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## **Decolonized Bodies: Aesthetic Activism in Afrofeminist Blogs from France, Spain and Italy**

### Abstract

This chapter introduces a comparative perspective on Afrofeminist blogs written and coordinated by members of the African diaspora in France, Spain and Italy. The article first highlights the relevance of digital media as a means of empowerment and as a space for the re-negotiation of identity constructions. Then, by focusing on the textual and visual representations of African and Afrodescendant women and their bodies, it explores how these digital platforms conceptualize Afrodescendance and Blackness. They point to painful experiences of racism and feelings of marginalization while also offering a shared and meaningful narrative of identification. The analyzed examples show that Afrofeminist blogs open up a space where racialized women discuss what it means to be Black in Europe. But they do more: they also generate alternative and affirmative narratives of Afrodescendance and Blackness that oppose the stereotyped and racist imageries still circulating in French, Spanish and Italian societies. In this context, the article explores representations of the Black female body that play a crucial role in a new digital aesthetic activism that challenges Eurocentric beauty standards and aims at decolonizing those bodies by means of a subversive aesthetics.

In this chapter, we take a comparative look at blogs written and coordinated by members of the African diaspora – that is, persons of African descent that live outside the African continent following coerced, induced or voluntary migrations and relocations in the past and the present (c.f., e.g., Boyce Davies 2008; Falola 2013: 1-2) – in France, Spain and Italy. These blogs all share an Afrofeminist perspective inspired by decolonial and, in particular, Black feminist theory (cf., e.g., Hill Collins 2000; Vergès 2019) which, referring to the continuous struggle of

Afrodescendant women to regain their voice within a context of feminist thinking, “place[s] Black women’s experiences and ideas at the center of analysis” (Hill Collins 2000: vii). One of the ways they do this is by revealing these women’s intellectual tradition and unmasking the “intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender” (ibid.: 8). Dealing with everyday racism and stereotyping as well as with the potentials and challenges of multiple attachments and transcultural identities, these blogs tend to discuss Afrodescendance and “Blackness” as a marker of shared experiences of both exclusion and belonging.<sup>1</sup> Elaborating on the notion of aesthetic activism that identifies the body as both subject to racist/symbolic violence and a potential space both of resistance to a racist regime of representation and also of self-empowerment (cf. Hall 1997 in general), we pay particular attention to (self-)representations of African and Afrodescendant women and their bodies on these blogs and discursive strategies that aim at decolonizing these bodies.

As studies on diasporic communities’ uses of the digital space confirm, the internet, and in particular Web 2.0, represent an interactive space where constructions of identities and shared experiences are negotiated, for they provide “the opportunity for reflection and the ongoing construction of the self” (Siapera 2012: 174; also Kreknin/Marquardt 2016: 10; Bailey/Georgiu/Harindranath 2007: 2-3). Furthermore, the internet notably bears the potential to provide visibility for otherwise marginalized groups whose members can become “active

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<sup>1</sup> When talking about ‘blackness’ or ‘race’ in the following, we need to emphasize that we understand those terms as discursively constructed categories of differences that arose within a context of colonization and colonial ideology and that describe a lived political and social reality in a modern/colonial world characterized by multiple experiences of discrimination and racism. Accordingly, Mark Terkessidis (2004: 98) argues that the “racialization” of the Other gives rise to a relation of inequality by “naturalizing” difference. As Rögglä rightly states, ‘racialized’ categories as ‘black’ or ‘white’ are fictions, but, notwithstanding, fictions that have fairly real effects on the lives of people, such as in the presence (or absence) of certain privileges, and that, therefore, need to be voiced (cf. Rögglä 2012: 17-20; also Hall 2019: 109-110).

agents in their own representation [...] through articulating digital ethnic, religious and gender identifications” (Leurs 2015: 25; also Siapera 2012: 185; Love 2019: 60).<sup>2</sup>

Critical research has shown that digital platforms, consequently, allow diasporic communities such as the Afrodiasporic communities in Europe to establish digital counterpublics. Those challenge and destabilize hegemonic narratives by revealing alternative views and staging the community’s members’ own self-images that thwart mainstream perspectives within a society (cf. Fraser 1992: 123; Bailey 2007: 212; Borst/Gallo González 2019: 290). With this paper, we correspondingly want to raise awareness to the fact that, accordingly, Afrodiasporic identity constructions are not only discussed in fiction and theoretical writing but tend to be addressed on a large scale in the internet, for instance in decentralized and participatory formats such as blogs. Counteracting the hegemony of Western narratives on Afrodiasporic communities,<sup>3</sup> these digital platforms open up spaces that turn into a potential tool of empowerment since they reveal the communities’ very own narratives and strengthen their participation in the producing of knowledge (cf. Love 2019: 58).

As a first step, we enhance our initial conceptual remarks on the relevance of digital media and blogs as a space for constructing and challenging identities of Afrodiasporic communities in France, Spain and Italy. As a second step, we zoom in on selected case studies to analyze textual and visual representations of African and Afrodescendant women and their bodies in Afrofeminist blogs from those countries. One feature shared by these blogs is the underlying assumption that a decolonization of aesthetics may foster the self-awareness and empowerment of women of African descent and, thus, advance a decolonization of thinking.

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<sup>2</sup> For a critical discussion of digital divides in this context cf., e.g., Leurs 2015: 19-21; Borst/Gallo González 2019: 287-288.

<sup>3</sup> By the term “Afrodiasporic communities”, we refer to communities constituted by people of African descent who live in the diaspora, that is, in our context, in Romance-speaking European countries.

## Afrodiasporic Communities and Aesthetic Activism in Cyberspace

Activists such as Desirée Bela-Lobedde state that, until a few years ago, there were basically no bloggers of African descent that deal with the experiences of African and Afrodescendant people in Spain for instance and/or write in Spanish (Bela-Lobedde 2018: 160-161). Nowadays, however, there is a rising number of digital platforms (such as web-zines, digital databases, blogs, YouTube channels and other video blogs) as well as initiatives related to Afrodiasporic communities in social media networks (e. g., Facebook, Instagram or Twitter) that tackle issues concerning Afrodiasporic communities in different European countries using other languages but English and are coordinated and/or written by members of these communities. They are written by individuals or collectives of bloggers and refer to national and transnational contexts (such as for instance *Afropean – Adventures in Afroeuropa* or *Live Unchained*). The huge number of platforms that can now be found is remarkable for it identifies the internet as an influential space where Afrodiasporic communities can gain visibility and shape their own narratives. The internet's potential as an empowering space is particularly significant if we consider its ambivalence as, according to the European Network Against Racism's Shadow Report, it also plays a major role in "forming opinions about migrants" (ENAR 2016: 15) and is frequently instrumentalized by far-right movements to spread false information (ibid.).

The extensive online presence of Afrodiasporic voices is certainly not just due to a rising trend in times of an increasingly interactive and participatory digital era of what is widely called the Web 2.0, allowing users to interact and collaborate to an unprecedented extent: A global trend of people branching out into the internet, sharing their lives and thoughts, commenting on others and being commented on. Rather, it may also be seen as a conscious decision to reach beyond established patterns of literary and theoretical writing, for both the academic and publishing worlds – although to different degrees with respect to the three countries covered in this paper – have continued marginalizing Afrodiasporic voices and self-presentations (cf. Crumly Deventer/

Thomas 2011; Brancato 2009; Passos 2008; Romeo 2018).<sup>4</sup> Correspondingly, Françoise Vergès highlights the importance of the digital in counteracting a hegemony of Western narratives, for “social networks and the digital can be re-appropriated and used to connect peoples through the [African] continent and beyond” (Vergès 2017: 46). She argues that such networks “have facilitated conversations in the world of culture, arts and politics” and opened up “new routes of circulation [where] uncharted forms of emancipation emerge” (ibid.). Likewise, Afro-German writer and activist Noah Sow emphasizes the resistive potential of seizing these new channels, as “[t]here is much power in addressing each other” (Sow 2017: 29) and, thus, taking advantage of alternative spaces of enunciation such as the digital (ibid.: 30):

For the first time, the tools to research *and* verify *and* publish our stories, herstories, histories are entirely in our own hands – if we so wish. Today we choose how we deal with cultural gatekeeping. [...] We can self-publish digitally, reach anyone who is interested, and use networks to get the word out, autonomously and on a global scale. (ibid.; her emphasis)

As Kathleen Connolly argues, marginalized voices can consequently “use cyberspace as a medium to participate in the production of knowledge and argue with or protest against attitudes they view as incorrect or unjust” (2015: 146).<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the digital space allows for a dynamic processuality of producing texts that can be modified, extended, contradicted, commented on, and so on and so forth. In particular of interest in this context are blogs, often displaying a multitude of different posts that commonly reach from diaristic, intimate topics to thoughts or comments on news,

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<sup>4</sup> The significance of the internet not only becomes evident if we consider the rising number of digital platforms coordinated by Afrodescendant people in Europe but also if we bear in mind the rising trend to crowd-fund projects by Afrodescendant people on digital platforms such as in the case of Amandine Gay’s documentary *Ouvrir la voix* [*Speak Up*] or *Metamba Miago: relatos y saberes de mujeres afroespañoles* [*Metamba Miago: Stories and Knowledges by Afrospanish women*], edited by Deborah Ekoka in 2019.

<sup>5</sup> For the (transnational) interrelatedness of many Afrodiasporic digital platforms, cf. Borst/Gallo González (2019) who study examples from Spain and Portugal. Many blogs not only link to each other but re-post (to some extent translated) texts from other platforms and networks.

current events, social issues etc. (cf. Serfaty 2004: 248). Due to their conceptual and medial flexibility, they foster ambiguities, ambivalent and even contradictory positionings as well as an openness to transformation (cf. Serfaty 2004). Correspondingly, they bear the potential to display a constantly developing and heteroglossic discourse that, according to Connolly, is not controlled by “an overarching narrative voice” (Connolly 2015: 151). As Viviane Serfaty (2004) argues, they open up a space where bloggers are enabled to express and negotiate a certain self-image or self-presentation, mediated through both written text *and* videos and pictures; that is, in our context, a space where subject positionings are discursively produced (cf. Kreknin/Marquardt 2016: 2) and that therefore allow Afrodiasporic identity constructions to be discussed.

When talking about identity constructions, we refer to Stuart Hall’s well-known assumption that identity is “[n]ot an essence, but a *positioning*” (Hall 1996: 113) that “is always in process” (ibid.: 110) and needs to be re-negotiated. Correspondingly, individual and/or collective positionings of bloggers emerge within the posts, positionings situated within a contradictory and ambivalent context of self-perceptions and perceptions by others (cf. Kreknin/Marquardt 2016: 2). Thus, writing back to stereotyped perceptions of the “Black Other”, the bloggers have been trying to re-appropriate a discourse on Afrodescendance and Blackness, exposing and oppugning those biased narratives as well as “defin[ing] their own humanity and affirm[ing] it in one another” (Love 2019: 70). We argue that, by doing this, they claim “Afrodescendance” as a shared narrative that allows them to identify with and, furthermore, to conceptualize positionings of the in-between, which are characterized by both enriching experiences of multiple attachments and disturbing experiences of racism and exclusion.

