

## Penetrating the Veil of the Invisible

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On May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1769, the slave ship *La Marie-Séraphique* set out from Nantes for West Africa.

<sup>2</sup> In its cargo holds it carried wine and spirits from Bordeaux, Langevin textiles, 181 iron ingots, porcelain from Nevers, and 1,379 bladed weapons and firearms. There were 12,000 pieces of cargo in total. After four months at sea, the ship put in at Loango, a port on the coast of Angola, where the question of the purchase of slaves was taken up with the authorities of the kingdom of Kongo. After weeks of negotiations with the Maufougé, the African version of a minister of the economy, the ship set out again for the islands of Caribbean, with more than three hundred slaves on board.

According to estimates of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, some 12,331,200 Africans were embarked on slave ships heading for the Americas. And it has been estimated that eight to ten million more “died during capture, marches to African ports, or the long wait in coastal depots.”<sup>3</sup>

*Africamericanos*, the exhibition curated by Claudi Carreras, is a journey in other senses. It is a collection of visual projects that follow the traces of these enslaved peoples centuries later, when the cruelty of their uprooting continues to takes its toll and the history of their lives can be read on other maps and in other testimonies. Historical reconstruction has only recently begun to penetrate the dense veil of invisibility that for so many years has concealed the lives of men and women subjected in countless ways to despoiling. In his notes to his edition of the *Pensées* of Pascal, published in 1774, when the disaster of

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<sup>2</sup> I have consulted the exhibition *A bordo de un navío esclavista. La Marie-Séraphique*, which gathers material from the collection of the Musée d’histoire de Nantes/Château des ducs de Bretagne, presented at the Museo del Oro in Bogotá from 27 October 2018 to 7 April 2019, during the very period I was writing this text.

<sup>3</sup> Aline Helg, *Slave No More: Self-Liberation before Abolition in the Americas*, trans. Lara Vergnaud (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), p. 17.

slavery was still ongoing, Nicolas de Condorcet wrote: “To tear men from their native lands by treachery and violence, in order to put them up for sale in public markets, like beasts of burden; to accustom oneself to seeing no difference between them and animals; to force them to work, by dint of blows; to nourish them not so that they may live, but so that they produce; to abandon them in old age or sickness, when one can no longer hope to recover by their work what it would cost to take care of them; to allow them to become parents only in order to give birth to children fated to suffer the same miseries, having become, like them, the property of their master, who can tear them from their arms and sell them; only to see their wives and daughters exposed to every insult from these men of no more humanity than shame! And this is how we treat other men....”

In her book *Slave No More: Self-Liberation before Abolition in the Americas*, Aline Helg has shown how a veil of concealment has been drawn over this reality for centuries. But the traces of memory have settled as a sediment that finds expression in communities, cultural modes, ways of life, and a range of splendid and completely original symbolic manifestations. It was and continues to be an invisible social and cultural sediment, but not a silent one. Its struggles and claims echo the denunciations made by Condorcet more than two centuries ago, bravely incorporating transformations of civic ideals and new forms of freedom.

The journey proposed by Claudi Carreras has the particular quality of being an exploration by means of photography. It is a visual journey undertaken by numerous photographers from the Americas, joined also by photographers from France, Spain, the United Kingdom, and Italy, all of them characterized by a specific quality: their vision has been touched by the geographical and historical force of the diaspora and has opened up, moreover, to a recognition of the world they have discovered. Paradoxically, it is the concept of “passivity” formulated by Pierre Verger, referring to the seventeen years he spent in Africa before settling definitively in Salvador (Bahia) in Brazil. This passivity is a form of involvement, of renouncing the object or focus of research in order to approach the life he is capturing with his lens. It is not indifference, but a “taking part,” in order, finally,

when full proximity and comprehension have been achieved, to be able to share the secrets guarded by “others.”

It so happens that, in order to take good photos, one needs to forget oneself in the place, to forget where we have come from, to live normally among the people of the land, so that everything remains natural... It is a rather passive attitude, such as the one that informed my research... My focus on the problems is different from the one that anthropologists in general tend to have. They always have a thesis, a working plan: they are looking for something in particular. They use their energy to attempt to obtain the information they need, which means that people immediately close off to them. I wasn't interested in anything in particular, I didn't go around asking questions. But I ended up becoming a pupil of the *babalaos*, who are the “fathers of mystery.”<sup>4</sup>

This is what allowed Verger to capture symbolic resonances in the contrast between the black woman and the tuxedo-clad store mannequin in a store, in which the inversion of black and white tones creates a striking composition, or in the relation between the woman in a long gown and animal mask, leaning against a wall on the street and smoking, and the little black boy who appears on the edge of the photo.

