

Titel/Title: Imagining Afrodescendance and the African Diaspora in Spain:
Re-/Decentering Belonging in Literature, Photography, and Film

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Veröffentlichungsversion/Published version: Postprint

Publikationsform/Type of publication: Artikel/Aufsatz

Empfohlene Zitierung/Recommended citation:

Borst, J. (2021). Imagining Afrodescendance and the African Diaspora in Spain: Re-/Decentering Belonging in Literature, Photography, and Film. *Research in African Literatures* 52(2), 168-197. doi:10.2979/reseafritelite.52.2.10.

Verfügbar unter/Available at:

(wenn vorhanden, bitte den DOI angeben/please provide the DOI if available)

doi:10.2979/reseafritelite.52.2.10

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Julia Borst won the 2023 Abioseh Porter Best Essay Award of the African Literature Association for this article.

Imagining Afrodescendance and the African Diaspora in Spain: Re-/Decentering Belonging in Literature, Photography, and Film

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Abstract: In recent years, an increasing number of African and Afrodescendant artists in Spain have been speaking from an in-between space defined by the experience of being perceived as the “racialized Other.” Their work is characterized by a political commitment and an aim to provide visibility to their communities and (re-)value their African heritage. From a cultural studies and discourse analysis perspective, I explore three diverse examples, poems by Yeison García López, a photobook by Rubén H. Bermúdez, and a documentary by Sergio Aparicio, that all imagine Afrodescendance as a shared narrative and empowering moment relating Africa and her diaspora. In their works, García López, Bermúdez and Aparicio conceptualize Afrodescendance as a powerful source of belonging. Relating to the multitude of African/Afrodiasporic realities, they offer a de-centered space of identification that enables the subject to embrace (new) networks of solidarity and through active self-positioning, transcend an experience of marginalization characteristic of her/his diasporic condition.

Funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) – project number 353492083

The African Diaspora in Spain and its Protagonists in Activism and the Arts

This paper investigates the artistic production of a new generation of Afrodescendant artists in Spain who, speaking from an in-between space, conceptualize Afrodescendance and Afrodiasporic belonging as an empowering moment of self-positioning and identification. This conceptualization allows them to transcend the experience of being excluded in a European society that tends to marginalize the “racialized Other”, silence their voices and obscure their claim to belong. My analysis covers artistic work from three different fields and, in doing so, shows the extent of this artistic push toward a vocal platform.

It should be common knowledge that the African presence on the Iberian Peninsula dates back many centuries, not only due to the age-long coexistence with Al-Andalus and its North African rulers but also to a lasting presence of (mostly enslaved) Africans dating back to the beginnings of the transatlantic slave trade and earlier (Plazolles Guillén 23; García Barranco 6). In his doctoral dissertation, historian and activist Antumi-Toasjié Pallás Valencia – known mainly as

Antumi Toasijé – impressively traces back this presence throughout the history of the peninsula up to the current day. Yet, he also argues that Spain’s “pasado cultural diverso” [diverse cultural past] (25)¹ continues to be ignored or disavowed, in particular concerning African influences that have been excluded “from the centuries-long conversation about Spanish identity” (Faszer-McMahon and Ketz 1). And this suppression is why some might still not know about this long-lasting presence.

Contemporary research shows that, while migration (from Africa, among others) to Spain has, indeed, notably increased since the 1980s, the presence of African and Afrodescendant people in Spain cannot be limited to this period (Fra-Molinero 154; Instituto Nacional de Estadística 20-21; Pallás Valencia 18). But still, the perception persists that migration from Africa is a phenomenon from the tail-end of the twentieth century; a phenomenon that, furthermore, parts of Spanish society tend to perceive as menacing (Faszer-McMahon and Ketz 9-12; Pallás Valencia 879). At the same time, the idea lingers that, given Spain’s notable history of cultural exchange and coexistence with northern Africa, “*no somos racistas*” [we aren’t racist] (Goode 209; original emphasis). This particular historical, political, and cultural background needs to be kept in mind when discussing the current situation of African and Afrodescendant people in Spain and their cultural production.

Existing studies have shown that the African diaspora in Spain has suffered from extensive invisibility for a long time. The collective memory in Spain has tended and still tends to spread a veil of silence over its colonial endeavors on the African continent as well as on its involvement in the slave trade (Pallás Valencia 17, 25; Brancato 33-34; Aixelà Cabré 140-46). Instead, it fosters “[un] mito nacional de la unidad racial de España” [a national myth of Spain’s racial unity] (M. García 15) that, according to several scholars (e.g., Repinecz 91-93; Persánch 117-18; Fra-

Molinero 147-49), resulted in a strategical “(re-)whitening” of Spain’s national identity in the 20th century.

Yet, Spanish society’s ignoring of this community is being challenged (M. García 17; Pallás Valencia 17, 25). Among other topics, academic research has taken on the task of studying the past and contemporary presence of African and Afrodescendant people on the Iberian Peninsula beyond current migratory movements (43-50). Furthermore, while, as Desirée Bela-Lobedde deplores in her autobiographical text *Ser mujer negra en España* [Being a Black Woman in Spain] (2018), until recently, black Spaniards had to grow up without any black role models in Spain. However, since the end of the last millennium, an increasing number of African and Afrodescendant activists in Spain have started raising their voices: “*la denominada generación afroespañola*” [the so-called Afrospanish generation] (Pallás Valencia 893; original emphasis). That is, a new generation of activists has emerged that, in large, have not migrated themselves—or if they have, at a very young age (Pallás Valencia 880). As recent studies show (Pallás Valencia 890, 893), unlike their migrant predecessors, they address different questions to some extent. Political scientist Saiba Bayo emphasizes that, unlike the former generation that aims at preserving a particular (national or ethnic) cultural background after having migrated, this new generation tends to “build a new identity by claiming their Blackness” (n. p.) within Spain. Moreover, sharing a set of similar experiences and ideas despite the community’s heterogeneity, these new activists increasingly deal with questions of antiracism and associate with transnational black movements and communities.²

Representatives of this new generation campaign in the political field (e.g., Rita Bosaho Gori, Yeison García López) or organize empowering events for the community (such as the *Festival Conciencia Afro* in Madrid or *Black Barcelona*). But they also create artistic work ranging from printed literature (e.g., Lucía Mbomío Rubio, Jeffrey Abé Pans, Oscar Kem-mekah Kadzue,

Desirée Bela-Lobedde, Yeison García López) to digitally published texts (on online platforms such as *Afroféminas*, *Africanidad*, *Negrxs Magazine* or *Radio Africa Magazine*, to name but a few), from music (e.g., Buika, El Chojin) to performances (e.g., Silvia Albert Sopale) and (audio)visual works of art (e.g., Rubén H. Bermúdez, Sergio Aparicio, Santiago Zannou).³

The work of many of these artists is characterized by activism and political commitment, in particular in the case of those born in Spain and with a Spanish passport. They tend to claim a space for the “black community” within Spanish society, rejecting the predominant equation of being black *and* being a migrant (M. García 18, 26). They question hegemonic structures and political reality, and their main impetus, according to Mar Garcia, not only consists of their thinking and re-defining of “blackness” on a global level but also of a critical debate of democratic structures in Spanish society itself (12-14). Their work and activism are consequently to be considered as being subversive in the sense that they try to penetrate the public space to “dar voz a los silenciados” [give voice to the silenced] (12).

However, Mar García reminds us to not mistake their claim for a black identity (*identidad negra*) as a return to essentialism but to recognize it as a strategic intervention:

el discurso racial, cuando se produce, debe entenderse como una construcción ideológica asumida por su eficacia política. Todos los que se definen a partir de ella saben bien que no existe una identidad negra, sino tantas formas de vivir la negritud como individuos. Pero también saben que, por separado, sus aportaciones corren riesgo de ser evaluadas exclusivamente desde la norma. Es por ello por lo que muchos artistas privilegian el aspecto comunitario de su creación. (26)

[the racial discourse, when it is produced, must be understood as an ideological construction assumed for its political efficiency. All of those who define themselves based on this construction know very well that there is not one black identity but many different forms to live blackness as individuals. But they also know that, individually, their contributions risk being evaluated exclusively from the norm. It is for this reason that many artists place importance on the community aspect of their creations.]

In accordance with what Gayatri C. Spivak has called “strategic essentialism” (184), many of these artists in Spain, thus, consciously use generalizing or homogenizing assumptions that allow African and Afrodescendant people in Spain to gain visibility as a collective.

In the following, I explore examples of artists from different fields that unveil that this debate about Afrodescendance and belonging is not limited to a specific artistic genre: poetry by Yeison García López, a photobook by Rubén H. Bermúdez, and a full-length documentary by Sergio Aparicio. These artists belong to the new generation of artists and activists of African descent who, some of them being *mestizxs* (of mixed race), have been born or grown up in Spain. Accordingly, they speak from an in-between space. This space is characterized by an ambivalent situation of belonging and exclusion, for Spanish society tends to relegate people “who look different” to the margins and the status of being “a foreigner” or a migrant who has never truly arrived (Persánchez; Espinoza Garrido et al. 3; Aixelà Cabré 141; Bayo). These artists represent a diasporic perspective and, insinuating that their individual stories speak to those who share similar experiences, target an audience that partakes of this diasporic condition. Bermúdez’s photobook, for instance, is explicitly dedicated to “all black people” (*YT* 240). In the closing credits, Aparicio dedicates his documentary to the female members of his family. But he also dedicates it to “all beings of light” (*Galsen* 57:08 min.), a concept he uses during his visit to Gorée Island to describe his own position within an African genealogy. He evokes this collective dimension when, in the documentary’s initial scene, the voice-over states that the body of the Afrodescendant subject who is travelling to Africa is “part of a bigger and spiritual organ” (*Galsen* 2:15 min.).⁴

As Felipe Espinoza Garrido, Caroline Koegler, Debora Nyangulu, and Mark U. Stein explain, European societies in general are marked by a notion of normative whiteness. These societies marginalize the “racialized Other”, which is why the scholars diagnose a politics of contingent belonging: “a conditional belonging that is strategically granted *and* revoked” (2; original emphasis) that results in a “discriminatory ... episteme that governs who can belong in Europe and under which conditions” (2). Yet, Espinoza Garrido, Caroline Koegler, Debora

Nyangulu, and Mark U. Stein argue that contingent belonging, as an active self-positioning and identity politics “from below”, can also bring forth “individual agency and resistance” (21; also 3-4). According to their understanding (4; also 22), these resisting and “defiant” narratives of identity explicitly allow for frictions that transverse established categories and preexisting ascriptions.

