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# **‘To Be Black in a ‘White’ Country’--On the Ambivalence of the Diasporic Experience in César A. Mba Abogo’s *El porteador de Marlow. Canción negra sin color* (2007)**

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## **Abstract**

This essay focuses on the ambivalence of the diasporic experience of the Black subject in Equatoguinean writer César A. Mba Abogo’s collection of short stories and poems *El porteador de Marlow. Canción negra sin color* (2007). It discusses how these texts reflect the experience of alienness and exclusion lived by the Black diasporic subject in a ‘white’ European society, unsilencing a marginalized perspective on African migration to and presence in Europe. Moreover, the essay proposes a reading of the extensive network of references to Black history, knowledge systems, and intertexts evoked throughout the collection as offering a way to transcend the Black diasporic subject’s isolation and to connect to a shared and ongoing history of oppression, displacement, and marginalization on the one hand but of agency, resistance, and self-empowerment on the other.

## **Introduction**

Equatoguinean writer César A. Mba Abogo, born in Bata in 1979, lived in Spain for several years, returning to his native Equatorial Guinea in 2006 (cf. Hendel, “Conversación”; Ngom, *Palabra* 251). Shortly afterwards, in 2007, the Spanish publishing house SIAL Ediciones published the writer’s first collection of short stories and poems: *El porteador de Marlow. Canción negra sin color* ‘Marlow’s Boy. Black Song Without Color’<sup>1</sup> (in the following referred to as *El Porteador*). This book is a highly poetic text (cf. Ngom, *Palabra* 254; Nistal, Introducción 8) written in 2003 against the background of the author’s own migration experience to Spain (cf. Mba Abogo,

“Escribir” 260). Recently, *El Porteador* has been increasingly noticed in the field of Hispano-African literary studies with analyses by Berástegui Wood, Bermúdez Medina, Díaz-Pinés Prieto or López Rodríguez most notably dealing with the hybrid and nomadic character of Mba Abogo’s writing.<sup>2</sup>

The collection’s texts reflect what Mba Abogo calls “una relación de amor y odio” ‘a relationship of love and hatred’ (Hendel, “Conversación”) that, according to him, most Equatoguineans feel with regard to the former colonial power. As Donato Ndong-Bidyogo--one of the most renowned Afro-Spanish writers--explains, exile and a diasporic condition are motives that are omnipresent in Equatoguinean literary production (cf. Hendel, “Donato” 110). Mba Abogo, furthermore, represents a new generation of Equatoguinean writers who, unlike their predecessors, are less concerned with a traumatic experience of displacement due to political exile and questions of ‘national’ identity in the post-independence era (cf. Ngom, “Equatorial”; Introducción). Instead, their writings--apart from denouncing the grievances of present-day Equatoguinean society--tend to deal with current phenomena of transnational migration, diasporic existence, and experiences of everyday racism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (cf. Nistal, “Razones” 54-55; Berástegui Wood 93). In this essay, I therefore focus on the question of how Mba Abogo narrates this diasporic experience of the Black African subject who migrates to and/or lives in a ‘white’ European culture. In this context, the term ‘Black’ does not refer to skin color but to label--to use Mba Abogo’s proper words--“un sentimiento” ‘a feeling’ and “una experiencia histórica” ‘a historical experience’ (Hendel, “Conversación”) of marginalization, coloniality, and racism (cf. Hall, “Old” 53). As the author explains in an interview, this is also how the title of the collection has to be understood: “No de la perspectiva del negro como color, sino negro como . . . una serie de condicionantes a las que uno tiene que hacer frente y viviendo en una sociedad que se define a

si misma como blanca. Entonces, Canción negra sin color es una canción negra, pero no alude a la idea de los colores” ‘Not from the perspective of black as a color but black as . . . a series of conditions that one has to confront living in a society that defines itself as white. Thus, Black Song Without Color is a black song but it does not allude to the idea of colors’ (Hendel, “Conversación”).

In this contribution, I first analyze the dialogic and polyphonic structure of Mba Abogo’s texts as a subversive strategy to unsilence the marginalized perspective of the Black subject, a strategy that challenges existing master narratives about Africa and Black diasporas. In a second step, I focus on the ambivalence of the Black diasporic experience characterized by “a shared, ongoing history of displacement, suffering, adaption, or resistance” (Clifford 306) that gives rise both to feelings of exclusion in the hostland and to the imaginary construction of symbolic realms of alternative belongings and solidarities. In this context, Mba Abogo’s writing transcends a nostalgic vision of Equatorial Guinea as homeland from the perspective of an exiled subject longing for a return, progressing to a deterritorialized and transnational notion of belonging that relates not only to the African continent but to other Black diasporic communities as well. Therefore, this essay focuses particularly on how a Black diasporic consciousness emerges that relates to a shared experience of both oppression and self-empowerment of a global Black community evoked through a complex network of references and intertexts.

### **Subversive Polyphony and the Unsilencing of Black Narratives**

Recognizing the subversive potential of Mba Abogo’s book requires looking more closely at its narrative structure. The collection is divided into two main sections: *El Porteador de Marlow*, consisting of 24 (very) short stories and two postfaces; and *Canción negra sin color*, composed of

33 short texts--mostly poems--merged into 6 subsections and a postface. The collection is soaked by the experience of migrating, and, correspondingly, the texts migrate equally between African realities and life in the diaspora in Europe. However, Mba Abogo does not explicitly refer to Equatorial Guinea or Spain but, instead, creates imaginary places in his fiction such as Karabumete, Puerto Fraga (both Equatoguinean / African cities), Franquicia (Equatorial Guinea / an African country) or Soladia (Spain / a European country; cf. Otabela Mewolo 135).<sup>3</sup> Whereas numerous contemporary Equatoguinean writers refer explicitly to the specific geographical settings of Equatorial Guinea and Spain (cf. Bermúdez Medina 66), Mba Abogo's imaginary places can be read as place holders for a multitude of realities in both Africa and Black diasporas in Europe. Thus, they transcend particular national contexts and point to more abstract geopolitical power structures determined by notions of 'center' and 'periphery,' of belonging and alienness, and by positionalities of privilege and exclusion.

The movements in *El Porteador*, however, do not only take place between spaces but are reflected in the narrative structure as well, turning the collection, as Cristián Ricci argues, into "un discurso dialógico, polifónico, ambivalente y subversivo" 'a dialogic, polyphonic, ambivalent and subversive discourse' ("Discurso" 981). First, the collection oscillates between genres, for the first part (*El porteador de Marlow*) is composed of very poetical short and micro stories that, according to the author (cf. Ngom, *Palabra* 254), are written like poems and the second part (*Canción negra sin color*) includes both poems and lyrical prosaic texts. Second, the typography changes continually, with alternating italicized and non-italicized text fragments, creating a hybrid texture that strengthens the impression of textual rupturedness and fragmentariness (cf. Ngom, *Palabra* 256). Third, and most importantly, the collection simultaneously evokes a plurality of voices.<sup>4</sup> This effect is created by a permanent alternation of narrators and focalizations--sometimes switching

from an individual perspective to a collective voice of many--and by numerous explicit and implicit references to a myriad of--both African *and* non-African--intertexts that are either introduced as a quote preceding a text fragment, mentioned by name in the texts, hinted at only implicitly, or interlaced through revisited motifs or characters (cf. Berástegui Wood, 93-94; Díaz-Pinés Prieto, 89).<sup>5</sup> These aspects turn Mba Abogo's collection into a highly complex and dense polyphonic writing of which the plurality and diversity of voices defies a thinking in universal terms, as criticized by Hamid Dabashi in his famous essay "Can Non-Europeans Think?," and hence structurally inscribes into the literary text a thinking beyond a single Eurocentric perspective.