There is a variety that enriches the visual decisions taken by the curator. On the one hand, there is the range of countries in which the visual experiences have taken place: as viewers can see, this corroborates the fluidity of the paths and movement of the diaspora. But on the other hand, it is a geography delimited by those settlements in which there is a noticeable presence of descendants of slaves: Costa Chica (Guerrero), Costa Arriba (Panama), Salvador (Brazil), Coyolillo (Veracruz), Múzquiz (Coahuila), Portobelo (Panama), Tumaco or San Basilio de Palenque (Colombia). Sometimes the accent is on the influence of Afrodescendant populations in countries where they are clearly in the majority;

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<sup>4</sup> “Candomblé com sotaque frances,” interview with Pierre Verger conducted by María José Quadros and published in *O Globo* (Rio de Janeiro) on 16 August 1992. Available online at <http://www.pierreverger.org/br/pierre-fatumbi-verger/textos-e-entrevistas-online/entrevistas-de-verger/candomble-com-sotaque-frances.html>. *Babalao* is a spiritual title given in Yoruba santería to priests of the religion, and to oracles or divinatory systems such as Ifá, originally from West Africa.

at other times, the focus is on those molecular realities which, however small they may be geographically, are symbolically and culturally intense.

It is at these focal points, in these precise places, that we find expressed with the greatest force the rituals of Candomblé, the healing virtues of the incense burners, or the tremendous consistency of significant objects of material culture.

The gathering together of commissioned projects, photographs taken at more or less distant points in history, images from books about the African presence in different parts of the Americas, and archival material is an achievement in itself, enhanced by the multimedia character of the exhibition. The commissioned work draws on the special dedication of photographers who are able to focus on chosen themes, on which they can put their own seal; the recovery of the extraordinary work of Sandra Eleta, who explored for years the Afrodescendant presence in Panama, is a contribution not only to photography, but to an understanding of the lived experience of enslaved peoples in the Americas. No less so is the work proposed by young photographers who already have a personal imprint, as they add to the visual history of the African diaspora in the hemisphere.

The gathering and exhibition of books add to the photography a bibliographical aspect, the task of researching and anthologizing, an effort of memory. Photography that adopts the form of a book belongs to the centuries-old tradition of the codex, of sewn signatures, and the magic of typography. It is not a trivial decision, but an approach that involves the encounter of two fundamentally different worlds, which puts the eyes into the hands, linking the faculty of vision with the ancient signs of written language. Something similar occurs when the curator adopts the more contemporary language of multimedia, that is, the risks and possibilities of convergence, including visual registers among new electronic supports, as in the case of *El peligroso camino de María Rosa Palacio* (The Dangerous Road of María Rosa Palacio), which integrates video, performance, and visual arts.

*Las estampas del Caribe nicaragüense* (Prints of the Nicaraguan Caribbean, 2000), by María José Álvarez and Claudia Gordillo, *Negro soy negro* (Black I Am Black, 1984), by Belgian photographer Christian Belpaire, *Candomblé* (1951), by José de Medeiros, and

*Tierra negra* (Black Land, 1994), by Mexican photographer Maya Goded are documentary projects that have taken the form of books. The second of these is the result of two years of work, 45,000 kilometers traveled, and 10,000 photographs taken as a basis for the final selection, while Medeiros's book about the initiation rites of the Daughters of the Holy One generated controversy in Brazil when it was first published.

Georges Didi-Huberman has reflected on the relations between books and books of images, underlining their connections with memory and the notion of archive:

Images are part of what we poor mortals have invented to record our tremblings (of desire or fear) and their consummations. It is therefore absurd, from an anthropological point of view, to oppose images and words, books of pictures and books as such. Together they configure, for each one of us, a treasury or a tomb of memory, regardless of whether that treasure is a simple snowflake or that memory is traced on the sand for a wave to wipe away. We know that every memory is always threatened by oblivion, every treasure threatened by plunder, each tomb threatened by desecration. This being so, each time we open a book—it matters little whether it is *Genesis* or *The 120 Days of Sodom*— we would perhaps do well to set aside a few minutes to think about the conditions that have made possible the simple miracle of that text being there in front of us, its having come down to us. There are so many obstacles. So many books and so many libraries have been burned. And, likewise, every time we turn our gaze on an image, we should think of the conditions that have prevented its destruction, its disappearance. It is so easy, it has always been so normal to destroy images.<sup>5</sup>