Those frictions and the resulting tensions continuously arise in the artists’ works. These deal with a local Spanish context but, at the same time, relate to a global context of both anti-black racism and Afrodiasporic communities as spaces of identification and self-empowerment. In their works, they conceptualize Afrodescendance as a shared narrative to which the “racialized” subject can relate and thus re-value her/his African heritage (Adi 185) and imagine alternative networks of belonging given her/his experiences of exclusion and stereotyping for “being black” within Spanish society. The notions of “blackness” and “race” (as a socially ascribed construct that determines the subject’s lived reality and not a biological fact) play a crucial role in this context. However, as we will see, many different aspects intersect in the artists’ works, opening up a complex network of geographical, historical, and/or cultural references that affect affiliations and the diasporic condition of the subject.

To varying degrees, the studied examples echo Pan-African ideas and imagine a transnational Afrodiasporic community connected through shared histories and experiences (nevertheless, with local particularities) and characterized by a feeling of common ground and solidarity (Adi 2-3), ideas that, as Saiba Bayo argues, “promote collective consciousness” (n. p.) and fuel “the intergroup relationship” (n. p.) within a highly heterogeneous Afrodiasporic community in Spain. By evoking such a diasporic network, the analyzed examples de-center affiliations and not only look back to Africa as a lost “homeland”. Instead, the works analyzed in

this paper symbolically and epistemically engage with the (in fact, highly heterogeneous) African diaspora elsewhere and multiple realities (Clifford 306; Hall, “Diaspora” 119-20).⁵

Still, Africa as a symbolic “center” is present, albeit, not as a geographical space but as a symbolic one charged with ascriptions. It is conceptualized as an ambivalent point of identification that speaks to the Afrodiasporic subject but, simultaneously, triggers an experience of discontinuity (Hall, “Cinematic” 213-14). Consequently, Stuart Hall, using the African diaspora in the Caribbean as an example, argues that Africa turns into a shifting signifier: It is “necessarily ‘deferred’—as a spiritual, cultural, and political metaphor” (217)—and “retold” as part of the African diaspora’s imaginary (218).⁶

Yet, the situatedness of the diasporic subject within Spain and/or Europe steadily pierces the surface of the artists’ narratives on identity constructions as well. Sergio Aparicio vividly sums up the frictions arising from these multi-polar positionings in an interview from 13 June 2018:

yo soy una persona que ha sido criada en Europa y que ha sido también discriminada en Europa, por lo cual yo creo que no he tenido un sentido patriótico de pertenencia en concreto, sino que siempre he divagado en un limbo de no saber de donde soy, ni de donde provengo. Creo que este es un punto de partida esencial a la hora de desarrollar un proyecto como Galsen. El explicar cómo una persona afrodescendiente se enfrenta a una situación de discriminación en su propio país de nacimiento, y cómo esto le lleva, a su vez, a buscar colmar esa carencia afectiva que tiene de sí mismo y de sus raíces que es, en mi caso, las raíces africanas. (Aparicio, *We’re Magazine*, n. p.)

[I’m a person who has been raised in Europe, and I’ve also been discriminated in Europe, which is why I think I haven’t specifically had a patriotic sense of belonging, I’ve rambled in a limbo of knowing neither where I’m from nor where I descend from. I think this is an essential starting point when developing a project like Galsen. To explain how an Afrodescendant person faces a situation of discrimination in her/his own country of birth, and how this takes her/him, at the same time, to look for filling this affective lack that one has of oneself and one’s roots that are, in my case, African roots.]

From a cultural studies and discourse analysis perspective, I analyze the poetry collection *Voces del impulso*, the photobook *Y tú ¿por qué eres negro?*, and the documentary *Galsen, el lenguaje de las almas* successively in the following. I will retrace and describe the notions and discourses on Afrodescendance these works echo and explore how the three artists conceptualize Afrodescendance as a space of identification for African and Afrodescendant people in Spain. The

paper discusses how the arts, thus, allow a symbolic community of “Others” to arise, a community who shares a condition of alleged “non-belonging” which, nevertheless, is turned into an empowering moment of solidarity with each other.

Entangled Afrodiasporic Communities and Transnational Solidarity—*Voces del impulso* (2016) by Yeison F. García López

The first example is a collection of poems entitled *Voces del impulso* [The Impulse’s Voices] and published in 2016 by Yeison F. García López, a writer and activist of Afrocolombian descent living in Spain.⁷ Among others, he is involved in antiracist movements and associations in Spain such as the “Kwanzaa,” “Conciencia Afro,” or “SOS Racismo” and in campaigns for the Spanish left-wing political party “Podemos,” and he also writes for the online journal *Negrxs Magazine* (e.g., M. García 47-59; Toasijé, “Voces”).⁸

It is, in particular, the third part of his collection of poems that is of interest in our context: It repeatedly broaches the issue of a poetic speaker of African descent that lives in a society in which “whiteness” is considered an unmarked norm. In his poems, García López alludes to the poetic speaker’s uprooting that, as in the poem “Consciencia” [Conscience], makes her/him oscillate between memories of a Colombian childhood and a postmigratory experience in Spain. However, at the end of this poem, the poetic speaker affirms that “me reafirmo como alma creciente, | como afrocolombiano, afroespañol, | negra es mi piel, humano es mi corazón” [I reaffirm myself as a growing soul, as Afrocolombian, Afrospanish, black is my skin, human is my heart] (VI 71). These verses indicate that the Self is not just situated within different geographic spaces—that is in Colombia or Spain—but within a symbolic and de-territorialized Afrodiasporic community defined not by a common origin but by a shared experience of “being black.” This

positioning echoes the emblematic verse preceding the collection's third part, entitled "Mi piel" [My Skin], and thematically framing its nine poems: "La historia se baña en mi negra piel" [History bathes in my black skin] (VI 54). Accordingly, most of those poems describe the racism poetic speakers have suffered in the past and keep suffering in the present, for instance by evoking Frantz Fanon's concept of the "white Other's gaze" that transforms the black subject into "cuerpos racializados" [racialized bodies] (60).⁹

The poem with the symbolic title "Comunidad" [Community] embraces this shared experience, stating that "Nos bañamos en el mismo mar de la historia, | pues es nuestra piel la que nos ata y nos abandona" [We bathe in the same sea of history, as it is our skin that ties us and abandons us] (VI 56). First, these verses highlight the historical dimension of the marginalization experienced by Afrodescendant subjects. The verses also emphasize that the poetic speaker's experience is not linked to territorial or cultural origins. It tends to be based on skin color, that is, on a "racialized" construct and its instrumentalization within a colonial and Eurocentric ideology. As many of García López's poems, these verses also strongly link the notion of Afrodescendance to "blackness." This notion is also taken up in the poem "Los márgenes de la memoria" [The Margins of Memory], affirming the fact that the "hijos y hijas [de África] sufren por la oscuridad de su piel" [sons and daughters [of Africa] suffer from the darkness of their skin] (VI 62; my addition). Finally, and this is essential, the poetic speaker does not undergo this experience as a merely violent act in "Comunidad" but describes it as the point of departure of an imagined community. Such a feeling of commonality is, furthermore, being emphasized by the repeated use of the first-person plural. However, the slightly negative connotation that resonates in the verb "atar" also indicates that this commonality is not just a chosen but also an imposed one.

As we can see in García López's poems, this community, however, is imagined beyond territorial borders as a transnational community that embraces people of African descent both from the African continent and from the African diaspora. Yet, the author de-centers the diasporic experience by reaching beyond two-dimensional connections between the African continent and the hostland. He complexifies hegemonic narratives of displacement by emphasizing a tripleness of his exile in "Los márgenes de la memoria" [The Margins of Memory], which refers to lateral movements between spaces including Africa, Columbia, and Spain (VI 62-64). Correspondingly, the Afrodiasporic community described by the author is represented as a relatively heterogeneous group, as the verse "las miradas entretejen *mundos dispares*" [the gazes that interweave *different worlds*] (VI 56; my emphasis; also 62) confirms. But the poem also reflects that the members of this community, nevertheless, have in common the experience of discovering being marked by their "blackness." Here, the noun "miradas" resonates a trope used by Frantz Fanon to describe this experience of "suffocating reification" (89) triggered by what he called the "dissecting white gaze" (95).

As insinuated by the poem "Comunidad," skin color serves as a metaphor for a shared history of racism that reduced Africans and Afrodescendants to commodities and bodies that could be used and violated. García López picks up this symbolism again in the poem "El otro" [The Other]

De aquí de allí siempre seré el otro,
 viajero sin un lugar de retorno,
 para el que los caminos se pierden en apertura
 donde seres externos controlan mi piel oscura,
 para quienes soy, aún sin verme, sospechoso.