As gender and media theorist Lisa Nakamura states, the internet is “a place where race happens” (Nakamura 2002: xii). She also emphasizes the limits and opportunities of digital forms of representation and self-representation in this context: “Images of race on the Net are both ‘stereotyped’ at times [...], and at other times, race is deployed in creative coalition building that creates a sense of community and racial identity online” (ibid.: xiii). It is this potential of “imagining” a community (cf. Anderson 2006) that should be kept in mind when looking

at the examples, an imagining of a community based on shared images and narratives that sustain a notion of commonality and allow for “strategic positions for self-expression” (Bailey/Georgiu/Harindarath 2007: 2). Accordingly, the narratives on Afrodescendance and the associated experiences and feelings articulated in the blogs elaborate a vision for those who otherwise frequently feel silenced to identify with, creating (new and/or alternative) self-images that oppose a biased image forced on people of African descent by a Eurocentric gaze, as criticized by Frantz Fanon in his groundbreaking book *Black Skin, White Masks*.<sup>6</sup>

When it comes to the exclusion and stereotyping of the “Black Other”, both Fanon (2008: 91) and Hall (1997) have highlighted the decisive role of the “racialized” body for the persistent functioning of racism, for it seemingly makes “difference” visible. Hall argues that the “representation of ‘difference’ through the body became the discursive site through which much of this ‘racialized knowledge’ was produced and circulated” (Hall 1997: 244). In his text “The Spectacle of the ‘Other’”, Hall shows that popular stereotypes often refer to physical characteristics of people of African descent such as hair texture, facial features or skin color, as stereotyping “*reduces, essentializes, naturalizes, and fixes ‘difference’*” (ibid.: 258; his emphasis; also 249 and Hill Collins 2000: 89). In the same essay, he highlights that meaning is always floating and, even though stereotyping might try to fix meaning by representation, “meaning begins to slip and slide” (Hall 1997: 270, also 228), which is why meaning can be “trans-coded” and re-appropriated by “wrench[ing], or inflect[ing it] into new directions” (ibid.: 270). It is precisely this re-appropriation of concepts such as Afrodescendance and Blackness and their meaning and the subversive aesthetics of representation of Black female bodies in cyberspace that we want to study in this paper.

As to French society in the present, where Afrodiasporic communities continue crusading for “social and political visibility” (Fila-

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<sup>6</sup> However, worthy of bearing in mind is that these self-representations and counter-images may also still convey elements of colonial and Eurocentric stereotypes: “Afro-European self-making [...] must be understood against both the historical background of colonialism and the contemporary politics of othering, both of which they seek to undo in a move of self-definition, but which they also perpetuate in some respects” (de Witte/Scarabello 2019: 319).

Bakabadio 2018: 169), Sarah Fila-Bakabadio has used a similar approach to study representations of the Black female body as a “site of tension and political struggle” (ibid.). She calls this phenomenon “to ‘re-present’, which means inventing new images of a specific subject (in this case, black women) to modify its social, political, and historical significance” (ibid.: 170), that is, people of African descent are “attempting to present blackness in their own terms” (ibid.).<sup>7</sup> Following a rich tradition of Black cultural movements such as “Black is beautiful” (Hall 1997: 270), Spanish blogger and author of African descent *Desirée Bela-Lobedde* refers to the notion of “aesthetic activism” [activismo estético]<sup>8</sup> to challenge Eurocentric standards of beauty that, according to Patricia Hill Collins, are “standards used by White men, White women Black men, and, most painfully, one another” (2000: 90). As Bela-Lobedde explains in her blog, “aesthetic activism” – an activism that is both feminist and antiracist – claims “the beauty of afro hair and black skin” [la belleza del cabello afro y la piel negra] and, correspondingly, promotes alternative aesthetics and beauty standards that empower people of African descent to “work on their identity” [trabajar su identidad] and that invite them on a journey (*viaje*) to discover their African heritage (Bela-Lobedde, no date). The medial (r)evolution and the possibilities offered by cyberspace are crucial in this context, as argued by German journalist and writer Hengameh Yabhoobifarah, as “[a]esthetic, self-determined and positive representations of bodies that disrupt this confining norm [a norm determined by a ‘white gaze’ according to Yagboohifarah] have first become visible to us in such a prominent position with the rise of Instagram & Co” [Ästhetische, selbstbestimmte und positive Darstellungen von Körpern, die diese

<sup>7</sup> Cf. also Fila-Bakabadio 2014 on the topic of the creation and evolution of (female) beauty standards within Afro-French communities: “The point of this chapter is to show that attempts to define black beauty contribute to the racialization of Afro-French identities whose cultural and historical specificities are shadowed by the experience of a race-based discrimination. It also shows that black people use this racialization to invent aesthetic models for Afro-Frenchness stemming from exchanges between global/local and dominant/minority aesthetic codes from the circulation of images among France, Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States” (2014: 80).

<sup>8</sup> If not otherwise indicated, all translations of quotes into English are ours.



einengende Norm sprengen, sehen wir erst seit Instagram & Co. an so populärer Stelle; Yagboohifarah 2019: 74; cf. also Love 2019: 54].<sup>9</sup>

In a first step, we give a short overview of the blogs' main objectives and their efforts to offer tools of self-affirmation. In a second step, where we focus on exemplary case studies from France, Spain and Italy, we turn our attention to representations that provide examples of African and Afrodescendant women and their bodies as sites of resistance and self-empowerment.

### **Afrofeminist Blogs as Tools of Self-Affirmation and Empowerment – An Overview of Examples from France, Spain and Italy**

If we consider digital platforms coordinated by Afrodiasporic people in general, we can sum up that the blogs deal with three pivotal issues. First, the denouncing of racism, stereotypization and marginalization as everyday experiences of people of African descent who are refused a place within European societies. Second, given this experience of exclusion, a focus on African and Afrodiasporic culture and cultural artefacts as a means of self-empowerment and self-affirmation. And third, the discussion of the potentials and challenges of multiple belongings and transcultural identity constructions; a discussion that also includes the question of how to label these identity constructions (cf., e.g., Borst/Gallo González 2019: 303). A key claim of many is that they want to open up a space where people of African descent in Europe can speak up and become visible, tell their own stories and visions; a space where they can affirm both their Afrodescendance and their relation to European societies and cultures, and, as stated in the blog *Afropean*, “explore the [...] interplay of black and European cultures, and the synergy of styles and ideas brought about because of this union”.<sup>10</sup>

Turning to blogs that share an Afrofeminist perspective, many of those deal with gender issues and intersectionality and, thus, share an Afrofeminist perspective as, for instance, *Afroféminas*, *EFAE – Empe-*

<sup>9</sup> For the significance of cyberspace for what is widely called the fourth wave of feminism cf., e.g., Cochrane (2013).

<sup>10</sup> “About”, *Afropean*, afropean.com/about/ [22 Jan 2021].

*deramiento Feminino Afrodescendiente en España* or *Desirée Bela* in Spain, *Badassafrofem*, *Les Bavardages de Kiyémis*, *Mrs. Roots*, *Periphéries* or *La toile d'Alma* in France and *Nappytalia* and *AFROselvaggio* in Italy, to name but a few.<sup>11</sup>

Conceptualized as a symbolic space of solidarity, empowerment and visibility, these blogs' main objective is to give women of African descent a voice and to enable them to speak up. The French blog *Les Bavardages de Kiyémis* [*Kiyémis's chatters*] has a vivid subtitle in this context: "An Afropean who makes noise" [*Une afropéenne qui fait du bruit*]. On the one hand, the blogger evidently claims a space within France and Europe by using the term "afropéenne", tying in with an ongoing debate in France that tries to capture "multiple belongings" [*des appartenances multiples*] (Miano 2012: 84) of French women and men of African descent "who wish to provide a space for both of them within themselves, [...] combine them without establishing a hierarchy" [*qui souhaitent arbitrer en eux les deux, [...] les mélanger sans les hiérarchiser*] (*ibid.*; cf. also Dechaufour and Chalaye 2015). On the other hand, the use of the expression "faire du bruit" is significant since it is not a neutral term but a statement in several ways: first, the blogger does not ask for permission to speak up or hold off the power of her voice to be heard over a long distance. Second, she does not speak in a diplomatic manner but with a subversive tenor, the expression "faire du bruit" reminding us of decolonial critic Maldonado-Torres's concept of the cry of the colonized other – a cry that represents "a call of attention to one's own existence" (Maldonado-Torres 2010: 110) and "the revelation of someone who has been forgotten or wronged" (*ibid.*: 48). "Faire du bruit", thus, represents an act not only of mourning but one of resistance as well in terms of an affirmation to have a story to tell, or, as the blogger herself says: "rediscover the history of our fights, of

<sup>11</sup> Apart from those, there are also a few feminist blogs that, among other topics, tackle issues concerning African and Afrodescendant women, such as *Locas del coño – Sororidad como autodefensa feminista*, *Radio Africa Magazine* or *Afroltalian Souls*. Moreover, there are also collective blogs and online magazine such as *MWASI*, a website on which the Afrofeminist collective of the same name posts on its members' political fight against the discrimination of Black women, or *Lallab Magazine*, whose focus is on Black and non-Black Muslim women and their fight against racist and sexist oppression.

our forces, of our combats, finally see our brilliances that have been unjustly erased [...]. It's beautiful to see us resist AND live, standing, dignified and proud" [redécouvrir l'histoire de nos luttes, de nos forces, de nos combats, voir enfin nos brillances injustement effacées [...]. C'est beau de nous voir résister ET vivre, debout, dignes et fièr.Es.]<sup>12</sup>

Correspondingly, the blogs do not simply give Afrodescendant women a voice but also value their knowledge and experiences. Likewise, the blog *Afroféminas* highlights that these digital platforms serve as a "fundamental tool for our collective liberation" [herramienta fundamental de nuestra liberación colectiva].<sup>13</sup> In an interview, journalist and blogger Lucía A. Mbomio Rubio points out that *Afroféminas* strives to make people listen to the very heterogeneous and polyphonic discourse of this community that, within *Afroféminas*, speaks for itself and is not just spoken about (cf. Olías/Campos/Caballero Medina 2016). Similarly, blogger Desirée Bela-Lobedde, formerly known under the pseudonym "La Negra Flor" [The Black Flower], previously used the neologism "afroblogger"<sup>14</sup> to describe her own ideological impetus, that is to fight biased images of Africa and its diaspora, to praise Afrodescendant cultures and to "empower Black women through esthetic activism" [empoderar a las mujeres negras desde el activismo estético] (Bela-Lobedde 2018b: 83).

