing different aspects of the show were present in several instances at the class. Pins, stickers, jewelry, clothing, magazines were just a few of the examples that, when present, pointed towards the children’s knowledge of the show. It seems, then, important to give an account of the content of this TV show, as it proved to be the most relevant for the study of the children’s perceptions regarding the intersection of race and popular culture.

The first season of “Patito Feo” starts with a story set in San Carlos de Bariloche, a city in the province of Neuquén, where Patito (the leading character, a teenage girl) is living with her mother. Due to a series of medical studies that cannot be done in Bariloche, Patito moves to Buenos Aires with her mother, where they will eventually learn about the existence of Patito’s missing father. The rest of the story/seasons take place in Buenos Aires. Thus, even when the
majority of the show takes place in Buenos Aires, the audience learns of Patito’s background from the very beginning. For this reason, Patito will be called “provinciana” (country girl) several times in the show, and the adjective appears continuously in different online discussions. Patito’s provincial background, along with her physical features –braces, braids and glasses-frame her as the typical “simple, good-natured but unattractive” girl. In other words, Patito embodies the children’s representation of “Ugly Betty”. In contrast, Antonella –her female counterpart leading character-, is presented as glamorous and successful, with a group of girlfriends/followers always willing to carry on her demands. Patito meets Antonella once she starts going to school in Buenos Aires, and it is obvious from the beginning of their relationship that their rivalry will be central to the show’s storyline.

Patito and Antonella first meet when Patito starts attending a school in Buenos Aires, and their rivalry will result in the formation of two opposing groups: “Las Populares”, led by Patito, and “Las Divinas”, led by Antonella. Predictably, both groups, their leaders and followers are constantly engaging in different competitions, mainly in the form of musical acts, since Antonella is portrayed as a successful teenage singer. Along with the tv show, three music CD’s were produced, and the range of products resulting from the show’s success extend from a full girls’ clothing line, available online in Argentina6, to a line of backpacks and purses, as well as digital cameras, puzzles, hair accessories, girls’ make up, Patito’s hat and glasses, dishes, umbrellas, towels, blankets and pillows, also available online in Spain7-8. In Argentina, all of these promotional elements were available as well, plus many others such as shoes, dolls, 

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computer games, and board games. If one looks at all the merchandising that arose after the broadcasting of the show, its success can hardly be contested.

Morduchowicz states that “television is always educational, because it influences the things children learn, both the content and the way of learning, a process in which rationality and emotion, information and disorganized representation blend” (Morduchowicz, 2002). Following this statement one can deduce that “Patito Feo” and its content, replicated by the children in several instances within the space of the school, is indeed an integral part of the set of elements that inform their world.

When looking at children’s perceptions regarding TV content, there is a pressing need to navigate the universes of singularity and social context. In other words, while children have to be considered as singular subjects, “singularity cannot be understood unless considered with reference to the world in which this singularity is constructed […] (and) although the social context does not (and cannot) directly model or determine a person, it is certainly the universe of meaning from which a person builds his/her own world and perception of reality” (Morduchowicz, 2002). What this means in terms of their interpretation of popular culture and its contents is, then, that when a certain discursive pattern emerges in several of the children’s responses, their singularity as subjects is merging with their racial perceptions as members of a social context. And, I argue, “Patito Feo” is one among several other media contents that influences this intersection. The importance of exploring its contents and how they are re-created and transformed helps us to understand the role of popular culture in the structure of representations that the children create to make sense of their worlds.
I have established earlier the need to understand telenovelas and its contents as one of the discursive texts in which social representations are performed. And since this format and its contents participates in the transnational flow that makes it available to other countries, the racial representations that the content of these shows provides inform not just argentine audiences but global audiences as well about the alleged racial homogeneity that supposedly conforms the argentine society. This perpetuates dominant narratives about our perceived “indian pical”, and further cements the stereotypical image of dark-skinned people as “the Other”.

Rocio Quispe-Agnoli explains how stereotypes influence, albeit problematically, the construction of a national identity. She states:

“Como toda estrategia discursiva, el estereotipo es forzosamente social. Es también una estrategia psíquica, y por lo tanto individual, de la discriminación. Por ejemplo, el yo nacional se construye en confrontación con el otro marginal. El estereotipo intenta fijar ambos sujetos y este es precisamente el problema del estereotipo: da la ilusión de una forma (ideal) de ser y parecer que se presenta fija pero que es justamente lo contrario, ya que las características de todo sujeto real y su identidad cambian a través del tiempo y no se pueden fijar”./ (Quispe-Agnoli, 2009)

As with every discursive strategy, the stereotype is forcibly social. It is also a psychic strategy and, as such, individual, of discrimination. For example, the national “me” is constructed in confrontation with the marginal “Other”. The stereotype tries to fix both subjects and this is precisely the problem of the stereotype: it gives the illusion of a (ideal) form of being and seeming that presents itself as fixed but that it is exactly the
opposite, since the characteristics of every real subject and its identity change with time and cannot be fixed

In the following chapter, I will map out the field of childhood/s studies in order to provide a deeper understanding about how children actually became a valid and recognized area of interest. In this chapter I also explain the theoretical framework that guides my research as well as the advantages I perceive in adhering to this paradigm. I contrast this paradigm with other theoretical frameworks that historically lead the way in childhood/s studies, distinguishing what several authors view as their advantages and disadvantages.

Chapter III is exclusively devoted to a deep analysis regarding the role of the researcher in conducting research with children, its theoretical and ethical considerations. In this chapter I explore issues of power and negotiations between children and adults, children’s agency in the school setting, and issues of validity and reflexivity. Due to the particularities of conducting research with children, in this chapter I attempt to give a glimpse of the situations I encountered that were specific to this kind of research.

In Chapter IV I explore how race is perceived by the children in my study, and how popular culture contributes to the normalization of existing racial perceptions and its participation in the process that places race at the intersection with class assumptions. In this chapter I look at several instances in which the use of race as a privilege/an insult support the claim that there is, in fact, a racial hierarchy at play, and I also investigate the role of popular culture in this ingrained social discourse. Here, I will analyze how racial representations in television content are interpreted by the children, and in which cases certain stereotypes arise that indicate the existence of a racial hierarchy.
Finally, in Chapter V I look at instances in which children overtly challenge the racial hierarchies explained in the previous chapter. Specifically, I analyze the process by which they make use of popular culture, recreating it as a mean to act out this challenge. Thus, I explain how even when popular culture is indeed embedded in a narrative of racial homogeneity, the children in my study defy these notions through their own interpretations of popular culture and its contents.
**FIGURES**

*Fig. 1.1 – Question Nr. 2 on the 2001 Census*

Is there any person in this house that self-identifies as a descendant or belonging to an indigenous population?

Yes → To which population? (See options in image above).

*Fig. 1.2 – Questions Nr. 5 and 6 on the 2010 Census*

1. Is any person in this house indigenous or descendant of indigenous populations (originary or aborigins)?

   Yes → Indicate the nr. Of persons

   Indicate what population

2. Are you or any other person in this house afro-descendant, or do you have any ancestors of afro-descendant or African origin (father, mother, grandparents, great-grandparents)?

   Yes → Indicate the nr. Of persons
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the show</th>
<th>Years running on TV:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pelito</td>
<td>1982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Señorita Maestra</td>
<td>1983-1985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clave de Sol</td>
<td>1987-1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Banda del Golden Rocket</td>
<td>1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montaña Rusa</td>
<td>1994-1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chiquititas</td>
<td>1995-2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cebollitas</td>
<td>1997-1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebelde Way</td>
<td>2002-2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floricienta</td>
<td>2004-2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casi Angeles</td>
<td>2007-2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patito Feo</td>
<td>2007-2008</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Fig. 1.3 – List of locally produced TV shows*
Fig. 1.4 – “Pelito” (1982)

Fig. 1.5 – “Señorita Maestra” (1983-1985)
Fig. 1.6 – “Clave de Sol” (1987-1990) -Sticker Album cover-

Fig. 1.7 – “La Banda del Golden Rocket” (1991)
Fig. 1.8 – Montaña Rusa” (1994-1996)

Fig. 1.9 – “Chiquititas” (1995-2001) – Music Album cover-
Fig. 1.10 – “Chiquititas” (1995-2001)

Fig. 1.11 – “Cebollitas” (1997-1998)
Fig. 1.12 – “Rebelde Way” (2002-2003)

Fig. 1.13 – “Floricienta” (2004-2005)
Fig. 1.14 – “Casi Angeles” (2007-2010)

Fig. 1.15 – “Pattito Feo” (2007-2008)
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Mapping the Field of Childhood Studies

Since childhood first started to be considered as an important area of study, there have existed several theoretical perspectives on this field of study. All of these approaches and perspectives have contributed in the conceptualization of childhood as a research arena unto itself, although the assumptions and theoretical frameworks guiding each of these methodologies may differ greatly, resulting in very dissimilar points of view on what are the main aspects that need to be explored when studying children and childhoods. My own work is situated within the tenets proposed by the paradigm within childhood studies sometimes called the sociology of childhood (Boden, 2006; Christensen & James, 2000a; Christensen & James, 2000b; Corsaro, 1997; Handel, G., Cahill, S. E. and Elkin, F., 2007; James & Prout, 1997; Qvortrup, 1991; Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta, & Wintersberger, 1994; Qvortrup, 2000; Woodhead & Faulkner, 1999).

It is this paradigm within childhood studies the one, I argue, which presents a new approach as to how children and childhoods need to be analyzed, based on the shortcomings of previously existing frameworks. The explanation as to how this new perspective differs from these other historically dominant frameworks in the study of children will be found across each of the accounts of the previously dominant frameworks in the study of children and childhood. In this way, I am attempting to show how we can benefit from using this approach, while explaining these other perspectives, their weaknesses, and strengths. The following section maps out how most approaches to the study of childhood have been historically described and analyzed, while giving an account of the frameworks that have guided the field of childhood studies the most.
Gittins explains that most approaches to studying the history of childhood generally fall into three categories: 1) The study of the changing material conditions of families and/or households through time, focusing on socioeconomic situations, 2) the attempt by psycho-historians to reconstruct and understand emotional and psychological changes in childrearing and the experiences of childhood in the past and 3) the study or description of legal and political changes in governmental attitudes to childhood, childrearing, and children by those interested in the history of social policy (Gittins, 2004).

As opposed to the socio-cultural perspectives, which focus on childhoods as a socially constructed component within specific cultures, sensitive to the specificities of both individual differences as well as socio-cultural differences and to historical and structural politics at play, developmental psychology, which has historically been the framework that has guided most of the studies on children and childhood, used to erase these particularities, focusing on the child as following universal developmental parameters, and viewing childhood as a linear process with specific stages that every child has to go through unequivocally in order to reach a certain level of cognitive competence.

While this perspective, which has been predominant in the study of childhood since its inceptions as a legitimate field of study, has lately started to recognize the presence of specific social factors that intersect with any child’s experiences, it originally equaled being a minor (a child) with immaturity, incomplete cognitive development, incompetence, lack of responsibility, etc. The status of adult, in contrast, was equaled to being competent, mature, responsible, etc. It also linked development with notions of ‘rationality’, ‘naturalness’, and ‘universality’ (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). The new paradigm sometimes called sociology of childhood, however, recognizes that age in itself is a biological, not a social, variable, and that it is insufficient to
characterize childhood just as race is inadequate in itself for characterizing a racial group’s social being, or just as sex cannot explain the social differences between women and men (Qvortrup, 1987).

In developmental psychology, the notion of ‘child’ defined not just physiological immaturity but also dependency, powerlessness, and inferiority. It concerned an embodied individual defined as non-adult (Gittins, 2004). However, under the new paradigm in childhood studies both childhood and adulthood are considered structural elements in an interactive relation (Qvortrup et al., 1994), and childhood is to be understood as a social construct, a social status delineated by boundaries that vary through time and from society to society, but which is incorporated within the social structure and manifested and formative of certain forms of conduct. Childhood, thus, always relates to a particular cultural setting (Jenks, 2005). According to this new paradigm, childhood is not a natural phenomenon and cannot be understood as such. The social transformation from child to adult does not follow directly from physical growth, and the recognition of children by adults –and vice versa- is not contingent upon physical difference (Jenks, 1996).

Also, from a child development point of view, childhood is a transitional phase, with the purpose of integrating the child into society. In the new paradigm in childhood studies, however, children already belong to society in the sense that they do, in fact, participate in organized activities, and childhood constitutes a part of the social structure interacting with other parts. Moreover, not only are children’s activities constructive, but they are also used instrumentally by adults. Thus, children are no less an active part of society and no less influenced by major societal events and developments than other persons or groups. Childhood is integrated into society (Qvortrup, 1991).
Finally, the ‘child’ in developmental psychology was characterized as 1. *Context-free:* Children were conceptualized as though having an existence that could be divorced from the context in which they live. They were assumed to function at a mainly individual level, with abilities and behaviors that were isolable from the social world in which they lived. 2. *Predictable:* Childhood was considered a phenomenon already known to adults, and children were seen as behaving and developing within predictable age parameters and seen as progressing naturally in a linear fashion; and 3. *Irrelevant:* Children were perceived as having less to offer to research – even about children themselves – than adults (Hogan, 2005). According to this perspective as it was shaped in its origins, children were unformed persons, passive and dependent, whose agency was viewed as being located not internally but externally. They were unreliable informants, unequipped for the task of describing themselves until approaching adulthood, when they can offer an adult-like perspective in adult language.

While developmental psychology has been the predominant framework in the field of childhood studies, postmodernism is critical of claims of truth. This means that the idea of a grand theory that poses an explanation for how society functions – in this case, children and childhood as a universal phenomenon – is treated with skepticism. As a result, other theoretical frameworks, based not on a psychological but on a socio-cultural approach, have been used and are still used to study this field (Boocock & Scott, 2005). Some of these frameworks have not necessarily been developed with the specific intention of applying them to study children and childhood/s, but they have all been, to different extents, used as such. It does not mean, however, that there aren’t overlaps between these perspectives, or that we can establish which one is “better”.

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Within these socio-cultural approaches that arose as an alternative—and a critique—to developmental psychology, the Functionalist Perspective was the dominant perspective during much of the 20th century. In this approach, societies and social groups are analyzed as systems of interrelated parts that are assumed to work together with a certain degree of internal consistency or cohesion, and with the goal of reaching social order, stability, and equilibrium. This perspective, with its most prominent theorists being H. Spencer, T. Parsons and R. Merton (Merton, 1957; Parsons, 1965; Spencer, 1895), attempts to identify the contributions and/or functions made by its component parts—social institutions such as school, family, etc.—to the operation of the total social system. To this extent, it considers that one of the major mechanisms functioning to maintain and reproduce order in societies is socialization, which has been variously defined, stressing either the individual learner, the process, or the social apparatus that shapes the process. The critiques to this perspective are based on its inability to explain why individuals would actively choose to reject existing norms, and on its inability to explain why and under what circumstances individuals choose to exercise their agency. If we relate this perspective to media reception and interpretation, it has the value of focusing on a collaborative view of the reception of media content. However, it does not acknowledge the possibility that these contents may be interpreted and transformed differently by different groups, sometimes even coming to opposite readings of the same text or narrative.