A striking example of intertextual references is the collection's title, which evokes Joseph Conrad's famous novel *Heart of Darkness*, published in 1899. Although this reference to a 'classic' European literary text seems to be, at first glance, inconsistent with what has just been said about challenging a Eurocentric perspective, a closer look at how the Equatoguinean author more than once plays with Conrad's template shows, in an exemplary manner, the subversive potential of *El Porteador*'s polyphony, as is demonstrated in the following.

I argue that Mba Abogo is writing back to the British writer, as the 'white' travel narrative in *Heart of Darkness* is substituted in *El Porteador* by new Black narratives that--from an antipodal point of view--tell Black experiences of living in Europe. However, they do that not from the unilateral perspective of one intradiegetic narrator but from a multiplicity of--to some extent--contradictory perspectives. In his collection, Mba Abogo replaces Conrad's eye-catching imagery of the menacing African continent by somber visions of the diaspora in Europe that make the migratory experience seem just as hostile and disturbing for the Black subject, as Bermúdez Medina confirms (cf. "Literatura" 68-69).

In *Heart of Darkness*, the embedded narrator Marlow, as a single narrative authority, embodies the 'white' imperial subject and Africans are only present as mute and dehumanized creatures abused by colonial agents. Yet, it is the Black subject--like Marlow's mute helmsman, who, in Conrad's novel, dies without uttering a sound<sup>6</sup>--that speaks up in one of Mba Abogo's stories with the symbolical title "El testamento del porteador de Marlow" 'The Testament of Marlow's Boy'. By its title and its content, this story not only writes back to Conrad but also replies to another story of Mba Abogo entitled--as the collection as a whole--"El porteador de Marlow", where the author revisits the image of the silently dying colonized as a trope to narrate the invisibility of African migrants stranded in European societies and the failure of their dreams, for the story's disillusioned protagonist Nzambi articulates his presentiment of possibly dying "de forma anónima y silenciosa, como el porteador de Marlow" 'in an anonymous and silent way, like Marlow's boy' (49).

Furthermore, "El testamento del porteador de Marlow" also resumes the untold story of one of Conrad's characters: a Black man punished in a brutal way for having caused a fire and who disappears into the wilderness afterwards "without a sound" (Conrad 24). The Equatoguinean writer's story in question is preceded by a direct quote from Conrad's text that narrates this silent disappearance, and the narration of Mba Abogo's story sets in at this very moment: that is, the man's disappearance into the forest is not the end but the beginning of Mba Abogo's text; a text that can be read as a story retold from the Black man's perspective, his story of resistance against being dehumanized and annihilated. For even as Mba Abogo's protagonist knows that he might disappear from the world's surface without leaving a trace, he screams out his anger into the world and raises his voice to confirm his resistance and his refusal to just disappear inside of a 'white' master narrative of history:

antes voy a gritar con toda la fuerza de mis pulmones. Cadáveres vivientes de rostros blancos como la luna. . . . ¡Escuchadme [sic] bien!: no cuenten conmigo para servirles [sic] las comidas, ni para lavarles la ropa, ni para cargar el marfil, ni para transportar el caucho... No cuenten conmigo, me renuncio en paz, no he traído vida alguna al mundo. No contarán con mis descendientes. (119)

before, I will scream at the top of my lungs. Living cadavers with faces white as the moon . . . . Listen to me carefully!: do not count on me neither to serve your meals, nor to wash your clothes, nor to load the ivory, nor to transport the rubber... Do not count on me, I resign in peace, I have not brought any life to this world. Do not count on my descendants.

Mba Abogo's explicit intertextual references to Conrad's novel and his re-interpretation and modification of tropes and motives reveal a crucial intention of the Equatoguinean's collection: to create a space in literature that unsilences Black experiences and challenges a Eurocentric discourse on both Africa and Europe and migration from Africa to Europe--discourses that exclude African or Afro-diasporic subjects' perspectives that often remain hidden, as Equatoguinean writer Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo criticizes in his essay "El escritor ecuatoguineano y el exilio a España" (cf. 133).

In his programmatic text "(La construcción de) la memoria del petróleo" '(The Construction of) the Memory of Oil,' Mba Abogo, to this effect, elaborates that it is not history that distinguishes his native Equatorial Guinea from other countries that have equally suffered from dictatorships and colonization. It is, instead, the country's solitude due to its political and cultural isolation after independence and the lack of interest of former colonizing powers such as Spain (cf. 45; also Hendel, "Conversación"), which is why Mba Abogo describes Equatoguinean literary writing as "fotogramas de soledad" 'photograms of solitude' ("Construcción" 45). However, Mba Abogo's



trope of solitude goes beyond a mere critique of this post/colonial isolation of Equatorial Guinea by, in equal measure, adverting to the marginalization and silencing of non-Western cultures in general. It does so, once again, by evoking meaningful intertexts: Gabriel García Márquez's novel *Cien años de soledad* 'One Hundred Years of Solitude' (1967) and the Colombian writer's programmatic Nobel lecture from 1982. In that lecture, García Márquez uses the metaphor of the solitude of Latin America to criticize a Eurocentric disrespect of other realities, knowledge systems, and epistemologies (cf. García Márquez, *Cien*). In "El sueño de Dayo" 'Dayo's Dream'-a short story that stresses the entanglements of individual and collective history (cf. Mba Abogo, *Porteador* 22)--the reference to García Márquez's famous novel even appears once more: there, Mba Abogo seizes on an established reading of García Márquez's Buendía clan ('estirpe') as an allegory for the history of Latin America (cf. Martin 50) and on the novel's apocalyptic final scene (cf. García Márquez, *Cien* 350-51) by referring to African history as "el Apocalipsis de la estirpe condenada a cuatrocientos años de agonía" 'the Apocalypse of the clan condemned to four hundred years of agony' (Mba Abogo, *Porteador* 20). Consequently, it can be argued that Mba Abogo's narrators articulate these silenced and marginalized experiences--"llena[ndo] ese silencio [de África] con palabras" 'filling that silence [of Africa] with words' (Ngom, *Palabra* 258)--to transcend the Black subject's solitude. In doing so, the author's texts reveal to the readers--to use Equatoguinean writer Remei Sipi Mayo's words--"nuestra realidad desde nosotros mismos" 'our reality from our perspective' (Ngom, *Palabra* 92).

The poem "El secreto de Europa" 'The Secret of Europe' is emblematic of this writing back to a Eurocentric historiography, for the lyric persona, directly addressing the readership--"Os revelaré" 'I will reveal to you' (Mba Abogo, *Porteador*, 101)--, pledges to unmask Europe's secret to have been "el eructo de los grandes holocaustos" 'the burp of the great holocausts' (101). Hence,

Mba Abogo's texts narrate, as Equatoguinean writer Ndong-Bidyogo critically puts it, "desde el ángulo de *Los condenados de la tierra*" 'from the angle of *The Wretched of the Earth*' ("Escritor" 136), that is, from the perspective of those that suffer from being epistemically subalternized. Decolonial critic Nelson Maldonado-Torres (cf. "Coloniality") uses Fanon's (cf. *Wretched*) concept of the condemned ('damné') to describe such a traumatic experience of coloniality, one that characterizes the existential condition of the (formerly) colonized non-Western Others whose very humanity is violated and compromised. Hence, the condemned live in a modern/colonial world "in which lordship and supremacy rather than generous interaction define social dynamics" (Maldonado-Torres, "Coloniality" 113). Being the Other, they therefore become invisible and--their perspective being ignored--are, thus, kept from becoming the subject of their own history and telling other truths, as Grada Kilomba (cf. 12) argues; instead, they are reduced to being the mere object of 'white' historiography.