Tiño mis mundos de negro intenso
 para bailar sin complejos en el arco-iris.
 Nadando entre los mares ocultos del miedo,
 siento, me apropio, contempló, soy el otro. (VI 59)

[From here from there I'll always be the other | traveler without a place to return to, | for whom the paths get lost in openness | where beings from elsewhere control my dark skin, | for whom I am, yet without seeing me, suspicious. || I dye my worlds in an intensive black | to dance without complexes on the

rainbow. | Swimming between the dark seas of fear, | I feel, I appropriate, I've contemplated, I am the other.]

The motif of “seres externos” that control the poetic speaker’s dark skin not only alludes to the practice of racial profiling but at the same time refers, again, to the reasoning of Fanon (92), who signaled that the subject’s “blackness” arose within the white Other’s gaze. Furthermore, these verses highlight that such a stereotypization disguises the poetic speaker’s subjectivity as she/he is not seen as an individual (“aún *sin verme*”; my emphasis) but reduced to her/his bodily features.

In addition, this poem echoes a motif from “Comunidad.” It hints at the poetic speaker’s conscient affirmation of her/his Afrodescendance (“*tiño de negro intenso*”) as being an essential feature of her/his identity (“soy el otro”). In an illustrative manner, it describes the emancipatory moment of (re-)appropriating oneself of one’s own “blackness,” a moment of substituting an imposed adscription by a positive, actively, and self-determinedly constructed self-image.

This is evocative of Costa Rican poet and activist of African descent Shirley Campbell Barr and her popular poem “Rotundamente negra” [Absolutely Black]. In that poem, widely read within Spanish-speaking Afrodiasporic communities, Campbell Barr articulates the need to (re-)appropriate and re-signify the term “negro/a” (*Rotundamente* 17; also Pallás Valencia 58). In an interview from 2007, she affirms the necessity of this empowering act of self-imagining:

yo reivindico la palabra negro porque nos la ganamos a pesar de que fue una palabra impuesta. ... Ha habido toda una resignificación del término que hoy yo reclamo Yo no quiero ser nombrada. Yo decido nombrarme. ... Soy negra y a mucha honra. (“No éramos” n. p.)

[I claim the word black as we earned it although it was an imposed word. ... There was a whole resignification of the term that I claim today I don’t want to be named. I decide to name myself. ... I’m a black woman and I’m very proud of it].

Comparably, García López’s imagery evokes positive self-affirmative connotations of “blackness.”

Consequently, being the Other, despite representing an experience of exclusion at first, turns into a recognition of the Self. This oscillation of the poetic speaker is simultaneously reflected in

the poems' titles, which echo the binary of alienation and belonging: "El otro" [The Other] on the one hand, "Comunidad" [Community] on the other. Basically, the poetic speaker constructs a community of "Others." Accordingly, possible geographical or cultural references are pushed aside by a chosen space of solidarity inspired by the shared experience of being "the Other" and, more precisely, "the black Other," given that, as stated by the verse quoted above: "es nuestra piel la que nos ata" [it is our skin that ties us] (VI 56).

While some of the poems unmistakably refer to a Spanish context evoking the city of Madrid (63), the concept of "Afrospanishness" (71), the Afrodescendant Students' Association "Kwanzaa" (69), or the notorious Spanish *Centros de Internamiento de Extranjeros* (CIE) [foreigner detention centers] (73-75), many remain vague and some even open up a transnational space of solidarity. "Los márgenes de la memoria" [The Margins of Memory] expresses the comfort the poetic speaker—solitary due to multiple forms of exile and displacement—feels when experiencing a feeling of belonging that arises from the encounter with Africa as a symbolic homeland: "... encuentro en las miradas de sus gentes, | silencios que me acarician ... | como a un lejano hermano pequeño" [... I find in the looks of her people | silences that caress me ... | like a far-off little brother] (62).

In addition, the trope of transnational solidarity is exemplified in the poem "Toussaint L'Ouverture." This poem evokes the Haitian Revolution as a crucial moment of enslaved Africans' liberation, a revolution whose impact cannot be reduced to the Haitian context but triggered a much vaster movement of decolonial emancipation. Consequently, García López refers to this Caribbean nation as "los cimientos de un mundo sin esclavitud" [the foundations of a world without slavery] (VI 65). This notion of transnational solidarity among people of African descent

is, furthermore, articulated in the compelling symbolism of the poem “Las llanuras de la manta”

[The Smoothings of the Blanket]:

Estos vientos que nos llegan desde el corazón de Europa
nos advierten de la necesidad de crecer en las noches.
Cimentar las redes fraternales entre los subalternos
aullando cómo feroces tormentas entrando en acantilados
moldeados por nuestras voces con la complicidad de la luna. (60-61)

[These winds that reach us from the heart of Europe | warn us of the necessity to grow in the nights
| Strengthen the fraternal nets between the subalterns | howling like fierce storms that come in on cliffs
moulded by our voices with the complicity of the moon.]

Here, the poetic speaker advocates solidarity among the “subalterns”, which we can read as marginalized groups subject to hegemonic power. She/he invites them to unite in a resistance movement fighting against oppression and for a world where—as articulated in the poem “CIE de Aluche” [*CIE*¹⁰ of Aluche]—“jugarán inocentes los niños y las niñas *antes de ser colores*” [innocent children will play *before being colors*] (*VI* 73; my emphasis), for a world that has overcome a racialization of the subject, “[donde] negra es mi piel, *humano mi corazón*” [where my skin is black, *my heart is human*] (70; my emphasis). Such an imagery of resistance is pervasive in García López’s poems, which evoke the imperative to keep fighting (60) and join a joint struggle for recognition and appreciation:

... lanzarme al mundo, y
reunirme junto a las voces, a los pasos, a las palabras
escritas sin miedo, a los vientos *transitando entre los*
márgenes donde se acumulan las hojas del árbol que
se nos impuso mirar desde uno de sus vértices. (64; my emphasis),

[... to throw myself into the world and | *to join the voices*, the steps, the words | written without fear, the winds
that *travel between the* | *margins* where the leaves of the tree accumulate, which | we were imposed to watch
from one of its vertexes]

As the metaphors used in the poem point out, this struggle links “the margins,” that is, marginalized communities, and, in this particular case, the African diaspora on a global level.

In an interview with Mar García, the poet confirms that “[p]onernos en el centro ... no es una simple cuestión de propiedad, es una cuestión de resignificar categorías que antes eran vistas como negativas (y muchas de ellas siguen siéndolo) y cargarlas con significados de poder” [to put us in the center ... isn’t a simple question of property; it is a question of resignifying categories that have been considered as negative before (and many of them keep being considered as such) and to charge them with meanings of power] (M. García 54-55). As I have shown, García López’s poems realize such a positive re-interpretation of Afrodescendance that contrasts with a stereotyped adscription by others. It does so by conceptualizing an Afrodescendant community that offers symbolic solidarity and opens up a de-territorial space the subject can relate to. In a second step, we will now have a closer look at photography and discuss how Bermúdez visually explores “blackness” through the creative act of selecting and re-composing photographs from his personal and public collections.

A Visual Exploration of “Blackness” and Afrodiasporic Networks—*Y tú, ¿por qué eres negro?* de Rubén H. Bermúdez

My second example is the photobook *Y tú, ¿por qué eres negro?* by Afrodescendant Spanish artist Rubén H. Bermúdez from Móstoles, Madrid.¹¹ Initially published in 2017, it was also temporarily available on the artist’s homepage for a free download before being re-edited as a bilingual paperback edition in 2018. Bermúdez works as a photographer, gives workshops on visual representations of “blackness,” and is involved with activist initiatives such as the collective “Afroconciencia” (since 13 February 2018, renamed as “Espacio Afro” on Facebook). In 2014, he started working on his project *Y tú, ¿por qué eres negro?*, first using a blog and an Instagram account and, later on, turning it into an exhibition and a photobook.¹² The project’s and book’s title are inspired by a recurring question in Bermúdez’s life that alludes to the astonishment of

others about him saying he is a Spaniard although he is black (M. García 120). It also alludes to the artist's particular personal circumstances, for he grew up in a "white" family and a traditional Spanish environment, not surely knowing about the sources of his African descent and, as he says, being "una mancha marrón rodeada de personas blancas" [a brown spot surrounded by white people] (López Bueno 1:45 min.) in family photos (Bermúdez, *Sofía Black*; Bermúdez, *ABC*; Okakene).

Bermúdez affirms in an interview with Mar García that the project's main goal was to "explorar mi negritud a través de la fotografía" [to explore my blackness through the medium of photography] (M. García 120). With its impetus to empower what Bermúdez designates as the "comunidad africana / afrodescendiente / negra" [African / Afrodescendant / black community] (*Presencia* 978) through such a re-appropriation of visual art, his project echoes tendencies of "artivism." This concept of "artivism" refers to the relation between activism and artistic expression that Ana Cebrián Martínez attributes to many contemporary African and Afrodescendant artists (282, 303; also M. García 12). Yet, Bermúdez himself argues that he does not consider himself a voice for the community. Instead, inspired by Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015), one of the intertexts the photographer recurs to, he uses his individual, personal experiences and perspective to create a narrative his audience might connect to (Bermúdez, *El Salto*).

