Afro-European Literature(s):
A New Discursive Category?

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ABSTRACT

The corpus of texts produced by Afrosporic authors in Europe is characterized in the first place by plurality: plurality of the languages used, of the authors’ African heritages, and of their European locations, all this adding to the specificities of individual experience. Moreover, Afrosporic literatures develop in different European countries at different times and follow very different patterns. Does it make sense then, at a time when even the notion of Europe itself is called into question, to talk about an Afro-European literature? This essay seeks to trace commonalities and differences of Afrosporic literary production in different European contexts and argues that a comparative perspective at both a diachronic and synchronic level is paramount to the understanding of new literary configurations across linguistic and national boundaries.

The field of Afro-European studies in itself is certainly not a novelty, but the terms “Afro-Europe” and “Afro-European” are being used increasingly in recent years, parallel to the debates on European identity accompanying the consolidation of the European Union. More attention is being devoted to marginal or marginalized spaces, and more scholarly work is being produced that explores the multifaceted cultural forms emerging within Europe, signaling the need to bridge the gap between the imperialism of postcolonial anglophone studies, on the one hand, and the traditional reluctance of more peripheral academic contexts to move beyond localisms and engage in a constructive debate on the international level, on the other. I am referring here to the importance of comparative perspectives in the study of the new literatures and to the urge of incorporating more linguistic contexts other than the anglophone and the francophone into postcolonial discourse. A comparative approach would signal not so much the emergence of a new field as a systematization of something that had remained nameless and fragmented, the coming together of previously isolated efforts to shed light on
the African experience and creativity on European soil. The act of naming this field and defining its scope is something that should not be taken for granted and needs to be debated.

With this paper I would like to touch upon a number of critical issues that emerge in research involving comparative work within the field of Afro-European literary studies. In the first place I will attempt to sketch the boundaries of this area of study, defining the historical meaning of Afro-Europe, exploring how different understandings and uses of the term (according to geographical, ethnic, or cultural criteria) give way to alternative configurations of the field and its scope, and showing to what extent this kind of approach intersects with other fields such as Diaspora Studies and Postcolonial Studies. In the second place I will interrogate the legitimacy of the term “Afro-European literature” as a category for the study of a large and diverse corpus of texts produced in different languages and within different contexts. Providing examples from Southern and Western Europe, I will address a number of problematic issues (constituted by both intratextual elements and extratextual factors) that are of paramount importance to a comparative approach: the heterogeneity of heritages, locations and allegiances, the diverse understandings of concepts such as race and ethnicity in different national and cultural contexts, the different frames and discourses in which Afrosporic texts are inserted, the diversity of historical developments, and the role of publishers, readerships, and educational and cultural institutions in shaping the configuration of the literatures in question. Finally, I will try to suggest possible directions of a comparative approach and I will call for the necessity of establishing Afro-Europe as a central category within European studies.

From an historical perspective, talking about an “Afro-Europe” means tracing the African presence in Europe, uncovering the silenced histories concerning Africans and their descendents from early modern times to the present. It also means bringing to light the contribution of people of African origin in shaping European culture and thought as well as acknowledging how crucial the existence of Africa was and is to the very notion of Europe. It means, therefore, foregrounding the reciprocal embeddedness of the histories of the two neighboring continents. But what does the “Afro” in Afro-European stand for? If we privilege a geographical perspective, then we are referring to Africa as a continent, and the “Afro” would include all people whose origins are located within the borders of the continent, without distinction between northern and sub-Saharan Africa. The prefix Afro-, though, has traditionally been used to indicate a sub-Saharan African connection, as in “Afro-American” or “Afro-Caribbean,” and associated with the black diaspora. If the “Afro” is taken to mean “black,” then the question arises of whether one should consider all black people located in Europe to be Afro-European, including diasporas from the Americas and elsewhere. Following this ethnic principle, one would consider Caryl Phillips (black Caribbean, located in Britain) to be an Afro-European writer, although Africa does not feature prominently in his work, but not so Doris Lessing (African-born, white, located in Britain), although her work has all to do with Africa and with European involvement in Africa.