Another prominent socio-cultural perspective that is created in contrast to functionalism is the Conflict Perspective. This perspective is critical of functionalism on the grounds that it gives insufficient attention to the social forces that precipitate social change. According to this perspective, social institutions are basically inequitable; thus, conflict is endemic to any society and needs to be studied as such. This approach, then, does recognize the differences and social
class inequalities present in all societies although, once again, it fails to see children as having the necessary power and agency to resist, undermine, or circumvent adult authority. This framework can be critiqued and contrasted to the new paradigm in childhood studies, then, not only because of its inability to distinguish children as a social group with the sufficient power to act as agents in social change but, also, because of its inability to acknowledge that conflict can also arise within and between groups of children themselves.

The *Interactionist Perspective* is yet another socio-cultural framework that arises as an attempt to explain social interactions and that has been used to analyze children and childhood, and is rooted in the symbolic interaction theory as formulated, mainly, by G.H. Mead (Mead, 1934). This perspective analyzes how people act according to their own interpretations of existing symbol-systems, and it faults functionalism for overemphasizing the influence of social institutions on individual behavior. In this case, the focus is on the process by which individuals create themselves and their social worlds through social interactions with cultural objects and ideas, as well as with other people. Society, then, is the framework within which social action takes place, *not* the determinant of that action. This approach focuses on how we develop a sense of “self” based on our interaction with “others”. While the way in which this perspective is applied has changed over time, this framework was originally criticized for leaning too much on the individual aspect of the process of “socialization”, while failing to acknowledge the role that large societal structures play in this process and in the production of cultural meanings. In other words, it is critiqued due to its micro-level of analysis, which fails to recognize the influence of social structures on individual interactions.

Finally, the *Social Construction Perspective*, which gives rise to the sociology of childhood by proposing a new paradigm for the study of children and childhoods, incorporates
the following principles, laid out by Prout & James (James & Prout, 1997): 1. Childhood, as distinct from biological immaturity, is neither a natural or universal feature, but appears as a specific structural and cultural component of societies. 2. Children’s social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspectives and concerns of adults. 3. Childhood is a variable of analysis that cannot be divorced from other variables, such as race, class, and gender. 4. Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them, and the societies in which they live. They are not just passive subjects of social structures and processes. 5. To proclaim a new paradigm of childhood sociology is also to engage in and respond to the process of reconstructing childhood in society. Within this approach we can situate Vygotsky’s idea of the ‘collaborative child’, who accesses knowledge through a socially constructed collaborative activity between individuals (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, the idea of children as social actors emerges.

This last perspective can be considered as the main proponent of the new paradigm sometimes called “the sociology of childhood”, in which my own work is based upon. This approach, whose tenets are shared by numerous authors/researchers of children and childhoods and which is considered as a field in its own right because it both examines a wider range of children’s experiences and it challenges conventional roles of children in society –and in social science research–(Boocock & Scott, 2005), distinguishes itself from all the frameworks described above for a variety of reasons. The key arguments supporting this new, distinctive approach, in addition to the ones explained above, are based in the recognition of childhood as a social construction. It means, moreover, being aware of the fact that there is no single or universal experience of childhood, and that changing perceptions of children and childhood over time and
space affect children’s social status and the way they are treated. It also means acknowledging that, although childhood occurs in all societies, children are differentiated on a number of social characteristics that shape their childhood experiences and opportunities (Boocock & Scott, 2005). The conceptual pitfalls that childhood researchers face when navigating existing notions of ‘child’, ‘childhood’, ‘development’, and ‘family’ are related, then, with the risk of accepting this notion as ‘natural’. By accepting the ‘naturalness’ of these notions, as well as the special nature of ‘childhood’ (Qvortrup, 1987), we risk falling into a reductionist approach that prevents us from recognizing children as active social beings with the ability and willingness to shape their social realities.

When we discuss children’s relation to popular culture, a fundamental part of this analysis needs to be focused on the structural factors (race, class, gender, geographical location, local conditions, and cultural practices) that are an integral part of these children’s lives. If we separate “childhood” – along with the assumptions of what it means to be a ‘good’ child, a ‘normal’ child, etc- from the specificity of children’s experiences, we will find an enormous amount of diversity in their activities, as well as in the essence of their daily social practices. Thus, paraphrasing Boocock and Scott, how can we paint an accurate portrayal of what contemporary children and childhood are, if their experiences can be found within a broad spectrum that ranges from being part of a consumer society to being disabled by lack of food or medical care, from being involved in wars – either as victims or as soldiers, or both- to being part of political movements, from being engaged in criminal activities to being inventors, among hundreds of other possible scenarios? (Boocock & Scott, 2005) We need to acknowledge, then, that there is no single or universal experience of childhood, and that this differs according to each place and point in time. As Anne Haas Dyson explains, these structural factors that intersect
with children’s lives are critical aspects of their sense of, and expression of, self and others (Dyson, 1997).

The perspective sometimes referred to as the sociology of childhood is, then, particularly useful to explore the relationship between children and popular culture, since it examines a wider range of children’s experiences and it challenges conventional roles and assumptions regarding children in society. Popular texts and the conflicting discourses around them contribute to children’s growing understanding of themselves as gendered, racialized, and socially connected members of a network of linked communities (friends, parents, teachers, etc) and to their emerging perception of their own position within a changing public sphere (Kinder, 1999). As an explanation for what popular culture might mean in the context of childhood, I would like to adhere to Mitchell and Reid-Walsh’s idea that although popular culture is usually considered in opposition to high culture, the relationship between them is more complex: that popular culture exists also within or inside high culture. If this complexity is recast into a spatial metaphor, perhaps high culture and popular culture do not exist in two separate spaces, but one inside the other (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002).

Before exploring the particularities of the relationship between children and popular culture specifically, let’s analyze first the general concept of ‘popular culture’. The origin of popular culture as an area of study within the field of Cultural Studies can be traced back to Raymond Williams’ quote: “Culture is ordinary” (Williams, 1958). This quote, and the idea of popular culture as a realm where people exercise human agency, creativity, and will for freedom within a consumer culture meant moving away from the reductive concept of mass culture as a vehicle of false consciousness and from the view of ‘high culture’ as the central, liberatory, form for all classes. With this shift, the focus now is turned on people’s everyday lives, and on how
modern societies create and circulate meanings and values. Culture, thus, helps constitute the structure of history, and contributes in shaping it (Jenkins, McPherson, & Shattuc, 2002).

When talking about popular culture, there are certain assumptions that guide this notion, although the authors that attempt to explain it recognize, above all, the difficulty of providing a round and all-encompassing definition of this concept. Some of these concepts, which are assumed as present and as partly defining the idea of popular culture (Jenkins et al., 2002) will be described next.

Immediacy refers to a characteristic that includes several interrelated notions, which are: intensification, or the exaggeration of everyday emotions with the intention of provoking strong feelings; identification, or the strong attachments to fictional characters or celebrities; and intimacy, or the embedment of popular culture into the fabric of our daily lives, into the ways in which we think about ourselves and the world around us. For Pierre Bourdieu, immediacy distinguishes the popular from the bourgeois aesthetic (Bourdieu, 1984). In the case of popular culture and children, there are several examples of mediatic texts in which this characteristic is easy to distinguish when looking at children’s reactions to, for example, certain television shows. The success among tween girls of Hanna Montana in the US and, very probably, around the world is but one example of this. And, in Latin America, a similar situation took place with the extremely popular children’s show “Floricienta”. In both cases, these specific shows were targeting -with great success- not just a tween audience but a tween gendered audience.

Multivalence is another characteristic assumed present in popular content. It refers, specifically, to the knowledge of popular culture and comes, many times, from minorities who cannot easily be identified as ‘outsiders’ or ‘insiders’ to it. Since children, due to the specific
spatial and historic instances and practices in which they participate (with, more specifically, a lack of control and decision over their own lives), can be considered a minority in itself, we need to recognize that popular culture texts differ in their interpreted meanings, and that viewers (children or any other audience) may or may not be interpreting them as an opportunity to resist dominant ideologies.

*Accessibility* is the act of favoring the concrete over the abstract, and of translating critical insights about popular culture back into popular culture itself. It does not mean avoiding complexity, but rather understanding the audiences. This particular instance is one that is very infrequently acted upon, especially in the case of children’s popular culture.

When looking at *particularity* as another component of popular culture this means, simply put, that details matter. In order to understand the particularities of popular culture we need to challenge certain assumptions. We should not assume that popular culture is based on continuous, repeated messages or that it is always used as a mean to reproduce dominant narratives. Looking at specific and concrete moments of cultural production, circulation, and reception helps to understand the range of possibilities within popular culture genres, and the complexities and contradictions that surround a popular text. Furthermore, how the text is interpreted is fundamentally important to analyze since, even when at the moment of production a particular text could have been intended to be interpreted in a certain, specific way, this interpretation may very well be challenged and re-constructed by the viewer/s. In the case of Anne Haas Dyson’s research on elementary school children’s interpretation of popular culture (superheroes such as X-Men and Power Rangers), some children were very clear in their resistance to interpret these texts as perpetuations of dominant narratives. Of course, one cannot forget that issues such as race, class, and gender are an essential part of the process of
interpretation and reproduction of mediatic representations, whether we are talking of children or of any other audience group.

*Contextualism*, also signaled as a key element of popular culture, indicates the need to analyze popular texts not as stand-alone entities, but as existing in relation to a large range of other discourses, and working within a vast social and cultural configuration of competing voices and positions. Specifically, it refers to the fact that there is no intrinsic or inherent value in a text, and that any text needs to be analyzed in context, which means its meanings are subject to change.

Very much connected to the previous concept, *situationalism* refers to the fact that texts have temporal and spatial properties. They exist in particular places at particular times, for particular audiences. In order to interpret the meaning of a cultural text or practice, we need to analyze it in its socio-historical conditions of production/consumption (Storey, 1996). What this means when researching children and popular culture, then, is that we need to pay special attention to the context in which this interaction takes place. Although the Power Rangers series is just as popular in Argentina as it is in the US among children of a certain age (and, I would argue, gender), the specific cultural practices, race dynamics, and class division/hierarchy at play in each of these spaces and in each moment in time—among other factors—will very probably mean that a study of this text in each of these contexts might result in a highlight of different aspects of it.

Ultimately, popular culture as a term was created as a way to mark off class divisions (Bourdieu, 1984; Jenkins et al., 2002). Yet, if we consider how popular culture texts are interpreted and re-interpreted, produced and re-produced, we can see that there is a broad range
of constructions of the relations between “the popular” and “the people”, with different consequences for the way in which popular culture is conceived and for the way in which it might be constituted as a site for cultural intervention. Thus, when engaging in the study of popular culture, it is important to be aware of the challenge of being honest about how we know what we know about it and, at the same time, avoiding the ‘ivory tower’ academic position. In other words, since an “immediate engagement with popular culture is the source of our knowledge” (Jenkins et al., 2002) we need to recognize and reflect upon the nature of this engagement and how it is affecting our research. And, when analyzing children’s popular culture, this presents a double challenge, since our status as adults and our preconceived notions might be preventing us from interpreting the texts –or the children’s responses to them- in the way they intended us to do so.

Culture, then, –and this includes popular culture- should be understood as the texts and practices that are part of our everyday lives (Storey, 1996). Popular culture is thus a key site for the production and reproduction of social relations. It is not, as was previously conceived of, “degraded” culture, or imposed from above. To explore how popular culture is more specifically related to children, Stuart Hall’s explanation of the relation between agency/identity/identification is particularly helpful (Hall & Du Gay, 1996; Hall, 1997). Hall states that these three concepts (and the politics of exclusion at play) lie at the core of the relationship between subjects –children- and discursive practices –popular culture texts-. Identities, for Hall, are never unified but increasingly fragmented and fractured, never singular but multiply constructed across different (sometimes opposing) discourses, practices and positions.
More importantly, *identities are constructed within, not outside, representation*. They arise from a narrativization of the self, and they are produced in specific moments at specific times, both historical and spatial. Identities fluctuate, and they are constructed through difference. With this idea of how the never-ending and constant process of identity construction happens in mind, we can think of popular culture as one of many of the discursive practices that intersect with children’s construction of their identities as well as with their practice of exercising agency.

My own study, which involves the study of children’s interpretations of media representations in Argentina, falls into the relatively new methodological framework discussed above, in which children’s social lives are studied as part of a historical and geographical context, and in which factors such as race, class, gender, and geographical location are also considered important elements that form their experiences. Within this framework, children are considered social actors actively shaping the world they inhabit and exercising their agency, as opposed to passive and powerless members of society, lacking in authority and not yet “fully developed”.

I have conducted my research *with* children –as opposed to *on* children- paying special attention to the process by which they actively interpret, re-construct, and circulate their own perceptions of how media representations are related to their social lives. This also means that, while I looked at specific cultural practices that shape these children’s interaction with media, I was also considering how issues of race, class, gender, geographical location, and power hierarchies –not just *theirs* but *mine* as well- were shaping the process of my research. It means, finally, to address Boocock & Scott’s question: How can we know what children and the
experience of childhood are really like, if facts about children and childhood/s seem to be as varied and contradictory as people’s opinions? (Boocock & Scott, 2005)

In my research, following the theoretical framework of the authors studied, I consider children as an integral part of society that contributes to its shaping just like any other social group, and that is quite capable and willing to construct and reconstruct meaning from popular culture texts. Thus, when I am explaining the relationship between popular culture and any audience, children should be read as part of that interaction. When studying children within this new paradigm in childhoods studies, structural factors such as race, class, gender, geographical location, and the intersection of these must be at the forefront of any analysis. The question that needs to be asked when researching children’s interaction with popular culture is, then: how are these factors, along with local conditions and cultural practices, interconnected with the mediatic texts studied and how do children interpret/construct/reconstruct this connection?

