

Africamericanos

Africa is the city of the *palanqueros*. For us, Africa is the world of the *palanqueros*, because the women and men of Palenque, the *palenquero* nation, come from Africa. This is a source of pride to us. Because we are here in this little corner where Benkos put us, because he was fleeing so they wouldn't kill us. Because when the Spanish wanted to finish off us African blacks who are here today, Benkos dragged us here, freeing us. And that is why, when we die here in San Basilio de Palenque, our spirits go to be taken up there in Africa, because we have a part of Africa, because we are Africans.

Yes, the spirit of a *palenquero* goes to Africa. It goes to join the rest of families that remained there in Africa. The spirit of the *palanqueros* goes to rest there, in the Beyond. Where is the Beyond? In Africa.

In these words, Emelina Reyes Salgado, candy vendor and singer of the group Las Alegres Ambulancias in the town of Palenque in Colombia, describes her ties to Africa, and how the spirit of the residents of San Basilio rediscover their ancestors in the *Beyond*, in Africa.

During our conversation, some children were chasing a rooster and shouting in Palanquero, a Creole language with a Portuguese substratum, a Spanish lexical base, and Bantu roots, with influences of Kikongo and Kimbundu. The streets of the town, of reddish earth, are full of puddles owing to the heavy rains. The clayey soil makes walking almost impossible, and local residents were sitting on the balustrades in front of their houses, seeking to alleviate the extreme heat of the Caribbean summer.

It is difficult to convey the sensations and the multiplicity of sense impressions stirred up by a place as intense as San Basilio: there is music everywhere, unknown aromas, poverty and beauty mixed together, all enveloped in a suffocating heat that hardly allows one to breathe and that generates, as strange as it may seem, a deep need to explore a reality born of one of the most painful processes that history has ever seen: one of the darkest and most complex episodes of our times. San Basilio is a little piece of Africa that has taken root deep in the heart of the Americas.

Benkos Biohó was an African leader born in what is now Guinea-Bissau, a member of the Bijago ethnic group. In 1599 he led an uprising against the Spanish troops. The uprising was not quelled and gave rise to the foundation of San Basilio de Palenque, "the first free

village of America,” a symbol of independence to all of the enslaved peoples of the western hemisphere.

The *palenques* or *quilombos*, settlements of blacks fleeing slavery, such as the one founded by Benkos Biohó, were much more common and significant than has hitherto been recognized. They were an important benchmark in the struggle against slavery and oppression.

Still today, San Basilio carries on its shoulders the burden of this freedom. Its infrastructure is deficient, its road connections difficult, its drainage and sewage insufficient, and its public services below even minimum standards.

These are circumstances that have been repeated systematically in the rural communities with majority Afrodescendant populations in many countries in the region: the Costa Chica in Mexico, Livingston in Guatemala, La Mosquitia in Honduras, Limón in Costa Rica, Portobelo in Panama, Haiti and the Dominican Republic in the Caribbean, the Chocó Department in Colombia, Esmeraldas and the Chota Valley in Ecuador.... To visit these places is to realize how the same patterns are reproduced in almost all of these countries and how these communities have systematically been denied access to the same rights as the rest of their fellow citizens.

Almost all social indicators regarding black populations in the region reflect the same realities: lower levels of education, higher unemployment, lower wages (for similar work), and fewer management positions in companies for Afrodescendant men and women. According to the most recent censuses in Brazil, for example, the Afrodescendant population of the country makes up 53.6% of the total, but Afrodescendants represent 76% of the poorest 10%. On the other hand, Afrodescendants represent only 17.4% of the richest one percent.¹ Figures on violence are equally revealing: a black man in Brazil is eight times more likely to be the victim of a homicide than a white man.²

The history of Afrodescendants in Latin America and the Caribbean is a chronicle of superstition and resistance, but also of pain and injustice. The grievances of the past of which this community has been victim have still not been repaired, not has its role in the construction and consolidation of contemporary Latin American society been sufficiently

¹ Data (2014) from the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE).

² Data from the Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada (Ipea).

recognized. There has been a systematic effort to “whiten” its legacy and render invisible its presence. These are processes that have marked the configuration of the Latin American imaginary up to the present day.

Juan José Nieto was president of Colombia in 1861, the first and only black president in the country’s history. For decades his presence was denied in history books and in the country’s presidential portrait galleries. In many paintings and official records of the period, his face was literary whitened.