As tools of self-empowerment, the blogs we are considering are written in particular for African and Afrodescendant people in France, Spain and Italy. This target audience becomes apparent if we read, for instance, the About section of *Badassafrofem* by director and blogger Amandine Gay. She understands her blog as a means of self-articulation and self-affirmation, for she repeatedly states that she does not write the blog to educate people who are not aware of their potential privileges – and these addressees include not only non-Black people, but, from her intersectional perspective, men, heterosexuals, non-disabled etc.: "I'm not here to PROVIDE YOUR education but to share and exchange points of view to finally enrich our reflections mutually" [je ne suis pas là pour FAIRE VOTRE éducation, mais partager et échanger des points

<sup>12</sup> "De la joie en politique", 4 March 2017, [lesbavardagesdekiyemis.wordpress.com/2017/03/04/de-la-joie-en-politique/](https://lesbavardagesdekiyemis.wordpress.com/2017/03/04/de-la-joie-en-politique/) [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>13</sup> *Afroféminas* on Instagram, [www.instagram.com/p/BUPdvFjIBg4/](https://www.instagram.com/p/BUPdvFjIBg4/) [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>14</sup> Cf. "Afro Blog", [www.negraflor.com/afro-blog/](http://www.negraflor.com/afro-blog/) [22 Jan 2021].

de vue afin d'enrichir mutuellement nos réflexions].<sup>15</sup> Yet, as Gay's wording shows, she does primarily speak to women of African descent but not exclusively to them: rather, she says 'votre éducation', inviting everyone to read what she has to say. Interestingly, the internet plays a particular role in this context, as, according to Gay, it represents a space that does not allow for ignorance anymore, for it is a freely accessible tool for self-education:

No excuses for your ignorance since the information, [...] that allows you to understand better the world, the wheels of power, the repetitions of history, the strategies of erasure or of promotion of memory, in short, the world in which we live, is there, a mouse click away.

Pas d'excuses pour votre ignorance car les informations, [...] celles qui vous permettent de mieux comprendre le monde, les rouages du pouvoir, les répétitions de l'histoire, les stratégies d'effacement ou de promotion des mémoires, bref le monde dans lequel nous vivons, sont là, à un clic de souris.<sup>16</sup>

Answering to a multiple discrimination of Afrodescendant women due to gender, race, sexuality, religion and so on, the blogs are conceptualized as spaces of both rebellion and self-empowerment as well as of solidarization of Afrodescendant women. According to the blog *EFAE – Empoderamiento femenino afrodescendiente en España [Female Afrodescendant Empowerment in Spain]*, it is this multiple discrimination that has left a vacuum within Afrodiasporic communities, for female voices are underrepresented within these groups. Therefore, the EFAE collective, founded in 2016, considers itself an “answer to the necessity of female representation in spaces of Afrodescendant empowerment” [respuesta a la necesidad de representación femenina en los espacios de

<sup>15</sup> “Juste une mise au point”, 24 Sept 2017, badassafrofem.wordpress.com/category/a-propos-de-ce-blog/ [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>16</sup> “Juste une mise au point”, 24 Sept 2017, badassafrofem.wordpress.com/category/a-propos-de-ce-blog/ [22 Jan 2021]. Cf. also Love about the internet as a tool of sharing knowledge: “In pedagogical terms, DBF [Digital Black Feminism] is a manifestation of a communal learning space that cultivates knowledge and understanding. DBF allows for Black women to spearhead conversations about beauty (double) standards, class, gender, politics, and race while providing a counterspace to combat issues such as police brutality, misogynoir, anti-blackness, and social injustices” (2019: 70).

empoderamiento afrodescendiente].<sup>17</sup> Consequently, the blogs call on women – and other socially marginalized gender identities – to gather their voices and become protagonists in “our fight for visibility of the Black woman” [nuestra lucha de visibilización de la mujer negra].<sup>18</sup> The Afrofeminist collective MWASI, founded in 2014, declares a similar goal, for the contributors complain that Black women (and Black people who at birth have been considered women) were invisible as political subjects (cf. also MWASI 2018: 20). They point to “the necessity to federate, to exchange and to express oneself on questions related to Black Women” [le besoin de fédérer, d’échanger et de s’exprimer sur les questions liées aux Femmes Noires],<sup>19</sup> to establish a transnational solidarity among Afrodescendant women in Africa and the diaspora (cf. *ibid.*: 21, 85) without neglecting the heterogeneity of that community. In this context, most blogs also denounce the scandalous shortcomings and “blindness” [aveuglement] (Vergès 2019: 29) of Western feminism, whose claim for alleged universalism only poorly disguises its hegemonic attitude, for it does not represent “racialized” women and their claims.<sup>20</sup>

In the following, we analyze representative Afrofeminist blogs from France, Spain and Italy – *Badassafroem*, *Les Bavardages de Kiyémis*, *Afroféminas*, *Diario de la Negra Flor/Videos de la Negra Flor*, and *Nappytalia* – to study in detail how those blogs discuss Afrodiasporic identity constructions and their relatedness to Afrodescendance and Blackness in the French, Spanish and Italian context. In this setting, we emphasize the representations of Black female bodies which, as the Afrofeminist collective MWASI compellingly states in its manifesto-like text *Afrofem* (2018), are controlled by a biased Western gaze and “assigned, by violence, to a defined space and social role” [assignés par

<sup>17</sup> “Inicio”, efaeblog.wordpress.com/ [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>18</sup> “Acerca de”, efaeblog.wordpress.com/acerca-de/ [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>19</sup> Description at the collective’s YouTube channel, also: [www.youtube.com/channel/UCpvYggTh\\_FmUGKY1sowymEQ/about?disable\\_polymer=1](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpvYggTh_FmUGKY1sowymEQ/about?disable_polymer=1) [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>20</sup> Cf., e.g., *Afroféminas*’ refusal to join the general feminist strike in Spain on 8 March 2018, as the bloggers criticize that Spain’s hegemonic feminism does not represent “racialized” women’s opinions and claim (“Por qué *Afroféminas* no se sume a la Huelga Feminista”, 5 March 2018, [afrofeminas.com/2018/03/05/porque-afrofeminas-no-se-suma-a-la-huelga-feminista/](http://afrofeminas.com/2018/03/05/porque-afrofeminas-no-se-suma-a-la-huelga-feminista/) [22 Jan 2021]; see also the provocative “Letter to White Feminism” [Lettre au féminisme blanc] in MWASI (2018: 42-43).

la violence à un espace et un rôle social défini] (MWASI 2018: 102), a racist practice that can only be overcome by making them widely visible and revealing Afrodescendant women's "flamboyance" [flamboyance]: "To make our lives shine isn't an option, it's a necessity." [Faire briller la beauté de nos vies n'est pas une option, c'est une nécessité] (ibid.: 105).

### ***Badassafrofem* and *Les Bavardages de Kiyémis* (France): Reclaiming and Re-Signifying Black Bodies**

An interesting example is the afore-mentioned blog *Badassafrofem* written by Afrofeminist activist Amandine Gay, who is also the director of *Ouvrir la voix*, a crowdfunded documentary officially released in 2017 in which 24 women discuss their identities as Black women in France and Belgium, denounce racism as a collective experience that they share living in a 'white'-dominated society and also air grievances within afro communities such as sexism or homophobia (cf. Kodjo-Grandvaux 2016; Marlier 2016). The digital space plays a central role in Amandine Gay's work and activism, as she crowdfunded her documentary via *Kickstarter*, has been promoting it online by uploading clips on *YouTube* for instance, has a twitter account (@OrpheaNegra) and writes the above-mentioned blog *Badassafrofem*.<sup>21</sup> Its subtitle is: "Afrofeminist or ABL (AngryBlackLady) in terms of the moon, Pansexual option Sorceress. If you aren't ready to question your privileges, keep your distance to this blog!" [Afroféministe ou ABL (AngryBlack-Lady) en fonction de la lune, Pansexuelle option Sorcière. Si vous n'êtes pas prêt.e.s à remettre vos privilèges en question, tenez-vous à distance de ce blog!].<sup>22</sup> It vividly illustrates the blog's main goals: those are, first, reveal the intersections of discriminatory practices women of African descent suffer based on skin color, gender and sexuality, and,

<sup>21</sup> Cf., e.g., [www.kickstarter.com/projects/1172129246/ouvrir-la-voix?lang=de](http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1172129246/ouvrir-la-voix?lang=de), [lavoixlefilm.fr/](http://lavoixlefilm.fr/), [www.youtube.com/user/orpheonegra/videos](http://www.youtube.com/user/orpheonegra/videos), [twitter.com/orpheanegra?lang=de](https://twitter.com/orpheanegra?lang=de) [all 22. Jan 2021]. For her online activities cf. also "!!! Juste une mise au point: le retour !!!", 12 Jan. 2015, [badassafrofem.wordpress.com/category/a-propos-de-ce-blog/](http://badassafrofem.wordpress.com/category/a-propos-de-ce-blog/) [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>22</sup> [badassafrofem.wordpress.com/](http://badassafrofem.wordpress.com/) [22 Jan 2021].

second, subversively challenge privileges that are justified by those categories. Likewise, it indicates a belligerent tone that asks for an active resistance against others' ascriptions about women of African descent.

Correspondingly, Gay puts the blog's main goals as follows: "My work is about the deconstruction of cultural and historical re-appropriation to which Black people, in particular, women, queers and handicapped, have systematically been victims." [Mon travail porte sur la déconstruction de la réappropriation culturelle et historique, dont les Noir.e.s, en particulier, les femmes, les queers et les handicapées ont été systématiquement victimes].<sup>23</sup> She, thus, advocates an active resistance against a hegemonic narrative that reduces Black people to passive victims of History: "The history of Black people is rarely presented as a history of action; we're the passive victims of History" [L'histoire des Noir.e.s est rarement présentée comme une histoire de l'action, nous sommes les victimes passives de l'Histoire].<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, she asks Afrodescendant communities to themselves ensure that they do not just speak up but that their voices also get heard:

It isn't enough to produce tools of emancipation; one also needs to be in a position to assure its diffusion if one wishes that they get undamaged to the ears of those concerned. The reason why I do not stop to incessantly repeat that we need to reappropriate narration.

[Il ne suffit pas de produire des outils d'émancipation, encore faut-il être en mesure d'en assurer la diffusion si l'on souhaite qu'ils arrivent intacts aux oreilles des concerné.e.s. Raison pour laquelle je ne cesse de marteler que nous devons nous réapproprier la narration].<sup>25</sup>

In this context, a positive re-appropriation of the symbolic dimension of what it means to be Black plays an important role. As the blogger states, being Black holds a certain ambivalence, for it embraces a history of oppression while implying the need to transcend this oppression by offering resistance and to conceptualize alternative, self-

<sup>23</sup> "Mise aux points sur les I et aux barres sur les T", 26 March 2015, [badassafrofem.wordpress.com/category/a-propos-de-ce-blog/](https://badassafrofem.wordpress.com/category/a-propos-de-ce-blog/) [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>24</sup> "Mise aux points sur les I et aux barres sur les T", 26 March 2015, [badassafrofem.wordpress.com/category/a-propos-de-ce-blog/](https://badassafrofem.wordpress.com/category/a-propos-de-ce-blog/) [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>25</sup> "Mise aux points sur les I et aux barres sur les T", 26 March 2015, [badassafrofem.wordpress.com/category/a-propos-de-ce-blog/](https://badassafrofem.wordpress.com/category/a-propos-de-ce-blog/) [22 Jan 2021].

empowering visions of Blackness that are, for instance, inspired by transnational Black movements:

Black because I carry the stigmata of the history of enslavement and colonialism on my skin. If someone tells me [...] about my gazelle body, touches my hair [...], presumes that I am a sex animal and of limited intelligence. I don't see there anything harmless. I see there the slave market, [...] the violations on the plantations, scientific racism and its misty theory according to which Black people were the missing link between white men and the ape. Well, BLACK, with all the specific experiences of inherited discrimination it includes [...]. BLACK with all its strategies of auto-defense put in place by Black women and men throughout centuries: maroonage, panafricanism, afrofeminism and all the politics of resilience of which we are the authors.