My work is also framed within the methodology of critical race theory. This perspective views identities as fractured not only by race, class, and gender but also by different geographical realities. Even when the concept of childhood is a theoretical construction, each individual child’s experiences need to be examined in the particular context in which they have taken place (Anzaldúa & Moraga, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 2000). According to this methodology, research does not, and cannot, aim at being objective, accurate, and generalizable. This methodology challenges notions of ethnic purity and the “authentic”, troubling the reification of ethnic and racial categories. And what is fundamentally important for any research following this approach is to be moral and ethical. This is important in any study conducted with other human beings; however, when doing research with children the ethical aspects of one’s research become especially relevant. The specificities of what this means will be discussed next.
Allison James, in “Ethnography in the Study of Children and Childhood”, mentions that children contribute through their social interactions to the shape and form which their own childhood takes, and adds that they are competent informants and interpreters of their own lives and of the lives of others (Atkinson, 2001). Following this approach, Bill Corsaro developed the term “interpretive reproduction”, which indicates that children do not just reproduce social practices, but they do it in an interactive process in which their own interpretations play a fundamental part in shaping culture in general (Corsaro, 1997). Seeing children as competent social actors, with knowledge of their own and with the ability to share this knowledge, is key in this approach. Next, I will delineate a series of ethical considerations involved in doing research with children, as proposed by some authors (Atkinson, 2001; Cook, 2002; Eder & Fingerson, 2002). Following some of these considerations, in italics, is my own perspective on each of these issues.

Since those who speak for childhood are rarely children, and children do not usually participate in the decisions that pertain to their lives, *researchers, then, should be a bridge between children and adults in charge*. It is fundamentally important, when conducting research in different environments, to address the impact of the setting, both for the process and for the resulting product. In other words, we need to examine questions such as: *Were children intimidated by the setting? Did the children perceive the researcher as an “authority”? Were they, on the other hand, more able to freely express themselves without being in the presence of their parents?* It is also vitally important to address the power relations between children and adults.

The power imbalance present between children and adult-researchers can be reduced by a series of measures. First, we need to recognize that access to a school/home/etc does not
guarantee children’s consent. As a researcher, one needs to be aware that it is hardly ever up to
the children to grant access to the school. Thus, once we have been allowed to participate in such
a public place, we still need to gain the children’s confidence and to achieve a certain familiarity.
Secondly, making the interviewing context more natural and relaxed might prove helpful as a
way of diminishing children’s perceptions of researchers as authority figures with a hidden
agenda and a need to get “correct” answers to their questions. As explained before, children
might find themselves in a more comfortable situation if they are being interviewed as a group,
with their peers. In this case, and since they are being collectively interviewed, there is also less
of a chance of adults imposing their own interpretations. Finally, by placing interviews within
larger activities with which children are familiar we might achieve a higher level of confidence
among children, which would allow them to comment on themes and situations that they might
not have felt secure enough to talk about in a more formal setting.

As a way of closing the gap between our own culture as researchers and adults, and
children’s culture at the moment and time of the study, researchers need to learn the
communicative rules used by children. To this extent, a preliminary participant observation and
a later comparison of the communicative rules used by children in this first context and during
the interaction with the researcher can shed light as to the level of comfort achieved by children.
If, in both cases, the communicative pattern remains the same, a certain level of validity can be
assumed. Also, an egalitarian cooperation between respondents and researcher should take place
along the researching process. This means, simply put, that there has to be reciprocity. The
researcher needs to give something in return for the information obtained. This does not refer to
any material compensation but, rather, to the empowerment of the interviewed group. A better
understanding of a specific situation, knowledge, empowerment, are all forms of retributions.
These retributions can also have the community as recipients. It is crucial to keep in mind that the research process is about understanding children’s perspectives, rather than about getting one’s questions answered. Finally, and essentially, it is critical to represent children in their own terms by presenting their voices in any research-related account. This helps in avoiding viewing them as “Other”.

While the focus of my research is on how children interpret media content, it is impossible to talk about children without mentioning parents/guardians/tutors. As Ellen Seiter explains, “beliefs about media effects on children are inextricably bound to adult use of the media, class position, and ideologies of childhood” (Seiter, 1999). And, while I do not adhere to the “media effects” theory, since I believe it fails to acknowledge how each audience provides its own interpretations for media contents, I agree with Seiter’s argument regarding the link between adults’ perceptions and children’s actions, as these interactions are influenced by one another.

Another concern related to the role of parents when doing research with children is the question of to what extent should we, as researchers, negotiate our study, and with whom (Parents? Children? Both?). Berry Mayall explains that, as a guest, the researcher’s social position does not have clearly established parameters; it has to be negotiated. There is a triangle of conventions and negotiations. As an adult, and a guest, the researcher may feel obliged to accept what conditions are offered by the adult, the parent. But as a guest of the child too, the researcher must take account of what the child sees as appropriate. And, third, the parent and child may negotiate between them how the social event is to be structured and who will take part (Mayall, 2000). I will later discuss all the methodological reflections that arose as a result of the above-mentioned ethical considerations while conducting my research. All of these
considerations need to be kept at the forefront of any research with children. Only then can we truly attempt to capture their distinctive accounts, perceptions, and experiences.
CHAPTER 3: ON “BEING NOTHING” – DOING RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN, ON CHILDREN

In order to understand how children incorporate their perspectives on representations of popular culture into their everyday interactions with their social worlds (peers, family, community in general) I have employed a mix of qualitative methods. These include participant observations, individual interviews –although not formally structured-, and two workshops that took place at different days, three weeks apart, during the course of my work. Since my approach relies in an interpretive, qualitative perspective, this means that this work does not seek generalizability or replicability, focusing instead on providing an in-depth study of the ways in which the intersection of popular culture and race are integrated in the contexts of these children’s lives.

In 2009 I spent four days a week, every week for four months, observing and talking to the children in one particular classroom, watching their behavior and how they use popular culture as a way to make sense of the lack of racial representations in television today in Argentina. The time I spent as a researcher, observing and being observed as well, posits questions about my (our) place as adult(s) researcher(s) within children’s cultures, and about the nature of these interactions. The critical analysis of this interaction, and the questions that arise from it, does not provide answers. It does, on the other hand, provide questions. It refers to, more specifically, what it means to be an adult-researcher in a social and geographical space such as a school occupied mainly, but not only, by children. As A. James explains, “the structural features of the school system help constitute an ideal and ready-made cultural setting for the ethnographic study of childhood. However, this being so, it is all the more important that researchers continue to remain reflexive about the impact this setting has both for the process
and the product of the ethnographic method” (James, 2001). In the following pages I analyze several instances in which I, as an adult researcher attempting to disentangle myself from the usual authority figure children encounter in such a setting, was involved in negotiations and power imbalances, and I show how several children and adults tested my reactions, the results of these tests, and how I gained a certain familiarity within the class.

My research took place in a public elementary school in Buenos Aires, and since all the paperwork that was needed in order to be granted permission to conduct my research in a public school in Buenos Aires was done from the US, I had no knowledge, prior to actually entering the class, of its composition as far as gender, class, and race. I did not know any of the children, or the teacher. My exchanges had been with the school principal exclusively, and she was the one who decided with which 3rd grade I would be working. It turned out that in the class I worked with there were several dark-skinned boys and girls, and these, I have been arguing, are the kinds of racial representations lacking in today’s television content in Argentina. The racial heterogeneity that composed the class, then, allowed me to gain a broader range of perspectives on how assumptions about race are perceived, acted on, and contested.

I began my research by conducting a regular series of participant observations, since this method can set the ground for posterior interviews (Eder & Fingerson, 2002) by allowing everyone involved to develop familiarity with one another. Additionally, a preliminary set of participant observations allowed for the determination of social interactions, communicative patterns, and social structures (peer group formation, children/teachers interactions, etc). Every morning I would arrive at the school as the last of the children were arriving too. I would sit at the end of the class, observe their interactions with each other, with the teacher, and with me, and I would take notes detailing them. After a few days of attending class with the children, I was
able to distinguish friendships, rivalries, and the teacher’s perceptions about some of the children, among other things.

There are some aspects of children’s lives and experiences that cannot be easily put into words, and that can much more effortlessly be captured through observation than through interviews (language variations, according to their sense of familiarity, for example). Excluding the children’s responses to the questions I formally posed to them during the workshops, all the comments and situations that arose as part of their understanding of race emerged during their regular interactions rather than from a formal and structured interview with me. Furthermore, in most of these situations I was not, at that moment, an active participant in those conversations.

I also conducted two different workshops in the class (see Appendix at the end of the chapter), so as to allow children to be comfortable in a setting familiar to them and in which they outnumbered the adults present (not the teachers in the school, but certainly the adults present in the room while the workshops were taking place). Laura, the teacher, very kindly offered me the possibility of working with the children exploring the issues of race and popular culture in more depth, suggesting I took time off any morning in order to do this. I took full advantage of her extremely generous proposition, which had the benefit of not having to disrupt these children’s routines by either having them stay at school longer than necessary or having to set up meetings at a convenient place for all, with all the possible complications that this might result in (lack of funding for transport, lack of time, lack of adult company availability, etc.).

Both of the workshops consisted of two different pictures plus a number of questions to be answered after looking at them. Photo elicitation proved an invaluable resource for achieving a clearer understanding of the children’s perceptions regarding race, class, and popular culture.
Based on the idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview, this methodology allows decentering the authority of the author (in this case no one, not even me, knew who had taken the pictures in question, since they were obtained doing an internet search of images) and grounding our work on the diverse interpretations of cultural symbols (Harper, 2002).

As Harper explains, photo elicitation can help to overcome the difficulties that anyone conducting in-depth interviewing in all its forms may face, such as the challenge of establishing communication between two people who rarely share taken-for-granted- cultural backgrounds (which is particularly true for adult researchers interviewing children), by anchoring the communicative exchange in an image that is understood, at least partly, by everyone involved (Harper, 2002). Since photographs do not necessarily represent empirical truths or “reality” (Clark-Ibanez, 2004) they can be more effectively used not as a mean of establishing correct answers but, rather, as an element that might help in providing a tangible prompt in which to anchor our questions in order to analyze emerging interpretations.

In the first workshop, I asked the children a series of questions (see end of chapter for the full workshops) intended to have both a deeper understanding of their tv-watching habits as well as to identify any possible upcoming relations between their notions of race and how racial representations, and the assumptions and hierarchies guiding them, were perceived by them in the shows they watch. Since there was, in fact, a very clear and common perception among them related to who should be allowed a role in television, I created the second workshop as a mean to further explore this emerging theme. The children’s responses and interactions will be discussed in detail in the next chapters. In this chapter, however, I want to analyze some of the methodological observations that I took note of while conducting my research, resulting from my interaction with the children and with the adults present at the school.
While I was spending time with the children in class, I always carried my notebook with me, and they would regularly see me furiously taking notes. In more than one occasion some of the children asked to see what I was writing, and I would always show them. Even when it was almost impossible for them to understand my handwriting, I would read to them what I had noted down. In the following pages, those observations directly translated from my notes –originally in Spanish- can be found in italics throughout the rest of the text.

A typical school day in this institution at the primary (elementary) level takes a full day, from 8.30 am to 4.30 pm. For my research, I spent four months –April to July of 2009- attending school Monday to Thursday from 8am to 1pm. This meant spending time not just during class but also during special activities (gym classes, English classes, chess classes, recesses, etc) and it also allowed me to spend lunch with the children in the school cafeteria. Lunch hour extended from 12pm to 1pm and, during lunches, I sat at the same table/s as the children did, paying special attention to rotate tables in a regular manner so as to have the possibility to interact with all children equally. I kept a chart in my notebook indicating how many times I had sat at each particular table so as to be completely fair to all the children, who consistently claimed my presence at their table for lunch. The following situation took place during the last month of my research and is an example of how closely monitored my presence at each table was by some of the children.

*When we go out to get ready for lunch, Jackson gets mad at me because I won’t be sitting at his table even when Hannah is absent (which means there’s an empty seat). I try to explain to him that I keep tabs in my notebook of how many times I’ve sat at each table, but he won’t listen, and when I try to show the chart to him he stops me and says: “I’m playing with the kids”*/Estoy jugando con los chicos.
Lily also asks me where I will be seating today, and I explain. And Mike also told me: “You will be seating at our table today, because my cousin didn’t come”. I tell him yes, it’s my turn at that table today.

12.22pm: Lunch – (Cont.)

After talking to Mike, Jackson comes over and tells me: “Today, you’re sitting at our table, because the girl came and then left”/Vos hoy te sentas en nuestra mesa, porque la nena vino y después se fue. He doesn’t wait for me to answer, he just leaves. While we’re going up the stairs, he’s tugging me to take me to his table.

Finally, he agrees to take a look at my notebook, so I show him the chart where I keep track of how many times I’ve sat at each table. He understands, and leaves with the promise that next time I will seat at his table (always contingent upon the fact that there is an empty seat for me).

When I first started attending classes with the children most of them seemed to consider me as a “novelty”. It was not usual to have an adult present in the class not exercising any authority and interested in observing their everyday interactions. The result of my presence was an initially constant demand for my attention, mostly from the part of a certain group of children (Jackson, Hanna, Eli, Helena and Abby were among them). I assumed, wrongly, that their interest in me would weaken with time. However, as the weeks went by, they became aware that my time at the school was limited, and this awareness resulted in a renovated effort to capture my attention and my presence. Jackson’s insistence in having me at his table came later during my research, and I believe it was his acknowledgment of the scarce time I had left at the school that might have prompted his behavior.
Adults, invariably, will be very much present in most of the situations that we, in the childhood/s studies field, are interested in, and we as researchers will always be faced with the need to negotiate our role in the space in which we conduct our observations. The following is a series of examples of how, when, and where some of these negotiations took place during my work.

When I started visiting the school in Buenos Aires, I made sure to get permission—in the form of signed consents—from what I saw as all the main parties involved in my research: the children, the parents, the teacher, and the school principal. I left the forms at the school and made sure to have them signed once I started my observations. A few of the parents did not give permission for their children to participate in the study, which turned out to be more problematic than I originally expected. Initially, I thought: “If a parent does not want their child to participate, then I will just not use any material arising from my interaction with that child”. Of course, the interaction would happen anyway, and it would be inevitable, but I decided not to record it if it emerged from someone who had not given/was not given permission to participate in my work. Such a situation took place, expectedly, and I found myself having a conversation with one of the girls from the grade very much interested in talking to me not just about herself, or myself, but about the topic of my research. Whose wishes should I respect, then? This girl’s parents signed the form specifically asking for her not to be part in my study, but when I mentioned this to her, she seemed embarrassed by the fact that an adult had made that decision for her. I told her exactly what I explained before, which is that she could talk to me about whatever she wanted, but that I did not have authorization to use what she said in my work. Her response was: “My mom didn’t really know what the project was about and that’s why she didn’t let me participate”. I am still not using any material arising from my interaction with her, but that doesn’t prevent me
from questioning whether that would have been her choice, had she been able to make one. Of course, the key point here is that she wasn’t.