María Remedios del Valle fought as just another soldier in the Argentine War of Independence, with such distinction that Manuel Belgrano promoted her to the rank of captain and she was nicknamed the “Mother of the Homeland” by her comrades-in-arms. She died in poverty, without having been paid a penny of the pension she was owed or received the monument she had been promised, because she was a woman and an Afrodescendant. The black presence in the wars of independence of Latin America and the Caribbean is more significant than many textbooks acknowledge.

The 1810 census in Buenos Aires showed that 9,615 people of African origin were living in the city alongside 22,793 whites. In other words, around 20% of the population. Yet according to some indicators, black Argentinians accounted for up to 65% of the rank-and-file of the troops of Belgrano and San Martín.³ Following independence, as the new nations in the region were consolidated, the living conditions of people of African descent failed to improve. It has been acknowledged that, in the War of the Triple Alliance (1864-1870), Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay sent Afrodescendants to the front lines as *cannon fodder*. In Brazil and Paraguay, where slavery had not yet been abolished, large numbers of enslaved men were conscripted into the army.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, as a result of the War of the Pacific (1879-1883) between Chile, Peru, and Bolivia, national boundaries were redrawn. Chile permanently annexed the territories of Antofagasta and Tarapacá, while Arica and Tacna were incorporated by a process extending over a decade, known as *chilenización*. This was a process of transculturation that consisted basically of an attempt to efface the traces of African and indigenous presence from a territory where blacks and indigenous people were

³ Diego Rojas, “La madre de la Patria,” in the journal *No me olvides* (Buenos Aires).

in the majority. It involved a process of targeted harassment that ranged from the expulsion of the men to the systematic rape of the women, all in the aim of “whitening” the race.

These are only some of the many examples of important Afrodescendant contributions that have been ignored or concealed in official histories. During this period, all over Latin America, but especially in Argentina, Chile, and Paraguay, a process of invisibility and negation of identity was consolidated. It has persisted to the present day.

The claims of these Latin American communities and the processes of salvaging their memory and dignity are unstoppable. It is obvious that, in so large a region, with such a diversity of origins and circumstances, these processes do not unfold in any uniform way. But it is also true that many countries experienced very similar events during the period of colonialization, and that these resulted in similar patterns during the consolidation of the independent republics, insofar as racial policies are concerned.

There are many variables that mark the rhythm of these claims. There is an increasingly broad consensus about the urgency of a rereading of history and a reappraisal of the importance of Afrodescendant communities in the configuration of a new Latin American imaginary. To this end, in December of 2013 the General Assembly of the United Nations approved a resolution proclaiming the years 2015-2024 the International Decade for People of African Descent: “*Emphasizing* that, despite efforts in this regard, millions of human beings continue to be victims of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, including their contemporary manifestations, some of which take violent forms.”⁴

The struggle against these injustices, which continue to perpetuate themselves over time, is a task that must be approached by way of multiple disciplines. There are ever more academic studies that permit a rereading of the histories of the countries in the region and acknowledge the role of key figures in their formation. It is important to make use of these new guideposts in order to restore the balance, demonstrating how even the right to information can be skewed in favor of an indoctrination designed specifically to endorse the status quo. The status quo is a social order that does not represent the population as it really is and that shrinks from the changes that might emerge out of a new construction of paradigms. The silenced voices of the so-called minority—in fact, overwhelming majorities

⁴ United Nations Resolution 68/237 to declare the International Decade for Afrodescendants.

in some case— have been called on to formulate a revision of the facts that can lay the foundations for a new and necessary social reconstruction.

The role of images in the formation and consolidation of imaginaries affects Negritude in a particularly striking way. Stereotypes about the beauty of black bodies, about lack of education, about musical gifts and “rhythm in the blood,” about a talent for sports, or a compassionate approach, have marked the most predominant narratives. Although the Americas in general have been portrayed from a Eurocentric perspective, which emphasizes the most exotic, folkloric elements of the region, in the images formulated of black communities, the reiteration of tropes about poverty and nudity, the imposition of an alien gaze, and the stigmatization of otherness are particularly significant.

Africamericanos is a multiplatform research, dissemination, exhibition, and participative production project that seeks to exhibit, reflect on, and influence the construction of imaginaries of Afrodescendant communities in Latin America and the Caribbean, even as it demonstrates how the pulse of this cultural tradition can be felt all across the western hemisphere, from north to south. As we have pointed out, the processes of the invisibilization, whitening, concealment, and deconstruction of the images of Afrodescendants are evident. It is necessary therefore to reveal and attempt to reconstruct visually the map of the African diaspora from a range of disciplines and perspectives.