Tracing the Afro-European along ethnic lines may be quite problematic and may lead to a revival of old racial categories that do not do justice to the complexities of identity. It should be recognized that cultural affiliation and
ethnicity are in some cases deeply interrelated and that this association may be useful and extremely productive in certain contexts, for example in the notion of the Black Atlantic, which foregrounds the transnational dimension of a diasporic counterculture born out of the intercontinental connections of black diasporas worldwide, or in the pluriethnic conceptualization of blackness in 1980s Britain, when nonwhite minorities were more than ever aware of their common concerns in response to the alarming rise of racism. Nevertheless, the binomial culture-ethnicity becomes much more slippery and ambiguous in other cases. It would be a strained interpretation, for example, to identify as Afro-European such a locally rooted author as Antonio Campobasso, born in southern Italy from a black American father and an Italian mother, since, although his work foregrounds blackness as a mark of marginality, it has practically nothing to do with Africa. Of course there is no prescription about how the term Afro-European is to be used. Whatever we mean by it, the term is doomed to be either too inclusive or too exclusive. But it is important that one is aware of the principles on which the use of the term is based and of the arbitrariness of any effort of categorization.

The notion of Afro-Europe cannot be disentangled from the general debate around multiculturalism, which is a central issue in the policy of the European Union. European nations have traditionally carried out divergent politics with regard to the integration of ethnic minorities. Stemming from fundamental differences in the colonial approach established in imperial times, contemporary multicultural politics in the different member states represent variations of the two opposing models adopted by Britain and France in the postcolonial era, which can be briefly described respectively as difference-oriented (“plural monoculturalism,” in the words of economist Amartya Sen) and assimilation-oriented. In the light of recent events (home-grown terrorism in Britain, banlieue rioting in France, murders and threats by Islamic fundamentalists in the Netherlands), both models are now widely believed to have failed. Caught between an alarming resurgence of extreme right-wing politics and the pressing demands of a common supranational policy, Europe urgently needs to reassess its colonial/imperial legacy and to find alternative ways of dealing with cultural diversity and effective strategies of inclusion of new citizens.

Within the context of heated debate around multiculturalism, the European literary scene is witnessing a proliferation of narratives which address issues of migration, diversity, conviviality (in the original meaning of convivere, “living together”), citizenship, and cultural conflict. Apart from highly praised works of indisputable literary quality such as Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* and Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*, one must observe with regret that high sales usually concern sensationalist narratives reinforcing negative stereotypes about immigrants (especially African or Muslim groups). These texts, which usually take the form of testimonial or autobiographies authored by a Western ghost writer, feed a Western white readership eager for third-world victim stories. One widely known example is former top model Waris Dirie’s series of bestsellers (*Desert Flower*, *Desert Dawn*, *Desert Children*), which have generated worldwide public debate around female genital mutilation.

The critical literature on the emerging field of Afro-European studies reveals relevant intersections both with Diaspora Studies and with Postcolonial Studies. This literature, however, is for the moment still quite modest in quantity and
geographically unbalanced. In fact, with a few exceptions, significant texts deal almost exclusively with Britain and France. Works focused on Britain are very much nation-oriented, committed to a struggle for the recognition of minorities and their inclusion in the notion of Britishness. The relationship between race and nation is at the heart of Paul Gilroy’s exploration of racial discourses accompanying the black settlement in Britain in ‘There Ain’t no Black in the Union Jack’ (1987), whereas his more recent Postcolonial Melancholia (2005) offers an insight into contemporary racist attitudes in the post-September 11th era. Within literary studies, debate around diasporas in Britain tends to stress differences among first-generation migrant authors and British-born authors more than differences among and within ethnic communities. One can still observe, moreover, certain inconsistencies in reference to how Black Britain is to be understood. Some scholars still cling to the old notion of blackness as inclusive of certain (but not all!) nonwhite minorities and place under the same umbrella authors of African and Asian descent. Two recent examples of this perspective are Susanne Reichl’s Cultures in the Contact Zone (2002) and Mark Stein’s Black British Literature (2004). Without having to share their terminological choices, though, one can see that their approach draws its strength from the fact that the authors highlight common stylistic strategies and thematic concerns among the corpus of selected works. A different understanding of Black Britishness is provided by the collection of essays Write Black, Write British (2005), edited by Kadija Sesay, which focuses on authors of African or mixed descent (born or raised in Britain) without considering possible differences between the Caribbean-British community and the more properly African-British community, or within the African diaspora itself. Relevant critical overviews in English about the African presence in France are Bennetta Jules-Rosette’s Black Paris (1998), which offers a comprehensive analysis of three generations of African writers from the times of the negritude movement to recent writing in the mid 90s, and Alec Hargreaves’s Voices from the North African Immigrant Community in France (1991, re-edited 1997), a groundbreaking study of Beur fiction. More recent significant contributions are Mireille Rosello’s Postcolonial Hospitality (2001), centered on the experience of immigrants from North and sub-Saharan Africa through the exploration of novels, films, and immigrant interviews, and Dominic Thomas’s Black France (2006), focused on the transnational dimension of the literature by authors of sub-Saharan African origin. As for Afrosporic literature produced in other countries in Europe, very few relevant critical works are available in English. One significant exception is Graziella Parati’s Migration Italy (2005), which examines immigrant literature as well as Italian cinema about migration. Texts with a more European-oriented outlook are Gilroy’s seminal work The Black Atlantic (1993), which offers an alternative reading of the paradigm of Modernity such as it has been received from imperial and Eurocentric discourses, and Michelle Wright’s Becoming Black (2004), focused on African diasporas in Britain, France, and Germany.