During my first visits to the school in which I conducted my research, in several instances the children tried to position me, to see where exactly in the spectrum of possibilities within the dynamics of this relationship (adult vs. children) my reactions could be placed. Who was I? If I was not a teacher, not a parent, and certainly not another child, then who was I? And in order to answer this question, the children tested my reactions and tried to place me in the familiar position of an adult figure whose behavior and reactions they felt they knew well.

I am standing in the playground, against the wall. Suddenly, Ian approaches me and tells me, in a loud voice: “They’re killing each other!”, while pointing at two other children that seem to be playing, albeit violently. I look at him and shrug, and he says: “Tell them something!” . I tell him that, if he wants to, he can go and tell the teacher, and I show him, pointing at her, where she is standing.

As time went by and the children grew more and more used to my presence, their reactions seemed to indicate that they perceived me as less of an authority figure and more of what Bill Corsaro calls “an atypical adult”, one more attuned to their experiences (Corsaro, 2003). These perceptions were made visible when they expressed their beliefs that the same rules that applied for them would apply for me, even when I was certainly not another student (or another child, for that matter) at the school.

While we are having lunch, sitting at the table, a boy from the other 3rd grade notices my notebook (I carry it with me at all times, scribbling down notes as I observe what’s going on). He warns me to put it out when they bring out the food
from the kitchen, so that the teachers will not take it away from me. Apparently, students are not allowed to bring anything –toys, notebooks, etc- to the lunchroom, and he’s afraid that I might be caught.

Nowhere in my research, however, is the perception of whether I would react as an authority figure more blatantly evident than in the following situation.

As I go out to the playground, I see Eli is bothering Abby and Hannah, who yell: “Miss!!!”, calling me for help. They are trying to get my attention and hoping that I will scold Eli for pestering them. Eli looks at me, then back at them and says: “She can’t help you. She’s nothing” (Ella no las puede ayudar. Ella no es nada).

This shift in their perceptions, however, did not happen overnight. And Hanna, one of the students, quickly pointed that out one day, while we were talking about my presence there.

Hanna asks me if I come to school to look at the children, and I say yes. She asks me about my own family, my sons, where I come from, and after a while she looks at me and says: “We thought it was a bad lady that was going to come”/Pensamos que era una señora mala que iba a venir.

I understood her confession as an expression of trust, gained after spending long hours with them at school. Of course, my own actions and everyday behaviors played a fundamental part in where in the spectrum I would be located. Since I was quite aware of this, I chose to situate myself as far from the authority figures that children come to expect in a school setting as possible, which sometimes even resulted in being situated by the children as “one of them”. My actions were guided by Allison James’ expression of what ethnography consists on, which she
explains as “(allowing) children to be seen as competent informants about and interpreters of their own lives and of the lives of others, and is an approach to childhood research which can employ children’s own accounts centrally within the analysis” (James, 2001). Adding to this belief my own efforts to stray away from a position of authority, the result was that the children allowed me to occupy a much more familiar space within their culture, one that not many other adults at the school had access to.

Another factor acting as an indicator of the children’s familiarity—or lack of—with me was the way in which they would address me. A couple of weeks into my research, I noticed that Nicholas was the only one that had started calling me “Vero”. The rest of the children still called me “Miss” (Señor). While the children placed me as an adult for which many of the rules that applied to them would apply also, the fact that they would still call me “Miss” well into my research indicates that they still saw me as an adult figure, even one closer in (some) attitudes to a child than to an adult. It took almost three weeks for Helena, who was not shy at all, to ask me if she could call me “Vero”, a request I answered to with a “Yes, of course!”. In some cases, the children were even quick to point out to some adults present that I could act as “one of them”, even when the adults themselves had not considered that possibility. The following situation took place during Chess hour.

Everyone gathers around the Chess teacher to listen to his explanation. When the explanation is over, the children start playing. Boys are paired with boys, and girls are paired with girls. Hannah is left without a partner, so the Chess teacher tells her to go to the other 3rd grade to ask the teacher if he can borrow someone to play with her for a while. When Hannah is leaving, Jackson says: “Let her play with Veronica!” /Que juegue con Veronica! The Chess teacher asks me if I want to,
I say “Sure” and so he tells Jackson that if Hannah comes back by herself, she’ll play with me. Hannah comes back with a boy from the other 3rd grade, and the Chess teacher sends the boy to play with Mike and pairs Helena with Hannah.

The Chess teacher had not considered the possibility of having me play with one of the children as a viable option, and he showed some reluctance when Jackson mentioned it. He did, however, ask me whether I would be willing to do so, allowing me once again to show the children my eagerness to participate in any activity in which they were involved as well. In the next situation, the children were both testing my reactions while at the same time demonstrating other adults present how they perceived me as part of their group.

*After the 1st recess, when it’s time to go back to class, the teacher has the children forming in two lines, one for the boys and one for the girls. Nicholas and Ian tell me to go to the girls’ one, so I stand at the end of it and I go in with the girls.*

*When Laura –the teacher- sees me coming in, she jokingly makes a comment about it. From now on, I will be entering the classroom at the end of the girls’ line, and Laura will joke about it one more time.*

Examples like the one above, in which the children make me an active participant in the day’s regular activities, abound in my notes. My reactions to these tests—in other words, my compliance in joining them in whichever activity they requested my presence—played a big part in being perceived as an adult with very different reactions than the ones they were probably expecting. Had I kept my distance and chose not to acquiesce, my interactions with them would have been completely different.
English class is about to start, and when the English teacher arrives, she makes the children sing a greeting song in English (they will do this, I will later learn, at the beginning of every English class). Hannah looks at me and tells me “You too”/*Vos también*, so I join them in singing the song.

There is yet one more instance, perhaps the most illustrating one, that shows how the children’s narratives about me informed some parents’ perceptions, and that illustrates the nature of these perceptions:

*As I am walking to school this morning after dropping off my own children in their daycares (a couple of blocks away), I run into Giaccomo and his mother and brother. They are also on their way to school, and when Giaccomo sees me he calls out my name: “Veronica!” and greets me. His mom seems surprised to hear who I am and what my role in the classroom is, and she explains that when Giaccomo talked about “Veronica” at home she assumed he was talking about one of the girls in his class.*

The previous example clearly shows my perceived status as part of the class and the following situation shows, furthermore, one of the children placing me away from the authority spectrum. In this next case, Nicholas confides in me and shares with me a piece of information that, in the hands of one of the adults regularly present in the school, could have meant a sanction or, at the very least, a verbal reprimand and/or warning. I see this as further proof of having achieved a status of “atypical adult” (Corsaro, 2003), at least for some of the children present.
The children are working on a math activity. I am trying to help Amy’s table, and so I ask Nicholas how did he arrive at the results he got. He leans over and whispers: “I don’t know. I cheated”/No se, me copie. He smiles at me.

While the exchange might seem innocent enough, my lack of a typical “adult” reaction, which would have been to reprimand Nicholas for what is a less than desirable reaction – cheating- helped him, and any other child in the class who might have been aware of our exchange, confirm that it was not my intention to act upon his actions and to dispense my opinions about the “correct” or “incorrect” nature of his actions. The sum of little acts like this one, paired with my reactions, allowed me to participate in the class from a position rarely granted by children to other adults.

During my research, I was able to observe that some of the adults at the school attempted to locate me within a familiar space just as much as the children. The adults participating in this process also made visible to the children that, in most cases, I was perceived as “one of them” (the adults). Furthermore, there were several instances in which the line dividing “them”/children from “us”/adults was quite clearly marked.

The children are in English class, and the English teacher is teaching the colors. When she finishes with the activity, she turns to me and tells me (in English):

“Because they check that I go through every part of the book, you know?” (sic).
None of the children, even the ones that are studying English outside the school, understand what she says and they ask about it, but the English teacher tells them (in Spanish): “If I said it like that it’s so that Miss will understand. Nothing”/Si lo dije así es para que la señorita lo entienda. Nada.
As a result of my own interaction with the children, the day-to-day contact between children and adults gradually suffered a shift. This resulting reallocation of spaces was made clearly visible during one of the coffee breaks the last month of my research.

The teacher in my classroom had invited me to get a coffee at the teachers’ lounge, where children are not allowed except in extraordinary situations (to call for a specific adult inside if this person is needed for something, for example).

While I was having coffee with the rest of the teachers present, there was a knock on the door. Without waiting for anyone to open it, Jackson shows up, looks for me in the room and asks me if I want to play cards with him. I say yes, leave with him and he, Amy, and I end up playing cards together in the playground.

This was hardly an emergency that justified Jackson’s need to look for me and yet, because of his interactions with me, he felt entitled to enter a space that he would have been otherwise precluded from entering. And this was not the only time during which some of the children made their agency purposefully visible.

Jackson hits one of the girls during chess hour. The chess teacher sees him and gives him lines to copy. After a couple of minutes, the teacher talks about Jackson as “this one”. Jackson replies: “This one has a name”. The teacher answers him back: “You hit a girl and you act cocky with me?? Stay quiet!” “Quedate en el molde!”.

In this occasion, Jackson is making it very clear to everyone present that, no matter how reprehensible your actions might be, no one deserves to be stripped out of something as inherently personal as their name.
When the children decided, as time went by, that I was interesting and/or funny enough to be around with, I also ended up being perceived as a sort of “possession”, and some of them would very much control who had access to my time and attention. Once, during a recess also by the end of my research, a girl from the other 3\textsuperscript{rd} grade came over to play with me with some cars. First Eli, and then Jackson, came over and told her: “You’re from 3\textsuperscript{rd} grade A, you can’t be with her!”/Vos sos de 3ero A, vos no podes estar con ella! And they sent her away. Their perception of me as a possession to be capitalized from was also clearly marked every day before lunch time. Consistently, almost all of the children would ask for me to sit at their table, and they would only be satisfied with a negative answer if I provided proof that it was my turn to sit somewhere else. This proof came in the form of a chart I designed at the end of my notebook, in which I kept careful track of every time I had sat at each of the different tables. Provided there was enough room for me to stay at a specific table (one of the children had to be absent for me to be able to sit at their place) I always tried to split the number of times spent at each table fairly. However, in a couple of occasions the children asked to see the chart to make sure I was being fair with everyone, a requirement that was always granted.

The space the researcher is occupying will be tested and contested not only by the children involved but by the adults as well. And my case, I encountered teachers in the school not only willing to demonstrate the children that I was an adult above everything else but, more importantly, quite resistant to accepting that discourses of racism could be found in a social space—a public sphere, even—such as the school.

*I am spending the 1\textsuperscript{st} recess today in the teacher’s lounge. I talk about my research with other teachers, and they don’t seem to believe me when I tell them that I’ve heard the word “Indian” being used as an insult by the children. They*
seem reluctant to recognize that such a blatant expression of racism could be found in the school, and they want to know which child said what. I tell them that I cannot disclose that information, since my research is confidential. One of the teachers tells me that they (plural) never hear that (race or ethnicity used as an insult) and, she adds, “it must have been a coincidence”.

Going back to the idea of being “nothing”, one of the harder notions that I had to grapple with while doing my research was the fact that by no means did I achieve the same level of closeness with all of the children in the class. It wasn’t just that I was “nothing” as far as my authority level, as some of them made quite clear; one child in particular tried very hard to make it noticeable that, for him, my presence in the classroom really was barely more than “nothing”. Usually making comments that would communicate to the rest of the class his affiliation with a high socio-economic status (eating sushi, going to the opera, playing with a play station, among other activities), Andrew was always quick at directing hurtful retorts to his classmates whenever things didn’t go his way. I found this attitude deeply perturbing, and while it was never my intention to intervene and I always refrained from openly taking sides, I found myself deeply conflicted by my inability to establish a bond with him. In my notes, at the end of my stay with the children, I wrote: Should I, as an adult, be more understanding and passive about attitudes that I find unacceptable because he is a child and/or because I am the one disrupting his life? Do I owe him that? How do I avoid judging him? I was never able to answer that. And while I never found an answer to this kind of situation, I still think it is of vital importance to keep asking the question. It is only through a perpetual reflexivity about the methodological elements in our research that we can gain a deeper understanding of how our interactions affect the power dynamics at play.
1er Taller: Los chicos y la televisión – Educación y Medios de Comunicación / 1st Workshop: Children and Television – Education and Media

1. Cuando miran tele en sus casas, lo hacen solos o acompañados? *When you watch TV at home, do you do it by yourself or with someone else?*

2. Si miran tele acompañados, por quién? Qué programas? *If you watch TV with someone else, with whom? What programs?*

3. Hay alguno de los programas de tele que nombraron que se sienten a ver sin interrupciones (sin hacer ninguna otra actividad mientras lo miran)? Cuál? *Is there any TV show from the ones you mentioned that you sit down and watch without any interruptions (without doing any other activity while you watch)? Which one/s?*

4. Cuando miran su programa favorito en la tele, lo comentan con alguien? Con quién? Cuándo (mientras lo miran, enseguida después, al otro día…)? *When you watch your favorite program on TV, do you talk about it with anyone? With whom? When (while you watch it, right after it, the next day…)?*

5. Respondan sobre el programa que más conozcan ("Casi Angeles", “Patito Feo” o el que miren más): Cuál es el nombre del programa? Les parece que los personajes del programa se parecen a alguna persona que ustedes conocen? Responder tanto en el caso de los personajes de los chicos, y de los grandes. A quién? Por qué? *Answer about the program that you know the most ("Casi Angeles", “Patito Feo” or the one you watch the most): What is the name of the program? Do you think the characters in the program look like anyone you know? Who? Why?*
6. Qué personaje de su programa de tele favorito les gustaría ser y por qué? Cuál no les gustaría ser, y por qué? Which TV character from your favorite program would you like to be and why? Which one wouldn’t you like to be and why?

7. Miren la revista que le tocó al grupo, y préstenle atención a las fotos. Después, comparen a las personas de esas fotos con las de las otras fotos que tienen. Notan alguna diferencia? Cuál? Look at the magazines in your group, and pay attention to the pictures. Then, compare the persons in that picture with the ones in the pictures I gave you. Do you notice any differences? Which ones?


9. Dibujen una escena, la que ustedes prefieran, de su programa favorito, y escriban un texto corto explicándola. Draw a scene, whichever one you prefer, from your favorite program, and write a short text explaining it.
Fig. 3. 1 – 1st Workshop. 1st Picture

Fig. 3. 2 – 1st Workshop. 2nd Picture
Workshop: Children and Television – Education and Media

Invento historias “de película”… / I invent movie stories

Mirá las dos fotos que siguen, y sobre cada una inventá una historia, como si estuvieras escribiendo el guión de una película. Armá la historia respondiendo las preguntas que sirven de guía. / Look at the pictures below, and create a story about each one, as if you were writing a movie script. Put the story together answering the guiding questions.