One of the aims of the project is to challenge the stereotypes and stigmas that weigh on this community. It is a very complex task to deal with themes of identity through the medium of the image without falling into hackneyed historical models and the very tropes that are being confronted here. Possibly the greater challenge of contemporary visual creators is that of generating new narratives that reappraise and cast doubt on the paradigms that combine to construct our current imaginary.

As a first stage in undertaking this project, we decided to visit the principal archives, libraries, and photography collections in the region. In most of these institutions, images of Afrodescendant communities were not properly catalogued as such. A long and painstaking process of research and investigation would be necessary to organize the materials and draw conclusions about the specific importance of these various collections. The Fototeca Nacional of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) in Mexico, the archive of the Casa de las Américas in Cuba, the Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de

Mesoamérica in Guatemala, the Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango and the collection of the Instituto Caro y Cuervo in Colombia, the Instituto Nacional de Patrimonio Cultural in Ecuador, the Biblioteca Nacional in Buenos Aires and the Academia Nacional de la Historia de la República Argentina (ANH) all provided, along with other institutions, a significant stock of images to reconstruct the visual history of Afrodescendants in Latin America and the Caribbean.

For the purposes of this volume, we decided to select six of the archives we visited, on the basis of their historical importance, the ties of the photographers in question with Afrodescendant communities, and their special relevance in the construction of current imaginaries.

The Fundação Pierre Verger in Salvador, Brazil, is a private institution in whose archives the work of this great French anthropologist, born in 1902, has been preserved. Verger devoted a large part of his life to understanding and making better known the riches of Afrodescendant cultures all around the world, and especially in Latin America. He used photography as a pretext for approaching otherness, exploring his identity through travel and exploration. His record of Afrodescendants cultures are perhaps the first visual depictions of the globalization of the diaspora. Verger understood African culture as few have ever done, immersing himself in it to the end of his days. The images at the beginning of this book are a minimal part of his work, but they constitute an indispensable testimony in reconsidering the imprint of African culture on Latin America and the Caribbean, especially in the first half of the twentieth century.

The Fondo Documental Afro-Andino at the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Quito preserves, among other materials, the photographic and audiovisual legacy of Juan García Salazar. It is the principal depository in Ecuador of visual, oral, and written materials about the Afro-Andean communities of the country. García Salazar was born into an Afrodescendant family in Esmeraldas and had a deep interest in preserving the intangible cultural heritage of Afro-Ecuadoran communities. The materials presented here are also a clear example of the difficulties faced by archives in their task of safeguarding their collections.

Solarized and overexposed by imprecise scanning, these images are evidence of the stoical efforts undertaken by researchers to preserve and disseminate this legacy, and of the

insufficient means they dispose of to carry out their task. Nevertheless, the visual result of this conjunction of circumstances has proved highly singular. The images are blurred by a treatment that puts them halfway between reality and fiction: dreamlike depictions of everyday scenes that refuse to disappear from the national memory.

The National Library of Peru is home to the Archivo Fotográfico Courret, the depository of one of the most complete visual chronicles of late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century middle and upper-class society in Lima. The photographs of the Afrodescendant servants who commonly cared for white children, even breastfeeding them, are especially significant. These wet nurses were photographed holding the children, but almost always enveloped, themselves, in black fabric, so that they could not be distinguished in the resulting positive image. These photographs are a clear testimony to the processes whereby Afrodescendants were rendered invisible in the images of the period.

Also in Peru, there is the family archive of Victoria Santa Cruz, a black Peruvian artist and activist recognized internationally as an exponent and champion of black culture in her own country. Her family constitutes one of the principal artistic references in Latin America. Together with her younger brother Nicomedes, she succeeded in recreating and communicating the rhythms, poetry, and traditions of the Afro-Peruvian community. Her poem “Me gritaron negra” (They Called Me Black) remains one of the most popular hymns of the Afrodescendant communities at the present day:

*[...] Finally / I've finally understood / Finally / I won't turn back / Finally / And I go on with confidence / I go on and hope / Finally / And I bless heaven that God wanted / Jet black to be my color / [...] I am black!*⁵

Returning to Brazil, the Instituto Moreira Salles in Rio de Janeiro possesses one of the most extensive collections of visual documentation about the history of Negritude in Latin America. The fact that Brazil was the last country in the western hemisphere to abolish slavery (on 13 May 1888), as well as being a pioneer in the use of photographic procedures, made it possible for a unique record of the lives of enslaved people to be formed: a visual legacy that evokes with power the darkest aspect of the age. The images gathered here

⁵ Excerpt from the poem “Me gritaron negra,” by Victoria Santa Cruz (ca. 1978).

document the labor of the enslaved in both urban and rural contexts, as well as the ethnographic features of Afrodescendants, through visiting cards and scientific catalogues in which black people —both free and enslaved— are shown working in the city.