It is compelling to consider Bermúdez's work in relation to another photobook project, *Salitre*, which was published in 2014 and coordinated by Spanish photographer Juan Valbuena. That project chronicles the lives of twelve undocumented Senegalese migrants who live together in Spain in a "casa-patera" ["house-boat", a house for those who came together across the Mediterranean in an open boat; my explanation] (Valbuena 6; also Iannone 360). It consists of

twelve notebooks with photos, drawings, or brief texts, each one composed by one of the migrants, and is completed by a thirteenth one arranged by Valbuena himself. In the latter, Valbuena explains the context and documents his own perspective on the daily life of the Senegalese men. If one critically compares Valbuena's and Bermúdez's works from a decolonial point of view, it catches one's eye that Valbuena *gives a voice to* the Senegalese migrants. As Catalina Iannone argues (359) in her study of Valbuena's work, he does so, by inviting them to compose their own notebooks but still overarching their discourse to some extent by the special status of his own opening notebook. Yet, Bermúdez *speaks from within* the Afrodiasporic community in Spain, critically challenging the representation of African and Afrodescendant people in the media (Pallás Valencia 915). Doing this, he succeeds in "ocupar espacios públicos con voz propia" [occupying public spaces with his own voice], which, according to Mar García (119), makes him turn into "un icono de las aspiraciones de los afrodescendientes" [an icon of the aspirations of Afrodescendants] in Spain.

Moreover, through *Salitre's* focus on undocumented migration, Valbuena and his collaborators illustrate a reality that runs the risk of solidifying prejudices that reduce African and Afrodescendant people in Spain to the status of (undocumented) foreigners. Bermúdez, however, transcends this point of view by claiming and even insisting on being an Afrodescendant Spaniard (and not a foreigner). A Spaniard who, as such, keeps being invisibilized and marginalized by Spanish society (Aixelà Cabré 141), as the photobook's title so vividly captures (e.g., Fig. 1). Likewise, his perspective is an evidently diasporic one. Although it repeatedly evokes a realm of experiences that connect Africa and Afrodiasporic communities, it raises awareness for the heterogeneity of black experiences (e.g., *YT* 170, 204, 220). Furthermore, given the artist's own

situation, the photobook also reveals the particular condition of being *mestizo*, that is, of “mixed race”, as well as that of living in the diaspora (e.g., 24, 118, 170, 186).

Y tú, ¿por qué eres negro? is a mélange of text fragments, capturing memories, thoughts or conversations, and particularly pictures that combine the photographer’s private photos and official photos, illustrations, collages, newspaper clippings, photos from archives and from the context of popular culture etc. It, thus, interlaces personal histories and collective experiences shared by the Afrodiasporic community in Spain and elsewhere. Consequently, despite being a very intimate testimony, *Y tú, ¿por qué eres negro?* inscribes itself into what Bermúdez called “un proceso más general, en lo afroespañol, en lo afro” [a more general process, into the Afrospanish, into the Afro] in an interview in *Radio Africa Magazine* (n. p.; also M. García 120). The photobook retraces a growing awareness of a subject of African descent situated in a Spanish / European environment, that is, an environment where “blackness” is considered a marker of Otherness that evokes daily experiences of racism. Bermúdez merges this experience in a telling double page (Fig. 2) that visualizes the normality of “whiteness” and, enumerating different racist experiences, he simply states: “Me pareció normal” [I saw it as normal] (YT 64).



Figure 1 (YT 192-93)



Figure 1 (YT 64-65)

The photobook's five parts range from the lack of role models, stereotyping, and racism to the subject's increasing awareness of her/his blackness, the discovery of role models and black agency as well as feelings of pride and solidarity.

In a review on the Afrofeminist blog *Afroféminas*, TV journalist, blogger and writer Lucía Asué Mbomío Rubio succeeded saliently in putting into words one of the photobook's main concerns. She writes that “Cuando me lo envió, lo leí a bocados. No podía parar. ¡Cuánta vida! Lo he dicho mal, ¡cuánta vida negra! Así sí” [When he sent it to me, I read it in one bite. I couldn't stop. So much life! I said it badly, so much black life! Like this, yes] (Mbomío Rubio, “Y tú” n. p.). By these words, she explicitly alludes to the photobook's aim to visibilize people of African descent and conceptualize “blackness” as a positive self-image, as I show in the following.

Bermúdez evokes the same shuttling back and forth between experiences of racism and moments of resistance / empowerment that can be found in García López's poems. Accordingly, *Y tú, ¿por qué eres negro?* includes photographs and other pictures that remind us of well-known cases of racist violence in Spain. I call to mind here only four examples: the murder of the Afro-Dominican Lucrecia Pérez (Fig. 3)¹³—a crime of racist motive that has shaken Spanish society for good and that, at the same time, represents a defining moment for both African and Afrodescendant people in Spain and the photographer himself (*YT* 82; Bermúdez, *Presencia* 976)—, the death of Congolese migrant Samba Martine in the Foreigner Detention Centre (*CIE*) of Aluche,¹⁴ Mame Mbaye, an undocumented street vendor from Senegal who died of a heart attack when pursued by the police on the streets of Madrid, and the undocumented migrants who drowned at the beach of Tarajal in 2014 as Guardia Civil officers prevented them from reaching the shore (e.g., *YT* 83, 185, 188-89, 199).

Likewise, other photographs and pictures expose racist practices in Spanish society such as blackfacing or highly offensive costumes that stereotype black bodies such as a man wearing a fancy dress with oversized black male genitals (e.g., 200-01). However, the photobook also comprises a myriad of pictures that visualize moments of resistance from both the past, such as the Haitian Revolution in the eighteenth century, and the present, such as demonstrations against the European Union’s border regime (e.g., 150-51, 185). Moreover, the photobook allows Bermúdez to visibilize thinkers, activists, and other role models of African descent that refer to diverse cultural contexts. Seven examples, to name but a few, are the formerly enslaved Spanish painter Juan de Pareja, Martiniquian writer and co-founder of the *Négritude* movement Aimé Césaire, the Martiniquian psychiatrist and political philosopher Frantz Fanon, US civil rights activists Malcolm X and Angela Davis, former President of Burkina Faso Thomas Sankara or Nigerian writer and feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (e.g., 149, 108, 79, 115, 152-53, 106, 163). The diversity of references that the photobook evokes is compelling as it confronts us with a myriad of different times and spaces, black movements and approaches to Afrodiasporic identity constructions, thus evoking notions that go beyond a homogenizing narrative of Afrodiasporic identity or “blackness.”

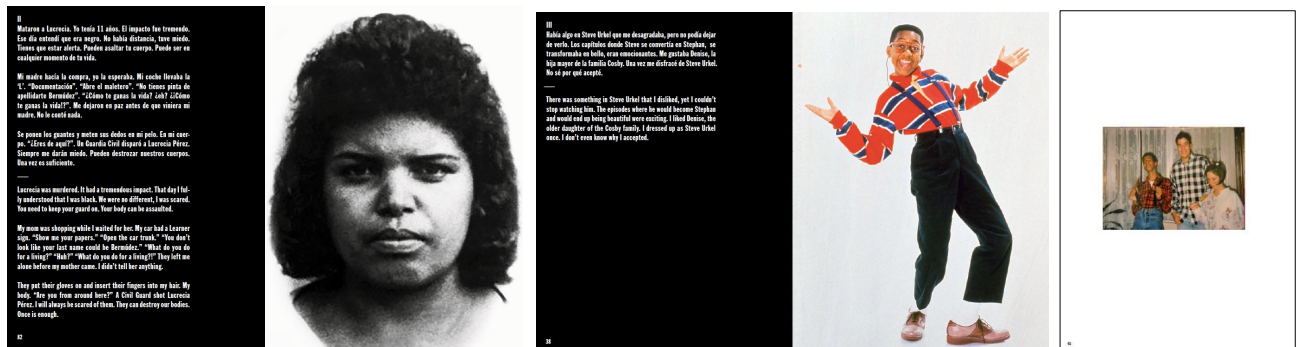


Figure 2 (YT 82-83)

Figure 4 (YT 38-40)

One fact is notable in this context. In particular in Part One, the photobook ironically plays with a certain stereotyping of people of African descent and, thus, imitates a biased perspective that attributes clichéd niches to their visualizations.¹⁵ *Y tú, ¿por qué eres negro?* artificially stages a Eurocentric perspective that perceives successful people of African descent as athletes, singers, or television stars (Bermúdez, *Presencia* 977).¹⁶ It, thus, echoes Stuart Hall’s distinguished analysis of representational practices of “stereotyping”; representations that “fix[.] ‘difference’” (“Spectacle” 258) and, thus, perpetuate racist imaginaries. Among the characters displayed by Bermúdez are ambivalent figures—such as the sitcom *Family Matters* character Steve Urkel—insisting on certain stereotypes instead of weakening them. Although they center on African American characters, those figures, here, echo the prevalent “white” representational regime that Bermúdez himself grew up with (also Bermúdez, *Xataka*), as photos and anecdotes of him growing up illustrate—among others, a picture of him mimicking Steve Urkel (Fig. 4; also *YT* 46-47).