The archives drawn on to produce this book are the Fundação Pierre Verger, the Archivo Fotográfico Courret in Peru, the archive of the Instituto Moreira Salles in Brazil, that of the Consejo Mexicano de Fotografía at the Centro de la Imagen, the Victoria Santa Cruz archive in Peru, and that of the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Ecuador. They all of them fulfill a range of functions, from documentary to ethnographical, from conservation to research to public exhibition. But they do so from their condition as “lacunae,” as

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<sup>5</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Cuando las imágenes tocan lo real* (Madrid: Círculo de Bellas Artes, 2007). English translation, “When Images Touch the Real,” available online at [https://www.academia.edu/6961918/Iceberg\\_catalogue](https://www.academia.edu/6961918/Iceberg_catalogue).

Didi-Huberman himself explains: “The archive itself is the lacuna, leaky by nature. Often, however, the lacunae are the result of a deliberate or unconscious censorship, destruction, assault, or auto-da-fé. The archive tends to be grey, not only from the passage of time you spend but also from the ashes of all that once surrounded it and has been burned.”<sup>6</sup>

There are various Afrodescendant diasporas. One is the long physical exile that severed all original attachments and sense of belonging, “from the gateway of no return,” to which the Panamanian photographer Sandra Eleta refers. Another is that of the mixings and hybridizations present in many blends and imaginative expressions of the music, dance, cuisine, symbols, and religious spirit of the Afrodescendant world.

But there are other paths, many other itineraries that cross the history of this diaspora. There is a trail five centuries long imbued with the desire for freedom that inhabits, as Jorge Panchoaga has expressed it, “the heart of memory,” which has shaped the senses of the Maroons and the *palenqueros*. All these and other diasporas are concentrated to this day in the lives of millions of Afrodescendants in the Americas.

Nevertheless, the injustices of some and the struggles for dignity of others still persist. After so many centuries, certain decisive challenges have still not been unaddressed: issue of autonomy and recognition, of the development of Afrodescendant communities and full access to a life of liberties and rights.

Many are the characteristics that remain evident in their lives. What photography does is to bear witness to them, to render them visible. As we review the visual registries of these Latin American photographers, these characteristics are made patent with a testimonial force that joins past with present and, above all, with future. Since the age of daguerreotypes, photography has “revealed,” a magical word that (in Spanish: *revelar*) emerges from the same alchemical process that takes place in the darkroom.

And although it is neither possible nor advisable to define a “revelation,” the visitor to *Africamericanos* will come across maps of escape drawn in women’s hair or bodies, sacred corners, levitating feet and crowns emerging from the sea, lords of the crossroads, healers, and Kongo kings.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

The contribution of Afrodescendant cultures to the symbolic diversity of Latin America is still to be discovered and appraised.

The exhibition is the result of an enormous effort of research, compilation, and selection performed by Claudi Carreras in the area of Afrodescendant communities in the Americas, first presented in Mexico in 2018, and consisting of almost seven hundred photographs. A smaller version—but no less important for all that—was presented at the Festival Gabo, a journalism fair held in 2018 at the Botanical Gardens in Medellín, Colombia.

Within the enormous void of invisibility that surrounds the diaspora of formerly enslaved peoples (a void which, as Helg as pointed out, is not only historiographical or documentary, but also social and existential), the existence of a visual archive is of great significance, in spite of its lacunae. The instantaneous character of the photographic image, its fleeting, episodic nature, make it far more fragile than writing. Its conservation protects something that otherwise would be completely non-existent. What has never been photographed sinks into the silence of oblivion.

Photography has the capacity to render mixtures evident. It can do so in either a subtle or a forceful way. It proposes contrasts and fusions that can be captured immediately, but which can be expanded, if one wishes to follow up on the details. Photography is a mestizo art.

The body of photographic work gathered by Carreras is full of expressions of mestizo cultures. It is present, for example, in the beautiful photographs from the Archivo Fotográfico Courret, in which black nannies in *rebozos* and mantillas hold white babies, children of aristocratic families of Lima. The images seem to be of hieratic scenes, the black caregivers hidden behind their black shawls accompanying children who are radiant on the capitals.

It was gratifying to see that *Africamericanos* was presented within the framework of Festival Gabo, the Colombian journalism fair, for several works by Gabriel García Márquez demonstrate, with palpitating vitality and, above all, truth, the Colombian writer's belief

that it is impossible to speak of Latin American realities without taking into account the immense contribution of the men and women who had at one time come from Africa.