This precariousness of the marginalized Others' voices that are made audible in Mba Abogo's texts is illustrated by the metaphor of the cry in the short story "El testamento del porteador de Marlow" (cf. 119) quoted above. Following Fanon, Maldonado-Torres refers to the condemned's cry as "a call of attention to one's own existence" ("Coloniality" 110) and as "the revelation of someone who has been forgotten or wronged" ("Cry" 48); an articulation that makes her or him transcend the state of invisibility and "non-being" (cf. "Coloniality" 110). The cry consequently not only represents an act of mourning that reminds the 'white' imperial subject of the existential condition of the (formerly) colonized Other but also one of resistance and epistemic self-empowerment and agency in terms of an affirmation to have a story to tell and of "unsettl[ing] the established formations of meaning and challeng[ing] dominant ideological expressions" ("Cry" 48). With Levinas's thinking in mind (cf. Levinas and Kearney 23-24), this cry can therefore be

read as a verbal realization of the invocation embodied by the Other's face ('visage') that reminds the imperial Self of her or his ethical responsibility towards the subalternized Other--a responsibility that has been veiled by a hegemonic discourse of Othering and epistemic supremacy (cf. Ashcroft et al. 156-57).

The cry eventually uttered by Mba Abogo's (reenactment of Conrad's) character in "El testamento del porteador de Marlow" thus can be read as the ethical claim of the Black Other to be acknowledged as an equal subject in her or his humanity. At the same time, this cry has also an ethical dimension insofar that it is a call *for Others*, as Maldonado-Torres explains: "The 'Don't kill!' that finds expression in Fanon's cry is not properly translated merely as a demand for individual preservation, *but as a general and more categorical demand to fight against a reality where Others are killed*" ("Cry" 51; my emphasis). This ambiguity also becomes evident in "El testamento del porteador de Marlow" where the lyric persona's cry does not only indicate "the 'return of a living subject' who impertinently announces his presence" (Maldonado-Torres, "Cry" 48) but turns into a collective cry for justice: "No contarán con mis descendientes" 'Do not count on my descendants' (Mba Abogo, *Porteador* 119).

Yet, the Black subject does not only gain narrative authority over her or his own history in *El Porteador*. By enacting a plurality of voices, Mba Abogo's collection engages at the same time in a 'decolonial dialogue' as the texts' manifold perspectives defy imposed truths and "break with"--what Maldonado-Torres calls--"monologic modernity" ("Coloniality" 115),<sup>7</sup> thus following Mba Abogo's own claim to "sembrar algo en este continente que arrastra tantos monólogos y diálogos inconclusos" 'to sow something on this continent that drags so many unfinished monologues and dialogues with it' (120).

Due to the plurality of voices in *El Porteador*, the reader thus faces a highly fractured and polyphonic whole that seems to disintegrate into loose fragments and shows no deeper narrative continuity between the individual texts. The collection thus visualizes on a structural level the solitude of the Black subject denounced by Mba Abogo (cf. “Construcción”) as well as a feeling of alienness shared by most of the lyric personae. Due to this omnipresent feeling of non-belonging, invisibility, and marginalization in the collection, the lyric personae cry out what decolonial criticism calls a twofold ‘colonial wound’ (cf. Kilomba, *Plantation 95*; Mignolo, “Epistemic” 3); a wound (in a literal and symbolical sense) caused by the traumatic physical and epistemic violence suffered by the post/colonial subject during and after colonialism and, also, a wound that does not close because this suffering is widely ignored by Eurocentric knowledge production. By pointing to this ‘wound,’ Mba Abogo’s texts reveal a very uncomfortable truth to their (European) readers, for the author’s characters--many of them migrants that have come to the promised European land--do not sing the grateful praises of Europe’s pretended generosity. Instead, in accordance with the author’s intention to “revelar las caras escondidas de la realidad” ‘reveal the hidden faces of reality’ (Ngom, *Palabra* 262), they remind European societies of their inherent racism and that they keep marginalizing and rejecting the Black Other, which is why Gloria Nistal in the SIAL edition’s introduction rightly qualifies Mba Abogo’s book as “un puñetazo directo al centro de nuestra conciencia para hacerla tambalear” ‘a direct punch to the center of our conscience to make it stagger’ (Introducción 8; cf. also Berástegui Wood 102).

## **The Ambivalence of the Black Diasporic Experience: (Dis-)Illusion, Exclusion, and the Burden of History**

In a second step, I now focus on what these hidden faces of reality are that are revealed in *El Porteador* and on how the diasporic experience of the Black subject is to be characterized. At first glance, one might tend to say that some of the texts in *El Porteador* denounce the grievances of African realities in a modern/colonial world, while others broach the issue of a precarious life in the European diaspora (cf. López Rodríguez, “Más allá” 90). A closer look, however, allows one to acknowledge that these allegedly separate settings are pretty much entangled (cf. Berástegui Wood 96). Berástegui Wood shows (cf. 97) that when Mba Abogo evokes African realities characterized by poverty (e.g., Mba Abogo, *Porteador* 15-16, 31-35), violence (e.g., 24-28, 84-88), and abuse of power (e.g., 37-41), migration and diasporic life in Europe are always implicit issues, as is explained in the following.

First, the collection’s texts reveal that Europe is inherent in the minds of many characters still living in the African homeland as an idealized or even utopian fantasy, as we can see in “La rubia y el Porsche” ‘The Blonde and the Porsche,’ for instance (cf. Berástegui Wood 96-97). This story goes back and forth between illusions about life in Europe, a life of deprivation in an African country, and the disillusionment that follows migration, as the following passage illustrates: “*Y no teníamos agua corriente y la electricidad era una anécdota. Pero soñábamos con ser estrellas de cine, músicos, economistas, abogados, escritores, ingenieros, como los adolescentes de Seattle o Genova. Pero nosotros no estábamos en Seattle o en Genova. Vivíamos en un mundo de entrañas, en una vergüenza injustificable*” ‘*And we did not have running water and electricity was an anecdote. But we dreamt of being movie stars, musicians, economists, lawyers, writers, engineers,*

*like the adolescents of Seattle and Genoa. But we weren't in Seattle or in Genoa. We were living in a world of entrails, in an unjustifiable disgrace'* (15).

Constructing these oppositions, the narration presents the characters as trapped between the real and an imagined world, between Africa and (imaginings of) Europe in a way that, even before they migrate, they become “refugiados mentales” ‘mental refugees’ (16). We can observe this, too, in the case of the protagonist of another story who makes up naïve dreams of a careless life of “incontables aventuras en las que siempre salía victorioso” ‘uncountable adventures from which he always emerged victoriously’ (34) in the future. Being the first story of Mba Abogo’s collection, “La rubia y el Porsche” in a certain way anticipates all the following stories dealing with the same desire to leave, for it is told by a ‘we-’narrator who displays this drivenness as the shared experience of many.<sup>8</sup>

Second, the entanglement of spaces in *El Porteador* is intensified, as the migrating subjects are provided with their own history: they are not only presented as coming *to Europe* but also as coming *from somewhere*. Consequently, they are no longer, as Mba Abogo criticizes in an interview, just “un cuerpo arrastrado por las olas hasta sus playas [de los europeos; my remark]” ‘a body dragged by the waves to their beaches [of the Europeans; my remark]’ (Ngom, *Palabra* 263). Instead, they are individuals with “sueños y proyectos” ‘dreams and projects’ (263) and a family left behind (e.g., Mba Abogo, *Porteador* 35).