Many of these images of slavery were taken by photographers who had become Brazilian citizens, having immigrated from countries where the practice had been abolished. Their photographs served to question and stimulate discussion about slavery, an institution which, in their view, constituted an obstacle to the modernization of the country. The faces of the enslaved observe us now from the distance of the past, demanding acknowledgement of their efforts and significance in the construction of an entire continent.

To close out this selection of archives, we included the collection of the Centro de la Imagen, the archival depository of the Consejo Mexicano de Fotografía, which organized the first two Latin American Photography Colloquiums (1978 and 1981) in Mexico City. In an unprecedented act of mobilization, a group of Latin American artists made an open call to make better known and generate interchange within the visual production of the time in Latin America and the Caribbean. The programs of these events included a series of lectures, roundtable discussions, and exhibitions that contributed in large measure to the construction of new paradigms for the photographic imaginary of the region. Through their declarations and manifestos, the participants and organizations left a lasting mark on an entire generation of photographers.

This collection now provides indispensable material to researchers who seek to understand the social movements of the time and the way in which photographers and visual artists positioned themselves politically through their work. The collection is made up of more than 8,000 images by 892 photographers from 27 different countries. Owing to its historical value, in 2016 it was listed on the UNESCO Memory of the World Registry, a distinction that will ensure its conservation as a documentary heritage of humanity.

With *Africamericanos* we seek to render visible images of a world born of the union of Africa and the Americas. The eurocentrism hitherto predominant has made it impossible to recognize the decisive role played by Afrodescendants in the social configuration of the region, although they constitute an intrinsic part of the culture and contemporary worldview of the entire region.

One of the magical moments of the project has been the encounter between the Afrodescendant painters Gustavo Esquina de la Espada and Manuel Golden, both of Panamanian origin, and the Mexican muralists Baltazar Castellano Melo and Olga Manzano. The Caribbean coast on the Atlantic side and the Costa Chica on the Pacific side came together in a process of shared imaginaries and the recognition of common characteristics. Two large murals welcomed visitors to the inaugural exhibition at the Centro de la Imagen in Mexico City. These works created *in situ* explored the origins of Afrodescendant culture in communities on the Costa Chica in the state of Guerrero in Mexico and the Costa Arriba in the province of Colón in Panama.

[Imagen: Mural 1]

The first mural depicts the arrival of Africans in the Americas through symbolic elements and representations characteristic of African culture. On the far left, a black dove symbolizes the African population that arrived in the western hemisphere. In the middle, growing out of the earth, is the Minga, a black man wearing the mask of a white woman, who represents *mestizaje*, the mixing of the races. The Minga is also a key figure in the dance of the devils in Guerrero. He holds in his hand an *arcusa* —a musical instrument that evokes the sound of the roaring of jaguars—, inside of which he carries a small child, who embodies the new race born of *mestizaje*, protected by the Maroon king. On one side is Elegua, a deity of the Yoruba religion, who is considered the origin and end of all paths.⁶ On the far right of the mural is a Congo queen from Portobelo, Panama, dancing with her partner, whose body has been dominated by one of the devils of the Costa Chica in Mexico.

[Imagen: Mural 2]

In the second mural the central figure is that of Mamaguarda, a protecting angel who preserves mestizo culture. She is flanked, on her left, by Yemoja, a deity of the Yoruba religion associated with rivers and the sea, who allowed the movement of Africans from their

⁶ Historically, the Yoruba religion has been present in Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad, and Haiti. Nowadays, however, many communities, regardless of where they may be located, have incorporated deities such as Elegua and Yemoja into their worldviews in order to identify with an African tradition.

continent of origin to the Americas, and on her right, by the Minga again, with an angel at his feet. In the middle of the mural, two devils represent the European conquistadors. One of them attempts to betray and, at the same time, to appease the black man riding a horse and receiving counsel from a multicolored bird, a messenger from the Congo people, who warns him of the true colonizing intentions of the devils. The figure of the Maroon, on the far left, is depicted dancing the *son de artesa*, a traditional dance of the Costa Chica that dates back to colonial times. It was danced out of sight of the plantation owners, as a form of resistance and rebellion.⁷ The dance is still performed in the region.