The question of whether we can consider the corpus of texts produced by the African diaspora in Europe as a whole, that is, of whether it makes sense to speak of Afro-European literature(s), is a fundamental one given the plurality and heterogeneity within it. Before we can trace the commonalities across the variety of countries, authors, genres, etc., we have to make sense of the differences, some of which are quite obvious, whereas others provide interesting starting points.
for investigating into the diverse cultural configurations that are being shaped in different European locations.

Plurality at the level of language should not pose a problem for comparative work, but in fact it does, especially if we consider issues of visibility and distribution as well as the variety of relations between the authors and the languages they use. One of the most important factors to be taken into consideration is the fact that not all European languages have the same weight and the same power, and books produced in more peripheral languages are less likely to reach a wide public than the ones produced in more international languages such as English or French. Black authors writing in Italian or Spanish, for example, are—independently from their talent—very rarely translated into other languages. Are they then doomed to be visible only on a local level? Not even that. Actually, in those countries, a disturbing phenomenon is taking place: while black writers from Britain and France are being translated by major publishers and are on display in the most popular bookshops, local black writers often rely on small publishers whose distribution is very limited. An extreme case is that of Italy, where books by immigrant writers are often impossible to find in bookshops and are instead sold in the street by immigrant vendors sponsored by humanitarian associations. In Spain, texts produced by the diaspora from the former colony of Equatorial Guinea still circulate in an underground circuit and are denied access to Spanish literary circles. Is this a sign that countries of recent immigration such Italy and Spain have a fascination with multiculturalism only when it takes place somewhere other than on indigenous soil? As a matter of fact, Southern European countries seem to have been struck by an acute form of colonial amnesia, leading to a complete erasure of the memory of past guilt. Both in Spain and in Italy, public debate about the consequences of imperial involvement in Africa is very rare and usually only concerns other colonial powers. Even now that immigration is a big issue in political debate and one which makes newspaper headlines on a daily basis, these two countries seem to perceive themselves as innocent hosts, kindly opening their doors to peoples in need. On the other hand, the fact that many people from Spain and Italy have also worked as migrant laborers abroad and have themselves been subject to racism, together with the general perception of Southern Europeans being nonracist or less racist than Northern Europeans, often results in a reluctance to openly address issues concerning racial discrimination.

An additional critical issue related to language is that it makes quite a difference whether the language used is a mother tongue, a colonial language or a language of education, or a second (foreign) language. Language becomes extremely significant in so far as it may mark the degree of integration or alienation of the author in the cultural context that applies and it may, in some cases, signal an ideological stance. Works in Italian by African immigrants who acquired the language as adults, for example, cannot be judged according to the same aesthetic principles by which we evaluate works by second generation Black British writers. Moreover, considering that a conspicuous number of migrant authors in Italy come from francophone countries and a smaller number from anglophone countries, their choice to write in a foreign language is all the more significant and signals, on the one hand, a rejection of the old colonial language in spite of the privilege attached to it (being published and distributed would probably be easier in those languages) and, on the other, a willingness to fully integrate in the host country
and become active participants in the public arena. The fact that Nassera Chora, a second-generation Algerian born and raised in France, should choose to write her autobiography, *Volevo diventare bianca* [I Wanted to Become White], in Italian is all the more striking considering the fact that her work is thematically more concerned with French society than with Italy and that it could have benefited from the popularity of Beur literature. There is then the case of authors writing in a language other than the one of their host countries. Chica Unigwe, for example, lives in Flanders and gets published in Dutch, but she writes in English and, paradoxically enough, her work (with the exception of a few short stories) is not yet available in English. A similar case is provided by the poetic and fictional work of Sidi Seck, a Senegalese resident in Spain, who originally writes in French but publishes in Spanish translation (his first novel, *Amina*, has just come out with the publishing house he has himself started). Finally, there are authors whose transnational experience translates into a translinguistic one: Fouad Laroui, a francophone Moroccan, has recently started to write in the language of his latest country of residence, the Netherlands; the superstar of francophonie, Tahar Ben Jelloun, decided to write one of his many works based in the South of Italy in Italian, a gesture that may be read as a tribute to one of his several homes, but also as a sign of the embeddedness of place and language and of the untranslatability of experience.