[Noire parce que je porte les stigmates de l'histoire esclavagiste et coloniale sur ma peau. Lorsque l'on me parle [...] de mon corps de gazelle, qu'on me touche les cheveux [...], qu'on présuppose que je suis une bête de sexe et d'une intelligence limitée. Je n'y vois rien d'anodin. J'y vois le marché aux esclaves, [...] les viols dans les plantations, le racisme scientifique et sa fumeuse théorie selon laquelle les Noir.e.s étaient le chaînon manquant entre l'homme blanc et le singe. Donc NOIRE, avec tout ce que ça comporte d'expériences spécifiques de discriminations héritées [...]. NOIRE avec tout ce que ça comporte de stratégies d'auto-défense mises en place par les femmes et les hommes Noir.e.s au fil des siècles: marronage, panafricanisme, afro-féminisme et toutes les politiques de résilience dont nous sommes les auteur.e.s.].<sup>26</sup>

This quote evidently links Gay's individual experiences as an Afrodescendant woman in France to a shared transnational history characterized by colonial and epistemological violence and its persistence to the present day or, as she declares, "I inscribe myself into the History of the Afro diaspora" [je m'inscris dans l'Histoire de la diaspora Afro].<sup>27</sup>

Simultaneously, the quote demonstrates the physicality of these experiences. Thus, Gay writes that she is Black because she bears the stigmata of a history of enslavement and colonialism on her skin, and she

<sup>26</sup> "Mise aux points sur les I et aux barres sur les T", 26 March 2015, [badassafrofem.wordpress.com/category/a-propos-de-ce-blog/](https://badassafrofem.wordpress.com/category/a-propos-de-ce-blog/) [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>27</sup> "Mise aux points sur les I et aux barres sur les T", 26 March 2015, [badassafrofem.wordpress.com/category/a-propos-de-ce-blog/](https://badassafrofem.wordpress.com/category/a-propos-de-ce-blog/) [22 Jan 2021].



also reveals that her body is the site at which a racist discourse hits. Through her body, she is assaulted as a Black woman. It is her body where she suffers racist adscriptions by Others, adscriptions that deny her very own humanity by tagging her “a gazelle”, the “missing link between white men and apes”. Such a view of her body, soaked by racist clichés, turns her body into an “assaultable” body, one that could be raped on the plantations, one that can be touched without permission, as we can read in the quote above. As the examples illustrate, Gay, as an Afrofeminist, refers not only to the Black body in general but to the Black *female* body in particular, for it suffers the intersections of different discriminatory practices: her body is not only “racialized” but simultaneously “sexualized”.

However, Amandine Gay refuses such a misappropriation of her bodily self and re-defines the body as a space of resistance that turns racialized and gendered body features into tools of emancipation. Mentioning in her blog that she is “body-positive”, she reminds her readers of the necessity to embrace their bodies as valuable and beautiful, as something that does not need to be hidden or disguised but displayed self-confidently. Accordingly, Amandine Gay not only mentions that she has been a nude model and a burlesque dancer herself, as a way to self-determinedly dispose of her body, but also adds pictures to this statement that celebrate Black bodies as strong, beautiful and diverse, pictures that challenge the afore-mentioned perception of the Black female body as a site of oppression for they show the body not as an object dominated by others but as an expression of the Self’s agency.<sup>28</sup>

Another interesting example of a self-confident visibilization of the Black female body can be found in a blog post where Gay discusses the phenomenon of the “niafous”, a term used to label Black girls who are seen as too loud and vulgar, who are said to wear too much make up and to have a bad taste in clothes, etc. As Amandine Gay states, this phenomenon has entered a mainstream debate in France in particular due to French director Céline Sciamma’s film *Bande de filles* [Girlhood], released in 2014, which deals with Black female youth gangs in

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<sup>28</sup> Cf., e.g., the pictures of the post “Mise aux points sur les I et aux barres sur les T”, 26 March 2015, [badassafrofem.wordpress.com/category/a-propos-de-ce-blog/](https://badassafrofem.wordpress.com/category/a-propos-de-ce-blog/) [22 Jan 2021].

France. Through this example, Gay raises the problem of shame that many members of the Afrofrench community feel towards girls such as the “niafous”, who seem to confirm stereotypes (and in particular physical stereotypes) of what mainstream French society considers as “typically black”. Consequently, Gay harshly criticizes the Afrofrench community’s ignorance of its own heterogeneity and asks its members to re-discover the “niafous” as a self-confident way “to be ‘unapologetically Black’, that is ‘Black without complexes’” [d’être ‘unapologetically Black’, à savoir ‘Noires et sans complexes’],<sup>29</sup> that is, as a way for them to occupy the public space with their bodies and to become visible as who they are without making concessions to others.<sup>30</sup>

Our second example from the French context is Afrofeminist blogger Kiyémis and her blog *Les Bavardages de Kiyémis*, which is inspired by her own experiences as a young woman of African descent in France and includes reflections and comments on recent events, news or sociopolitical debates – some of the experiences that she also addresses in her poem collection *À nos humanités révoltées* [*To Our Humanities In Revolt*], published in 2018.

In “Scander tant qu’il le faudra l’évidence” [Chant as much as evidence requires], a revealing blog post from 2016, Kiyémis describes Black women’s invisibilization and dehumanization through the Others’ gaze. Again, it is the body that becomes a target of racism and sexism:

Your body, object of disgust or of excessive fantasy, can be touched, grabbed, studied, without your consent. It is attacked, assaulted. It is colonized, claimed by others than yourself. It isn’t yours anymore. [Ton corps, objet soit de dégoût [sic], soit de fantasme démesuré, peut être touché, agrippé, étudié, sans ton autorisation. Il est agressé, violenté. Il est colonisé, revendiqué par d’autres que toi. Il ne t’appartient plus.]<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> “Niafou Is The New Punk”, 8 March 2015, badassafrofem.wordpress.com/2015/03/08/niafou-is-the-new-punk/ [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>30</sup> Cf. in this context also “Un corps c’est tout un monde”, 8 Febr. 2018, badassafrofem.wordpress.com/category/societe/ [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>31</sup> “Scander tant qu’il le faudra l’évidence”, 16 Dec. 2016, lesbavardagesdekiyemis.wordpress.com/2016/12/16/rappeler-sans-cesser-levidence/ [22 Jan 2021].

She narrates a similar experience in another post that has the meaningful title “Regards” [Looking]:

Do you see me?  
 I know that you see my skin.  
 Do you see me?  
 I know that you see my hair.  
 Do you see me?  
 I know that you see my breasts and my buttocks.  
 [...]
   
 [Est ce que tu me vois?  
 Je sais que tu vois ma peau.  
 Est-ce que tu me vois?  
 Je sais que tu vois mes cheveux.  
 Est ce que tu me vois?  
 Je sais que tu vois mes seins et mes fesses.]<sup>32</sup>

There, the poetic speaker is, once again, reduced to her body, a body interpreted by the Others’ gaze in this very poem. Kiyémis also addresses this topic in her poem “Femme noire, territoire” [Black women, territory; cf. Kiyémis 2018: 33]. She is not seen as a human being, as an “I”. Instead, Others just see particular physical features that echo a colonial discourse characterized by racist stereotypes of Blackness, that is skin color, hair texture and sexuality. This hypocrisy of the alleged acceptance of the Black body in Western societies is likewise denounced by the Afrofeminist collective MWASI, who states how that body is only accepted if its characteristic features – and the following quote names the same features as Kiyémis – are repressed:

This is an imposed figure [this politic of respectability; our addition] which is only feasible if our *skin* isn’t too dark, if our *hair* is wisely tamed, our *voluptuousness* dissimulated, our natural beauty sufficiently altered to suit what others expect of us.  
 [C’est une figure imposée [cette politique de la respectabilité] qui n’est réalisable que si notre *peau* n’est pas trop foncée, notre *chevelure* sage-

<sup>32</sup> “Regards”, 14 March 2015, [lesbavardagesdekiyemis.wordpress.com/2015/03/14/gaze/](https://lesbavardagesdekiyemis.wordpress.com/2015/03/14/gaze/) [22 Jan 2021].

ment domptée, notre *volupté* dissimulée, notre beauté naturelle assez altérée pour convenir à ce qu'on attend de nous.] (MWASI 2018: 103; our emphasis)

In both of her posts above, Kiyémis denounces such a gaze by expressing her desire to not be seen as the “racialized Other” but as an individual human being in its dignity and beauty with, as she says elsewhere in “Regards”: “My magnificent black skin. My twinkling black skin [...]. My sparkling black skin [...].” [Ma peau noire magnifique [...]. Ma peau noire scintillante [...]. Ma peau noire étincelante].<sup>33</sup> In the 2016 post, Kiyémis underlines this argument by using pictures showing self-confident, strong and beautiful women and not hiding their heterogeneity. In particular, the animated picture of women in a pool is interesting as the woman in the front looks the readers right in the eye, confronting their biased gaze, and the other woman in the back virtually seems to splash the readers to make them wake up and see the perfidiousness of racist stereotypes.

That Kiyémis considers the body as an ambivalent site of both stereotyping and self-empowerment is made clear in other posts as well, for instance, when she denounces the bigotry of Western feminism, for it misinterprets the femininity and sexiness of Black women as vulgar. Kiyémis argues that Western feminism does not see the subversiveness of bodily performances as a means of self-determination and emancipation, which she illustrates by mentioning artists such as Beyoncé or Nicki Minaj, often attacked by feminists for being too sexy, or “twerking”, a dance style often considered as sexually provocative: “And this makes me laugh because one will say this, one will slam Amber Rose and Beyoncé who twerks but I’ve never seen any attempt to tear to pieces Dita von Teese because she did striptease” [Et puis ça me fait rire, parce qu’on va dire ça, on va clasher Amber Rose et Beyoncé qui twerke mais je n’ai jamais vu d’essai descendant Dita Von Teese parce qu’elle faisait de l’effeuillage].<sup>34</sup> Also in “Les Négresses sales” [Dirty

<sup>33</sup> “Regards”, 14 March 2015, [lesbavardagesdekiyemis.wordpress.com/2015/03/14/gaze/](https://lesbavardagesdekiyemis.wordpress.com/2015/03/14/gaze/) [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>34</sup> “La politique de respectabilité VS le twerk: faites vos jeux”, 23 Febr. 2015, [lesbavardagesdekiyemis.wordpress.com/2015/02/23/la-politique-de-respectabilite-vs-le-twerk-faites-vos-jeux/](https://lesbavardagesdekiyemis.wordpress.com/2015/02/23/la-politique-de-respectabilite-vs-le-twerk-faites-vos-jeux/) [22 Jan 2021].

Black Women], a poem published in her book *À nos humanités révoltées*, she plays with the discriminatory stereotypes imposed on Afrodescendant women by re-interpretating them as moments of resistance:

[...] Look at us.  
 Dirty Negresses.  
 Niafous.  
 Bitches.  
 Darkies.  
 Look at us.  
 Protest, powerful.  
 Realize the unthinkable.  
 Set on fire.