1er Guión de Película / 1st Movie Script:

1. Quiénes son los chicos de la foto? Who are the kids in the picture?
2. Donde están, y que están haciendo? Where they, and what are they doing?
3. Qué problema tuvieron? What problem did they have?
4. Cómo lo solucionaron? How did they solve it?

Fig. 3.3 – 2nd Workshop. 1st Picture
2do Guión de Película / 2nd Movie Script:

3. Quiénes son los chicos de la foto? *Who are the kids in the picture?*

4. Donde están, y que están haciendo? *Where are they and what are they doing?*

5. Qué problema tuvieron? *What problema did they have?*

6. Cómo lo solucionaron? *How did they solve it?*

*Fig. 3.4 – 2nd Workshop. 2nd Picture*
CHAPTER 4: RACE AS A GATEWAY TO POPULAR CULTURE

As part of my work in Buenos Aires, I was allowed to conduct two workshops, during which I attempted to explore the children’s ideas regarding the interaction of race and popular culture. Based on the children’s answers to the questions I posed in those workshops (see Figures at the end of the chapter), as well as on a series of examples in which I observed the children using race as a discursive practice during the course of their school day, this chapter focuses on how discourses of race are embedded within assumptions of “primitivism”, “lower class”, and “uneducation”, and on how these same discursive practices are transferred and applied to the realm of popular culture as a way of exercising control over who is allowed to participate in television and why.

Since in the next two chapters I will be basing my analysis on my interactions with the children at the school in Buenos Aires in which I conducted my research, I would like to begin by briefly introducing them. Being minors, and in order to preserve their anonymity, all the real names have been changed and pseudonyms have been used instead consistently throughout this dissertation. Unless otherwise specified, all the children I interacted with are between 8 and 9 years old, and all the information I am presenting was voluntarily offered by the children themselves.

Even though I learned several personal stories and pieces of information about the children from sources other than the children themselves (mainly from Laura, the teacher) I have chosen to disclose here only the information that the children themselves voluntarily shared with me. Following the line of reasoning of Sonja Grover, who states that “research participants at one level own their data in the same way that we own all our information” (Grover, 2004), I
decided to treat the children’s personal stories as pieces of information with a value and importance determined by the children themselves. In other words, if they didn’t feel a specific aspect of their lives was, for whichever reason, not worth divulging or sharing with me personally, I have not included those experiences in their descriptions.

Due to the lack of official minorities in Argentina, and since it is my argument that it is mainly the skin color that determines how race is interpreted, I have chosen to purposefully add this element as part of the children’s information. The main reason to add this characteristic to the children’s descriptions is that this becomes a fundamental part of how racial discourses are challenged when the children talk about their own possibilities as TV characters and when they re-appropriate and reinterpret certain TV contents, a process that will be further explained in the next chapter.

The children

**Abby:** She is originally from Paraguay and moved to Argentina a couple of years prior to 2009. Of all the girls in the class, she was the one that demonstrated the biggest interest in “Patito Feo”, specifically in embodying the character of ‘Antonella’. Very outgoing and an innate leader, she would swiftly coordinate choreographies during recess, easily attracting the company of Stephanie and Amy. During class, Laura –the teacher- would frequently sit her by herself up front, since her talkative disposition would prove to be disruptive when sharing the table with other classmates. Dark skinned.

**Amy:** While I shared several interactions with Amy, she did not provide much personal information about herself. As opposed to other girls in the class (such as Abby, Hannah and Helena), she seemed to establish certain boundaries that regulated her interest in popular culture.
She was attentive in class and very much loved and respected by her classmates, and only during recesses would she engage in conversations or games that involved elements of popular culture. Fair skinned.

**Andrew:** Of all the boys in the class, Andrew was the most verbally aggressive one. He would regularly insult his classmates (boys and/or girls) for attitudes that conflicted with his own desires and was always looking for Giacomo’s company and friendship. He would repeatedly bring up in class situations that indicated his adherence to a high socio-economic class (mentioning eating sushi, going to the opera, attending different cultural events or playing with expensive toys, for example) and he was particularly hostile towards Collin. Light skinned.

**Clara:** Sweet and quiet, she was Helena’s good friend. Her younger sister was also a student at the same school. Clara would silently cry when she felt she was being left behind, but her classmates (especially Helena, Hannah and Abby) would immediately try to console her and include her in their games. Fair skinned.

**Collin:** Originally from Ukraine and new to the class. He seemed to be struggling to find a place within the group and would often bring new or special toys/items as a mean to negotiating a friendship. At the beginning of my stay in the classroom, the children would tease him saying he was “not popular”. After a couple of months, however, Collin had made a few friends and he seemed to have gained some respect from his peers. Light skinned.

**Daisy:** The ‘artsy’ girl in the class. Daisy was very interested in crafts, and a couple of times brought from home different projects she had made herself, to the admiration of the rest of the class. While she didn’t share any obvious friendship with one specific girl/boy, she seemed comfortable playing with any of her classmates. Light skinned.
**Eli:** Outgoing and clownish, Eli was very interested in sharing his passion for popular culture (in particular, horror movies) with me. He has one older sister and a younger brother (a baby, at the time of my research), and his friendship shifted from Giaccomo—at the beginning—to Collin—later on-. Light skinned.

**Ethan:** Quiet and mature, Ethan did not provide much information about himself. During recesses he could be seen playing with Eli, Giaccomo and, occasionally, Nicholas. Light skinned.

**Giaccomo:** Originally from Bolivia, he seemed to be the brightest student of the class. He would consistently finish all the assignments before any of his peers and would regularly complain about being bored. Laura would challenge him with more difficult coursework, which he would finish swiftly and effortlessly. Although he accepted Andrew’s attention and friendship requests, he was also a good friend of Nicholas, and this would prove to be a source of tension between Andrew and Nicholas, who regularly competed for Giaccomo’s interest. Dark skinned.

**Hannah:** Originally from Peru and, just like Collin, new to the class. Hannah also seemed to have a hard time fitting in the group. Not as focused and quick learning as some of her peers, initially some of the boys (Andrew, Giaccoamo and Nicholas, mainly) would tease her and complain about this. As time went by during my research, some of the girls started to include her in their games. Hannah would see me as a friendly face in the class and would regularly search my company and attention. Dark skinned.

**Helena:** Very chatty and outgoing, Helena was the first in the class to approach me, asking me to document all the tv shows she would regularly watch. A good friend of Clara, she would often console and defend her in the event of any confrontations. Her dad is from San Juan. Light skinned.
Ian: Good humored and with a positive attitude, Ian was the first to offer Collin his friendship. He would be the first to try to stop any fights and was regularly defending the new students if any of his peers were teasing them. Light skinned.

Jackson: Cheeky and funny, Jackson is originally from Chaco, a province in the interior of Argentina. Suffering from a bad reputation, he was regularly sat up front by himself. Jackson struggled to be part of the group and to be treated fairly, and he was often punished because of his irreverence. Light skinned.

Katie: Aspiring child actress, Katie attended Arabic dance classes and acting classes for girls. Very interested in “Patito Feo” and other children programs, she would bring to class some of the songs that they were rehearsing in her acting classes to show to her friends. She would often play with Helena and Clara. Fair skinned.

Lily: Interested in fashion and always polished, Lily was the one girl that opened up to me without any concerns and shared with me many pieces of information regarding her personal life. The youngest of two sisters, she had a 3 yrs old niece that she adored and whom she would babysit often. Although quiet and reserved with her peers, she was easily accepted as part of Abby’s group of friends and would often play with them during recesses. Dark skinned.

Mike: While not very outspoken, Mike seemed to have no problems being friends with several of his classmates. Comfortable around both his male and female peers, Mike would often play during recesses with Jackson, Ethan, Eli, Hannah and Abby. He was absent from school several weeks. Dark skinned.

Nicholas: Almost always sitting next to Giaccomo, both of them shared not just school but English classes at a private institute. A good friend, and nice to his peers, he was the first to start
calling me “Vero” (expressing familiarity confidently), and to place me in different situations as one more of the girls in the class (by, for example, telling me to go to the end of the girls’ line at the end of recess to enter the classroom). He mentioned once being from Tucuman. Light skinned.

*Stephanie*: Friends with Abby and Katie, Stephanie mentioned once that her mom is from Tucuman, just like Nicholas. She was very immersed in, and knowledgeable about, the plotline of “Patito Feo” and would quite often play and rehearse choreographies enacting characters from “Las Divinas”. Light skinned.

Let us now explore how race plays a part in the realm of children’s everyday lives in the context in which I was a participant, and how children use racial constructions in everyday situations as a means of establishing hierarchical differences and with certain negative connotations associated with notions of class. During my time at the classroom, I was able to observe how some of the children used race discursively in this manner in several occasions. I hereby present a series of examples that show the children’s acknowledgement of a racial hierarchy and, more importantly, an understanding of how one’s positioning within this racial structure (either one’s own positioning or how/where others place us) can –and does- influence whether we are allowed access to certain elements and/or situations.

At one point in my research, the following situation took place:

*We go out to the playground so that the children can observe the school from within its center and draw a blueprint of it. While we are lying on the floor, Hannah -who is seating right next to me- points at Abby and tells me: “She’s black. I’ll draw her all in black”. I assume Hanna is talking about Abby’s skin*
color, but I do not want to take that for granted. I notice that Abby is wearing black leggings, so I ask Hannah if she means the color of Abby’s clothes. She says: “No, it’s because of this” and touches Abby’s leg (the part not covered by the leggings) with the tip of her pencil. Abby and Hannah are, within their class, the two girls with darker skin.

In this exchange, only the idea that there are different skin colors is present, and Hanna is not seemingly loading the term “black” with any noticeable connotations. It is evident, however, that according to Hannah being “black” deserves a special mention, which one can understand as rooted in the idea that being “black” is equal to being “different”. The importance of Hanna’s specific mention of “black” as a characteristic worth noting can be related to the notion that representations and, more importantly, stereotypes, refer as much to what is imagined as to what is perceived as “real”, with a deeper meaning lying in what is implied, but cannot be shown (Hall, 1997). In other words, if we look at the series of examples in which race is specifically mentioned by the children—as their responses to the first workshop will show-, the implications are that possessing a darker skin carries with it the burden of being associated with lack of education, lack of beauty and with being read as “uncivilized” and unworthy of a place in popular culture. Some of the children’s statements are more overt than others, and in some cases there is a very purposeful intention of making this association visible. In the following example, furthermore, Stephanie makes it very clear that she believes that, as a general rule, physical features carry with them certain benefits, and that this privilege is blatantly evident even to her:

Helena brought some flyers about how to take care of children during the winter. She walks around and hands them to the rest of the class. She gives me one too. A while later, Stephanie sees that Helena has two different flyers, and there were
only a few of one of them. She tells Helena: “You are blonde; that’s why you have everything”/Vos sos rubia, por eso tenes todo.

Helena had been the one that brought the flyers in the first place, so it would have been logical for Stephanie to assume that Helena had both of them because they were originally hers. However, Stephanie emphasizes Helena’s “blondness” as the reason for having what not everyone else in the class was able to have. Physical features as a racial trait, thus, are seen in this case as a factor inherently related with power and privilege. And this intersection is made even more visible in the next examples, in which the embodiment of specific racial aspects such as “Indian/aborigin” or “black” is verbally punished by using these adjectives as an insult. The following exchange took place between Eli and Hannah, who were staying inside the classroom while the rest of the class was outside for recess:

*While the recess is taking place and Hannah and I are inside the classroom, Eli comes in.*

*Hannah: “Go out, baldy!”/Sali, peladito!*

*Eli: “Indian!”/India!*

*Hannah: “Baldy!”/Peladito!*

*Eli: “Indian!”/India!*

*Hannah: “Indian!”/Indio!*

It is important to clarify that, in this verbal exchange, as well as in countless occasions in everyday life in Argentina, the word “Indian” is used as a synonym of “uncivilized”. While nowadays children learn at school that the correct term is “aboriginal populations”/pueblos
originarios, it used to be the case that children would learn, in school, the different names of the
indian tribes/tribus indias that inhabited the country before it was colonized by the Spaniards.
‘Indians’, then, was—and still is—a term commonly associated not just with the original
inhabitants of the Argentine territory but, more importantly, with barbarism and lack of
education.

Stuart Hall, in “Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices”,
explains that there are three major moments that have given rise to an avalanche of popular
representations based on the marking of racial difference. The first one began with the sixteenth-
century contact between European traders and the West African kingdoms, the second one was
the European colonization of Africa and the third one was the post-World War II migrations
from the “Third World” into Europe and North America (Hall, 1997). In Argentina, I argue, the
first moment to serve as a landmark for the continuing series of representation of natives and
aborigins as “uneducated” and “uncivilized” took place, like the first moment mentioned by S.
Hall, in the sixteenth century. However, unlike that first moment, this moment is focused in
Europe’s conquest of South America, with the arrival of the Spaniard troops that came to
conquest the South American territory, its resources and its people.

It is no coincidence that the word “Indio”/“Indian” has been used by some of the
children as an insult, considering the history of this word, and the assumptions behind it. When
Christopher Columbus started his endeavor, his intention was to discover a route to the East
Indies. Never recognizing that the lands he arrived at were, as opposed to his original destination,
previously unknown to Europeans, he called the inhabitants he encountered “indios” (Herbst,
1997). The term began then to be associated with notions of dark skin, barbarism, and
uneducation, as well as with the general idea of lower class and servitude.
This discursive practice was later perpetuated by one of Argentina’s founding fathers, and the pioneer in the field of education, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, who in 1845 wrote “Facundo – Civilización y Barbarie”/”Facundo – Civilization and Barbarism”, in which he expands on his theory of a binary between the uneducated natives exemplifying barbarism and the civilized urban inhabitants –of European descent, mainly-, as the portrayal of democracy and education. This dichotomy and its resulting assumptions are an important element within national discourses of race even today in Argentina, and the school as a public sphere is not an exception of the places within which these narratives can be heard.

And if the word “rubio”/”blond” is sometimes used as the epitome of privilege, I was also a witness of the use of the word “negro”/”black”, in contrast, as the representation of “barbarism”. On a separate occasion, I wrote down the following observation:

I hear a girl -who isn’t in my grade- in the playground, calling another boy:

“Negro batatero”.