The imaginaries depicted in the mural belong to the contemporary culture of African roots that has spread steadily all over the Americas, adopting symbols and traditions of diverse origins in a process of globalization and cultural hybridization that revalidates its legacy.

Africamericanos begins its photographic journey, following a glance at the images of Pierre Verger, in the northern part of Latin America, with the work of Mexican photographer Mara Sánchez. In her series *El cimarrón y su fandango* (The Maroon and His Fandango), the photographer deals in staged settings with the ties of the community to its territory and the most deeply rooted traditions of the Costa Chica in the Mexican states of Guerrero and Oaxaca.

Maya Goded presents *Tierra negra* (Black Earth), a project of a much more documentary slant from the same region, consisting of a collection of images from her first photobook of the same name, published in 1994. The series is a visual treatment of women in Mexican black society, exploring their beliefs, myths, and customs, with a special emphasis on the question of healing. The photographer has worked intensely on this subject matter all through her career.

In 1993, at almost the same time as Goded, Manuel González de la Parra began a documentary research project in Coyolillo, an enclave with a significant Afrodescendant population on the Gulf coast of Mexico. Several years later, in 1999, De la Parra moved to Tumaco in Colombia, where, after several comings and goings between the two places, he published the book *Luces de raíz negra* (Lights of Black Origin, 2004), an ethnographic document that gathers visual correspondences between these two communities. It was

⁷ These symbols and descriptions were developed together by the four authors of the murals.

precisely in Coyolillo that Koral Carballo, a photographer from Veracruz, undertook the project *El misterio disfrazado* (The Mystery in Disguise). Carballo explores the different layers of information that must be uncovered in order to reconstitute the visual map of the Mexican diaspora of Veracruz. Concealed amidst the colorful fabrics of the carnival disguises are the stories that configure the social makeup of the state.

At almost the other end of the country, in Coahuila, Argentinian photographer Luján Agusti has documented, in *Jinetes de la frontera* (Horsemen of the Border), a community of Mascogo origin that arrived in Mexico from the United States, fleeing slavery. The Mexican government of the mid-nineteenth century allowed them into the country on condition that they would create a buffer army along the northern border in order to check the advance of US troops. This project was commissioned especially for the exhibition.

Finally, two other commissioned projects about Mexico bring us back to the Pacific coast. The first is the work of Yael Martínez, a photographer from the state of Guerrero who has worked on long-term documentary projects. In his series *Su sangre en mi sangre* (Their Blood in My Blood), Martínez deals with issues of identity and tradition in the *tierra caliente*, the low-lying 'hot lands' region of his native state. In the second project, Oaxacan photographer Hugo Arellanes draws up an inventory of objects of different uses in the Afro-mestizo culture of Cuajiniculapa, in an installation entitled *El polvito en tus zapatos* (The Dust on Your Shoes). Together, these seven projects configure the visual map in *Africamericanos* of Mexico, a country that openly acknowledges its indigenous and European roots, but which resists accepting the importance of black culture in its foundational base.

Continuing our journey in the direction of Central America and the Caribbean, we begin with *Desgaste* (Worn Out), by Cuban artist Yomer Montejo, a series of *mises-en-scène* created with X-rays, in which skin color cannot be distinguished. In *Noctambules* (Sleepwalkers), Josué Azor portrays the Haitian night and the queer community in his country, in a project that champions the right of everyone to express his or her identity freely, while at the same time questioning the visual paradigms that inevitably put the emphasis on poverty in depictions of Haiti.

From Nicaragua, Claudia Gordillo and María José Álvarez present their publication *Estampas del Caribe nicaragüense* (Prints of the Nicaraguan Caribbean), a collection of

images taken in the late 1990s, which invite us to reflect, beyond clichés, on the multiethnic essence of Central America, especially on the Caribbean side. In *Archiving the Familiar*, Costa Rican photographer Marton Robinson presents fragments of his personal archive. With works generated in different supports and an installation designed specifically for the exhibition, Robinson confronts and interrogates the viewer regarding the stereotypes that still weigh on the black community in Costa Rica. In *El blanqueamiento de la sangre* (The Whitening of the Blood, 2014), the artist prints a set of silkscreen self-portraits in which his image is gradually whitened and effaced by his own blood and semen. As an epilogue to the work from this region, we selected Panamanian photographer Sandra Eleta, who has portrayed with deep sensibility the mysteries of the village of Portobelo during the length of her career.