Look at us.  
 Ugly.  
 Aggressive.  
 Hysterical.  
 Menacing.  
 Terrifying,  
 Magnificent. [...]

[Regarde-nous.  
 Les négresses sales.  
 Les Niafous.  
 Les Putes.  
 Les Noirtes.

Regarde-nous.  
 Protester, puissantes.  
 Réaliser l'impensable.  
 Foutre le feu.

Regarde-nous.  
 Laides.  
 Agressives.  
 Hystériques.  
 Menaçantes.  
 Terrifiantes,  
 Magnifiques.] (Kiyémis 2018: 34-35)

Another insightful aspect concerning *Les Bavardages de Kiyémis* arises from the blog's intersectional perspective not being limited to racism and sexism but, likewise also tackling weight as another discriminatory regime based on standardized beauty ideals that Black women are confronted with and that turn the body into a political space. To that effect, Kiyémis states:

As a curvy black woman [...], beauty is something political. [...] I regain this right to love myself [...]. I regain it by looking at women that look like me. Proud, beautiful women who radiate sensuality, beauty. [Mais en tant que [...] femme ronde noire [...], la beauté c'est encore quelque chose de politique. [...] Je reconquiers ce droit à m'aimer [...]. Je le reconquiers en regardant des femmes qui me ressemblent. Des femmes fières, belles, qui respirent la sensualité, la beauté.]<sup>35</sup>

This last sentence puts in a nutshell what can briefly be said about the impact of whole different kinds of blogs, blogs that explicitly focus on beauty, fashion and lifestyle. There are numerous examples in all three countries: *Black Beauty Bag*, *Gaëlle Prudencio*, *Sofia Black*, *Miss Black Glamour* or *Natural Black & Beautiful*.<sup>36</sup> Although they do not explicitly foster the theoretical discussion on Blackness, they nevertheless stage women of African descent as beautiful since they show the female body in its diversity with respect to hair, skin color, weight and so on, and, thus, offer these images that Kiyémis mentions in the quote above: images of other women that look like her. Moreover, we can also find categories such as “Afro-Revolutionaries” [Afro Revolutionarias/os] at *Sofia Black*, for instance, where Afrospanish women and men with natural hair are interviewed and the political dimension of natural hair is alluded to. To what extent the diversity of beauty ideals and natural hair play an essential role in the studied blogs will become evident if we now have a look at some more examples from the Spanish and Italian context.

<sup>35</sup> “Allez viens, on se libère”, 22 Dec. 2014, [lesbavardagesdekiyemis.wordpress.com/2014/12/22/allez-viens-on-se-libere-2/](https://lesbavardagesdekiyemis.wordpress.com/2014/12/22/allez-viens-on-se-libere-2/) [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>36</sup> Cf. [www.blackbeautybag.com/](http://www.blackbeautybag.com/), [gaelleprudencio.com/](http://gaelleprudencio.com/), [www.sofiablack.com/blog/](http://www.sofiablack.com/blog/), [missblackglamour.com/](http://missblackglamour.com/), [naturalblackandbeautiful.blogspot.com/](http://naturalblackandbeautiful.blogspot.com/) [all 22 Jan 2021].

## ***Afroféminas* and Desirée Bela-Lobedde's Online Activism (Spain): Challenging Eurocentric Beauty Standards and Celebrating Black Bodies**

*Afroféminas* [*Afrofemales*] is a Spanish blog founded in 2013 and written by many different bloggers of African descent in Spain and elsewhere. According to Antoinette Torres Soler, it is mostly around 10 bloggers that collaborate with *Afroféminas* (cf. Civieta 2017). If one has a closer look on the authors of the posts, one sees that *Afroféminas* really bring together Afrodescendant women from around the globe, for there are bloggers from numerous Spanish-speaking countries in the Americas as well as translated posts that put the issues being dealt with by Afrospanish women in a global context (cf. also Borst/Gallo González 2019: 299-304). *Afroféminas*'s blog posts, often based on the bloggers' personal experiences and frequently supplemented by theoretical reflections, deal with issues such as every day events, culture, fashion, education, Spanish society and history from the perspective of women of African descent.

One of the central issues discussed in the posts is the experience of everyday racism in Spain such as the devaluation of African and Afrodescendant women's hair texture or their stereotyping in advertising, for instance. In many posts, there is a specific focus on microracisms, that is, circumstantial gestures in everyday life that are nevertheless offending and violating as they rely on discriminatory stereotypes, for instance when a person says, as one blogger writes, that "*Although you are black, you are attractive as you have smooth features*" [*Aunque seas negra, eres guapa porque tienes rasgos suaves*].<sup>37</sup>

In two of her videos from 2013 entitled "Being a Black Woman in Spain" [*Ser mujer negra en España*], online content creator Desirée Bela-Lobedde confirms that this form of racism plays a major role in Spanish society, which in general identifies itself as non-racist, by reporting similar experiences such as being continuously confronted with

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<sup>37</sup> "MicroRacismos", 24 March 2015, afrofeminas.com/2015/03/24/microracismos/ [22 Jan 2021]. Felipe Espinoza Garrido et al. describe such a temporarily exclusion of people of African descent by the notion of "contingent belonging", that is "a conditional belonging that is strategically granted and revoked, meted out by 'white Europe' when useful to its own interests" (2019: 2).

the prejudices that Black people cannot be Spaniards and are believed to not work in a decent job, etc.<sup>38</sup> Correspondingly, many blog posts on *Afrofeminas* deal with the anger of bloggers who are turned down or (temporarily) excluded by Spanish society, characterized by “normative whiteness” (Espinoza Garrido et al. 2020: 2) but nevertheless their home – an experience that gives rise to ambivalent subjectivities in particular in the “postmigratory context” for, as Espinoza Garrido, Koegler, Nyangulu and Stein argue, “white European ideology does not cope with the status of someone ‘racially different’ yet not ‘only just arrived’” (2020: 3).<sup>39</sup>

When reading *Afrofeminas*, the omnipresence of the Black female body is conspicuous, for it is both written about in the blog posts and represented in the pictures that illustrate the written texts. Numerous posts tackle the “racialization” of the Black female body that often goes hand in hand with racist stereotypes such as the passionate and savage Black woman or the alleged messiness and impurity of women of African descent’s natural hair, harshly criticizing the discriminatory practice of *Othering* in Spain.<sup>40</sup> Hence, this offensive “interpretation” of the Black female body by others is portrayed as a hostile appropriation of this body, which adds to other acts of aggression, as for example, virtually physical assaults as described in some posts that deal for instance with the invasive touching of hair without asking. Likewise, the significant role of skin color when it comes to others’ perceptions of women of African descent is emphasized in many posts: some describe the experience that Black skin is often seen by others as an essential marker for exclusion in Spanish society and as a purportedly unambiguous hint that someone must “be from somewhere else” or others deplore the phenomenon of “colorism” [colorismo], which gives rise to a further hierarchization of African and Afrodescendant women, in particular in a

<sup>38</sup> Cf. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=FevqnylXMbo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FevqnylXMbo) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=PnT6aK0ce8I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PnT6aK0ce8I) [both 22 Jan 2021].

<sup>39</sup> For an overview of topics tackled on *Afrofeminas* cf. Borst/Gallo González 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Cf., e.g., “3 estereotipos de la mujer negra que deben dejar de existir”, 29 May 2017, [afrofeminas.com/2017/05/29/3-estereotipos-de-la-mujer-negra-que-deben-dejar-de-existir/](https://afrofeminas.com/2017/05/29/3-estereotipos-de-la-mujer-negra-que-deben-dejar-de-existir/); “Reconociendo estereotipos racistas: Jezebel, la negra isaciable”, 20 June 2017, [afrofeminas.com/2017/06/20/reconociendo-estereotipos-racistas-jezebel-la-negra-in-saciable/](https://afrofeminas.com/2017/06/20/reconociendo-estereotipos-racistas-jezebel-la-negra-in-saciable/); “Mujeres negras y el despojo de sus cuerpos”, 30 June 2016, [afrofeminas.com/2016/06/30/mujeres-negras-y-el-despojo-de-sus-cuerpos/](https://afrofeminas.com/2016/06/30/mujeres-negras-y-el-despojo-de-sus-cuerpos/) [all 22 Jan 2021].



context of *mestizaje* (being of mixed race) that makes people perceive allegedly privileged forms of lighter skin color.<sup>41</sup>

At a second glance, it catches one's eye that a particular type of photograph accompanies many posts that discuss the above-mentioned experiences. Frequently, these photos aesthetically stage the beauty of Black skin and natural hair, turning them into symbols of empowerment. They, thus, visualize the bloggers' claims for emancipation and self-determination, as the following quote clarifies: "My skin [...] is memory, it is history, it is force, it is love and beauty" [Mi piel [...] es memoria, es historia, es identidad, es fuerza, es amor y belleza].<sup>42</sup> If one browses the blog posts on *Afrofeminas*, one can easily see that, prevalently, these pictures visually contradict the denounced discriminatory practices by unveiling a heterogeneity of beauty that challenges a Eurocentric and racist idea of what is understood as beautiful.

Similarly, Desirée Bela-Lobedde, together with Deborah Ekoka from *United Minds*, launched the campaign #yosoymiropiopianondebelleza [#Immyownbeautyideal] in 2017. On her YouTube channel, Bela-Lobedde called on Afrodescendant women to make their beauty visible in cyberspace, asking them to upload selfies on Instagram and Twitter using the hashtag "I am my own beauty ideal" and to retweet photos uploaded by others. These photos would all appear in a video exalting ("exaltar") the beauty of African and Afrodescendant women with the objective of normalizing it and of creating role models for others (cf. also Galaup 2017).<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Cf., e.g., "Colorismo: conceptos del feminismo negro", 22 Aug. 2016, afrofeminas.com/2016/08/22/colorismo-conceptos-del-feminismo-negro/, "Colorismo en la comunidad afro: el privilegio de la piel clara", 24 June 2017, afrofeminas.com/2017/06/24/colorismo-en-la-comunidad-afro-el-privilegio-de-la-piel-clara/, "No soy sólo negra", 15 Apr. 2017, afrofeminas.com/2017/04/15/no-soy-solo-negra/, "Mujer migrante y afroespañola: ¿Te sientes Española?", 15 Febr. 2019, afrofeminas.com/2019/02/15/mujer-migrante-y-afroespanola-te-sientes-espanola/, "¿Lo que no se nombra, no existe? Llamemos lo negro por su nombre: negro", 26 Jan 2019, afrofeminas.com/2019/01/26/lo-que-no-se-nombra-no-existe-llamemos-lo-negro-por-su-nombre-negro/ [all 22 Jan 2021].