Interestingly, whenever the grievances of life in an African country are denounced, the texts simultaneously point to the co-responsibility of Europe. For those grievances are placed in relation to a colonial history of oppression and the perpetuation of asymmetrical power structures in a postcolonial era, as we can see for instance in “El país en el que lo redondo es cuadrado y los peces vuelan” ‘The Country in which the Circular is Square and where Fishes Fly’: there, a phenomenon

of the elements is used as a metaphor to describe the unstoppable and irruptive violent force of colonial power structures when the protagonist Rey and his peers are identified as “[g]ente sin futuro, sin pan, sin nada, *flagelados por el viento occidental*” ‘people with no future, with no bread, with nothing, *flagellated by the occidental wind*’ (33; my emphasis).

At the same time, intertextual references to the anti-colonial thinker Frantz Fanon emphasize that the subject’s ‘Blackness’ considerably affects the personal diasporic experience in Europe. As Fanon emblemizes by the well-known saying from a child quoted in *Black Skin, White Masks* “*Maman*, look, a Negro; I’m scared!” (91), the gaze of the ‘white’ European Other assures that the Black subject never forgets that she or he is ‘from somewhere else’ and not ‘from here’; or, as Ndongo-Bidyogo clarifies with respect to the particular situation of African migrants in Spain, that it is “el entorno el que crea la conciencia de raza, la percepción de la marginalidad” ‘the environment that creates the conscience of race, the perception of marginality’ (“Escritor” 134).<sup>9</sup>

Mba Abogo reenacts this gaze of the ‘white’ Other in a highly symbolic phrase uttered by the lyric persona in the text “El lamento de Walcott” ‘The Lament of Walcott’ that reads: “mi tragedia, a saber, ser negro en un país blanco” ‘my tragedy, in fact, to be black in a white country’ (*Porteador* 123). In this text of the collection, the lyric persona mourns the condition of the Black diasporic subject that belongs to Europe due to a legacy of colonialism and, nevertheless, remains a foreigner: “esa Europa en la que soy a la vez hijo y forastero” ‘that Europe in which I am son and stranger at the same time’ (123). This quote illustrates vividly the tension mentioned by Paul Gilroy “between chosen identities and given identities . . . in the history of the Black Atlantic diaspora, where the obligation to engage in self-discovery has always involved an act of refusal” (“Roots” 19).

Mba Abogo's "El lamento de Walcott" stresses the subject's powerlessness to overcome this paradox by evoking St. Lucia writer Derek Walcott's poem "A Far Cry from Africa" that deals with a similar condition of in-betweenness experienced by the postcolonial Caribbean subject who can ignore neither her or his African nor her or his European legacy (cf. Walcott, 18). Likewise, a legacy of colonial history overshadows the diasporic condition of the Black subject in Mba Abogo's texts, in which being in-between tends to be conflictive for the lyric personae. For they keep being reminded that they do not live in "un todo-mundo inédito que ignora las nociones de centro y periferia" 'an unprecedented All-World that is ignorant of notions of center and periphery' (*Porteador* 123), a reference to the Martiniquian philosopher Édouard Glissant--who Mba Abogo mentions by name--and his concept of "Tout-monde" (cf. Glissant, *Traité*). Instead, they continue suffering from an omnipresent burden of a colonial legacy and live in a world where the Black subject is constantly exposed to the colonial gaze denounced by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

This exposure is most evident in the story "*What a wonderful world*", the English title of which stands in contrast to its topic: it deals with the Black subject's experience of exclusion in a European society and explicitly refers to Fanon's "Los Condenados de la Tierra" 'The Wretched of the Earth' (Mba Abogo, *Porteador* 55). In that story, the gaze of the 'white' Others, evoked as "una marmita de ojos, feroces como el afilar de hachas de un verdugo vikingo" 'a cauldron of eyes, ferocious such as the whetting of a Viking executioner's axe' (57), precipitates the protagonist Nguema into a state of inner crisis. After having migrated to Europe, he feels disrooted ("desarraigo", 57), as he has to live in a society he perceives as deeply hostile; a society where "[t]odo era falso . . . como una mala fotografía" 'everything was wrong . . . like a bad photography' (56).<sup>10</sup> This dismissive gaze of the Others keeps reminding the protagonist that he is 'different' in the 'white' Others' eyes and that his physical visibility in a 'white'-dominated society reduces his



subjectivity to a bunch of stereotypes: “Como siempre, la respuesta a *tantas miradas malévolas* estaba en *el tono de su piel*. Inmigración, inseguridad ciudadana, caníbales, ola de calor africano, etc.” ‘Like always, the answer to *so many malevolent looks* was in *the color of his skin*. Immigration, public insecurity, cannibals, African heat wave, etc.’ (58; my emphasis).

In “*What a Wonderful World*”, the narrator furthermore contrasts the Black subject’s exclusion to the privileged position of the ‘white’ imperial subject, who is embodied by a drunken young European sleeping on a bench with vomit on his face (cf. 54). This young man, however, is not liable to the critical gaze of his surroundings: “a él, el escombros moderno sangre de su sangre y carne de su carne, simplemente le ignoraban” ‘being the modern rubble blood of their blood and flesh of their flesh, they simply ignored him’ (55). Similar to Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s renowned novel *Americanah* (2013), it is the encounter with a society characterized by ‘white’ supremacy that makes the Black diasporic subject in Mba Abogo’s texts aware of the true significance of being Black in a ‘white’ conceptual modern/colonial world; an awareness echoed by the previously quoted emblematic phrase “mi tragedia, a saber, ser negro en un país blanco” ‘my tragedy, in fact, to be black in a white country’ (Mba Abogo, *Porteador* 123), which implicitly reflects Fanon’s complaint in *Black Skin, White Masks* that the Black subject is “overdetermined from the outside. I am a slave not to the ‘idea’ others have of me, but to my appearance” (95).

Hence, these feelings of being rejected and reduced to her or his physical appearance are characteristic of the Black subject’s condition described in the *El Porteador*. In “El sueño de Dayo” the protagonist of the same name--sent to Europe by his mother--correspondingly bemoans that his generation “estaba regalando su alma y a cambio recibía humillaciones agitadas y desprecio compasivo” ‘was giving his soul and in return he received agitated humiliations and compassionate despise’ (19). Having left Africa for Europe geographically, but never really having been allowed

in metaphorically, Mba Abogo's characters and lyric personae are "condenado[s] a vivir en una frontera" 'condemned to live on a border' (100). This border space in the poem entitled "El lamento de un ángel de carbón" 'The Lament of an Angel of Coal'<sup>11</sup> contains no positive connotation in Mba Abogo's poem, for it is not presented as an in-between of polycentric belongings. Instead, it is pictured as a space of displacement that gives rise to a feeling of alienation, or, as the lyric persona says: "No hay paredes en este mundo para mis rótulos" 'There are no walls in this world for my signs' (100).

Correspondingly, the euphemized visions of many characters mentioned above collide with this reality of exclusion, as we can see, for instance, in short stories such as "La rubia y el Porsche", "El país en el que lo redondo es cuadrado y los peces vuelan" or "El porteador de Marlow". After migration, Europe turns into some kind of mythological monster "[que] le había devorado la cabeza" '[that] had devoured his head' (49) and the heads of all those who came looking for help (cf. also 34-35). The collection's characters consequently struggle with the insight that they might have fled physical suffering but now have to endure perfidious forms of epistemic violence. In "La rubia y el Porsche", the narrator comments on this disillusionment as follows: "*Y descubrimos, horrorizados, que más allá de nuestras fronteras seguíamos expuestos a latigazos. Las manos que habíamos perseguido durante tantos sueños no tenían dulzura ni fraternidad para nosotros. . . . Descubrimos que la imagen del Porsche y la Rubia era una entelequia y aprendimos a sufrir de forma metálica. Habíamos perdido la inocencia*" 'And we discovered, horrified, that beyond our borders we continued being exposed to whiplashes. The hands that we had pursued in so many dreams had no softness or brotherliness for us. . . . We discovered that the image of the Porsche and the Blonde was an entelechy and we learned to suffer in a metallic manner. We had lost our innocence' (16). What is particularly striking about this quote is that the Spanish term 'latigazo'--

also used in a figurative way referring to events that have shaken us--derives from the term 'látigo' 'whip' and thus evokes the history of enslavement of African people. The use of 'latigazo' in Mba Abogo's text therefore clearly relates the present fate of African migrants to a colonial legacy and a transatlantic Black experience of violence in times of enslavement.