The word “negro” has its English translation in “black”, and the word “batatero” can be interpreted in a few different ways. First, because “batata” is “yam” in English, being called “batatero” can be equal to being called “dirty” (as yam pickers would be). Second, there seems to be a general understanding that “batatero” can also mean “dumb”, or “a person that makes many mistakes”9. In any of these cases, the world clearly carries a negative connotation, and increasingly so when paired with the word “black” as a racial insult. Another very commonly heard phrase that uses the word “negro”/”black” following the same assumptions is the derogatory expression “negro de la villa” –its English translation would be “black from the slum”-, an

9 http://diccionariolibre.com/definition.php?word=batatero
insulting expression that is extremely common to hear applied to people believed to be lacking not just disposable income but, more importantly, manners and/or education. Indeed, during my research, this expression came up during one of the children’s fights:

_Collin and Eli are fighting (I don’t know about what), and I hear Eli saying “(...) negro de la villa”._

The term “negro”/black, however, is also very commonly used quite affectionately between friends, and many well-known artists in Argentina are better known by that term followed by their names, last names or nicknames, than by their full names. This is the case for people such as cartoonist and writer Roberto Fontanarrosa (el “negro” Fontanarrosa), musician and actor Horacio Fontova (el “negro” Fontova), radio announcer Elizabeth Vernaci (la “negra” Vernaci) and internationally acclaimed singer Mercedes Sosa, who was most commonly known as, simply, “la negra”.

The question arises, then, of how to discern when the term “black” is used in Spanish with an either affectionate or offensive purpose? The key lies in the context. Since every utterance is pronounced within a specific situation, observing the details surrounding the verbal exchange will provide clues as to the nature of the communicative pattern. With this explanation in mind, if we consider Andrew’s propensity to use hurtful and derogatory expressions when communicating with others, we could conclude that, in the following example, his response to Abby is meant to be interpreted as insulting rather than affectionate.

_The children are working on doing this month’s calendar. They have to add the references, and the holidays. Abby reads what Laura has written in the_

It could be argued that the previous example does not provide enough information that would allow us to interpret the use of “black” as offensive. In the next situation, however, both Abby and Andrew once again are the protagonists of an exchange that sheds more light in Andrew’s use of the word “black”.

Abby has a pen that Andrew wants to use. He asks her to borrow it several times, but Abby says no. Later, she’ll say yes, but then she’ll say that ‘yes is no’ (so she is still not lending it to him). After a while, Andrew grabs then pen anyway. Abby gets angry and wants it back, but Andrew keeps it. She leaves her seat to go and retrieve it, and when she’s getting close Andrew throws it at her seat. Abby returns to her seat, and Andrew, angry about having to give back the pen, quietly calls her “negra”/black and “negra chancha”/filthy black.

In this case, the use of the word “black” as an insult is made even more visible by being paired with the word “chancha”. “Chancho” is translated as “pig” in English, and it is frequently used in Spanish to characterize someone’s physical appearance, or her/his actions, as dirty or filthy. The fact that Andrew is using both terms together, thus, is an indication of his intention to infuse his utterance with an insulting connotation. I argue, then, that his use of the word “negro/a” or “black” follows a pattern that indicates that the situations in which he expresses this term are such that one can only interpret it as an insult. We can relate this process with Foucault’s definition of ‘discourse’, in which not just language but other elements of practice that conform the context of every utterance are included (Foucault & Gordon, 1980).
My work centers on children’s perceptions regarding how characters in popular culture are represented in television, and on how this can be tied into the children’s perspectives of socially structured racial dynamics; however, since in a public sphere such as a school there will inevitably be adults present, during the course of my research I was also able to observe the reactions of some of the adults with which I interacted. Although not all of them, some of these adults reacted quite negatively to the idea of racial hierarchies being a relevant factor in children’s lives and demonstrated an unwillingness to accept that children might be quite aware of the assumptions that guide discourses on race. Not every adult I engaged in conversation with expressed the same belief, however, and it is interesting to see how their opinions differed according to the specific role that each of the adults in question was specifically playing within the social structure, and according to their own experiences.

For some of the teachers in the school, the notion that children might engage in verbal exchanges during which race could be purposefully used in an offensive manner seemed foreign and strange, and they expressed a strong resistance to accepting the fact that children’s use of insulting racial epithets could be anything more than just a happenstance. This position is strikingly different than the one the children would normally manifest –sometimes more explicitly and sometimes as a result of their actions- and it could be interpreted as based on the need to preserve children’s “innocence”, since acknowledging that children are aware of racial hierarchies and its social dynamics means recognizing their ability to comprehend very complex social issues that go beyond being merely able to “play”. This is an absolute challenge for anyone following the traditional cannons of what “being a child” is supposed to entail since, as N. Denzin explains, “childhood is conventionally seen as a time of carefree, disorganized bliss” (Denzin, 1978). In other words, and following the tenets of developmental psychology, a child is
in many cases considered a person still in formation, not yet fully developed or “socialized” and incapable of participating in society as a member that shapes its own culture. Adults’ perceptions of children’s apparent lack of grasp of the normative discursive practices that regulate people’s lives can be considered as one more aspect that separates the world of children from the world of adults, if only—or, at least, mainly-at school. The situation mentioned before in which a teacher expressed skepticism and reluctance to admit that children could use negatively loaded terms rooted on racial characteristics (“Indio”/”Indian”) is an example of such an instance of willfully ignoring that children can have just as much agency in the representation and re-creation of racial hierarchies as adults, and of insisting to preserve the supposed innocence that childhood is presumed to inherently contain at its core.

Even when the belief that children would not purposefully use race as an insult was one shared by not one but a few adults, my encounter with Giacomo’s mother proved that a very different position existed among other adults such as her. During the exchange that follows, and after I explained to her in more detail what my research was about, she expressed her satisfaction about the fact that someone was actually talking about issues of race, since she felt that racial hierarchies were an issue that hardly, if ever, were talked about. If we compare the following situation with the previous example we could make the argument that, in both cases, the expressed opinions—quite opposite to one another—are guided by a very diverse set of life experiences, which highlights the need to always bring into context which factors might be influencing someone’s perspectives since, as it happened in these examples, the resulting positions could turn out to be contrastingly different.

As I am walking to school this morning after dropping off my toddler in his daycare (a couple of blocks away) I run into Giacomo and his mother and
brother. They are also walking to school, and after I greet them, I start chatting with Giaccomo’s mom. When I explain who I am, she seems surprised, and she tells me that when Giaccomo talked about me at home she thought he was talking about another girl in his class. I talk to her about my research, and when I explain what I’m interested in looking at, the topic of discrimination comes up. She tells me that she’s from Bolivia, and that she suffers from discrimination every day. She then tells me about a problem she had the other day with a neighbor, and about how her neighbor told her that “Here we deal with things by skin color” / Aca nos manejamos por el color de la piel.

Giaccomo’s mother mentions her physical characteristics as an integral part of how she is usually perceived, but she does not specifically relate her “foreignness” to her experiences being discriminated. I argue, however, that both her skin color and the fact that she comes from Bolivia are intricately related. In Argentina, the general perception and, as a result, the normative discourse, is that immigrants from neighboring countries such as Bolivia, Peru, and Paraguay are without exception “uneducated”, “lower class”, and “uncivilized”. Thus, the intersection of elements such as “dark skin” and “ethnicity” becomes the pillar around which stereotyping practices are centered in Argentina. The resulting discursive practices that lie at the core of this process can be found, by extension, in the children’s own narratives of who can be allowed a place in television, and why. This perceived image of Bolivia, Peru, and Paraguay as “indigenous” (with all the consequent stereotyping practices this entails) is not exclusive to Argentina but it is widespread among the rest of Latin America.

Nowhere in my research is the relationship between race, class, and popular culture made more salient than in the children’s responses to both of the workshops I conducted. Images may
not contain new information, but can trigger meaning for those who look at them, and relational and contextualized meanings may emerge through the use of photographs that may not have done so otherwise (Clark-Ibanez, 2004). All of the responses to the 1st workshop, which have been included at the end of this chapter, make some kind of correlation between skin color and class, or skin color and beauty which, in turn, points to some of the main reasons as to why the children feel that some children and not others should be granted a place in television.

During the first workshop and when presented with two different pictures (see Figures section at the end of the chapter), the questions that proved more useful in order to gain a better understanding of children’s interpretation of race and popular culture were the following: Do you believe that the people in the pictures I gave you could act in television? Why? Why not? In which program? Interpreting what kind of character? Once the children looked at both pictures, in almost all of their responses the general emerging theme is that darker-skinned children (the ones in the first photograph) were considered “poor”, “ugly”, and “homeless”. Although these were just a few of the adjectives used to describe the children in the first photograph, these traits surfaced consistently enough to allow for an analysis of their intersections.

In several of the children’s responses, the perception of those children’s as “poor” is paired with a characterization of them as “ugly”. Thus, having darker skin is equaled with belonging to a lower class which, in turn, is equaled with being unattractive. It is remarkable how often the apparent relation between “dark skin” and “ugly” is expressed and made salient by almost every child in the classroom. This transitive transference is then relocated to the realm of popular culture in which, according to most of the children’s responses, “ugly” and “poor” (darker skinned) children should not be allowed to participate. It is in all of these responses that we can see the evident emergence of racial stereotypes. And three weeks later, right before the
second workshop, Laura’s priming questions to the class regarding the nature of the first workshop, their ideas and interpretations, shed even more light as to the nature of their perceptions and the relation between race, class, and popular culture. In my notes, I wrote:

*We’re having the 2nd workshop today, and before we start Laura asks the children about the 1st one. She asks the children what they remember about it, and what do they think it was about:*

*Abby: “The differences between people”/Las diferencias sobre la gente.*

*Giaccimo and Nicholas: “The differences between the poor and the rich”/Las diferencias entre pobres y ricos.*

*Helena: “Which one of the two pictures could be on TV”/Cuál de las dos fotos podían ir a la televisión.*

*Eli: “About TV, if we watched it by ourselves or with someone else”/Sobre la TV, que si la vemos solos o con alguien.*

*Giaccimo: “About the poor and the rich. That the poor are not on TV and the rich are. They’re more important”/Que los pobres y los ricos... Que los probres no salen en la televisión y los ricos sí. Son más importantes.*

*Laura asks the children what should be the title for the 1st workshop:*

*Ian: “The poor and the rich”/Los pobres y los ricos*

*Helena: “The ugly and the beautiful”/Los feos y los lindos*
Hannah: “The ones who are on TV and the ones who aren’t”/Los que salen en TV y los que no.

(…)

Laura, who is quite aware of my research and of the implications of the children’s responses about how racial characteristics can be the basis of certain inferences about class and one’s place in the social structure, asks the children why do they think that the children in the pictures were poor or rich:

Giaccomo: “Because they were different”/Porque eran diferentes.

Hannah: “They were dirty”/Estaban sucios.

Laura: “Is the color of the skin related to money?”/Tiene que ver el color de la piel con el dinero?

Everyone: “No!”

Laura: “But then why were they poor or rich?”/Pero por qué eran pobres o ricos?

Mike: “Maybe the other ones were also rich”/Capaz que los otros también eran ricos.

Helena (pointing at one of the girls in the 1st picture): “This one is the whitest and the nicest”/Esta es la más blanca y la más linda.
Tracing a pattern from all of these responses, one could formulate the following comparison:

“dark skin” = “poor” = “ugly” =

In the previous exchange, Helena is the one that most openly acknowledges that race is indeed embedded in assumptions about beauty and, we could add, class. If “the whitest (is) the nicest”, then it logically follows that “the darker are the ugliest”. And, based on all of the responses presented above, dark-skinned children (“ugly” children) have no place in television.

After having had a few weeks to reflect on the first workshop, and when pressed about whether the color of the skin is related to “money”, or issues of class/socio-economic status, all the children quickly give the “correct” and “expected” response: “No!!”. Mike even goes as far as to revisit his previous opinion and express that “Maybe the other ones (the dark-skinned ones) were also rich”, an interpretation that was never mentioned before by any of the children. There is, then, an acknowledgment that, in an ideal world, there should be no relationship between skin color and class. The children know what the socially accepted relation between skin color and class is, or should be, and they are readily and willingly able to articulate it. However, this is not the interpretation that the children expressed when first asked about who should be allowed in television and why.

In “The Spectacle of The ‘Other’”, Stuart Hall explains the essence of stereotyping as a practice that works in different levels (Hall, 1997). At one point, it reduces a person to a small series of exaggerated and simplified characteristics, essentializing “difference”. At the same time, it divides the normal and the acceptable from the abnormal and the unacceptable, excluding, thus, everything that does not fit, everything that is different. Stereotyping, then,
“symbolically fixes boundaries, and excludes everything which does not belong” (Hall, 1997).

Based on this explanation, the children’s responses to the two workshops I conducted as part of my research show, I argue, how representations of darker skinned children are interpreted and read as outside the permitted boundaries of who is allowed in television. Normative discourses of race, together with the presumed power of broadcasting to normalize certain kinds of cultural values and standards (Davies, 2001) result in children’s perceptions of dark-skinned people as belonging “outside” television boundaries, except in the few cases in which they could justify their presence by possessing a special kind of “talent”.

A common response among some of the children in the class to the question of whether the children in the pictures could have a place in television and, if so, doing what, was that these children could actually be in television if, in fact, they appeared to possess some kind of special talent. Having a good voice, dancing, making jokes, or playing a sport could, thus, act as the key that would open the door to fame for children that, it is suspected, would not otherwise find such a position by their mere looks. It is possible to trace this idea to the practice, started mainly by the tv show “Showmatch” (originally “Videomatch”) of giving children a segment to demonstrate their abilities.

While certainly not the first TV program to do this, Showmatch’s biggest innovation was to give children this possibility in a program specifically targeting an adult audience, so much so that it was, and is, broadcasted at night. The fact that the children were aware of the structure of this show is yet more proof that not only do they engage with tv content that is expressly planned for children, but also with tv programs designed for adult audiences.
Fame is also, quite justifiably, linked to socio-economic status, with some of the children mentioning that the characters of already existing television shows are famous, and the children in the pictures presented to them were not and, as such, were poor. The connection between fame and class is, indeed, understandable, since we can all see the luxurious lives that most of the actors and actresses seem to have the privilege of living. However, this connection is not so comprehensible when it is made between only the dark-skinned children in the first picture, making the assumption that they belong to a lower class, and leaving the socio-economic status of the children in the second picture as open to the imagination.

These normative racial discourses, however, were not in place in every situation I encountered with the children. In the next chapter, I will analyze the instances in which the barrier that is put in place to preserve the entrance to popular culture is broken down to allow for the reenactment of television content, even when some of the elements of this reenactment might be perceived as in tension with the children’s own racial backgrounds.
Fig. 5.1 – Abby’s response

7) Casi Angeles son famosos y “Patito Feo” los otros no y son mas pobres

“Casi Angeles are famous and ‘Patito Feo’ the others no and they are poorer”

8) pueden bailar mucho y los de abajo pueden a ser a ser un teatro de invierno.

“They can dance a lot, and the ones below can make a winter theatre”
Fig. 5.2 – Amy’s response

7) los chicos de aca de la foto están mal vestidos y los otros vien vestidos por que son sucio.