Another aspect which makes placing all Afro-European texts under the same umbrella particularly problematic is the heterogeneity of the authors in terms of different African heritages, European locations and individual experience (meaning by this both the uniqueness of the subjective and markers of difference such as gender, class, and education). It is difficult to take into account all these elements at once, and the process of selection we operate when embarking on a comparative work takes a different configuration according to the frames we choose to privilege. Within the Italian context, for example, reading migratory narratives by black sub-Saharan African authors alongside ones by authors from Africa is not only feasible but also extremely revealing both of the view from Africa of the peripheral position Italy occupies in Europe and of the typically Italian construction of the figure of the immigrant and the foreigner based more on outward looks than on anything else. A number of texts, in fact, highlight, on the one hand, the proximity of Italy to Africa both in cultural and ethnic terms and, on the other, the dynamics of exclusion that may involve immigrants as well as underprivileged Italians and that are based especially on markers of class distinction such as ways of dressing and speaking. In Spain, on the contrary, the stronger discrimination suffered by North Africans as compared to the benevolence by which Spaniards look at sub-Saharan Africans would make this association more difficult, provided that there were at all texts by North Africans to read alongside the still small number of texts by sub-Saharan Africans. In fact, in spite of the large numbers of North Africans resident in Spain, there is as yet no literary production by this group, if one excludes Mohamed El Gheryb’s *Dormir al Raso* [Sleeping in the Open], a report on migration with no literary pretence written in collaboration with a Spanish author, and Rachid Nini’s beautiful *Diario de un ilegal* [Journal of a Clandestine], which was published in Arabic and only later translated to Spanish. And here the question arises of why there are so many North Africans writing in Italy and not in Spain, where their presence is so conspicuous. This takes us to other important
issues to be taken into consideration, such as the role of publishers, universities, and institutions of various kinds in determining the existence and shaping the form of the new literatures in question and the impact of marketing strategies on the production and reception of these texts.

In different European countries, we can easily observe that Afrosporic texts are inserted in very different frames. In France, for example, black writers of African descent are still seen as part of the grande famille de la francophonie and not much distinction is made between writers of different heritages. Inclusion in the national canon, on the other hand, seems to be based on the degree of literary achievement and international recognition. The case of Calixthe Beyala is particularly meaningful in this respect: she was described as a French writer when at the height of her success, but suddenly went back to being an “African” writer when she was accused of plagiarism.