Moreover, the alternation of illusions and disillusionment present in this last quote is a recurrent trope in Mba Abogo's texts and is expressed most succinctly in the poem "He vivido en Europa" 'I have lived in Europe,' where the lyric persona outlines the ambivalence of the diasporic experience repeating several times the following verses: "He vivido en Europa / He vivido en el paraíso / He vivido en el infierno" 'I have lived in Europe / I have lived in paradise / I have lived in hell' (97). This ambivalence gives rise to the crises experienced by the collection's protagonists, who have to deal not only with exclusion<sup>12</sup> but with the disintegration of their hopes, too.

However, it is not only the encounter with the 'white' gaze in Europe that defines the Black diasporic experience in *El Porteador*. The protagonists' lives are simultaneously described as "anclada[s] en la historia" 'anchored in history' (22), a description that correspondingly unmasks the present marginalization of the postcolonial diasporic subject as a reenactment of colonial oppression.<sup>13</sup>

This significance of colonial history becomes particularly evident in the poem "Canción negra sin color" 'Black Song without Color', where the lyric persona relates a Black African genealogy--emblemized through the image of the tree--to the shared traumatic experience of slavery that links Black Africans to the Black populations of the Americas: "Nuestro árbol agoniza / Las ramas se retuercen de dolor / Bahía-Haití-NuevaOrleans..." 'Our tree agonizes / The branches twist in pain / Bahía-Haiti-NewOrleans...' (110). These lines allude to the same network of entanglements between past and present, between Africa and other Black diasporas, as

mentioned in the term ‘latigazo’ described above, reminding the reader to think Black diasporic identities always in relation to a historical experience of colonial violence. This relationality also illustrates why Mba Abogo’s characters mostly try in vain to belong to and fit into the society of the former colonizer, an intent creating a disturbing feeling of unease they cannot overcome.<sup>14</sup>

One of the most vivid examples of how the burden of colonial history weighs heavily on the protagonists of the collection is the short story “Hora de partir” ‘Time to Leave’ (cf. also Berástegui Wood 98-99): it is the story of a Black man--Ka--and a ‘white’ woman--Ariadna--who meet in some European city and subsequently become lovers. Their first meeting goes along with an idealizing description of the urban space as “un pedazo de Europa con un ritmo lento. Apacible. Con los ojos puestos en muchas partes del planeta...” ‘a piece of Europe with a slow rhythm. Gentle. With the eyes turned to many parts of the planet...’ (Mba Abogo, *Porteador* 65). The ‘mixed’ couple as a trope of transcultural coexistence, however, is slowly deconstructed throughout the story.

Ariadna’s naïve curiosity for Africa is the first hint that the characters cannot free themselves from history, for the ‘white’ woman’s superficial fascination mirrors a colonial attitude that does not meet with the complexity of Africa’s heterogeneous realities and cultures:

Ariadna no paró de hacerle preguntas a Ka, con los ojos brillantes como un felino agazapado tras un arbusto en una noche negra de mayombe, sobre África. Le preguntaba sobre Zanzíbar, sobre Tombuctú, sobre Ouagadugu, sobre Etiopía, sobre sitios de los que había oído hablar. . . . Ka esbozaba risa de lluvia y le decía que la distancia que separaba a su país de Malí era tan enorme que los cielos de ambos países estaban cortados por sastres reñidos. (68-69)

Ariadna did not stop asking Ka questions about Africa, with sparkling eyes like a feline hidden behind a bush in a black Mayombe night. She asked him about Zanzibar, about Timbuktu, about Ouagadougou, about Ethiopia, about places she had heard people talking about. . . . A laughter of rain formed on Ka's lips, and he told her that the distance that separated his country from Mali was so enormous that the skies of both countries were cut by quarreling tailors.

Consequently, Ariadna's attitude leaves a bitter taste, for it makes Ka himself seem to be just one of those African objects of curiosity and desire she wants to acquire knowledge about.

In the end, the legacy of colonialism catches up with Ka: the protagonist realizes that--despite all its intimacy--sexual intercourse with Ariadna reenacts the encounter between the 'white' and the Black body: "los estigmas de la historia se encendieron en las pieles de Ka y Ariadna. Y dentro de sus cuerpos, que yacían sobre cenizas calientes, se apagó la hoguera del sueño de la comunidad humana" "the stigmas of history kindled in the skins of Ka and Ariadna. And inside their bodies, which were lying on hot ashes, the blaze of the dream of the human community went out" (70). Thus, the protagonists' efforts to try to "despigmentarse" 'unpigmentize themselves' (74), that is, to pretend that skin color--and simultaneously a colonial legacy--is not of any importance, are in vain. Hence, Mba Abogo points out that individual struggles to overcome differences are doomed to fail as long as racism is still firmly rooted in a society--as is the case throughout the texts of *El Porteador*. These texts remind the reader that one cannot hide from history but that it is part of present--African, Afro-diasporic and European--identities and that we therefore have to actively deal with it, as alluded to by the short story's title "Hora de partir," which can be read as an appeal to the reader to leave "su burbuja particular" 'her or his particular bubble' (74)--as Ka and Ariadna should do--to confront everyday racism.

Similarly, the protagonist of the afore-mentioned short story “El sueño de Dayo” experiences migration as a painful confrontation with history: he re-lives the trauma of colonial violence in hallucinatory visions and becomes aware of the past being significant for his own identity as a Black diasporic subject in Europe, for “. . . África le colgaba de sus espaldas, . . . era el color de su rostro y el calor de su cuerpo” ‘. . . Africa dangled from his shoulders, . . . she was the color of his face and the heat of his body’ (18-19).

Yet, as the author denounces in a very short poem of the collection’s subsection “Canción negra sin color,” the interrelatedness of colonial past and postcolonial present keeps being silenced in a Eurocentric discourse on present-day Africa. In the poem in question--whose symbolic title “Lamento de un iniciado” ‘Lament of an Initiated’ highlights the privileged position of knowledge of the diasporic subject who is able to embrace alternative perspectives--the lyrical persona claims that Africans need to “. . . escupirles a la cara esa llama / Que dejen caer sobre nuestras bocas hambrientas” ‘. . . spit in their face that flame / They let fall on our hungry mouths’ (114), the term ‘llama’ referring to a destiny of “tormentos y espantos” ‘anguish and horror’ (114) mentioned at the beginning of this very poem. However, as its title shows, only those who are ‘initiated’--that is, those who are prepared to see behind the curtain of existing truths--are able to perceive and truly understand “las lágrimas de África” ‘the tears of Africa’ (114), which symbolize an enduring experience of post/colonial oppression.

## **Re-Connecting to a Shared Experience of Oppression and Self-Empowerment: Black Intertexts as a Symbolic Homeland**

So far, my analysis of Mba Abogo’s short stories and poems has shown that the disturbing feeling of non-belonging and exclusion characterizes the condition of the Black diasporic subject in *El*

*Porteador* due to the reenactment of colonial structures and racist migration regimes. Yet, the texts do not leave it at that, which brings me to my last point. On the contrary, they counteract the subject's isolation by re-locating her or him inside a global Black community through a diasporic network of Black intertexts--the concept of intertextuality in this context referring not only to a text's relatedness to other written texts but to cultural and epistemological systems of signs in general (cf. Bachmann-Medick)--as explained in the following.