“The children in this picture are badly dressed and the others are nicely dressed because they are dirty”

8) podian acer un acto de cantar por que

“They could do a singing act because”
7) Los chico no son populares y pobres porque son feos
“The children are not popular and poor because they are ugly”

8) Para que salga en la tele deberian ser lindos
“To be on TV they should be good looking”
Fig. 5.4 – Clara’s response

7) Las dibinas son mas lindas que ellas.
   “Las Divinas” are better looking than them

8) si porque los chicos pueden cantar
   “Yes, because the children can sing”
Fig. 5.5 – Collin’s response

7) que ai diferencias una clara(no) una mas negro

“there is a difference one is lighter one blacker”
7) lo hicos son mas lindo.

“The children are better looking”

8) No me gustaria que esos chicos tengan una bicicleta porque son pobres.

“I wouldn’t like those children to have a bicycle because they are poor”
8) Porque son pobres.

“Because they are poor”

9) Pueden cantar porque deben tener buena bos.

“They can sing because they must have a nice voice”
6) No me gustaría ser Xica porque es negra.

*I wouldn’t like to be Xica because she is black.*

7) los chicos de la rebista son mas bonito quelosotos

“The children in the magazine are better looking than the others”

8) ami me gustarian que los chicos estén en la tele porque notienen dondebibr

“I would like the children to be on TV because they don’t have where to live”
Fig. 5.9 – Helena’s response

7) los chicos de la revista son mas lindos
“The children in the magazine are better looking”

8) No me gustaria que la foto 1 este en la tele y la foto 2 si porque son lindos
“I wouldn’t like that the first picture were on TV and the second picture yes because they are good looking”
Fig. 5.10 – Katie’s response

7) Que de las res vista son famoso y de la foto son pobres.

“That the ones in the magazine are famous and the ones in the picture are poor”

8) Podrian aser un teatro de pobres.

“They could make a ‘theatre of poor’”
7) Los chicos de la revista son mas lindos.

“The children in the magazine are better looking”

8) Si por que son muchos.

“Yes, because they are a lot”
Fig. 5.12 – Nicholas’ response

7) son pobres y los otros son ricos

“They are poor and the other ones are rich”
7) Las divina son más lindas que ellas.

“Las Divinas’ are better looking than them”

8) Las chicas pueden salir en la foto porque pueden cantar.
Los chicos pueden salir en la tele jugando en partido.

“The girls can be in the picture because they can sing”

“The boys can be on tv playing matches”
In the previous chapter, I have presented a series of examples that show how children infuse representations of dark-skinned people with ideas of “ugliness” and “low class”. In this chapter, I analyze those instances in which those discursive practices are challenged and disputed by the children, mainly by associating themselves with television characters and by reappropriating and reinterpreting popular culture content, even when this process contradicts their previously expressed viewpoints regarding who should be allowed access to these spaces.

The role of media in the construction of children’s identities has been explored by several authors (see (Berry & Mitchell-Kernan, 1982; Boden, 2006; Buckingham, 1993; Gerbner et al., 1994; Kinder, 1999; Morduchowicz, 2001; Morduchowicz, 2002), among others), and to understand this role we must situate racial, ethnic, and gendered representations within their historic and spatial context, since the identity discourse of different groups points to fluctuating constructions of ethnic identities and cultures (Guzmán, 2006). In I. Molina-Guzmán’s own words, “constructs of ethnic identity are not ephemeral but are rather in a constant state of formation and reformulation as these constructs respond to the ever-shifting terrain of postcolonial global-culture” (Guzmán, 2006). Popular culture, as a space where identities are performed, perceived, created and re-created, plays an integral role in the lives of these children, most of whom are interpreting the intersection of race and popular culture in contradictory ways, depending on whether that intersection is applied to a racialized “other” or to themselves. This could be interpreted as a conflicting process during which normative discourses are indeed perpetuated “in theory”, only to be later challenged “in practice”, and suggesting the children’s acknowledgment of the problematic nature of these practices.
During the course of my work, the one TV show that stood out at the center of these practices was “Patito Feo”/”Ugly Duckling”. It is important to understand this program’s plot and its characters, since it is through role playing them that some of the children showed how normative racial discourses can be resisted and defied. The beginning of “Patito Feo”/”Ugly Duckling”’s story introduces single mom Carmen and her daughter Patricia, simply known as “Patito”. They live in San Carlos de Bariloche, a small town located in Argentine’s Patagonia. Patito, after falling off her bike, meets Matias, towards whom she feels an instant attraction. He is there on vacation, and when the holidays are over he returns to Buenos Aires, his hometown.

Carmen and Patito will soon have to travel to Buenos Aires for medical reasons and, once there, Patito meets the hospital director, Leandro, who will turn out to be her estranged father (although neither of them will be aware of this for some time). Carmen and Patito remain in the city for Patito’s medical treatment and Leandro, upon learning of Patito’s desire to sing, suggests that she apply to the fine arts school directed by his mother, to which Patito agrees. It is here that Patito will encounter Antonella, Leandro’s step-daughter and a student at the same school, and a rivalry will soon arise, taking the form of two competing groups: “Las Divinas”/”The Divines”, led by Antonella, and “Las Populares”/”The Populares”, led by Patito. Needless to say, Antonella is the embodiment of jealousy and meanness, always attempting to sabotage Patito in any of her endeavors. Eventually, their rivalry will turn into friendship, but not before several of their encounters are marked by their antagonism.

Antonella’s character has been frequently criticized for promoting racism and discrimination, to the point of having a magazine’s cover dedicated exclusively to this issue. During the show, it was not uncommon to hear Antonella refer negatively to Patito’s physical

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aspect and background. What is the allure of this character, then, that enticed several of the girls in the class to reenact its story? Dark-skinned girls such as Abby and Stephanie were always eager to reincarnate this character, her songs and choreographies. If one looks at how dark-skinned people is read in Argentina—and one need only look at the children’s responses mentioned in the previous chapter to gain a deeper understanding of the racial hierarchies socially at play— it is my argument, then, that they are reverting the expected roles and challenging normative discourses in an attempt to demonstrate that popular culture can be—and is—used subversively to shift power imbalances. In other words, if I am Antonella, then I cannot be subjected to racism, because I am the one that discriminates against others. Thus, I am no longer an “Other”, and I am locating myself within the frameworks of “the powerful”, crossing boundaries and occupying a space that I was previously prevented from occupying.

The trademark song from the group “Las Divinas” / “The Divines” that Antonella leads is, in fact, further proof of how this group of girls is the “gate keeper” of their school/neighborhood:

*Nadie pasa de esta esquina / Nobody goes through this corner*

*aquí mandan las divinas / las divinas rule here*

*porque somos gasolina / because we are gasoline*

*gasolina de verdad / real gasoline*

*Todos saben quien manda en este school / Everybody knows who rules at this school*

*porque nosotras somos gente cool / because we are cool people*

*gente que siente, con sangre caliente / people that feel, with hot blood*
que quiere hacerse oír / that wants to be heard

Sea como sea, aquí no entran las feas / Be that as it may, no ugly girls come in here

pa’ que lo veas, te voy a mostrar / so that you see, I’ll show you

mira esa fea, aquella otra fea / see that ugly girl, that other ugly girl

aquí no pueden entrar / they can’t come in here

Nadie pasa de esta esquina / Nobody goes through this corner

aquí mandan las divinas / las divinas rule here

porque somos gasolina / because we are gasoline

gasolina de verdad / real gasolina

Nosotras bailamos bien you know? / We are good dancers, you know?

Dance, dance y mucho dance / Dance, dance and a lot of dance

Lo que pide tu corazón / What your heart asks for

Your heart, your heart, a ti te vamos a dar / Your heart, your heart, we’ll give it to you

Las divinas, las divinas, brillan, brillan como estrellas / Las divinas, las divinas, shine, shine like stars

Fuera feas, fuera feas, para ustedes no hay lugar / Out, ugly girls, out ugly girls, there’s no room for you

Nadie pasa de esta esquina / Nobody goes through this corner
The lyrics of this song, interpreted as a mediatic text, help situate the group Las Divinas’/The Divines as the one made up of beautiful, rich, and fair skinned girls—even if only the physical aspect is specifically mentioned—and as one in which “there’s no room for (ugly girls)”, thus further enabling discourses that allow for such an intersection and the resulting assumptions. Furthermore, the fact that in my observations it was almost invariably girls that participated in this role-playing might be an indication of a process of unequal discrimination, rooted in the unbalanced representations of racialized female characters. Interestingly, in all of the situations I was able to observe it was always the same group of dark-skinned girls in the class the one that was constantly engaging in the practice of reappropriating mediatic texts (songs, choreographies, pieces of dialogues, etc) from “Patito Feo”. While a few other girls also expressed an interest in the show, it was mainly Abby, Katie, and Stephanie the ones that would recreate and transform those texts in order to become the protagonists of the story, and they would eagerly express that association if prompted to do so.

_Abby, Stephanie and Katie tell me they are the main characters in “Patito Feo”/Ugly Duckling. When I ask them which are they, they say: “Las Divinas”/The Divines._

It could be argued that girls might be in need of more actively express a subversive shift in the roles they are expected to incarnate because they are exposed to a higher degree of racism and discrimination -of policing- than their male counterparts. During my work, specific instances
of sexism within the school were never blatantly evident; however, since it was the girls that would most readily acknowledge socially structured racial dynamics, it may be safe to assume that there is an underlying reason for this recognition that is related to how they are perceived and treated in their everyday lives. Indeed, there were several instances in which I was able to observe the group of girls I mentioned before associating themselves with Antonella and her group, “Las Divinas”/The Divines, as shown by the following series of notes.

Before going in, a group of 4 girls -Abby, Stephanie, Katie and Amy- are playing “Patito Feo”/Ugly Duckling. They pose, and Abby acts as the leader of the group. Later on, once we’re already in the classroom, I’ll hear Abby make a comment on “Las Divinas”/The Divines but I cannot hear what she says about it.

Abby, Katie and Stephanie are dancing a choreography from “Las Divinas”/The Divines from “Patito Feo”/Ugly Duckling. Laura sees them and she joins them, trying to follow their steps, jokingly. Abby is organizing the group and, very sensually, teaching them the steps. Laura only stays a little bit and then walks to a different part of the playground.

In the example above, while Laura -the teacher- made an attempt to join the group in their dancing recreation, her discomfort at the sensuality of Abby’s movements was quite palpable, and she immediately disengaged herself from the activity. Once again, I interpreted her uneasiness as a result of Abby’s purposeful disregard of the social norms that are expected to regulate children’s behaviors; more specifically, girls’ behaviors. Only in very limited and controlled environments are girls allowed and even encouraged to engage in somewhat sexual behaviors (like beauty pageants). The school, however, is a space in which those kinds of
behaviors (wearing make-up, wearing revealing or suggestive clothing, or engaging in sexually explicit dancing moves, among other things) are discouraged, and while Laura did not openly and verbally express her embarrassment, the fact that she chose to disassociate herself from the girls’ dance routine almost immediately after seeing Abby’s sexually suggestive moves is, I argue, indicative of her disapproval.

I mentioned before how, during my research, it was mostly the same group of girls that I would see engaging in the subversive practices of re-appropriating and reinterpreting popular culture to challenge normative racial discourses. However, there were a few instances in which some of the boys would attempt to take part in these practices, only to be rejected by the girls, as the next example shows.

The same group of girls (Abby, Katie and Stephanie) dance to the rhythm of a song from “Patito Feo”/Ugly Duckling. They are “Las Divinas”/The Divines. Two boys try to play with them, but they are not very welcomed. One of them leaves, the other one stays. The girls do not let him play with them, so he finally leaves too, but comes back after a while.

(…)

While we’re having lunch, I ask Abby which character from “Patito Feo” would she choose if she had to choose the one that was like her the most. She says ‘Antonella’, because if she curls her hair she “looks just like her” (sic). Nicholas, sitting in front of her, agrees and says that she would, in fact, look very much like Antonella if she had curls.
In the conversation mentioned above, I found it extremely interesting that Nicholas would reinforce Abby’s perceptions regarding her alleged physical similarity with Antonella since, as I explained in her introduction, she had dark skin while Antonella does not. Both of them have long, dark hair, which could have been the basis for the comparison. Still, in this particular instance both children erased any dominant racial discourses that place dark skinned people outside the boundaries of what is acceptable in television and reaffirmed their belief that, even when their responses regarding the picture of a group of children very much like them in their physical aspect could elicit opinions rooted in their perceived “ugliness” and “low class”, when the lens is turned towards them there is a vertiginous shift in their point of view, allowing for a comparison that places them at the same level/s than their favorite TV character.

Reenacting dancing choreographies was a big part of how the girls would re-appropriate popular culture, but there were other practices in which they would engage that served the same purpose. One of these performances entailed embodying their favorite “Patito Feo”/Ugly Duckling character, almost infallibly Antonella. In the following example, Hannah volunteers her full name, while Abby pushes the boundaries of her role-playing.

While we are in the playground, I ask Hannah about her poodle-scarf. I ask what is it called (I am referring to the dog’s name) and she says: “Chalina (scarf), in Peru”. Abby comes over and tells me about her, and about her names, and she says her middle name is Antonella, because of “Las Divinas”/The Divines. Hannah, who is listening, tells me that her middle name is (and she writes it herself in my notebook) “Haiko Tamari Hannah”. The girls tell me that in “Patito Feo”/Ugly Duckling, Patito and Antonella have switched bodies. Abby tells me:
“I’m going to write down my real name”, and she writes down “Antonella” in my notebook.

In my work, it was mainly the girls the ones that demonstrated a tendency to use popular culture subversively; however, both boys and girls consistently showed their knowledge of “Patito Feo”/Ugly Duckling’s characters, dynamics and plot, and would use elements from the show in everyday situations. I mentioned in the children’s introductions that Collin was originally from Ukraine, and that he would usually bring new or valuable items from home in order to establish his socio-economic status as, at least, middle-class. Her mother was a psychologist in her home-country, and she had been important enough to be featured in a magazine article, with a picture of her accompanying the piece. Collin had brought the magazine to class before, I learned, but the children refused to believe that the article and photography were real. While the girls would frequently associate themselves with “Las Divinas”/The Divines and their leader, Antonella, being “popular” (Patito’s trait) was in no way negatively perceived, even when it was not their first option. In fact, several times the children applied the notion of “popular” to either approve or disapprove of someone’s conduct or clothing. The following is one example in which they use the idea of being “popular” to express their feelings towards Collin.

Since many children have expressed a desire to be famous when they grow up, there is a discussion on what it means to be “famous”, which then turns into a discussion on Collin’s mom photo in a magazine. I learn that Collin’s mom photography appeared in a magazine, and he brought it to school to show the rest of the children, but they do not believe him and say that the picture was glued and that it wasn’t real. Only Ian defends Collin, and says that there are many jealous
children/“muchos celosos”. The rest of the children chant together: “He’s not po-
pu-lar!” (Noes-po-pular!). Abby, bringing the discussion back to the idea of fame,
then says: “We can also be singers, music singers, like ‘The Divines/Las
Divinas’” and sings a song from the TV show.