<sup>42</sup> "Por qué te ofende mi piel?", 25 June 2015, afrofeminas.com/2015/06/25/por-que-te-ofende-mi-piel/ [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>43</sup> Cf. "Yo soy mi propio canon de belleza. Campaña en redes sociales", 24 Apr. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHJWCLgWsM; "Campaña Yo soy mi propio canon

Bela-Lobedde, author of the autobiographical text *Being a Black Woman in Spain* [*Ser mujer negra en España*] (2018) whose title echoes her two *YouTube* videos mentioned above and that deals with her experiences of being a Spanish woman of African descent, started her blog – formerly known as *Diary of the Black Flower* [*Diario de la negra flor*] and renamed as *Desirée Bela* in 2018 – with the initial aim of advocating for a “normalization” of natural hair in Spanish society. Highlighting the entanglements of aesthetics and identity, she dedicates herself to what she calls “activismo estético” [aesthetic activism], which aims not only at challenging stereotypes but also at promoting a decolonization of “racialized” persons’ bodies and creating role models to

empower black women [...] and help them to work on their identity respecting the naturalness of their afro features and their skin color, overcoming the aesthetic slavery and apartheid that Eurocentric beauty ideals impose on people.

[empoderar a las mujeres negras [...] y a ayudarlas a trabajar su identidad desde el respecto a la naturaleza de sus rasgos afro y al color de su piel, superando a la esclavitud y el apartheid estético que imponen los cánones de belleza eurocéntricos.] (Bela-Lobedde 2018b: 83)<sup>44</sup>

In this context, she ties in with MWASI’s critique that Eurocentric conceptions of beauty “deny what we are, [...] force us to deny ourselves” [nient ce que nous sommes, [...] nous obligent à nous renier nous-mêmes; MWASI 2018: 101], which is why a non-hegemonic aesthetics is urgently needed (cf. also *ibid.*: 110-111).

The notably aesthetic pictures that can be found on social networks such as Twitter under the hashtag #yosoymipropiocanondebelleza consciously expose those bodily features mentioned by Bela-Lobedde, features that tended and still tend to be devalued by beauty ideals influenced by a colonial legacy and a Eurocentric perspective of beauty. The self-representations posted under the campaign’s hashtag do not only reveal the beauty of bodily features depreciated as inferior by such a discriminatory perspective but, by exposing – or one might even say “celebrating” – those features visually, transform them into acts of

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de belleza”, 2 May 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjzjducGAak](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjzjducGAak) [both 22 Jan 2021].

<sup>44</sup> Cf. also “Quién soy”, [www.desireebela.com/quien-soy/](http://www.desireebela.com/quien-soy/) [22 Jan 2021].

resistance, for these photos allow women of African descent to re-appropriate their own bodies by reclaiming their genuine beauty and acknowledging that “I’m beautiful as who I am!” [¡soy bella como yo!].<sup>45</sup>

Comparable to what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls “strategic essentialism”, these visual self-representations promote a common aesthetic, in some way homogenized, that allows women of African descent to gain visibility as a collective and to challenge the bias of Western beauty ideals (cf. Spivak 1988: 204-205; Spivak 1984/85: 184; Castro Varela/Dhawan 2015: 191). The same strategy can be observed in the case of the photos on *Afrofeminas*. There, one blogger explicitly confirms that the Black female body turns into a “political weapon” [arma política]: “If it curls like this, if it expands like this, it is to make sure that we are seen, let’s say it is like a spare room. A method to gain space with the body, since often it is not possible with the voice” [Si se riza así, si se expande así, es para asegurarse de que somos vistos, digamos que es como un espacio de reserva. Un método de ganar espacio con el cuerpo, ya que muchas veces no puede ser con la voz].<sup>46</sup>

Although *Afrofeminas* and the campaign initiated by Desirée Bela-Lobedde both explicitly emphasize the heterogeneity of African and Afrodescendant women’s beauty by revealing a vast picture of different and unique women, the staging of “typical” features (considered characteristic of people of African descent) in the pictures reflects an essentialist construction of Afrodescendance and Blackness that transforms the negative experience of “being different” into a positive moment of empowerment. This transformation becomes evident in blog posts’ titles such as “Mi hair, my identity” [Mi pelo, mi identidad] or “My hair, my crown” [Mi cabello, mi corona], which highlight the entanglements of aesthetic activism, questions of identity and affirmation of one’s own African descent.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, the aesthetization of the Black female

<sup>45</sup> “No soy bella como tú... ¡Soy bella como yo!”, 4 Dec. 2014, afrofeminas.com/2014/12/04/soy-bella-como-yo/ [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>46</sup> “El pelo, la diversidad y por qué el Orgullo debe ser interseccional: testimonio y reflexión”, 1 July 2017, afrofeminas.com/2017/07/01/el-pelo-la-diversidad-y-por-que-el-orgullo-debe-ser-interseccional-testimonio-y-relexion/ [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>47</sup> “Mi pelo, mi identidad”, 11 Dec. 2016, afrofeminas.com/2016/12/11/mi-pelo-mi-identidad/; “Mi cabello, mi corona”, 10 Nov. 2016, afrofeminas.com/2016/11/10/mi-cabello-mi-corona/ [both 22 Jan 2021].

body turns into acts of resistance that counteract the marginalization of African and Afrodescendant women in Spain.

Likewise, as another blogger argues, the liberation of imposed beauty ideals, by cutting straightened hair and letting it grow naturally, represents an act of emancipation and bears the potential to symbolize the “acceptance of being Afrodescendant” [aceptación del ser afrodescendiente].<sup>48</sup> Or, as we can read elsewhere: “For us, though, hair continues being a slow process of acceptance, of self-respect, of recognition and self-esteem” [Para nosotras, sin embargo, el cabello continúa siendo un lento proceso de aceptación, de amor propio, de reconocimiento y autoestima].<sup>49</sup> At the same time, it is a subversive act against colonial practices of control and oppression of women of African descent that aimed at “erasing our identities” [borrar nuestras identidades].<sup>50</sup>

Correspondingly, the pictures in *Afrofeminas* endorse the associated texts in which the bloggers speak up to denounce the stereotyping of women of African descent. As self-representations, they become a means to “[c]laim the right to be black in a world that prefers to invisibilize us” [reivindicar el derecho a ser negro en un mundo que prefiere invisibilizarnos].<sup>51</sup> To create spaces for their beauty and complexity,

<sup>48</sup> “Mi pelo, mi identidad”, 11 Dec. 2016, afrofeminas.com/2016/12/11/mi-pelo-mi-identidad/ [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>49</sup> “Mi cabello, mi corona”, 10 Nov. 2016, afrofeminas.com/2016/11/10/mi-cabello-mi-corona/ [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>50</sup> “El cabello es político, el cabello tiene género y tiene raza”, 14 Sept. 2017, afrofeminas.com/2016/07/26/el-cabello-es-politico-el-cabello-tiene-genero-y-tiene-raza/ [22 Jan 2021]. The blog *EFAE* even opens up a historical perspective in this context, for a translation of a blog post from *Le Blog du Griot* points to a tradition of Black women’s resistance with respect to their hair: it tells the story of the law in Louisiana in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that forced Black women and women of color to wear a sort of a turban or headscarf (*tignon*) to disguise their hair. First thought to draw of the attention to the eye-catching hairdos common among Black women at that time and, thus, make them less visible, Black women subversively defied the law’s objective by wearing very noticeable headgears that “las hacia mas bellas y seductoras” [made them more beautiful and seductive] (“Cuando las mujeres negras tenían que cubrirse los cabellos para evitar la envidia de las mujeres blancas”, 30 March 2017, efaeblog.wordpress.com/2017/03/30/cuando-las-mujeres-negras-tenian-que-cubrirse-los-cabellos-para-evitar-la-envidia-de-las-mujeres-blancas/ [22 Jan 2021]).

<sup>51</sup> “No soy morena, soy negra!!!”, 24 Sept. 2017, afrofeminas.com/2017/09/25/no-soy-morena-soy-negra/ [22 Jan 2021].

“to decolonize us, not only aesthetically but also mentally and intellectually” [decolonizando[nos], no solo estéticamente, si no también mental y intelectualmente]<sup>52</sup> and, consequently, to enable their dignity as equal human beings. Correspondingly, one blogger writes:

To acknowledge the diverse beauty of diverse women is a small step towards acknowledging other values of other cultures and destroying the myth of occidental superiority. We are all worthy and we all deserve recognition.

[Reconocer la belleza diversa de las mujeres diversas es un pequeño paso rumbo a reconocer los demás valores de las demás culturas y deconstruir el mito de la superioridad occidental. Todas somos dignas y merecemos ser reconocidas.]<sup>53</sup>

Likewise, *Afrofeminas*'s coordinating team explicitly explains this exposure of the Black female body as beautiful as a means of gaining self-esteem, of becoming visible and of objecting to established visualizations of beauty: “It isn't frivolous; it is struggle. As we are beautiful” [No es frívolo, es lucha. Porque nosotras somos bonitas].<sup>54</sup>

Yet, similarly to Amandine Gay in *Badassafrofem*, the bloggers of *Afrofeminas* do not disguise the ambiguity of what it means “to be Black”. The poetic text “Why does my skin offend you?” [¿Por qué te ofende mi piel?] alludes to this ambiguity by staging Black skin as a site of both historical violence and resistance *and* beauty:

Don't stop, watch her scars. They have been here for years, [...] discrimination and barbarism are inscribed in my skin, but it keeps being beautiful, admire it. [...] But my skin is strong, it doesn't matter how much you hurt it, [...] it is reborn and dazzles. It knows how to heal itself and it is a specialist for fights. It knows how to defend itself; it is a lioness defending its puppies [...]. Don't underestimate it.

<sup>52</sup> “Mi estética: una resistencia social”, 20 Aug. 2017, [afrofeminas.com/2017/08/20/mi-estetica-una-resistencia-social/](https://afrofeminas.com/2017/08/20/mi-estetica-una-resistencia-social/) [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>53</sup> “6 ejemplos de micro racismos contra las mujeres Negras”, 22 May 2017, [afrofeminas.com/2017/05/22/6-ejemplos-de-micro-racismos-contra-las-mujeres-negras/](https://afrofeminas.com/2017/05/22/6-ejemplos-de-micro-racismos-contra-las-mujeres-negras/). For the diversity of beauty cf. also [afrofeminas.com/2015/07/06/la-dichosa-obsesion-de-la-belleza/](https://afrofeminas.com/2015/07/06/la-dichosa-obsesion-de-la-belleza/) [both 22 Jan 2021].

<sup>54</sup> “Somos bellas y por eso lo mostramos”, 25 Nov. 2014, [afrofeminas.com/2014/11/25/somos-bellas/](https://afrofeminas.com/2014/11/25/somos-bellas/) [22 Jan 2021]. Cf. in this context also Hill Collins 2000: 169.