In his study of hybridization in *El Porteador*, Berástegui Wood identifies Mba Abogo's writing--mirroring a transcultural reading experience--as a "reflejo de la profunda interconexión cultural que existe en este mundo global y poscolonial . . . , un proceso de sinergias culturales donde se entremezclan y dialogan diversas tradiciones" 'reflection of the profound cultural interconnection that exists in this global and postcolonial world . . . , a process of cultural synergies where diverse traditions intermingle and communicate' (94). Mba Abogo himself confirms in an interview that he is "un nómada" 'a nomad' (Ngom, *Palabra* 263), having "una identidad rizomática" 'a rhizomatic identity' (263) that despite its bonds to Africa, establishes plural and hybrid relations, and opens up symbolic spaces for transcultural dialogues (cf. Berástegui Wood 93-94; López Rodríguez 91-92), as we can see in the network of plural relations evoked in *El Porteador*.<sup>15</sup> In a highly innovative manner, *El Porteador* thus goes beyond the migration experience of the Equatoguinean subject by addressing questions of identity in a globalized, 'postnational' world (cf. Berástegui Wood 105; López Rodríguez 87). Referring to Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity that "gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" (Rutherford 211), Berástegui Wood correspondingly identifies Mba Abogo's writing in *El Porteador* as "un acto narrativo que trata de renegociar el espacio discursivo e incorporar nuevas formas de ver la realidad" 'a narrative act that

tries to renegotiate the discursive space and to embrace new forms to see reality' (96). As such, it challenges hegemonic master narratives and "abr[e] espacios de contestación" 'opens up spaces of contestation' (Berástegui Wood 104). This effect is attained through both an ambivalent but differentiated vision of Africa and the Black diaspora in Europe and the dialogic and polyphonic structure of *El Porteador* in which different discourses coincide, clash and/or converge (cf. Berástegui Wood 105).

Berástegui Wood is certainly right in emphasizing the cosmopolitan character of the Equatoguinean writer's collection that goes beyond the bilateral axis of 'Equatoguinean homeland' and 'Spanish hostland' and, thus, connects the narrative "con el resto del mundo" 'with the rest of the world' (105). However, it is striking that the intertextual networks evoked in *El Porteador* include an eye-catching abundance of Black voices from both Africa and the Black diasporas throughout the world. Therefore I argue that this referentiality to a global Black community, its history, thinkers, and texts not only confirms the collection's cosmopolitan and transcultural character but also presents a source of self-empowerment for the Black diasporic subject, who, due to an experience of displacement and exclusion in the 'white' hostland, is looking for an imagined 'homeland' she or he might relate to. In *El Porteador*, this 'homeland' is non-territorial and symbolic insofar as it stands for a shared experience of post/colonial violence and oppression on the one hand but represents a decolonial tradition of resistance, emancipation and self-empowerment on the other (cf. Hall, "Cultural" 111-13; Gilroy, "Roots" 24; Clifford 306). This ambiguity is summed up in an excerpt from the poem "Mandela" that reads:

Sabias [sic], Mandela

Que África está preñada de humillaciones:

Sobre el tejido negro de nuestra piel



*Cabalgan los holocaustos de los que nadie habla*

Sabias [sic], Mandela

*Que los negros de todas las latitudes*

*Estamos condenados a errar sin recursos*

*Hasta que de nuestras manos*

*Brote una nueva trayectoria para la humanidad* (Mba Abogo, *Porteador* 115; my emphasis)

You knew, Mandela

That Africa is impregnated with humiliations:

On the black tissue of our skin

*Ride the holocausts that no one talks about*

You knew, Mandela

That the *blacks from all latitudes*,

We are *condemned to stray* without means

Until *from our hands*

*A new path for humanity will grow*

That Mba Abogo's texts transcend the specific situation of Equatorial Guinea--relating to the experiences of and speaking to 'the blacks from all latitudes' (115)--has already been mentioned. It becomes even more evident if we consider the multiple references to central events in African history, for several short stories and poems refer, for instance, to the exploitation of African people-

-by focusing on colonial violence in Africa--while others evoke a troublesome postcolonial African history (by mentioning the Rwandan genocide, as in “Rwanda mi amor” ‘Rwanda My Love,’ or apartheid in South Africa, as in “Mandela”) or broach African resistance to oppression (by naming several civil rights activists such as Nelson Mandela, Patrice Lumumba or Ken Saro-Wiwa in the subsection “Canción negra sin color” of the second part of the collection). That Mba Abogo’s texts claim a Panafrican relatedness also becomes obvious in the poem “Una noche de invierno bajo el techo de la creación” ‘A Winter Night Under the Roof of Creation,’ in which the diasporic lyrical persona refers to “la sangre negra de un continente” ‘the black blood of a continent’ (104) that runs through her or his veins.

Yet, these references to historical events, figures in public life, cultural production, and so on are not restricted to the African continent but represent the “complex cultural and social intermingling between Africa, Europe and the Americas” (Cohen 149) that Paul Gilroy describes in his concept of the ‘Black Atlantic’ and its shared history of discrimination and resistance (cf. *Black*) as a “global circuitry of Black cultures and the identities they support, nurture, and protect” (“Roots” 16).<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, those references embrace Black diasporas in the Americas as well by evoking, for instance, transcontinental slavery as in the previously mentioned poem “Canción negra sin color” (*Porteador* 110). This poem opens up a transatlantic axis of referentiality by mentioning territories in the Americas--Bahia, Haiti, New Orleans--that stand both for a shared Black history of enslavement and discrimination, and crucial centers of Black diasporic culture.

By these references to a global Black community and by constantly relating to Black history, activists, thinkers, intertexts, and so on, *El Porteador*, while denouncing the marginalization of the Black diasporic subject in Europe, establishes alternative networks of relations and belonging that

are based on a shared experience of marginalization, displacement and colonial violence (cf. Gilroy, “Roots” 24-25).

Examples of these intertextual references evoked by Mba Abogo are novels by Haitian diaspora writers (cf. *Porteador* 31, 37) that deal with questions of diasporic identities and experiences of migration and deterritorialization. These writers are Marie-Célie Agnant, who, in her novel *Le livre d’Emma* ‘The Book of Emma’ (2001), addresses the transgenerational implications of the trauma of deportation and enslavement of African people or Émile Ollivier, whose novel *Passages* ‘Passages’ (1991) broaches the issue of Haitian refugees--the so-called ‘boat people,’ who cross the Sea to reach North America--and the condition of being in exile. By evoking these intertexts, the author of *El Porteador* once again correlates African migration in the present to other episodes of (forced) displacement of Black people in history.

Another revealing intertext is Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes’ famous verse “I, too, sing America” (109) that precedes one of Mba Abogo’s poems that harshly criticizes Europe’s “amnesia” ‘amnesia’ (*Porteador* 105) and her refusal to engage in her history, her “génésis” ‘genesis’ (105) and her “crímenes [que] han quedado impunes” ‘crimes [that] have remained unpunished’ (105).<sup>17</sup> This poem entitled “El fin del tiempo de las mascotas” ‘The End of the Time of Pets’ relates to the self-empowerment of Hughes’s lyric persona, who claims not only to have a voice--“I, too *sing* America” (Hughes 109; my emphasis)--but to inherently belong to and embody U.S. society and culture--“I, too, *am* America” (109; my emphasis). In the Equatoguinean author’s poem, the lyric persona comparably claims the right to denounce the Black subject’s exploitation and exclusion and to speak up: “Europa / Yo también quiero cantarte” ‘Europe / I also want to sing you’ (Mba Abogo, *Porteador* 105).