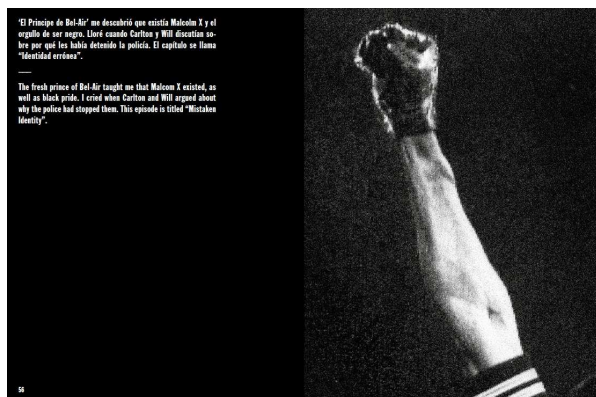


Figure 5 (*YT* 56-57)

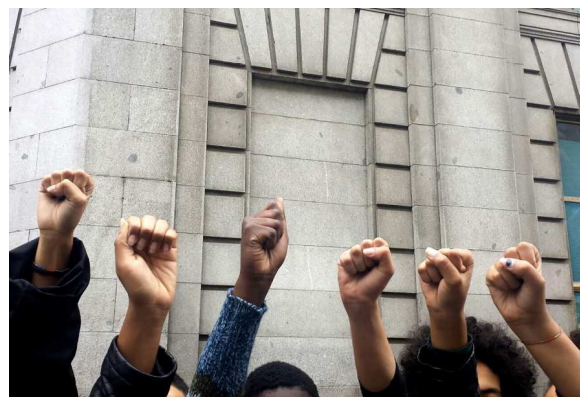


Figure 6 (*YT* 228-29)

Yet, successively, the photobook tracks the Self’s growing awareness of African and Afrodescendant role models beyond those niches and its progressive emancipation from existing clichés. The photobook recalls events and situations that have pushed the Self to deal with the

persistence of racism in a “postcolonial” world, that is, racism on an individual and, in particular, on a structural level, as the photographer tends to emphasize (e.g., M. García 122). But more than that, it also reveals an increasing presence of photos that stage events, personalities, and symbols of black resistance and solidarity (e.g., Figs. 5 & 6). It also does so beyond local contexts as the following quote insinuates: “We shout together that ‘Black lives matter too’. | The black Atlantic.” (YT 204). That Bermúdez explicitly wants to play with existing imaginaries and clichés also offers an explanation of his particular way of photographing. As he explains, it consists of “resignifying existing images” (Bermúdez, *BerlinArtLink* n. p.) by re-arranging, re-composing, and re-contextualizing them. Accordingly, in her reading of Bermúdez’s work, Inés Plasencia confirms an opening up of spaces for Africans and Afrodescendant people to “sentir orgullo” [feel pride] (Plasencia n. p.; also YT 56).

Furthermore, in an interview with Genevieve Peattie from 2017, Bermúdez states that, in general, “si hay una forma de luchar contra el racismo es desde lo colectivo” [if there is a form to fight against racism it is from the collective] (*Es Racismo* n. p.). In *Y tú, ¿por qué eres negro?*, the photographer has brought into being such a symbolic collective, one that visibilizes African and Afrodescendant role models from the past and the present, models that keep being ignored by Spanish visual culture (Cebrián Martínez 30). The artist, thus, elaborates a visual counternarrative, hence challenging the Eurocentric imaginaries that continue claiming the interpretative high ground on “racialized” bodies and are being denounced as racist in the photobook. Accordingly, I agree with Plasencia, who argues that Bermúdez’s composition re-appropriates images and symbols of Afrodescendance, proposing:

un nuevo espacio de significado dedicado a las personas negras donde los antiguos referentes racistas queden desenmascarados y ridiculizados para acto seguido validar otros referentes en los que la comunidad afrodescendiente pueda verse reflejada. (n. p.)

[a new space of meaning dedicated to black persons where old and racist role models are being unmasked and ridiculed to, subsequently, validate other role models in whom the Afrodescendant community can see themselves reflected.]

Consequently, Bermúdez's photobook does not just represent the history of Africa and its diaspora as a history of violence and suffering. Instead, despite not silencing those negative moments, it simultaneously brings to light a history of achievements and resistance.

Beyond that, *Y tú, ¿por qué eres negro?* mirrors a particular Spanish, local context, as it recalls memories shared by people of African descent who lived and / or grew up in Spain. Examples are highly controversial and racist advertising campaigns by Spanish brands *Cola Cao* or *Los Conguitos*, the above-mentioned murder of Lucrecia Pérez in 1992, the scandalous deaths of refugees in Tarajal in 2014, Spanish school-book covers, or blatant evidence of Spanish colonialism (e.g., *YT* 25 & 31, 82-83, 199, 28, 128-31 & 138-39). Having chosen this focus, Bermúdez not only pays tribute to a local experience but also claims a space for this experience inside Spanish society, which keeps ignoring its own involvement in colonialism in Africa and the continuous presence of a black population in Spain's past and present (e.g., Bermúdez, *Es Racismo*; Brancato 33-34; Aixelà Cabré 140-44; Pallás Valencia throughout).

However, Bermúdez's exploration of "blackness" in *Y tú, ¿por qué eres negro?* is not limited to this local context. Instead, numerous pictures make the photobook "conecta[r] con la diáspora Africana en el mundo" [connect with the African diaspora in the world] (M. García 123) and imagine a transnational community characterized in particular by South-South relations. First, there are personalities from well-known African diasporas in other European countries and the United States, such as the celebrities from sport, music and film business already mentioned. Yet, other pictures are evocative of numerous activists and thinkers of the Global South, such as those from the Caribbean or the African continent, which according to Françoise Vergès represents the "historical site of the dispossessed" (136). Simultaneously, in one of his short texts, Bermúdez also

evokes a similar transnational network to which the individual can connect when he describes natural hair styling as an empowering moment by referring to a multitude of different geographical, historical and cultural contexts:

Winnie combed my hair. We didn't know each other then. It took three days to untangle my hair. ... We watched *Michael Jackson* videos. I learned what twists are. We talked about *Juan de Pareja*. We talked about the *maroons*. We talked about *Haiti*. It was beautiful. She gave me a pink comb with a *black power fist*. (YT 148; my emphasis)¹⁷

Moreover, the photobook's references embrace a historical dimension not only by mentioning crucial moments of resistance in the history of the African diaspora but also by emphasizing, in particular, that Africa had *not* been a continent without history prior to the arrival of Europeans. Bermúdez (YT 206-19) exhibits various pictures of and illustrations referring to powerful African realms, women and men (e.g., the empires of Ethiopia, of Kanem-Bornu and of Mali or the King of Ashanti) as well as movements of resistance against colonialism and slavery (e.g., Nzinga Mbandi of Mataba's victory against the Portuguese, or Fermina Lucumí, leader of a rebellion of enslaved people in Matanzas).¹⁸ In addition, Bermúdez has interestingly framed these pictures (204, 220-21): They are preceded by a reference to Paul Gilroy's ground-breaking study on the Black Atlantic that carved out the circulation of ideas and culture between Afrodiasporic communities as well as the agency of black people. And they are followed by a screenshot of the search engine *African Ancestry*, which is designed to help people of African descent to actively recover their ancestry, unveiling ties between Africa and the African diaspora on an individual level.

At the same time, these references to marginalized and silenced histories, whose unveiling, according to Dipesh Chakrabarty's line of argument, would "provincialize" a Eurocentric master narrative,¹⁹ are also framed by a reference to an important intertext of Bermúdez's project: Grada Kilomba's *Plantation Memories* (2008), which deals with experiences of racism in daily life. The

first hint to that text is to be found in Part Three of the photobook, where Bermúdez displays a picture of a mask used to punish enslaved Africans (Fig. 7). The same mask also plays a crucial role in the book by Kilomba, who considers this mask as a symbol of the silencing of African and Afrodescendant people.²⁰ She insinuates that those people need to revolt against such a silencing and affirms accordingly: “I am the describer of my own history, and not the described. ... I *become* ... the author and the authority on my own history” (Kilomba 12)—an important quote also to be found in the last part of Bermúdez’s photobook (*YT* 226-27). The picture of the mask accompanies the photographs of important role models of black agency from throughout the African continent and its diaspora in Part Two of the photobook (118-19). The quote from Kilomba’s analysis, in turn, follows the references to alternative African histories mentioned above (*YT* 226-27). Both intertextual references, thus, retrace the African or Afrodescendant subject’s awakening to the need to unsilence her/his own and other marginalized voices.

Furthermore, Kilomba’s call to become the author of one’s own story is mirrored by an emblematic picture of Bermúdez himself, one showing him looking through his camera’s viewfinder (Fig. 8; also *YT* 224-25)—that is, as a person who is actively handling the camera and taking the pictures. Or, to say it with Kilomba’s words, the photographer of his own history. Bermúdez confirms this empowering impetus of his photobook when being asked about his main goals, which are “contarnos nuestras propias historias” [to tell us our own stories] (Bermúdez, *Presencia* 977), “contar nuestras propias verdades” [to tell our own truths] (979).

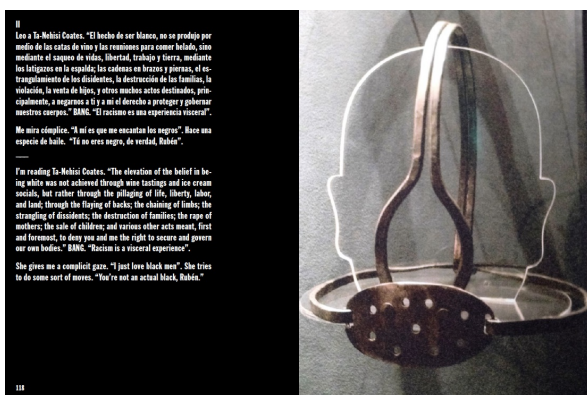


Figure 7 (YT 118-19)

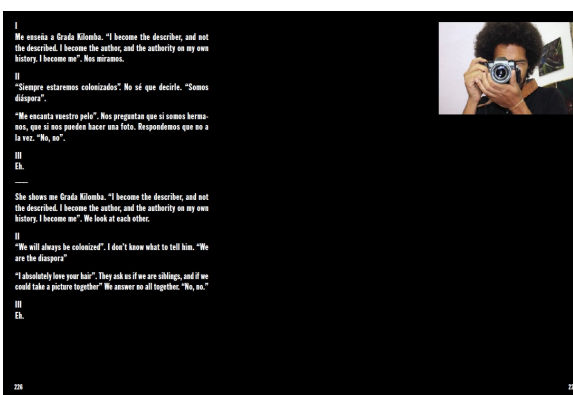


Figure 8 (YT 226-27)

Bermúdez, exploring his own “blackness” through photography and short texts, weaves a complex narrative of Afrodescendance and constructs fluid positionings of the diasporic subject who keeps moving within complex, transnational and, thus, decentered networks of affiliations. Contrastingly, Aparicio, who we turn to next, adopts a much more Africa-centered perspective that stages the “return to the homeland” (in a literal and figurative sense) as a crucial experience for the Afrodescendant subject and her/his self-awareness.