In Great Britain, we are witnessing a gradual “migration” of Afrosporic literatures from the postcolonial discourse to the notion of Black Britishness. Although there is as yet no common agreement on what this term should refer to, the debate is recently being articulated in terms of generation and citizenship. In her introduction to Write Black Write British, for example, Kadija Sesay argues that whereas some postcolonial writers can be referred as Black British, benefiting from this “new catch-all sexy terminology,” Black British writers cannot also be termed postcolonial: “They are writers born in Britain, educated in Britain and because of heritage and parentage, their ‘take’ on Britain is viewed through different glasses from those born elsewhere, and possibly raised and or educated here” (16). A few lines below, she admits that she doesn’t see herself as a Black British but more as an African British, although she does not explain why. While this kind of argument appears quite confusing and dangerously touches upon obsolete notions of authenticity, it is nevertheless very telling of present anxieties about terminology concerning minorities and their way of articulating identity. The debate, of course, arises from the wish to take into account ethnicity and citizenship as well as heritage and experience. On the one hand, the old all-inclusive British discourse on blackness that served to enhance solidarity among all non-white citizens in their fight against racism seems to have been happily overcome (although a few scholars still insist on seeing Asian British writers as black) in favor of more differentiation among minorities. On the other hand, one can still feel a certain discontent with the way migrants (and non-migrants) of different generations and heritages are brought together under the same category. Although in most British bookshops we find shelves devoted to “black writers,” in scholarly work national, ethnic, and cultural categories easily shift according to the focus one seeks to privilege and the same writer can be termed alternatively as African, African British or Black British, or Caribbean, Afro-Caribbean, Caribbean British, or Black British. This confusion, of course, concerns above all first-generation migrant writers such as Buchi Emecheta or Grace Nichols and, in so far as it remains a mere issue of terminology, it is not that important to reach an agreement. Nevertheless, it may be helpful in some cases—especially when dealing with second- and third-generation writers—to recognize dominant cultural heritages, on the one hand, and meaningful transnational connections, on the other. Among black writers of Caribbean descent, for example, we find some whose work is deeply rooted in the Caribbean (Amryl Johnson, for example) and some other whose work has a stronger connection with
Africa (Mutabaruka, among others), in the same way as writers of African descent may be more or less “connected” with the country of origin of their parents (in the work of second-generation Nigerian-British Diran Adebayo, for example, the Nigerian connection is as strong as in the work of African-born writers such as Biyi Bandele or Shimi Bedford).

In Italy, both academic discourse and the institution of a literary prize for migrant writers (Eks&Tra) have been crucial in encouraging the development of a new italophone literature, usually identified as “migration literature.” This label refers to a corpus of works produced by authors from Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. The emergence of this literature in 1990 significantly coincided with the decree on immigration known as the *legge Martelli*, which issued residence permits and legalized the position of large numbers of clandestine workers. Three autobiographical works were published in 1990, all by Africans, which recounted the migratory journey to and through Italy and the process of adjustment to the host country: Senegalese Pap Khouma’s *Io, venditore di elefanti* [I, Vendor of Elephants], Tunisian Salah Methnani’s *Immigrato* [Immigrant], and Moroccan Mohamed Bouchane’s *Chiamatemi Ali* [Call Me Ali]. The first fictional narratives appeared in the following years: Senegalese Saidou Moussa Ba’s *La promessa di Hamadi* [Hamadi’s Promise], published in 1991, and Tunisian Mohsen Melliti’s *Pantanella*, published in 1992, are the best known. The first literary accomplishments of immigrant women stress once more a preference for autobiography, with a special focus on childhood and on the traditions of the country of origin: Eritrean Ribka Sibhatu’s *Aulo* (1993), Somali Shirin Ramzanali Fazel’s *Lontano da Mogadiscio* [Far from Mogadiscio] (1994), and Capeverdian’s Maria de Lourdes Jesus’s *Racordai: Vengo da un’Isola di Capoverde* [Racordai: I Come from an Island of Cape Verde] (1996) all evoke the childhood world, recreate communal life in the native village and introduce the reader to local traditions, providing a detailed background to the migratory journey before engaging in a comparative assessment of their experience in Italy. These pioneering works, which address an Italian readership, arise from the double need to give voice to the experience of immigrants and to make Italians familiar with the cultures of origin of their new neighbors, fulfilling, therefore, a function of cultural mediation. More recent works, such as Smari Abdel Malek’s *Fiamme in paradiso* [Flames in Heaven] (2000), Jadelin Mabiala Gangbo’s *Rometta e Giulio* (2001), Igiaba Scego’s *Rhoda* (2004), and Pap Khouma’s *Nonno Dio e gli spiriti danzanti* [Granpa God and the Dancing Spirits] (2005), go beyond the autobiographical and the testimonial, and experiment more both thematically and stylistically.