Central America and the Caribbean have of course been especially significant regions for Afrodescendants in the Americas. From the mid-nineteenth century through the early twentieth century, the Pan-African movement emerged in an attempt to strengthen bonds between African societies and their diasporas in Europe and the Americas, in response to Western expansionism. The integration of Pan-African communities beyond their territorial borders was the dream of many Afrodescendants in the region. The most famous instance was the Black Star Line, a shipping company founded in 1919 by Marcus Garvey—who also created the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)—for the purpose of transporting both goods and people from the Caribbean to Africa, although the enterprise failed. Garvey's legacy is still alive, but it is experiencing great difficulties: in 2016 the offices of the UNIA in the port town of Limón in Costa Rica were consumed by fire.

Moving into South America, Nicola Lo Calzo explores the traces of the Maroons in Surinam and French Guiana. In *Obia*, the photographer explores the evolution of the traditions of African origin in their inexorable process of hybridization and transformation, fueled by globalization. The great question here is how to preserve the riches and legacy transmitted by several generations of Afrodescendants without renouncing the benefits offered by modernity.

In his series *Diablos de Turiamo* (Devils of Turiamo), Nelson Garrido takes an anthropological approach to the Afro-Venezuelan festivities, where masks and rhythm play

a central role. Meanwhile, in *Negro, soy negro* (Black, I am Black) Christian Belpaire looks at Negritude in Venezuela from a more systematic documentary perspective.

From Colombia, Carolina Navas portrays the young residents of Tumaco, a region scarred by the violence of the drug trade and by conflicts linked to the territorial reorganization undertaken as a result of the peace process in the country. The life expectancy of these young people is much lower than the national average. Pablo Chaco, for his part, depicts the life of José María, a man blind from birth, exploring with him fictitious universes by means of blindness. Together they undertake a journey through the deepest darkness.

The Colombian artist Liliana Angulo brings to life one of the most popular and deeply-rooted practices in the Afrodescendant communities of her country: hairdressing, the care of hair and its possible meanings. In the collective project *Quieto pelo* (Still Hair), Angulo documents the work of various hairdressers in the towns of Quibdó, Buenaventura, and San Andrés. Finally, the anthropologist and photographer Jorge Panchoaga offers, in his series *Kalabongó* (Firefly), a visual chronicle of the oral history of the Colombian community of San Basilio de Palenque, the first free village in the Americas (founded by Maroons), where the cry for freedom continues to resound even to this day.

From Ecuador, Karina Aguilera Skvirsky and Isadora Romero explore different aspects of the communities of Valle del Chota and Esmeraldas, the two provinces with the largest black populations in the country. In her multimedia project *El peligroso camino de María Rosa Palacios* (The Dangerous Road of María Rosa Palacios), Aguilera Skvirsky follows the route taken by her great-grandmother —María Rosa, then a girl of fifteen, crossing the country in search of work and better living conditions— as a search for her ancestors. In her second project, *Los obreros del Ferrocarril* (The Railroad Workers), the artist portrays, through the superposition of current and historical images, the workers who built the great railway infrastructure of the Andean nation in the early twentieth century. Meanwhile, in *Polvo de estrellas* (Stardust), Isadora Romero explores the most ardent desires of the black communities of the valley: to become a musician, a dancer, or a soccer player, as the only possibility of prospering and abandoning one's place of origin. A dream limited by the lack of opportunities imposed by Ecuadoran society.

From Peru, Leslie Searles presents, as a commissioned project, the series *Yapatera: la soledad del barro, la caña y el algarrobo* (Yapatera: The Solitude of Clay, Sugarcane, and

the Algarrobo Tree), in which she documents the wild landscapes of this region of the country, which was named the first Place of Memory of the Slave Route by the UNESCO. Owing to lack of jobs and governmental neglect, the families of this northern Peruvian communities leave their homes to travel to the city.

Music can be heard in the portraits of Lorry Salcedo, a Peruvian photographer resident in New York City, who photographed members of the Ballumbrosio family in Peru in the 1980s and early 1990s. The Ballumbrosios are an important clan of musicians and dancers who have kept alive the flame of the Afro-Peruvian tradition.