In *Of Love and Other Demons*, Sierva María, the daughter of the Marquis de Casaldueiro, grows up among the bonfires, beliefs, songs, and language of the black slaves. “She could dance with more grace and fire than the Africans, sing in voices different from her own in the various languages of Africa, agitate the birds and animals when she imitated their voices. By order of Dominga de Adviento, the younger slave girls would blacken her face with soot. They hung Santería necklaces over her baptism scapular and looked after her hair, which had never been cut and would have interfered with her walking if they had braided it into loops every day.”

Even before entering forever the convent of the Clarissan nuns, writes Gabo, the little girl “had begun to blossom under a combination of contradictory influences.” This is the same crossroads from which the photographs of *Africamericanos* draw their magical, premonitory significance.

The fact that a dog’s bite may be associated with rabies or with demonic influences is no more than the result of contact with black servants and their familiarity with mestizo culture.

The man crowned with flowers and wearing a deer’s mask, standing in an immense tree, by Koral Carballo, or the twins, the hoofed foot, or the girl with blue smoke coming out of her ears, by Bruno Morais and Cristina de Middel, are powerful figures. Their strange, enigmatic, and mysterious qualities are precisely the result of the syncretic operations of mestizo culture.

In Coahuila, there are still descendants of the black settlers who arrived from Florida in the nineteenth century, just as on the sugar plantations of Nuestra Señora del Rosario Almolonga, in Jalapa, Veracruz.

These operations also appear in mixes of populations, in bodies, fiestas, material culture, and especially religion. And it is in these cultural practices that the effects of the diaspora are most present and alive. The selection of photographs made by the curator is full of them: for example, in the rituals captured so often in the photographs of Pierre



Verger, for whom Candomblé “confers dignity on the descendants of slaves” because it “allows them to be themselves, instead of [their] adopting a way of life that has nothing to do with their nature.” In this way, mestizo culture has identity at its root. Candomblé, unlike psychoanalysis or psychodrama, which represent publically what is concealed in the unconscious, takes place in the setting of the fiesta. “People can show what it is to be admired, because in the end it is not a person who is saying or doing these things: it is an *orisha*.”

The religious spirit is a central dimension of mestizo cultures. It possesses a quality of strangeness that makes it both a practice of identification, often secret and enigmatical, and a form of interaction that opens the way to the syncretism such as that produced by the encounter of African traditions with Christian symbols. Fusions such as these are the result of genuine struggles, of “images at war,” in the words of Serge Gruzinski, for whom mestizo cultures “are never a panacea: they express combats in which there is never any winner and which are always beginning again. But they confer the privilege of belonging to several worlds in a single life.”

Images of bodies are doubtless one of the most persistent testimonies in the visual world of *Africamericanos*. Everything evokes them in the composition of *La Marie-Séraphique*: an object of commerce, the body of the slave was stripped of its dignity and transformed into chattel, into merchandise, which, according to the Black Code signed Louis XIV in 1685, could be taken and disposed of by its owner as he saw fit. Centuries later, the descendants of the black slaves appear with a resignified corporality, which the archives preserve and the photographs visualize. In them there are obvious transformations, but also similarities to ancestors that have traversed geographies and centuries. There are corporal representations that escape the habitual esthetic of Afro-American populations and which contribute other approaches to the understanding of the diaspora, of mestizo culture, and above all of the encounter between past and present. *Jinetes de la frontera* (Horsemen of the Border), by Luján Agusti, is one of them. The relationship between horse and slave to be found among the Mascogos, who arrived in Coahuila fleeing slavery in the United States, is a sign of identity. Their portraits, their hats, boots, belts, and whips could be those

of a Texan rancher. Nevertheless, there is an indelibly black quality to their gestures and postures that makes them completely different.

A similar sensation, albeit figuratively distant, is that of the young men of Tumaco captured by the Colombian photographer Carolina Navas. Their explicit bodies, erect and almost defiant, form part of a convulsive, terrible geography, in which living is extremely difficult and being young almost impossible. Their ancestors, who arrived at the plantations and mines of the Pacific coast, experienced the same desperation that, centuries later, is to be found in the lives of these young people living in the midst of a sea of coca plants and imminent dangers. Their faces and their expressive bodies and attire demonstrate a firm and unbowed dignity.

There are still many paths to follow, many struggles to complete, but the history of Afrodescendants recreated in the work of compilation and exhibition performed by Claudi Carreras is of a remarkable variety and consistency. Now there is the truthful testimony of this book, in which the images continue their movement amidst the social, political, and cultural progress of the black communities of the Americas, as well as in the multiple interpretations of its readers.