Although the large majority of immigrant writers in Italy are African, their work is seldom considered separately and writers tend to focus on migratory issues as a result of the fact that discourse around this literature is especially articulated in terms of migration and integration. An example of how the requirements of the market can affect authors’ choices is provided by the genesis of a short story by Jadelin Mabiala Gangbo. This particularly talented writer, born in Congo and abandoned by the family in Italy at a young age, was brought up by Italians and has little connection with his country of origin. A few years ago, as he told me in a private conversation, he was contacted by the organizers of the literary prize for migrant writers Eks&Tra, who encouraged him to submit a work on his experience as an “immigrant” in Italy. His first reaction was of surprise and puzzlement, not
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...devoid of a certain resentful discomfort: “But I am not an immigrant,” he thought to himself. Nevertheless, a literary prize is a literary prize; he admitted, something crucial for a young writer wanting to emerge, and therefore he set himself to work and produced his own version of immigrant experience in Italy. His solution to this gap between the expectations of the establishment and his own experience was a short story on the vicissitudes of an alien landed from another planet. More than a merely funny anecdote, this episode suggests that at the same time as it is promoting the development of a new literature, the discourse on “migration literature” is also setting boundaries for what does and does not qualify, and risking, therefore, to create a literary ghetto by denying access into the more properly national canon. However, as a country of recent immigration, Italy is doing quite well, after all, in the effort to open the literary scene to new voices from developing countries. Together with other scholars in Rome, Armando Gnisci, who has written widely about migration literature, set up a database of works by immigrant writers in Italy, a valuable resource for researchers and readers at large.

Spain, on the contrary, which shares much with Italy both in terms of cultural heritage, racial in-betweenness (both Spaniards and Italian were classified as non-white as immigrants in North America) and rapid transformation from massively sending work force abroad to becoming receiving societies, seems not to be equally accessible to immigrants, at least at the level of cultural production. In spite of the large presence of migrants from African countries, very few texts have been published (and the ones that have been published are not easily available on the market), although there is the hope that the progressive immigration policies of the new government will bring forward a substantial and fast change. Until recently, Afrosporic writers residing in Spain have not received much attention and, in any case, they have been seen as “Africans” rather than Afro-Spanish and their work has been marketed as exotic. The past colonial relationship with Equatorial Guinea has favored the opening of a space for writers coming from this country, but with the exception of Donato Ndongo, who published his autobiographical novel *Las tinieblas de tu memoria negra* [Darkness of Your Black Memory] (1987) with a major publisher, their works have had a very limited distribution.

The only hispanophone country in sub-Saharan Africa and with a history marked by brutal oppression both in colonial and postcolonial times, Equatorial Guinea occupies one of the most marginal spaces—if one at all—in past and current scholarship in the plural research fields where it should belong by right: Hispanic, African, and Postcolonial Studies. While Latin American countries have been embraced as part of the much cherished *hispanidad*, Equatorial Guinea does not feature on the map in spite of the fact that the majority of Guinean writers presently reside in Spain. Hispanophone Guinean literature can be traced back to colonial times, when two novels were published: Leoncio Evita’s *Cuando los Combes luchaban* [The Struggle of the Combes] (1953) and Daniel Jones Mathama’s *Una lanza por el Boabi* [A Spear for the Boabi] (1962). Due to their colonial perspective, both works enjoy very little popularity among contemporary Guinean intellectuals. During the eleven years of Francisco Macías’s brutal dictatorship following independence in 1968, which reduced the country to endemic poverty and high rates of illiteracy, one third of the population fled. Later, though the new regime led by Teodoro Obiang Nguema raised hopes of change, the country never developed a truly democratic system, and censorship and repression continue to this
day to be common practices. As a consequence of these historical circumstances, hispanophone Guinean literature is a literature mostly produced in the diaspora. Among the most relevant works, apart from the already mentioned novel by Donato Ndongo, are Juan Balboa’s *El reencuentro* [The Re-Encounter] (1985), María Nsue’s *Ekomo* (1985), Eugenio Nkogo’s *La encerrona* [The Trap] (1993), and Francisco Zamora’s *Cómo ser negro y no morir en Aravaca* [How to Be Black and Not Die in Aravaca] (1994). The main concerns of these writers range from the impact of colonization on the mind of the Guinean subject and the conflict between tradition and modernity to the destructive effects of Macías’s dictatorship, the trauma of exile and the difficult life conditions of blacks in Spain. Recently, a new generation of writers—Tomás Ávila, Maximiliano Nkogo, and Joaquín Mbomio among others—are exploring new themes and giving new directions to Guinean literature. These authors, who have not experienced political exile, are more focused on the present than their forerunners.