The Diasporic Subject and the (Symbolic) Return to Africa—*Galsen, el lenguaje de las almas* (2018) by Sergio Aparicio

Sergio Aparicio’s documentary *Galsen, el lenguaje de las almas* [Galsen, the Language of Souls] (2018) is the third example studied in this paper.²¹ Sergio Aparicio, also known under the pseudonym OKOBÉ aka Creisy Lyon, son of a Spanish mother and a Cameroonian / Equatorial Guinean father, is an Afrodescendant Spanish musician and visual artist currently living in London (Aparicio, *Afrofeminas*).²² As Aparicio states in the synopsis accompanying the *Vimeo* trailer, *Galsen* describes his own journey “to Africa and to its interior,” one challenging established

concepts such as “[r]ace, prejudice, spirituality, belonging, culture” in the form of “an impressive audiovisual and musical soliloquy” (*Trailer* n. p.). A journey of a subject torn between different worlds whose search echoes W. E. B. Du Bois’s (e.g., 11) notion of “double consciousness,” which betokens the ambivalent experiences characteristic of the African diaspora in general.

Initially, Aparicio shared his self-financed movie on the digital video platform *Vimeo* (initial upload: 22 Apr 2017) to disseminate it among as many people as possible (Aparicio, *The Cultural* 43). In 2019, however, it was also officially released in the United States and Belgium according to the Internet Movie Database IMDb (on 13 July 2021). Aparicio’s documentary has attracted remarkable attention as it has been in the official selections of several international film festivals such as the Pan African Film Festival 2019, the Afrika Filmfestival 2019 and AFRIFF (Africa International Film Festival) 2018, to name but a few.

As a matter of fact, *Galsen* stands out among other Spanish documentaries dealing with Afrodescendant people’s search for and (re-)discovery of their African heritage. Two examples that can be mentioned here are Santiago Zannou’s *La puerta de no retorno* [The Door Of No Return] (2011), a feature-length movie that narrates the director’s father’s journey from Spain to his native Benin to make peace with his sister and the past; or Lucía Asué Mbomío Rubio’s short documentary *Estás en tu casa* [You’re In Your House] (2017), shot with a mobile phone and freely available on *YouTube*, which documents the Equatorial Guinean artist Gorsy Edú Abaga’s journey to Palenque de San Basilio de Colombia—the first free village funded by enslaved Africans in the Americas—, a short documentary addressing historical and cultural entanglements between Africa and the Americas. All those films deal with similar topics, Mbomío and Aparicio even both pointing out the importance of music, which, doubtless, reminds us of Paul Gilroy’s emphasis on music as a tool of subversive creativity in his study *The Black Atlantic* (1993). However, *Galsen*,

in which Aparicio collaborated with numerous other artists, resembles less a classic documentary than an artistic, highly symbolic audio-visual reflection on his own African cultural heritage. It is characterized by a creative assembling of commonplace and (highly) symbolic sequences, sometimes speaking for themselves and sometimes paired with a voice-over narrating the subject's inner thoughts or reflections, often portraying a poetic dimension.²³

Zannou's documentary mentioned above as well as Miguel Alcantud's Spanish motion picture *Diamantes Negros* [Black Diamonds] (2013)—a film about two illegally contracted underage African football players and their struggles in Europe—are two examples highlighting the ambivalence of the return experience, which represents a moment of both happiness and alleged failure. Yet, *Galsen* tends to represent return as a moment of empowerment for the Afrodescendant subject. This subject, being a victim of marginalization in Europe as, according to the voice-over, “[g]enerations don't matter, you will always be an immigrant, even if you never migrate” (*G* 5:08 min.), searches for alternative belongings, which is why the director himself decides to travel to “my other mother, Africa” (1:39 min.). Although *Galsen* has been filmed in and visualizes specific African countries (Senegal and Gambia), it does not refer to these contexts. Instead, it explicitly uses “Africa” as a symbolic construct (Aparicio, *The Cultural* 42; Hall, “Cinematic 216-17), serving the subject as a referential framework to connect with, as I show in the following.

According to the trailer's description, the term “Galsen” is not only “the way in which Senegalese young people designate their country in slang” but, simultaneously, refers to the “stop on the path that leads to the lack of perennial certainties that is the identity for an African-descendant” (Aparicio, *Trailer* n. p.). As the documentary's composition highlights, that path is not linear but circular and anfractuous. Accordingly, Aparicio keeps mixing scenes and shots from Western and African contexts and revisiting motifs such as “mother Africa” or the “sea that unites

and separates us” (see below). At the same time, there is a conspicuous continuous presence not only of music and dance but also of a subject who, through her/his corporeality, her/his voice and body, embraces her/his African descent and heritage as a symbolic anchor for her/his identificational positionings. Yet, Aparicio keeps mixing diverse cultural references through visual, auditive, and textual elements that entangle his journey with a multitude of different spaces and open up a transcultural map that de-centers the subject’s connectedness. Accordingly, the voice-over comments that “[b]orders don’t move, *people do*” (*G* 27:48; my emphasis).



Film Strip 1 (*G*; scene starts at 1:05 min.)

Of interest in this context is the first scene, which evokes a man, presumably Aparicio himself, first at the shore of the sea and then immersed in the water (Film Strip 1). It not only introduces the central motif of the journey but also counteracts a predominant reading of the sea when discussing Africa and its diaspora: frequently, the motif of the sea echoes a history of violent deaths reaching from the transatlantic slave trade and the Middle Passage to current escape routes of African refugees trying to reach European shores. Yet, *Galsen* stages water as a place of “Rebirth,” which is also the title of the film’s first chapter.²⁴ In particular, the camera’s movements, immersing into and resurfacing from the water again and again, are evocative of an intertext that—although we do not know if Aparicio himself had it in mind—viewers familiar with contemporary Spanish cinema might be reminded of: namely, *Retorno a Hansala* [Return to Hansala] (2008) by

Chus Gutiérrez. This well-known Spanish director's motion picture starts with a famous scene of a refugee drowning in the Mediterranean whose body, in the course of the film, is returned to his native village in Morocco. Here, seeing the migrant subject atrociously die exposes the sea as a deadly space of transit for those who travel on a South-North axis.

Yet, *Galsen* not only reverses the direction of travel but also converts the connotation of the sea and the atmosphere of the corresponding scene into a positive and empowering image. To start with, Aparicio's initial scene is characterized by a slow, peaceful music and warm sepia colors, which contrast the very somber audio track in *Retorno a Hansala*. Furthermore, Aparicio plays with a recurrent immersion of the camera, which, however, does not imitate the subject's drowning. In fact, it imitates an emerging movement that visualizes the symbolic rebirth of the subject and makes the water stand for his "immersion" into a search or journey to (re-)discover his African heritage and his affiliations to the African continent.

Subsequently, the documentary traces the director's search, evoking scenes of daily life as well as of music and dance, mixing African and European or American spaces as it includes scenes from Senegal, Gambia, Barcelona and New York (Aparicio, *Afrofeminas*).²⁵ Yet, *Galsen* does not explicitly refer to a local context. Instead, it uses Africa as a point of cultural and identificational reference shared by Afrodiasporic people throughout the world who are searching for a compensatory framework that alleviates their being excluded as foreigners within the respective host society. Correspondingly, the voice-over labels the subject's journey to Africa as the "solitary path ... all african descendant [sic] have to walk one day" (*G* 1:43 min.) and the subject is considered "a Griot, a teller of stories, my story and at the same time your story" (2:28 min.). This monologue evokes a collective dimension of the subject's search, which is intensified by the protagonist remaining a blurred figure. This blurredness turns him into a placeholder for others

like him and alludes to a communality that he is about to discover during his journey: “It is impossible to record more clearly, when your body is no longer yours, but a part of a bigger and spiritual organ, of a dialogue that I named, the language of the souls” (2:10 min.). This back and forth between solitude and communality emphasizes the ambivalence of the diasporic experience lived by the Afrodescendant subject in *Galsen*.

In the final scene, the symbolic of the sea is revisited during Aparicio’s visit to Gorée Island and the famous and highly symbolic “Door Of No Return” in the House of Slaves, memorial to the transatlantic slave trade. This visit symbolically connects the director’s journey to Africa with the reverse “journey” of enslaved Africans who were deported to the Americas (and Europe) in the past. It opens up a historical dimension of movements, as we can see when we look closer at the text accompanying the scene. It is spoken by a voice-over that articulates the inner thoughts of the subject, a subject with his back to the viewer. Not showing his face he turns, again, into a placeholder for others:

When I got there, I knew the butterflies were the souls. I was not alone. ... Everything is fine said the wind. The same wind, that centuries before caressed the souls of thousands of slaves that passed never to return. There, in that land, in that house. They left their smiles, their games of childhood, their innocence. The embrace of their eyes full of tears would be the only relief they’d get. [music and voice turn more dramatic in the following; my comment] Those butterflies without chains flew peacefully among the reflective silence of my mind. I embraced the pain, and the pain embraced me. I took some with me and, in return, I left there a part of me. [voice sighs and character turns to the viewer; my comment] I am the son of slaves from the old and the new order, but I am a being of light with a random body on an old soul. And love for the souls is what I left there. Everything is fine, said the wind silently. [character starts turning around again; my comment] Everything is fine. Behind that door, [character starts walking towards the door; my comment] the sea that bounds us, the same sea that tears us apart. (*G* 54:20 min.)