[No te detengas, observa sus cicatrices. Han estado ahí por años, [...] la discriminación y la barbarie están marcadas en mi piel, pero sigue siendo bella, admírala. [...] Pero mi piel es fuerte, no importa cuánto la dañes, [...] renace y deslumbra. Sabe sanarse sola y es especialista en luchas. Sabe defenderse, es una leona protegiendo a sus cachorros [...]. No la subestimes.]<sup>55</sup>

The emphasis on and affirmation of African and Afrodescendant women's beauty on *Afrofeminas*, however, refrain from establishing new exclusionary perceptions of beauty. Instead of just showing standardized esthetical pictures, the blog also includes a post on African American activist and breast cancer survivor Ericka Hart, who became famous for attending the Afropunk Festival in 2016 topless after having had a double mastectomy. With this, Hart wanted to raise awareness for breast cancer and "reclaim my sexuality".<sup>56</sup> Her scarred body, thus, represents an act of resistance against a racist and patriarchal society that marginalizes her for being Black, a woman *and* ill, and, at the same time, it symbolizes the heterogeneity of beauty at large. Another insightful example in this context is a blog post on US-Haitian blogger Mama Cax who, due to cancer, had to have her leg amputated.<sup>57</sup>

Additionally, *Afrofeminas* also opens up a space where the Black female body, at first an object interpreted by others, turns into a subject with a voice, capable of telling her own story. It is an emancipatory act, as vividly described by Grada Kilomba: "as I write, I *become* [...] the author and the authority on my own history. [...] I become the absolute opposition of what the colonial project has predetermined" (Kilomba 2008: 12; her emphasis). Why speaking out is so important, is illustrated in posts that denounce the limited perspective of Western feminism since it does not speak for Afrodescendant women who suffer

<sup>55</sup> "¿Por qué te ofende mi piel?", 25 June 2015, [afrofeminas.com/2015/06/25/por-que-te-ofende-mi-piel/](https://afrofeminas.com/2015/06/25/por-que-te-ofende-mi-piel/) [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>56</sup> "Op-Ed: Why I Decided To Attend Afropunk Fest Topless, Showing My Mastectomy Scars", 1 Sept. 2016, [afropunk.com/2016/09/op-ed-why-i-decided-to-attend-afropunk-fest-topless-showing-my-mastectomy-scars/](https://afropunk.com/2016/09/op-ed-why-i-decided-to-attend-afropunk-fest-topless-showing-my-mastectomy-scars/) [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>57</sup> Cf. "Ericka Hart, la imagen afro de la superación del cancer de mama", 30 March 2017, [afrofeminas.com/2017/03/30/ericka-hart-la-imagen-afro-de-la-superacion-del-cancer-de-mama/](https://afrofeminas.com/2017/03/30/ericka-hart-la-imagen-afro-de-la-superacion-del-cancer-de-mama/); "La historia de superación de Mama Cax", 22 Apr. 2018, [afrofeminas.com/2018/04/22/la-historia-de-superacion-de-mama-cax/](https://afrofeminas.com/2018/04/22/la-historia-de-superacion-de-mama-cax/) [both 22 Jan 2021].

from the intersections of discriminatory practices for being not only Black or women but Black women. The bloggers, thus, put into practice a decolonization of thinking, as described in many posts, and participate in the elaborating and divulging of African and Afrodescendant women's knowledges (cf. also Borst and Gallo González 2019). They destabilize and unhinge long-standing, discriminatory master narratives and categories of thinking by providing a space to "raise OUR voices" [alzar NUESTRAS voces].<sup>58</sup>

This raising of voices yields to the emergence of alternative and different narratives of self-affirmation that enable the blog's readers to think out of the box, to embrace difference. Unsilencing hitherto marginalized perspectives, blogs such as *Afrofeminas* give rise to the "producción intelectual" [intellectual production]<sup>59</sup> essential to empower women of African descent:

A production that reflects on our problems, our experiences and our body as black women. Networks of women searching to empower themselves and to propose solutions to their questions, the search for a positive esthetics and a resignification of our bodies, as our esthetics is also politics, a decolonized politics that first and foremost needs decolonized bodies. [Una producción que reflexione sobre nuestros problemas, nuestras experiencias y nuestro cuerpo como mujeres negras. Redes de mujeres buscando empoderarse y proponer soluciones a sus cuestiones, la búsqueda por una estética positiva y la resignificación de nuestros cuerpos, ya que nuestra estética igualmente es política, una política descolonizada, que antes de todo necesita de cuerpos descolonizados.]<sup>60</sup>

<sup>58</sup> "¿Qué propones para tener más visibilidad como mujer afrodescendiente?" 16 Sept. 2017, afrofeminas.com/2016/08/21/que-propones-para-tener-mas-visibilidad-como-mujer-afrodescendiente/ [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>59</sup> "Yo soy porque nosotras somos", 12 March 2015, afrofeminas.com/2015/03/12/yo-soy-porque-nosotras-somos/ [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>60</sup> "Yo soy porque nosotras somos", 12 March 2015, afrofeminas.com/2015/03/12/yo-soy-porque-nosotras-somos/ [22 Jan 2021].

## ***Nappytalia* (Italy): “Natural” Hairstyles as Self-Affirmation and Markers of Diversity**

Many of the issues tackled in *Afroféminas* can also be found in the Italian blog *Nappytalia*, a blog founded in 2014 by Evelyne Sarah Afaawua, whose parents are from Ghana but who has been living in Italy most of her life. Although her blog is dedicated to “Afro-Italian Nappy Girls, the Natural Hair Movement made in Italy” and primarily addresses women, it is less critical with respect to Western feminism than the other examples studied so far but tends to challenge Western beauty ideals in general, including both women’s and men’s perspectives. Apart from *Nappytalia*, other blogs and websites, generally operated by individual women, promote alternative beauty ideals and focus on hairstyle like, for instance, *AFROselvaggio* (on Pinterest) or *Natural Black & Beautiful*. The latter focuses also on “natural hair”, combining practical tips with autobiographical posts that describe, for example, the journey towards becoming “natural”. There are also collective websites, such as *AfroitalianSouls*, which point explicitly to the diasporic community as a whole. Other networks, such as the *Afroitalian Power Initiative*, promoted, amongst others, for instance by former Minister for Integration Cécile Kyenge, aim more precisely at increasing the social, political and economic impact and visibility of the diasporic community.<sup>61</sup>

*Nappytalia* started as a page on Facebook but has now evolved into a multi-faceted “universe” of different activities inside and outside the internet, such as the successful start-up *Nappytalia Eco Bio Cosmetics SRL* that, according to Evelyne Sarah Afaawua’s online shop, specializes in products for natural Afro hair<sup>62</sup>. Furthermore, Evelyne Sarah Afaawua and her team organize social events, like workshops and the

<sup>61</sup> Cf. for further information <https://timeforafrica.it/afroitalian-power-initiative> [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.nappytalia.srl/> [22 Jan 2021].



*NappyHour*,<sup>63</sup> and she has received several awards, both for her entrepreneurship and for her blog.<sup>64</sup>

Many of *Nappytalia*'s blog postings deal with practical questions regarding hair and hairstyle. In this context, some posts reflect on racism and racist images and descriptions of (female and male) bodies of African and Afrodescendant people and their hair, including a historical perspective. The post "Being Nappy is a serious thing" [Essere Nappy è una cosa seria], for instance, stresses the colonial and Eurocentric origins of beauty ideals regarding the Black female body: "[B]lack beauty goes against everything Western society has imposed as worldwide beauty ideology [...]" [la bellezza nera si oppone a tutto ciò che la società occidentale ha imposto come ideologia di bellezza mondiale].<sup>65</sup> Thus, political and social activism and the discussion of beauty ideals are intertwined: "Nappytalia promotes natural hairstyles as an anti-racist practice that challenges dominant white-based aesthetic canons [...]. It also encourages young people to research, discuss, and redefine their African roots and heritage" (de Witte/Tr 2019: 327). In fact, many blog posts relate back to the mentioned "African heritage", stressing, at the same time, the solidarity between Black women in Africa and in Afrodiasporic communities worldwide. Furthermore, issues such as freedom, liberation, self-esteem and happiness are some of the core ideas of *Nappytalia*. How much these issues are interrelated with the representation of the female body, and especially with hair, becomes clear when taking a closer look at the term "nappy", as it is used within the context of *Nappytalia*. As Zine Magubane, associate professor of sociology and African diaspora studies at Boston College, highlights in an article from 2007, the term has a racist background:

Nappy, a historically derogatory term used to describe hair that is short and tightly coiled, is a preeminent example of how social and cultural ideas are transmitted through bodies. Since African women first arrived on

<sup>63</sup> Cf. <http://www.nappytalia.it/nappytaliaontour2016-nappy-hour-milano/> [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>64</sup> E.g., the Money Gram Award in the category "Young Entrepreneurs" in 2015 and the Africa Italy Excellence Award as Best Blogger in 2016. Cf. <http://www.nappytalia.it/stampa/> [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>65</sup> Sara Bentass, Evelyn S. Afaawua, "Essere Nappy é una cosa seria", 1 Febr. 2018, [www.nappytalia.it/essere-nappy-e-una-cosa-seria](http://www.nappytalia.it/essere-nappy-e-una-cosa-seria) [22 Jan 2021], their emphasis.

American shores, the bends and twists of our hair have become markers of our subhuman status and convenient rationales for denying us our rightful claims to citizenship.<sup>66</sup>

However, the use of “nappy” in *Nappytalia* reverses the original meaning: as Evelyne Sarah Afaawua emphasizes, it is to be understood as a composition of the words *Naturally* and *Happy*.<sup>67</sup> Accordingly, a denigrating term becomes an expression of self-esteem and freedom, and, thus, can be considered as a kind of “counter-narration”. As Geneviève Makaping, who was born in Cameroon and has become an Italian citizen, points out in her essay/diary *Traiettorie di sguardi. E se gli altri foste voi?* [Trajectories of looks. And if the *other* were you?],<sup>68</sup> “[i]t is a case of negation of individuality, of the other’s identity [...], a negation planned by those who hold the power for very precise aims” [Si tratta della negazione della individualità, dell’altrui identità [...], negazione programmata per scopi ben precisi da coloro che detengono il potere] (Makaping 2001: 39). Still, the employment of basically racist, discriminating terms remains a highly discussed subject, as Makaping states for herself: “I am not a ‘woman of color’. I am a Negro” [Io non sono una ‘donna di colore’. Sono una Negra; Makaping 2001: 38].<sup>69</sup> Claiming the right to use a denigratory term for her self-description causes uneasiness because it holds a mirror to those who are convinced they use apparently “politically correct” terms, such as the cited “woman of color”, which, nonetheless, carry the weight of discriminatory, colonial thinking.

Makaping’s assertion is to be understood within the context of institutional and everyday (micro-)racism in Italy, as illustrated by

<sup>66</sup> Pet 2007, cit. from [www.commondreams.org/views/2007/04/12/why-nappy-offensive](http://www.commondreams.org/views/2007/04/12/why-nappy-offensive) [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>67</sup> “La Genesi... Afro-Italian Nappy Girls. Il Natural Hair Movement made in Italy”, no date, [www.nappytalia.it/afro-italian-nappy-girls/](http://www.nappytalia.it/afro-italian-nappy-girls/) [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>68</sup> The parallels to the aforementioned post “Regards” by Kiyémis are striking: Makaping also refers to strategies of ‘Othering’ and to being reduced to an object, conforming to racist stereotypes of colonial heritage.