As for writers coming from other linguistic areas, very few names have attracted the attention of major publishers and reached a wide public. One exception is Agnès Agboton, from Benin, who published her autobiography with Lumen. In *Más allá del mar de arena* [Beyond the Sea of Sand] (2005), the exoticization of the migrant African subject for marketing purposes is evident both in the subtitle of the autobiography, “An African woman in Spain,” and in the first lines of the back cover: “When Agnès Agboton left her home in Benin and arrived in Barcelona, she was eighteen years old and she had never used a moving staircase, neither had she entered a department store, but she brought along all the wisdom of her homeland.” However, this is probably the first text acknowledged as “Afro-Spanish,” and the narrator herself, in the account of her life, lays a special emphasis on the cultural syncretism her migratory experience has put her through. Another relevant voice is Cameroonian Inongo-vi-Makomé, a prolific writer who has published a number of stories for children as well as essays on migration and a novel, *Rebeldía* [Rebellion] (1996), about the disillusionment of an emigré returning to his homeland after twenty years of hardships in Spain. African writers resident in Spain generally maintain a strong connection with their home countries (a second generation of Spanish-born Afrosporic writers is yet to emerge) but are active participants in the cultural scene of the host country, being often committed to spread and promote knowledge about African traditions, culture, history, and politics. Similar to their counterparts in Italy, they take on the role of mediators and their work is especially valuable as a bridge between the native population and diasporic communities.

Afro-European literatures develop in different countries at different times and take quite different shapes according to the contexts in which they are inserted. For this reason, a comparative approach turns out to be quite problematic, especially if we seek to read the long and already canonized tradition of Black writing in former imperial nations such as Britain or France alongside the much more recent and more isolated Afrosporic voices in countries of recent immigration such as Italy or Spain. Diachronic and synchronic readings reveal commonalities as well as major differences produced by the specificity of each context. A synchronic reading of migratory texts produced in recent years, for example, shows common concerns among immigrants, independently from the context, and suggests that the alienation experienced by immigrants in countries
of recent immigration is not very dissimilar from the one experienced by recent immigrants in countries with a long tradition of multiculturalism (see Brancato). Nevertheless, even a purely thematic approach of this kind is not unproblematic. What emerges from a comparative reading of texts centered on the migratory experience is that, while there are striking commonalities in the representation of immigrant life, the way this theme is approached varies according to the degree of “authority” of Afrosporic subjects in the specific context. One can observe, for example, that Afro-Italian and Afro-Spanish authors express a less conflictive view of the relationship between the dominant group in the host country and the African minority than Afro-British and Afro-French authors, and the tone they use is much more conciliatory and reassuring. This may lead readers to believe that Southern European countries are less discriminatory and more welcoming, although one should also take into consideration the fact that cultural conflicts are usually more pronounced the larger the number of immigrants. Nevertheless, there are other extratextual factors that may easily escape our attention and that are indeed quite important. Apart from the impact of both institutional discourses and marketing strategies mentioned above, one should consider the importance of readerships (real or imagined) in determining the communicative choices made by authors. Whereas books published by black writers in Britain—and to a lesser degree France—can boast a substantial black readership both locally and internationally, books produced in Southern European language do not enjoy the same privilege. By reading Afro-Spanish and Afro-Italian authors, it becomes immediately obvious that they address a local readership, exclusively white, and that the urge of being understood and accepted by the indigenous population is at the core of their communicative efforts. It is not surprising, therefore, that their criticism of the host society should be milder than the one brought forward by black writers residing in countries where the black community is more numerous, more established and more confident.

Exploring Afro-European literature(s) comparatively therefore means tracing diachronic and synchronic connections that reveal new configurations across linguistic and national boundaries. The texts themselves are transnational and transcultural and foreground a comparatist perspective where Africa and Europe—and Africa in Europe—are continuously set against each other in an effort to problematize what the two continents mean to each other, how they interact and give place to new syncretic cultural formations. The plurality of vision of diasporic groups with their “contrapuntal” awareness of simultaneous dimensions (Said 186) constitutes a key element of the process of European decolonization from within. Therefore, rather than being seen as a subcategory of Europeanness—which would involve a perpetuation of a Eurocentric vision—Afro-Europe should be incorporated into the debate on European identity as a constitutive element of the cultural heritage of the continent and one that contributes to the displacement and reformulation of the concept of Europe such as it has been conceived in centuries of imperialist Weltanschauung and Eurocentric practice.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research was supported by a Marie-Curie Intra-European Fellowship within the 6th European Community Framework program.
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