Film Strip 2 (*G*, scene starts at 54:07 min.)

This scene not only saliently shows the documentary's poetic and artistic dimension. It also sheds light on the Afrodescendant subject feeling situated in a border zone where not only various spatial dimensions overlap but temporal dimensions as well. This positioning is visually expressed, too, through the subject's movement. In the initial scene of the documentary, he seems to come out of the water to get back to the place his ancestors, who left by the Door of No Return, would never get back to. In the final scene (Film Strip 2), he follows their path at Gorée Island, approaching the Door of No Return, wandering on symbolic traces that also evoke the subject's own search. Yet, subsequently, he does not pass through the Door of No Return but stays on the threshold, a highly symbolic space representing the in-between of the Afrodiasporic subject. An in-between not free of conflicts and frictions, as expressed in a sentence repeated several times at the beginning and the end of the documentary: "The sea that unites us, the same sea that separates us" (e.g., *G* 3:02 min., 56:18 min.). The scene also emphasizes the contradictory symbolism of the sea as a space of birth, encounter and linkedness as well as of death, distance, and division, as a contact zone of (violent) colonial encounter in the past and a space of mobilities crisscrossed by intertwined voluntary and involuntary travel routes of people of African descent.

Yet, the scene at Gorée Island suggests a self-determined positioning of the subject who, without doubt, identifies with his ancestors' histories, given that he claims to be a "son of slaves."

At the same time, he seems to be reconciled with the past after his journey, for he uses a positively connotated metaphor to describe himself as a “being of light.” Strikingly, it is exactly in this moment that Aparicio changes his position. While he has previously shown only his back to the viewer, he now turns around when claiming this genealogy that connects the Afrodescendant subject of the present with her/his enslaved ancestors. Although those ancestors suffered from a widely different and violent experience of displacement, it is a displacement that, nevertheless, is entangled with the subject’s search in the present. Simultaneously, this very moment marks a change of perspective since the subject reverses the enslaveds’ view through the Door of No Return to an uncertain destiny. The subject, instead, looks back to Africa as the point of departure before coming to a standstill in the symbolic space of the threshold, indicating his neither staying in nor definitely leaving Africa symbolically speaking.

Furthermore, the documentary ties in with a motif mentioned above: “Mother Africa” as the symbolic origin of the Afrodescendant subject. Aparicio revisits this trope in a dance scene that aestheticizes a black woman and her corporeality, manifested in the act of dancing (Film Strip 3). The setting is comparatively neutral: the woman dances in some sort of courtyard with decent graffities, reminding the viewer of an urban space that could be either in Africa, in Europe or elsewhere. Likewise, the woman wears neutral black clothing. The scene starts as a sequence of static pictures, underscored by the sound of a beating heart, that subsequently opens out into the flow of a dynamic film sequence staging the woman’s dancing moves.



Film Strip 3 (*G*; scene starts at 12:18 min.)

Again, the voice-over emblazes these pictures with a highly poetic text. The text plays with the notions of the term “mother” as one who gives life, cares, and empowers on a literal (the child’s mother) and symbolic level (Africa). At the same time, it evokes a matrilineal African genealogy by calling the woman “Mother. Grandmother. Daughter.” (*G* 14:37 min.) and opens up a historical dimension of African and/or Afrodiasporic experiences that are oppressed and silenced by a historiography written by the winners—that is, according to Aparicio (*The Cultural* 44), white heterosexual men—, as the voice-over affirms at the beginning of Chapter Three: “The elephant will always be the evil, if the hunter is the one who tells the story” (*G* 23:38 min.).²⁶ That quote underlines the documentary’s goal to embrace a different picture of Africa and what it means to be of African descent. And that picture, according to the artist, denounces the stereotyping of the African continent from a Eurocentric point of view, unveils African/Afrodescendant people’s own stories “without filters or intermediaries” (*Ethnicities Magazine* n. p.), and aims to “abrir las mentes” [open minds] (*The Cultural* 43).

The textual as well as the visual arrangements of the dance scene aesthetically spotlight bodily features frequently associated with a racist discourse that inferiorizes black bodies as “less beautiful.” Yet, in *Galsen*, both the voice-over and the frames praise this very body: “your fleshy lips, your wide nose, and your afro hair, which fill with light and light up the world” (*G* 15:26

min.; also Film Strip 3). As we can see in this quote, which echoes people of African descent's attempts "to present blackness in their own terms" (Fila-Bakabadio 170), the voice-over re-values these bodily features. It overwrites a racist discourse about the black woman's body with an empowering picture of that woman's beauty.

Yet, Aparicio's recurrence to the trope of the embodiment of Africa in the figure of a woman also echoes an African male literary tradition. In that tradition, according to Florence Stratton's feminist critique (39-55), women characters—often romanticized, aestheticized or even sexualized—tend to embody a male vision of African women that reproduces the gender relations of patriarchal societies and excludes women from authorship and citizenship. Indeed, individual aspects of such an imagery reappear in Aparicio's documentary. In a certain manner, *Galsen* depicts the dancing woman as an "aesthetic object" (Stratton 52) provided with meaning by a male-authored narrative—her dance moves and the camera's moves both evidently highlighting her physicality and sensuality. Yet, at the same time, Aparicio's scene thwarts the traditional trope by explicitly providing the woman with agency when the voice-over summons her to "[k]eep on inspiring the world with your continuous battle" (*G* 15:05 min.). The scene, thus, offers an empowering dimension by praising her rebellious and non-docile nature, clearly positively connotated.²⁷

Moreover, the visual and verbal praising not only of the dancing woman's agency but of her beauty and physicality as well can be interpreted as a decolonizing strategy that echoes a movement of "aesthetic activism" currently observable, among others, in digital media coordinated/written by people of African descent in Spain and other European countries.²⁸ According to Desirée Bela-Lobedde, one of the voices of this movement in Spain, aesthetic activism (*activismo estético*) promotes "racialized" women's empowerment and helps them "a

trabajar su identidad desde el respecto a la naturaleza de sus rasgos afro y al color de su piel, superando a la esclavitud y el apartheid estético que imponen los cánones de belleza eurocéntricos” [to work on their identity respecting the naturality of their Afro features and their skin color, overcoming the aesthetic slavery and apartheid that Eurocentric beauty ideals impose on people] (Bela-Lobedde, “Negra” 83)—that is, by praising their beauty.

At the end of the scene, Aparicio’s artistic re-interpretation of African femininity converges in the word “negra” [black woman]:

Because you’ve [sic] a name, [voice keeps a moment of silence but music and dance continue; my comment] and that is Africa. [voice keeps a moment of silence but music and dance continue; my comment] Black [camera perspective changes from long shot to close up of the dancing woman; my comment]. (*G* 15:45 min.).

The word “negra” is repeated six times while the camera, slowly zooming out from a head and shoulder close-up to a medium close-up, shows the woman’s face expressing self-confidence and pride. It, thus, portrays a notion that can be considered as the basic principle of anti-black racism— that is, skin color—as an affirmative and emancipatory element of the subject’s identificational positioning and, thus, reinforces the empowering symbolism of the whole scene.

In the penultimate scene, which switches from a setting in a rehearsal room to a classroom in an African country, Aparicio performs a song that echoes a similar positive and affirmative vision of Afrodescendance. Due to the audiovisual conception of the scene, that vision seems to trigger an empowering collective experience: we see the artist sitting in front of a class of children and taking turns with them to sing the words “Je suis Africain” [I’m African]. The idea behind these words—that Africa has the potential to become a (positive) space of belonging for subjects of African descent—strongly echoes the Pan-African approach of “celebrat[ing] ... the very notion of being African” (*Adi* 3). The euphoric singing, the self-confident gestures—again and again the

protagonist and the children stretch their arms to the ceiling in an empowering movement—and the camera’s emphasis on the children’s positive attitudes together create a moment of pride and solidarity that evokes the very same re-appropriation of what it means to be of African descent and its positive re-interpretation, which can be identified in the example of the dancing woman.

Conclusion

In this article, I have studied the work of three artists who are of African descent and have a shared experience of living in Spain. In their works, ranging from poetry to photography and film, they all tackle the diasporic experience of the African/Afrodescendant subject who encounters continuous frictions living in a society in which “being black” is considered synonymous with being a foreigner, a migrant and, simply, not “from here.” Consequently, from a diasporic perspective, they conceptualize Afrodescendance as a transnational symbolic space relating Africa and her diasporic communities. They offer a de-centered sphere of identification that enables the subject of African descent to imagine (new) networks of solidarity, to resist being “othered” and to affirm her/his African heritage. In their works, the artists stage Afrodescendance, having at first been experienced as a source of exclusion, as a powerful source of belonging and identification. Yet, although all three stage what Mar García refers to as a “racial discourse” (26)—one that recurs to essentialist notions for political purposes to provide visibility to the community—, they do not give in to a unidimensional representation but display various angles and heterogeneous narratives.

García López, Bermúdez, and Aparicio are members of a new generation of African and Afrodescendant artists in Spain who are part of a rising activist movement that both fights racism and advocates the visibilization and re-valuation of Spanish society’s heterogeneity in the past and the present. This generation likewise claims an equal space for people of African descent within

Europe in general and Spain in particular, and as such, all three share a political commitment that arises in their artistic work. They do not practice an elitist discourse but want to reach their community, which, in particular, becomes evident in the case of Bermúdez and Aparicio, who both share(d) their work online for free or, in the case of Bermudez, have re-edited their work in a cheap paperback edition. Emanating from their individual experiences as Spanish citizens of African descent, they conceptualize a narrative of the Afrodiasporic subject's search for belonging that others can embrace and relate to. While having suffered themselves from the lack of black role models in Spain, these artists' works aim at thwarting this absence of African and Afrodescendant voices within Spanish society.