Mba Abogo mentions numerous other Black but also non-Black thinkers, from Africa and other parts of the world--African intellectuals such as Théophile Obenga and Léopold Sédar Senghor, writers such as African American novelist Richard Wright, Caribbean writers and theorists such as Derek Walcott and Édouard Glissant, Nigerian Nobel prize winner Wole Soyinka, Angolan poet Antonio Cardoso, Mozambican writer Mia Couto, and so on. Many of these thinkers share an experience of migrating and living in a Black diaspora and/or their theoretical and literary writings explicitly deal with questions of both African and/or Afro-diasporic cultures and identities, the significance of the experience of displacement, and a (symbolic) African 'homeland' for Black cultural movements, as well as with the self-empowerment of African and Afro-descendant people. And it is not by coincidence that many of the voices quoted or implicitly mentioned in *El Porteador* have played and/or play a decisive role in Black movements of self-determination and empowerment that aim to draw the African and Afro-diasporic subject's attention to her or his African heritage. Mba Abogo proposes a similar solution of epistemic relocation in his texts: if 'white'-dominated societies show nothing but rejection towards the Black diasporic subject, she or he has the option to relate to global Black knowledge systems that both open up new possibilities and networks of belonging and offer narratives of resistance to exclusion and marginalization in the past and present that she or he might identify with nowadays. In this sense, 'Blackness' in *El Porteador* turns into a trope for positions of peripherality in a modern/colonial world order in which the marginalized subject keeps being pushed away from the 'center', although this is where she or he is physically located. Consequently, the subject is forced to create new lateral points of reference beyond the 'center': the Black knowledge systems conceptualized in *El Porteador*.

This reasoning is condensed in the short story “Los hermanos de Senghor” ‘Senghor’s Brothers’, which comprehends an explicit reference to the cultural movement of *Négritude* aiming at “rehabilitat[ing] African history and . . . reevaluat[ing] African culture” (Irele 57), of which Léopold Sédar Senghor is one of the originators (cf. Ashcroft et al. 144-45). Mba Abogo’s “Los hermanos de Senghor” tells the story of protagonist Mpolo, who is looking for a room in a shared apartment in a European city. Whenever he shows up in person for an interview and his potential flatmates become aware that he is Black, he experiences discrimination--whether in form of rejection, offending curiosity, or paternalizing neoimperial discourses about Africa (cf. *Porteador* 78-79). They confront the protagonist again and again with what Mba Abogo--following Wole Soyinka--calls “su memoria racial” ‘his racial memory’ (*Porteador* 79); a concept referring to a transgenerational experience of racist discrimination. The author interestingly illustrates this experience with a colonial imagery that evokes the chains put on enslaved Africans by describing the burden of this ‘racial memory’ as “sólida como una cadena, [que] se trenzaba alrededor de sus manos y sus pies y su cuello” ‘solid like a chain woven around his hands and his feet and his neck’ (79). Disillusioned by other people’s reaction to his being Black, Mpolo eventually decides to move in with other men and women from Senegal, Angola, and Equatorial Guinea (cf. 79). He, thus, turns his back on both a European society structured by ‘white’ supremacy and its discriminatory practices of Othering and turns, instead, towards a Panafrican, or--if we consider the multiple references to worldwide African and Afro-diasporic movements and knowledge systems mentioned in *El Porteador*-- even global Black community.

In his essay “(La construcción de) la memoria del petróleo”, Mba Abogo uses a similar imagery to describe the situation of Equatoguinean writers who write to “dar voz al silencio de Guinea Ecuatorial” ‘give a voice to the silence of Equatorial Guinea’ (4). There he argues that

Equatoguinean writers *do* and *do not* belong to a global *hispanidad*--“el reino de Cervantes que es un reino de este mundo, nuestro mundo” ‘the kingdom of Cervantes that is a kingdom of this world, of our world’ (4)--which is why, to overcome their seeming isolation with respect to Spain, they need to establish alternative networks: “Nosotros los poetas de Guinea Ecuatorial ya no estamos tan solos. *Ya somos multitud. Ya tenemos nuestro Viyil*” ‘We, the poets of Equatorial Guinea, are not so alone any more. *We are already a multitude. We already have our Viyil*’ (4; my emphasis).<sup>18</sup>

What is interesting in *El Porteador* is that, despite Mpolo’s decision to turn to an exclusive Black (housing) community, the collection itself does not isolate Black knowledge systems by using one-sided intertextual references. In fact, Mba Abogo’s collection simultaneously engages in a dialogue with ‘white’ thinkers and intertexts, for instance, as well as with those from other parts of the globe such as Latin America. Berástegui Wood correspondingly refers to the author’s texts as a “narrativa cosmopolita” ‘cosmopolitan narrative’ (Berástegui Wood 96), the textual hybridity of which mirrors the condition of a transcultural subject that stays related to Africa but has been changed by living in the diaspora (cf. 96; also Ricci, “African” 225). Through this transareal and transcultural poly-relationality that becomes manifest in the intertexts, Mba Abogo’s texts emphasize that knowledge can be both local and global in its impact (cf. Dabashi), that is, not ‘either/or’ but always ‘in Relation’, a vision that is reflected in Mba Abogo mentioning of Caribbean philosopher Édouard Glissant, originator of the ‘Poetics of Relation’,<sup>19</sup> as a source of inspiration: “Soy africano de Guinea Ecuatorial, esa es mi elección, pero cuando escribo construyo posiciones, lo único que puedo hacer es, parafrasear a Glissant y decir que escribo en presencia de todas las lenguas del mundo . . .” ‘I am African from Equatorial Guinea, that is my choice, but when I write, I construct positions, the only thing that I can do is to paraphrase Glissant and say that I write in the presence of all languages of the world . . .’ (Ngom, *Palabra* 258).

Correspondingly, Mba Abogo retrospectively challenges the necessity of withdrawal to the alleged protected space of the Black (housing) community framed in “Los hermanos de Senghor” when revisiting this metaphor in the postface of the second part of his collection. In this last text, the narrator challenges the protagonist’s initial attempts both to “*fundirse con los hermanos de Senghor*” ‘merge with Senghor’s brothers’ (Mba Abogo, *Porteador* 149) and to “*dedicar todas sus energías a un solo fin: caer bien, ser aceptado*” ‘dedicate all his energies to a single goal: to be liked, to be accepted’ (149). The ideal that leads to self-determined subjectivity--“*un yo bien definido*” ‘a well defined I’ (149)--as sketched in this postface, on the contrary, implies a mobility of the subject to move and choose freely between discourses, cultures, epistemologies, etc.: “*elegir de guía a la nube más vagabunda de entre las más vagabundas*” ‘to choose as a guide the most wandering cloud among the most wandering clouds’ (150) and “*agarrarse a todas las ramas o a cualquier cosa que flotase en el río [sic] de la vida*” ‘hold on to all the branches or to anything that might float in the river of life’ (150). However, the text puts straight that this claim for mobility cannot wipe out a colonial legacy that overshadows the Black subject’s condition, for “*las jornadas de sangre y lágrimas de los hijos e hijas de África siguieron contaminando la espuma de sus sueños*” ‘the days of blood and tears of the sons and daughters of Africa kept contaminating the foam of his dreams’ (150). To that effect, Ricci argues that, in *El Porteador*, “el escritor-personaje-voz poética no es completamente africano, aunque tampoco europeo, sino más bien es transformado en una significativa construcción de una identidad liminal” ‘the writer-character-lyric persona is neither completely African nor European but is transformed into a remarkable construction of a liminal identity’ (“Discurso” 983; cf. also Nistal, Introducción 10). Correspondingly, as Mba Abogo writes in the first “Postfacio” ‘Postface’ of the collection, *El Porteador* is not a simple revolt but an attempt to “podar recuerdos (y angustias) en la espesura de

mi existencia” ‘prune memories (and anxieties) in the thicket of my existence’ (90); that is, to articulate the ambivalence of the Black diasporic subject’s position in a ‘white’ conceptual world--“mi tragedia, a saber, ser negro en un país blanco” ‘my tragedy, in fact, to be black in a white country’ (123)--and to embrace this ambivalence.