The example above is not the only instance in which the children used the notion of
“popularity” borrowed from “Patito Feo”/”/Ugly Duckling to relate it to someone’s status in the
classroom. In the example that follows, they use the same idea in order to establish their approval
about Eli’s new piece of clothing. Interestingly, in this case the children are borrowing an
element from one TV show in order to show their enthusiasm about another TV show,
integrating different aspects of popular culture to create a new and converging narrative.

_The bell rings, and it’s Physical Education hour next, so the children take off their
white coats. When the boys see Eli’s new Ben 10 sweatshirt, they say: “How
popular!”/Que popular!_

If, as I. Molina Guzmán (2008) argues, symbolic practices affirm material practices that
produce, reproduce and maintain inequality and if we look at the production of media content as
one of those possible practices, then it is hardly surprising to see examples in which the girls
attempt to reconfigure that disparity by expressing their desire to be perceived as part of the
privileged sectors. Their belief in the relationship between light skin (or blonde hair) and
privilege is present in one of the examples in the previous chapter, in which being blonde is
equaled with “having everything”, and the following situation is proof of some of the girls’
perception of what physical aspects are sought-after.
In Hannah’s table the girls are talking about being princesses or queens, and with **blue eyes**.

If we only consider this one piece of conversation, we might fail to perceive the children’s guiding notions regarding the intersection of race and privilege. After all, this only suggests an apparent connection between one’s physical aspect and notions of beauty. However, looking at both examples together allows us to gain a deeper understanding of how both of these notions are also tied to the idea of privilege.

Not only did the girls incorporate elements of “Patito Feo”/*Ugly Duckling* during recesses, but they also found ways -as the next example shows- of incorporating elements of the show inside the classroom.

*The first thing Laura does this morning is to read a commitment that the children have written (it’s a collaboration) in which they pledge to play nicely during the recesses. In it, each child has made a specific promise as to what they will be doing during the recesses, and Stephanie has written that she will play “Las Divinas” with Abby, Amy and Katie.*

As part of the first workshop, one of the tasks I asked the children to do was to look at some magazines that I had brought. In order to elicit a comparison between the characters from the TV shows they named as popular and the pictures of dark-skinned children I found online, I brought to class four different magazines (two “Patito Feo”/*Ugly Duckling* ones and two “Casi Angeles”/*Almost Angels* ones) and asked them to browse them and, after a certain time, to keep rotating them between groups. All of these magazines came with a small added prize (a bracelet, two posters and a furry ball) and a at the end of the workshop I had a drawing in order to give
away all the magazines and the prizes. I put every child’s name in a bag, and I asked for volunteers to draw names out. The last prize to be awarded was a “Casi Angeles”/Almost Angels magazine, which ended up in the hands of Collin, the rightful winner. When his name came up, a general groan could be heard from the class, but Andrew was especially upset by this turn of events and made it his mission to obtain the magazine at all costs. After offering Collin several of his possessions in exchange for it without success, he was finally able to reach an agreement by trading it for an autographed caricature that looked like it could be of value. Some of his classmates criticized him for the transaction, stating that his drawing was one of a kind, while the magazine could be bought at any kiosk (a valid point, I might argue). Andrew, however, was very happy with the swap and the next day I wrote down the following observations:

Andrew tells me that he brought the ‘Casi Angeles’ magazine (that Collin won yesterday, at the raffle, and which he traded for a drawing), and Nicholas tells me that he found his bracelet (just like the one that came in the ‘Casi Angeles’ magazine).

(…)

I notice that Ethan is wearing the ‘Casi Angeles’ bracelet that he won in the raffle yesterday (the same one that Nicholas has).

I am using these situations to illustrate that the realm of popular culture was not exclusively limited to the girls in the class, and that there were several instances such as these ones in which boys would express interest in and knowledge about the same TV shows that the girls mentioned watching, although it was far more common for me to see the girls re-enacting pieces of “Patito Feo”/Ugly Duckling, as in the next examples.
Abby pretends to be a showgirl (vedette), and Helena and Daisy are escorting her while she dances. Amy and Katie watch. After a while, Stephanie joins them.

Hannah approaches me and wants my attention. When I ask her about it, Abby tells me they’re dancing ‘Las Divinas’ (Patito Feo). She and Stephanie are using the benches as stairs, walking down saying ‘Sorry’ (sic) and pretending to be models. On each side, and standing in the steps, the other girls make room for Abby and Stephanie as they come down with their diva attitude. They sing a song from the show.

Helena and Stephanie sing a song for Laura. They say it’s from ‘Las Populares’ (Patito Feo)

(...)

Abby is playing ‘Las Divinas’ again, pretending to be Antonella (Patito Feo) going down the benches like a diva, but she lets Lily be the protagonist for a while (since it’s her birthday today). Daisy, Amy, Katie, and Lily are escorting her, and Hannah is right behind me watching. The girls dance a choreography, they go up the stairs and Abby positions them. She goes on top with Lily, Katie and Amy are one step below, and Daisy and Hannah (who joined them later) at the bottom. They make room, and start going down in order. Abby introduces Lily to the rest of the girls as “Luciana”. Helena and Stephanie are playing together, on a different area of the playground.

In the next examples, the girls took their role-playing even further, blurring the limits of fiction and reality by either insinuating that they would only take verbal abuse if it came from
Antonella, thus suggesting that an actual interaction between them and Antonella would be a possibility or, furthermore, by referring to themselves as characters from “Patito Feo” /Ugly Duckling, even inside the classroom, during class.

While we are waiting in line to go back to the classroom, Hannah talks loudly to Stephanie. Stephanie replies: “You’re not Antonella to scream at me like that!” /Vos no sos Antonella para gritarme así!

(...)

Laura reads the story “Veridica Historia de Rios, Mares y Montañas” by Gustavo Roldan, about a toad, savvy and a liar, who tells the rest of the animals how he created, along with a group of toads friends, the rivers, seas and mountains. There’s a discussion after the reading about streetwise people (‘cancheros’). Abby says she pretends to be streetwise because she’s Antonella (Patito Feo) and when Hannah is about to say something Katie throws her an eraser and tells her: “Shut up, Patito!”.

I find this next and final situation particularly interesting, since it seems especially relevant to illustrate how perceptions of race are never fixed and, more importantly, how discourses on race are applied differently in different situations.

Lily comes over to show me three pictures she brought from home. There’s one of her as a baby, one of her niece, and one of her as a toddler. Helena sees them, and when she looks at the one of Lily as a toddler she tells her: “You were black!” /Eras negrita! Lily doesn’t answer.
In the situation described above, Helena’s statement gives rise to two different ideas that I believe are predominantly significant, as they pertain to my argument regarding the fluidity of how race is perceived and how normative discourses on race are challenged and subverted. In the first place, Helena’s use of the past tense (“You were black!“/Eras negrita!), along with the surprise with which she made the statement, indicates that she does not consider Lily as black/negrita now. This is interesting because, as I stated in Lily’s introduction, I perceived her to be dark-skinned, and definitely not as light-skinned as Helena. Helena, however, and based on the above statement, seems to not share my opinion. Following this idea, then, race can be –just like beauty- “in the eye of the beholder”. In the second place, the mere fact that Helena finds it important to even mention Lily’s “previous” racial features suggests her understanding that race is, indeed, an integral part in the social construction of identities, even if her surprise at the perceived change in Lily’s appearance indicates how uncommon she finds this situation.

Finally, I argue that the break in the discursive nature of who is allowed in TV (“they” vs. “me/us”) can be related to Foucault’s argument that not only is knowledge always a form of power but power is implicated in the questions of whether and in what circumstances knowledge is to be applied or not. Thus, when TV narratives and the perceived notion that dark-skinned children do not have a place in television are utilized to explain the situation of “others”, that same knowledge is challenged (as a form of subversive power) in discourses about “me/us”.

(Foucault & Gordon, 1980)
FIGURE

Fig. 6.1: “Noticias Magazine” – Nr. 1636, May 2nd, 2008

“THE SUCCESS OF DISCRIMINATION –
TV as a reflection of the fracture among the young”

“Patito Feo and the incorrect rating”
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

In Argentina, racial diversity is frequently erased from popular discourses, and the grand narrative of this country presents it as mostly white and European and lacking in racism due to its historical formation—based, mainly, on several immigration waves that contributed to these discourses. And television is no exception. In fact, as I have shown here, the role of the media—in particular, television—in children’s perceptions of their social worlds is such that the result of the lack of racial heterogeneity in television characters leads the children to assume that such representations should not be allowed a place in popular culture. I have shown in this study, as a result of my conversations about television and race, that children’s responses and unquestioning acceptance demonstrate the normative power of representational homogeneity in today’s popular culture.

However, accepting and perpetuating discourses about racial hierarchies was by no means equal to a lack of subversive uses of television content, as I have shown how several of the children broke the barriers that separate race and popular culture, but only when those instances applied specifically to them. I argue that children are definitely capable of making sense of the lack of racial representations in today’s Argentine television, while at the same time being immersed in a series of social relations that might contradict the racial portrayals that television shows today. Interestingly enough, while race cannot be talked about as a separate social construction disconnected from notions of gender and class, the social spectrum of socio-economic-statuses is, in fact, present in today’s television characters in Argentina. It is my argument, then, that the fact that characters from lower classes are as available and depicted as much as characters from upper classes in fact helps to perpetuate the idea that racial diversity
does not exist. Class diversity is acknowledged, while racial diversity is not. Because race is always read within discourses on class, the invisibility of racial diversity becomes especially problematic when portrayals of class diversity are plentiful. This situation is then a stronger indicator that racial homogeneity is the apparent norm.

My decision to conduct research in Buenos Aires, Argentina, was rooted in the belief that analyzing discourses of race and its intersection with popular culture was, for several reasons, an especially important task to conduct in this country. First, barely any work has been done that explores the triadic nature of the connection between popular culture, children and race. The specificities of the historical racial construction of the Argentine society, starting with its colonization and the massive genocide of the original inhabitants, have resulted in the apparent and commonly held belief that we are, indeed, the “Paris of Latin America”, a nation that can only be characterized as white and that has been frequently described as a “melting pot” (crisol de razas) but one in which only European immigrants have been historically considered worthy of mention. Negating the racial diversity that is an essential part of the Argentine society means erasing from our social and cultural identity a part of our history that continues to be present, even when the media insists in ignoring it. And the children, as I have shown, are willing and eager to show us that they will not let that happen. Secondly, while I have found the work of two Argentine scholars in an area similar to the one I have explored, in one case the focus was on race -but not on children or popular culture- and, in the second case, the focus was on children and popular culture -but not on race-. Thus, this is an attempt to bridge those two different approaches and to add to that analysis the children’s own voices, as much as one can do so. Finally, studies similar to this one have been conducted by several researchers in the United States and in other countries, and extending this work to Argentina with similar results, even
under such different historical and social conditions, adds to the body of existing literature and reinforces the idea that there might be something universal about children’s ability to re-create, reproduce and challenge existing notions through their use of popular culture.

It is true that, according to my observations, it seems that the power of mediatic texts is such that children, maybe inadvertently, perpetuate existing narratives that equate dark skin with “lower class” and “ugliness”. They did this, as far as I was able to observe, when I presented them with pictures of children that might very well have been themselves, since many of them shared the same physical qualities with the children portrayed in the pictures. However, I conducted only two workshops with them, during the course of two mornings. The rest of the four months I stayed with them as part of the class their behaviors were telling a much different story. A story, that is, in which they were the protagonists, regardless of their class background and, more importantly, regardless of their skin color and their perceived races and/or ethnicities. A story in which it doesn’t matter what one looks like, it only matters who one wants to be. And if who they want to be is at odds with who they should be, the conflict between these two positions is never even acknowledged, as it has little importance during the act of reclaiming one’s position.

The fact that children are quite capable of recognizing the problematic nature of mediatic texts (TV programs, songs, magazines, etc) such as the ones explained in this work and, more importantly, their ability to move past and contest the contradictory nature of these contents is indicative of their ability to participate as social actors in the act of re-shaping and re-producing elements of popular culture that might be guiding their actions. As Waisbord explains, “formats neither crystallize a static notion of national culture nor are pure impositions of external values, (but) they are texts in which different understandings of national identity are projected and
redefined against the backdrop of imported formulas” (Waisbord, 2004). It seems especially relevant, then, to understand how children react and recreate these notions, based on the available content.

Television remains a central place for articulating the national (Waisbord, 2004), and if we agree on children’s capacity of participating in this process as agents of change, then we can make an important contribution by helping them to actively recognize how to bridge the disconnection between ingrained normative discourses in popular culture and the revolutionary instances in which those discourses are challenged. (Again, “they” vs. “me”). Once they recognize those instances in which normative discourses are inadvertently perpetuated, they can then become agents of change themselves, and the process of challenging problematic and contradictory mediatic texts can begin not just by reappropriating popular culture and reproducing its contents subversively but, more significantly, by purposefully questioning the nature of those contents before being reproduced. In other words, once children learn to critically analyze how media representations are portraying “others”, and to recognize the assumptions guiding those texts, they can extend those instances in which normative discursive practices are challenged in order to include “others” as much as themselves.

Incomplete aspect of my research:

While it was my intention to spend a few more weeks conducting research at the school, due to unforeseen circumstances (an outbreak of the N1H1 epidemic flu, which resulted in the abrupt decision of the Argentine government to begin the school winter break three weeks in advance) I was not able to round up the work the children and I did during both workshops. It
was my intention to dedicate some time at the end of my stay to bring to their attention the emerging preconceived notions about the stereotypical representations perpetuated in popular culture. However, this was not possible. Even when I believe the importance of this work lies in the reaffirmation that children are indeed capable of transforming culture, I also agree wholeheartedly with the affirmation that “if we seriously mean to improve the life conditions for children we must, as a minimum precondition, establish reporting systems in which they are heard themselves as well as reported on by others” (Qvortrup, 1997) This was a much needed missing step in my work, and one that should not be considered unimportant.

**Suggestions for future research:**

My work was strictly confined to a single 3rd grade class in one elementary school located in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The classroom composition was such that it allowed for the observation of and interaction with a diverse group of children, different both in their gender, socio-economic status and races/ethnicities. While this kind of qualitative methodology does not seek generalizability, extending this work to include children of different ages, geographical backgrounds, and life experiences, among other factors, can do nothing but contribute to the general understanding of how, in each socially constructed and historical context of childhood, both children and adults negotiate the terms under which culture is created and recreated.
REFERENCES