Yet, like others of their generation—such as writer Lucía Mbomío Rubio in her recent novel *Hija del camino* [Daughter of the Road] (2019), actress and playwright Silvia Albert Sopale and her unipersonal play *No es país para negras* [It Is Not A Country for Black Women] (premiered in 2016 and still being performed), or the collaborators of *Negrxs Magazine*, a digital journal founded in 2017—, they do not just “look back to Africa.” They do not present a nostalgic view of a lost homeland and/or passing criticism on the political, economic and social conditions in post/colonial African states—angles that we can frequently find among an older generation of Afrodiasporic writers in exile in Spain, as in the case of many Equatoguineans. Instead, this new generation increasingly de-centers belonging, claiming its right to be both, Afrodescendant and Spaniards, negating neither their African heritage nor their being part of Europe. Their re-connection to Africa is not purely literal, it is more symbolic.

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Endnotes

- 1 Bermúdez published a paperback edition of his photobook in Spanish and English in 2018. English quotes are taken from this bilingual edition. While Aparicio's documentary is originally in Spanish, the version uploaded on *Vimeo* provides English subtitles, which are used for quoting (although they sometimes slightly vary from the audio track). All other English translations of Spanish quotes are mine.
- 2 Accordingly, these activists and artists tend to refrain from the nostalgic and/or critical view of the (lost) homeland that is characteristic, for instance, of African writers of an older generation forced into exile in Spain due to political reasons (N'gom Faye; Vi-Makomè 49).
- 3 At the same time, these last years have witnessed an increasing amount of activist writing dealing with racism in Spanish society and the particular experience of the Spanish black community. Examples are Antoinette Torres-Soler's account of black feminism in Spain, *Viviendo en modo Afrofeminas* [Living in Afrofeminas mode] (2018); Desirée Bela-Lobedde's autobiographical text *Ser mujer negra en España* [Being a black woman in Spain] (2018) and her recently published book *Minorías: historias de desigualdad y valentía* [Minorities: Stories of Inequality and Courage] (2021) consisting of testimonies by racialized women; journalist Moha Gerehou's personal testimony on racism in contemporary Spain entitled *Qué hace un negro como tú en un sitio como este* [What Does a Black Guy Like You Do in a Place Like This] (2021); or essay collections such as *Cuando somos el enemigo: activismo negro en España* [When We Are the Enemy: Black Activism in Spain] (2019) edited by Jeffrey Abé Pans, *Metamba Miago: relatos y saberes de mujeres afroespañolas* [Metamba Miago: Stories and Knowledges of Afrospanish women] (2019), crowd-funded and edited by Deborah Ekoka, or *Las españolas afrodescendientes hablan sobre identidad y empoderamiento* [Afrodescendant Spanish Women Talk about Identity and Empowerment] (2018), edited by Odome Angone.
- 4 García López does not dedicate his poem collection to a particular audience, but he refers to his life as "alma negra sentida" [felt black soul] (*VI* 1) in the preliminaries of his book.
- 5 This tendency can be observed in other examples as well. For an extensive analysis of transnationally imagined diasporic networks in digital platforms in Spain and Portugal see, for instance, Borst and Gallo González.
- 6 For the criticism of a symbolic (re-)appropriation of "Africanness" by some Afrodescendant artists and activist in Spain see Spanish writer of Equatoguinean descent Edjanga Divendu Jones Ndjoli's critical analysis of concepts such as "afroespañolidad" [Afrospanishness] from 20 March 2019; as well Saiba Bayo's analysis of the "feeling of strangeness" that a new generation of Black African descendants in Catalonia "experience[s] in their contact with Africa" (n. p.) in such a way as to replace "Africa" by the new label "Afro". For a critical discussion of a diaspora-centric discourse on Africa and Africanness that, to some extent, risks reproducing a hegemonic rhetoric by homogenizing and, in part, even exoticizing and/or romanticizing Africa, one that does not capture actually lived, African realities, see furthermore Akinro and Segun-Lean.
- 7 Citations to *Voces del impulso* will be cited parenthetically in the text as *VI*.
- 8 Several poems by García López have also been included in the free anthology *Lecturas del desierto. Antología y entrevistas sobre poesía actual en España – poetas nacidos a partir de 1982* published in 2018, which includes poems written by 47 young Spanish writers (López Fernández et al.). In 2021, he has also published a second poem collection entitled *Derecho de admisión* [Right of Admission] (2021)
- 9 Interestingly, García López also uses a bodily metaphor to describe the traumatic dimension of the poetic speaker's experience of racism when she/he mentions "mis cicatrices abiertas" [my open scars] (*VI* 69). This imagery alludes both to the decolonial concept of the "colonial wound" (Mignolo 3) and Fanon's notion of the black subject's attacked body schema that collapses under the white gaze "giving way to an epidermal racial schema" (92).
- 10 CIE stands for *Centro de Internamiento de Extranjeros* [Foreigner Detention Center].
- 11 Citations to *Y tú ¿por qué eres negro?* will be cited parenthetically in the text as *YT*.
- 12 Another project arose from the photobook: a movie entitled *A todos nos gusta el plátano* [We All Like Bananas], screened in December 2019 at the Cineteca Madrid of Matadero Madrid and not officially released and available yet. According to a pamphlet provided by Bermúdez, the movie is supposed to "amplificar, tensionar y hacer más rico" [amplify, (provide) tension and enrich] (Bermúdez, *Dossier*) his initial project.

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- 13 See also the emblematic essay *Cómo ser negro y no morir en Aravaca: Manual de recetas contra el racismo* [How to Be Black and Not Die in Aravaca: A Manual of Recipes Against Racism] (1994) by Francisco Zamora Lobo, an Equatoguinean writer living in Spain, which echoes Pérez's murder.
- 14 See also García López's poem on the *CIE* of Aluche.
- 15 For an extensive analysis of stereotyping of African and Afrodescendant people in media, visual culture, and society see Cebrián Martínez 232-55.
- 16 Examples are basketballer Magic Johnson, soccer player Ruud Gullit, actress Liza Bonet, and singer Michael Jackson (*YT* 16-17 & 19, 33 & 36, 42, 46).
- 17 The reference to Juan de Pareja in combination with Spanish painter Diego Velázquez's portrait of him—an enslaved African in Velázquez's service set free at a later date—is meaningful in this context given the emancipatory effect of Pareja's representation, who, according to art historian Carmen Fracchia, is illustrated "as a free subject even before his emancipation" as in his painting "Velázquez endows Pareja with his own humanity" (177).
- 18 Interestingly, Bermúdez does not include those pictures without commenting on what they illustrate: in the endnotes, he contextualizes pictures he took from other sources, which is not only a sign of his ambition to make all his readers open their eyes to heterogeneous narratives of the history of African and Afrodescendant people. It, moreover, shows that, due to a universalized Eurocentric narrative that dominates most people's thinking, he considers even the black community he dedicates his photobook to might not be familiar with the events and personalities he embraces in his work (*YT* 240).
- 19 See also Bermúdez's visual reference (*YT* 163) to Chimanda Ngozi Adichie's famous TED talk "The Danger of a Single Story" from 2009.
- 20 Bermúdez's photobook echoes this silencing when it states on different occasions that "I heard few black men talk" (*YT* 112) and "I had heard very few black women speak" (148).
- 21 Citations to *Galsen, el lenguaje de las almas* will be cited parenthetically in the text as *G*.
- 22 For his photographic work see also his homepage (www.okobephoto.com/, accessed 28 May 2020) or his Instagram account (www.instagram.com/_okobe_/?hl=de, accessed 28 May 2020).
- 23 See for instance the scene at Gorée Island described below. According to the documentary's credits, the voice-over's texts are conceptualized and spoken by the artist himself.
- 24 There is also an explicit reference to amniotic fluid (*G* 2:48 min.), which not only strengthens the imagery of rebirth but also echoes the trope of "Mother Africa" that is consistently evoked in the documentary.
- 25 For the filming locations see, e.g., the review of the documentary, "Soy África", on Agencia de Noticias RedAcción (www.ANRed.org) from 26 August 2018.
- 26 See Aixelà Cabré for an analysis of the predominance of a Spanish perspective in the context of imperial memory on Spain's and Equatorial Guinea's common past (e.g., 147-48).
- 27 For a critique of Aparicio's scene of the dancing woman and the director's reference to and homogenizing vision of Africa see Jones Ndjoli.
- 28 Distinguished examples are the Afrofeminist blog *Afrofeminas* (afrofeminas.com; accessed 3 June 2020), founded in 2013 by Afrocuban activist Antoinette Torres Soler, currently residing in Spain, or *Diario de la negra flor* (no longer online, as of 3 June 2020) and *Desirée Bela* (www.desiree-bela.com; accessed 3 June 2020), blogs created by Desirée Bela-Lobedde, an Afrospanish activist who published the successful autobiography *Ser mujer negra en España* [Being a Black Woman in Spain] in 2018. In addition, there are documentaries such as Tony Romero's and Fátima Osia's *Gente de pelo duro* [People of stiff hair] (2014, TR Movies) or Javier Sánchez Salcedo's *Afro, así es mi pelo* [Afro, my hair is like this] (2013, available on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=xk3SxL10u3k; accessed 18 September 2019). They both deal with the persistent stigmatization of natural Afro hair and contrast it to an empowering narrative of a history of resistance and symbolic emancipation through wearing one's hair in a natural style. For a discussion of aesthetic activism in digital media see, e.g., Borst and Gallo González.