### **The Final Words?**

Finally, I would like to conclude with a critical remark: so far, my analysis has shed light on the ambivalence of the diasporic experience of the Black subject characterized by experiences of exclusion and Othering. Moreover, I have discussed how *El Porteador* shows ways of establishing alternative networks of relations and belonging to a global Black community based on a shared experience of both oppression and resistance. In this context, I have also elaborated that the literary text can serve as a space to unsilence marginalized voices that articulate a shared experience of Black diasporic existence, forcing readers to face other--and potentially uncomfortable--truths. However, if we take into account the publication process of *El Porteador*, we have to question whether we really get to hear the lowdown. Why is that?

In an interview, Mba Abogo explains that the collection published by SIAL Ediciones is not the book as he would have wanted it in the first place but a shortened and ‘disarmed’ version (cf. Ngom, *Palabra* 254-55). He confirms that he omitted both a prologue explaining why he had written *El Porteador* and several texts that might have been misinterpreted. Subsequently, the author states that this ‘re-editing’ of his text might have been a good idea, for, even as it is, he has been accused both of giving voice to his own resentments against Spain and of shedding a bad light on his native Equatorial Guinea (cf. 254, 259). On these grounds, he states that he would not want to know the reactions if he had published the book as planned. It might be a coincidence that,



in the same breath, Mba Abogo mentions that his book project had been previously declined by several publishing houses and then ironically adds that “las hogueras [de la inquisición] no me hacen mucha gracia” ‘the stakes [of the inquisition] do not amuse me’ (Ngom, *Palabra* 254). It might be a coincidence. However, my reading of *El Porteador* allows the assumption that, with these comments, Mba Abogo calls on his readers to critically consider who decides who and what gets published or not, that is: who and what do the readers get to read at all? By telling us in this interview that there are two versions of the book--“el corte de escritor” ‘the writer’s cut’ (Ngom, *Palabra* 255) and a somehow extenuated (‘censored’?) published version--Mba Abogo reminds us that, although European societies seem to be starting to concede space to marginalized Black voices, this recent interest might not be as honest as it initially seemed. Rather, we might keep questioning premature conclusions and looking for hidden perspectives and alternative truths between the lines.

## Notes

1. All translations of quotes into English are mine if not otherwise indicated. A special thanks goes to my colleague Bàrbara Roviró for her help with the translation of the Spanish quotes and to César A. Mba Abogo for his willingness to engage in discussing his collection's title and its adequate translation.
2. For the general unawareness of both literary critics and Spanish readers for African and Afro-diasporic literature written in Spanish cf. Brancato, "Voices" 5; Trujillo "Historia" 873; for an increasing attention to the topic in the 21<sup>st</sup> century cf. Ngom, Introducción 17.
3. Cf. Nistal ("Visiones") for the use of imaginary place names in works by other Equatoguinean writers such as José Fernando Siale Djangany or Maximiliano Nkogo Esono; for the presentation of urban space in Mba Abogo's writing cf. also Odartey-Wellington, "Ciudades" 91.
4. For the dialogic structure of literary discourse in general cf. e.g. Bakhtin.
5. For the author's comment on the collection's intertextual references cf. Ngom, *Palabra* 257; for more examples of intertexts in Mba Abogo's writing cf. Díaz-Pinés Prieto.
6. "We two whites stood over him, and his lustrous and inquiring glance enveloped us both. I declare it looked as though he would presently put to us some question in an understandable language; but he died *without uttering a sound*, without moving a limb, without twitching a muscle" (Conrad 47; my emphasis).
7. Cf. in detail Maldonado-Torres: "Decolonization itself, the whole discourse around it, is a gift itself, an invitation to engage in dialogue. For decolonization, concepts need to be conceived as invitations to dialogue and not as impositions" ("Coloniality" 115).
8. A similar vision of Europe as the promised land in opposition to a bleak reality of the here and now is featured in the story "El país en el que lo Redondo es cuadrado y los peces vuelan" "The

Country in Which the Circular is Square and Where Fishes Fly.’ In this text, the main character Rey opposes the “miseria de Puerto Fraga [que] se exhibía ante sus ojos sin contención, . . . penetraba a la fuerza en su espíritu y en todo su ser” ‘misery of Puerto Fraga [that] exhibited itself before his eyes without restraint, . . . penetrated with force into his mind and his whole being’ (Mba Abogo, *Porteador* 33) and “la posibilidad de elegir otra vida” ‘the possibility to choose another life’ (33) in Europe. The analogy between this one and the first story is even reinforced by an intratextual reference, for the protagonist Rey explicitly dreams of “un porsche y una rubia” ‘a Porsche and a blonde’ (34).

9. For a detailed analysis of the historic experience of exploitation, marginalization and discrimination, and the current situation of the Black diaspora in Spain cf. e.g. Vi-Makomè.

10. Another example is the case of the protagonist Ka in “Hora de partir” ‘Time to Leave,’ whose experience of marginalization is strongly related to his skin color, cf. images such as “rechazo pigmentado” ‘pigmented rejection’ (Mba Abogo, *Porteador* 66), “cada mirada vacía, sorda y puznante que se clavaba en su piel” ‘every empty, deaf, and sharp gaze that bored into his skin’ (66-67).

11. It is to be noted that the title of the poem indicated in the contents is “Lamento de un orisha en europa [sic!]” ‘Lament of an Orisha in Europe’ and not “El lamento de un angel de carbón” as inside the collection.

12. Whereas the diasporic subject is shown as excluded in this poem, the lyric persona transcends such a binary thinking of Self and Other by emphasizing her or his “relationship with the Other” (Glissant, *Poetics* 11) as being essential for her or his own identity when claiming: “Cuando me reúna con mi gente / Hablaré de los hombres y mujeres de Europa / Hombres y mujeres como

nosotros” ‘When I reunite with my people / I will talk about the men and women from Europe / Men and women like us’ (Mba Abogo, *Porteador* 98).

13. Cf. also “Me han hecho la vida más cansada y pesada” ‘They Made My Life More Tiresome and More Tedious,’ where the illegal migrant Héctor suffers from feelings of hopelessness symbolized by “aquella pestilencia engendrada por las páginas de la historia” ‘that stench fathered by the pages of history’ (Mba Abogo, *Porteador* 47). This metaphor alludes to a continuity of oppression and marginalization of people of African descent.

14. Cf. the afore-mentioned examples of “Me han hecho la vida más cansada y pesada” or “*What a wonderful word*”.

15. For the notion of a rhizomatic identity cf. e.g. Glissant, *Poetics* 143-44.

16. Cf. in detail Gilroy: “It is no longer a simple, expressive and unidirectional diaspora with an identifiable and reversible pattern of dispersal as its starting point. Its nonlinear dynamics have created multiple, looped lines of intimacy capable of conducting the heat of political affinity as well as the possibility of common identity” (“Roots” 26).

17. Spanish society’s lack of interest with regard to her colonial history on the African continent as well as to both Equatoguinean cultural production and the African migrant’s perspective in general is a problem about which many Afro-Spanish writers complain, cf. Remei Sipi Mayo or Joaquín Mbomio Bacheng in Ngom, *Palabra* 92, 151; Ndong-Bidyogo, “Escritor” 133.

18. As Justo Bolekia Boleká explains (7), a ‘viyil’ is a traditional place of debate and decision-making in Equatoguinean culture.

19. Cf. e.g.: “The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root. Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of

Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other”  
(Glissant, *Poetics* 11).

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