Occupying an enormous territorial extension, Brazil is the country with the largest number of Afrodescendants in the Americas, and second only to Nigeria worldwide. Although the presence and heritage of Africa have been indispensable to the development of Brazilian culture, Afro-Brazilians remain stigmatized and rendered invisible, as Afrodescendants are all over Latin America. Their presence looms so large, however, that it is not possible to conceal it, however much the attempt has been made in institutional terms.

What is presented here about Brazil embraces a broad spatial and temporal panorama in this subcontinental nation. In *Paraíso tropical* (Tropical Paradise), Rosana Paulino explores the lushness of this tropical country and examines the modes of exploitation to which the black population is subject. Paulino uses images printed on fabric that she herself has sewn, employing techniques learned from her ancestors, in a gesture that connects different generations of her community. Meanwhile, Eustáquio Neves, an artist from Minas Gerais, includes several layers of information in his images, which make them difficult to read. According to Neves, the history of Afrodescendants is a chronicle full of gaps and erasures, where the superposition of confused narratives makes a linear reading of reality impossible.

For five years, Luisa Dörr has accompanied Maysa, an Afrodescendant girl from the outskirts of São Paulo who dreams of being a model and walking down the runways of the country. In some intimate portraits, Dörr documents Maysa's quest to obtain a place of her own in Brazilian society. A dream that will make a better life possible.

In the series *Pele Preta* (Dark Skin), Maureen Bissilliat abandoned painting and for the first time photographed Afrodescendant models in the nude. It is a project of a highly oneiric nature about the beauty and sensuality of black skin, which had a strong impact on

Brazilian society in the 1960s. Ten years before, one of the milestone publications about the Afro-Brazilian world and religions of African origin had appeared: *Candomblé*, by José Medeiros. It was the first monographic treatment of this religious practice, a comprehensive examination of the rituals which, until that time, had been considered secret and obscure in Brazil.

In *Eu, mestiço* (I, Mestizo), Jonathas de Andrade explores the Brazilian stereotypes reflected in the anthropological study “Race and Class in Rural Brazil,” carried out in the 1950s. The photographer contrasts images of his visual production with an installation that reveals the most recurrent aspects of racism in Brazil.

The last project about Brazil is *280 chibatadas* (280 Lashes), by Rio de Janeiro photographer Angélica Dass. It consists of images from the photo album of her Afrodescendant family, accompanied by racist tweets such as can be found constantly on Brazilian social media with complete impunity.

From Argentina, Nicolás Janowski reflects on the processes of whitening undertaken in his country. Using census figures and documents from the last two hundred years, the photographer offers proof of the policies to eradicate the black community from the country and its gradual diminishment in national censuses. This commissioned project combines historical documentation, testimonies from the country’s iconic political figures, and contemporary images.

Finally, in *Medianoche en la encrucijada* (Midnight at the Crossroads), Bruno Morais and Cristina de Middel explore the world of Esù, on a journey that leads us into the deepest roots of African spirituality, crossing the oceans and arriving at four strategic shores: Benin, Cuba, Brazil, and Haiti. Esù is the dynamic that governs the movement of life: an energy that renews and preserves. A messenger between humankind and the gods, this deity must be the first to be worshipped. He is the guardian of the roads, crossroads, and markets. Esù represents change, ambiguity, and opportunity.

The possibilities of interpreting life out of spiritual conjunction are endless, just as the journey of the African peoples to the Americas is reinvented every day. *Medianoche en la encrucijada* proposes a follow-up journey and a free study of the transformations, in both content and form, that affect the Orisha Esù, following the routes of the trade in enslaved

Africans. It also attempts to offer a non-obscurantist reading of religions of African origin, in contrast to the missionary strategy of demonizing pagan ideas.

All of these projects combine to make up the visual body of *Africamericanos*, a complex structure of visions and imaginaries that explore the world of the African diaspora in the Americas.

In its strictest etymological sense, photography —‘writing with light’— is a tool that allows us to draw out of the darkness realities and fictions that have been largely concealed, denied, and ignored. The history of Afrodescendants in Latin America and the importance of their legacy is one such narrative that still needs to be completed.

Let us hope that this volume sheds a little bit of light on this historical injustice. There are many more images to see and to create. There are more subjects to explore and more narratives to be constructed, which will lead us to new and more balanced imaginaries.