<sup>69</sup> Makapings’s discourse echoes the self-affirmative movement of the *Négritude*, founded by Caribbean and African authors such as Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor in the 1930s in France. Cf. also Achille Mbembe’s study on the origin of the concept of ‘race’ in *Critique de la raison nègre* (2013), where the author puts into evidence that the processes of “racialization” is still not outgrown (cf. also Banaré 2013).

various examples from her own private and working experience. Accordingly, as blogger Evelyne Sarah Afaawua states in one of her more “programmatically” post, letting her hair grow in a “natural” way is not only a personal choice within the context of individual, personal freedom, but also a statement about Italy’s society:

I am Italian, but, at a certain stage in my life, a series of questions casted doubt on my *identity*, hence a crisis and the rediscovery of something extremely beautiful: my *diversity*. Being Italian and Ghanese, the rediscovery of my *roots*, being the proof of the harmony both cultures can have, all of this showing through my *hair*. [...] We are Italians, but with Afro hair, daughters and sons of mixed couples, we are a new generation of Italians who do not want to forget their origins, claiming their ignored identity. [Sono italiana, ma ad un certo punto della mia vita una serie di domande hanno messo in dubbio la mia *identità*, da lì una crisi e la riscoperta di una cosa bellissima: la mia *diversità*. L’essere italiana e ghanese, la riscoperta delle mie *radici*, essere la prova dell’armonia che entrambe culture possono avere, manifestando tutto attraverso i miei *capelli*. [...] Siamo ragazze/i italiane con i capelli riccioafro, figli di unioni miste, una nuova generazione di italiani che non vogliono dimenticare le proprie origini, rivendicando la propria identità ignorata.]<sup>70</sup>

As becomes evident from her blog post, Evelyne Sarah Afaawua’s definition of identity goes hand in hand with difference. Her understanding reflects what we stated earlier: she claims a transcultural identity, and her self-definition as *Italoghanese* or *Afroitaliana* is not intended as a demarcation marker. On the contrary, it is meant to make the heterogeneity of Italy’s society visible – a heterogeneity which, as she points out, is largely ignored by the political and public discourse.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>70</sup> “La Genesi... Afro-Italian Nappy Girls. Il Natural Hair Movement made in Italy”, no date, [www.nappytalia.it/afro-italian-nappy-girls/](http://www.nappytalia.it/afro-italian-nappy-girls/) [22 Jan 2021]; her emphasis. In a former version of her post, however, Afaawua addressed girls and women while, in this latest version, she also speaks to men.

<sup>71</sup> Everyday racism, rooted in Italy’s colonialism, as well as institutional racism are, in fact, burning issues in Italy, as has become evident for instance when Cécile Kyenge, born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, was nominated Minister for Integration in 2013: she was attacked severely, with clear racist attitudes, not only by “notorious” right-wing opinion makers but also by other members of parliament. Cf. on the topic of racism and colonialism in Italy also, Romeo 2018, Makaping 2001 and the publications of the research project *InterGRace* (International Research Group on Race and Racisms), [www.intergrace.it](http://www.intergrace.it) [22 Jan 2021].

Evelyne Sarah Afaawua also encourages her followers to make themselves visible. For instance in *Nappytalia*, images of the body and especially of hair styles play a crucial role in this process, as emphasized by the play on words “where hair and identity interweave” [dove capelli ed identità s’ intrecciano].<sup>72</sup> In a post from March 2017, Evelyne Sarah Afaawua defines accepting natural hair as a political factor: “To accept the nature of natural Afro hair is a *POLITICAL STATEMENT*; it is a *DENIAL* of the standardization of beauty canons; it promotes *DIVERSITY*, inviting people to be *AUTHENTIC*.” [Accettare la natura del capello Afro al naturale è un *POLITICAL STATEMENT*, è una *ABNEGAZIONE* alla standardizzazione dei canoni di bellezza, è una promozione alla *DIVERSITÀ*, invitando le persone all’*AUTENTICITÀ*].<sup>73</sup>

This statement recalls the examples from France and Spain, for *Nappytalia*’s bloggers likewise invite their readers to go against stereotyped and canonical ideas of beauty and share their experiences. As Evelyne Sarah Afaawua encourages her readers to share their opinion on the topic with her, on *Nappytalia* there are likewise several blog posts with autobiographical content. Similar to *Afroféminas*, these posts are often accompanied by images of different “Afro” hairstyles. These illustrations, including both “private” snapshots as well as staged, more “professional” pictures, reflect core issues of *Nappytalia*, such as self-esteem and an alternative view on beauty. As stated by the author of one blog post, the photographer Michael Yohannes confirms that

currently, within society and in the part of the world where I live, *my Western features are appreciated more than the African features*. This is why, through some of my photographic works and now also through my style, I try to emphasize and/or improve people’s view on this aspect.

[attualmente, nella società e nella parte di mondo nella quale vivo, *i tratti occidentali della mia persona vengono apprezzati di più dei tratti africani*.

Per questo motivo attraverso alcuni miei progetti fotografici e ora anche

<sup>72</sup> [www.nappytalia.srl/shop-online-prodotti-ecobio-per-capelli-ricciafro-e-ricci/](http://www.nappytalia.srl/shop-online-prodotti-ecobio-per-capelli-ricciafro-e-ricci/) [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>73</sup> “Il viaggio dell’accettazione. Accettarsi per amarsi”, 31 March 2017, [www.nappytalia.it/il-viaggio-dellaccettazione/](http://www.nappytalia.it/il-viaggio-dellaccettazione/) [22 Jan 2021]; her emphasis.

attraverso il look, cerco di enfatizzare e/o migliorare la percezione che hanno le persone su questo aspetto.]<sup>74</sup>

Accordingly, one of Yohannes's photographs on *Nappytalia* shows a group of young women, all wearing Afro curls, sitting on the grass in a park, laughing at each other, apparently enjoying the moment, as they all look relaxed, full of self-esteem.<sup>75</sup> Thus, this photograph seems to match the aforementioned citation from the blog's main editor: "Happily natural, an awareness that results in an expression of happiness while reappropriating one's own personality and body" [Felicemente al naturale, una presa di coscienza risultante in una espressione di felicità nel riappropriarsi della propria persona].<sup>76</sup> In short, *Nappytalia* puts into practice a union of personal experience and political statements. Body and hair are being reclaimed by their owners, who are encouraged to refrain from following stereotyped (Western) canons of beauty.

Although blog posts are stressing the aspect of international solidarity, there is nonetheless a clear focus on Italy:

The success of *Nappytalia* is to be found in its blending of inspirational elements derived from different socio-historical contexts and in its giving voice to a specific Afroitalian experience. It fills a void for locally situated practices and discourses on natural hair and black beauty, as it is written in Italian [...]. (de Witte/Scarabello 2019: 329)

What is more, as shown for instance by the aforementioned statements by Evelyne Sarah Afaawua, the blog posts stress diversity as well as a self-understanding as Italians, thus challenging the notion of "Italian-ness" [italianità] understood in terms of "whiteness", which, as various essays and fictional texts written by Afrodescendant women (and men) clearly testify, is still the hegemonic notion when it comes to discussing the "national character".<sup>77</sup> As de Witte and Scarabello elaborate,

<sup>74</sup> "La fotografia identitaria", 5 May 2017, [www.nappytalia.it/la-fotografia-identitaria-di-michael-yohannes/](http://www.nappytalia.it/la-fotografia-identitaria-di-michael-yohannes/) [22 Jan 2021]; his emphasis.

<sup>75</sup> "La fotografia identitaria", 5 May 2017, [www.nappytalia.it/la-fotografia-identitaria-di-michael-yohannes/](http://www.nappytalia.it/la-fotografia-identitaria-di-michael-yohannes/) [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>76</sup> "La Genesi... Afro-Italian Nappy Girls. Il Natural Hair Movement made in Italy", no date, [www.nappytalia.it/afro-italian-nappy-girls/](http://www.nappytalia.it/afro-italian-nappy-girls/) [22 Jan 2021].

<sup>77</sup> Cf., e.g., the short stories in *Nuovi imbarazzismi. Quotidiani imbarazzi in bianco e nero... e a colori* (2004) by Kossi Amékwoyoa Komla-Ebri.

“[t]hese new Afro and African identities advanced by young Europeans do not turn away from Europeaness (as dominant identity models would assume: the more African, the less European), nor simply add to Europeaness (‘multicultural’ identities), nor even mix with Europeaness (‘hybrid’ identities), but are in and of themselves European” (2019: 330). However, central figures of Black activism in Italy, such as Italian writer Igiaba Scego whose parents are from Somalia, denounce the challenge of being accepted as such, with Scego, for example, arguing that

Europe prefers not to see us. It treats us like unauthorized bodies within national contexts, forever foreigners. For the continent, we are displaced, we are considered like belonging to somebody else, while in fact we belong to it, made in Europe.

[L’Europa preferisce non vederci. Ci tratta come corpi estranei della nazione, perenne stranieri. Per il continente siamo fuori posto, siamo considerati roba altrui quando di fatto siamo roba sua, made in Europe.] (Scego 2017)<sup>78</sup>

Correspondingly, by staging themselves – their bodies, their hair, their approach to life – as independent, strong and self-determined, *Nappytalia*’s bloggers challenge stereotypes that arose from a colonial ideology and claim their own aesthetics for various reasons. First, they present an alternative to standard Italian (Western) beauty ideals, based, to put it bluntly, on skin color as the main feature with regard to “Italianness”.<sup>79</sup> Second, the images conveyed clash with the way women perceived as “non-white” were exploited during the period of Italian colonialism – images that are still recurrent in the way “non-white” women are perceived and staged as “exotic”.<sup>80</sup> Third, successful business women like Evelyne Sarah Afaawua cause a crisis for the

<sup>78</sup> Cf. also the discussion of the concept of Afropeanness as a claiming of space for Blackness within European societies as in Pitts 2019: 1.

<sup>79</sup> An exemplary case is the national beauty contest *Miss Italia*, analyzed by Sca Njegosh. She cites the polemics that arose when Denny Méndez, born in Santo Domingo, was elected Miss Italia in 1996; her election was “contested by a part of the jury because of her not ‘representing’ the ‘typical’ Italian beauty” [viene contestata da una parte della giuria perché non ‘rappresentativa’ della ‘tipica’ bellezza italiana] (2018: 18).

<sup>80</sup> Cf., on these topics, Di Barbora 2018 and Giuliani et al. 2018.

attribution of “minor” works, for instance as housekeepers, to Black women in Italy, thus overcoming the “white hegemony” [egemonia bianca] and the “thick invisible line that separated them from whiteness” [la spessa linea invisibile che li separava dalla bianchezza] (Giuliani 2013: 257).

## Conclusion

To conclude, we can briefly summarize that the analyzed examples show that Afrofeminist blogs open up a space where women of African descent raise their voices to discuss what it means to be Black in France, Spain and Italy. They conceptualize Afrodescendance and Blackness as ambivalent experiences by pointing to a painful experience of racism and feelings of exclusion while also invoking a meaningful narrative to identify with and embrace. Accordingly, the blogs generate alternative and empowering visions of Blackness that oppose stereotyped and racist images of African and Afrodescendant women, which continue to circulate in French, Spanish and Italian societies. As we elaborated, the Black female body plays an essential role in this context, for the blogs reclaim and re-appropriate this body, previously an object of racist and sexist attitudes, to, self-determinedly, create new and empowering images of Blackness and womanhood or, from an intersectional perspective, Black womanhood within a European context.

Yet, research on blogs and other digital platforms written and/or coordinated by people of African descent in European countries is only at its beginning and more comprehensive analyses of this extensive field of research are an evident desideratum for further academic writing. Within the Italian context, what strikes, when comparing the different “national” contexts, is the lack, of avowedly Afrofeminist blogs such as *Afrofeminas*. Thus, it would be challenging to uncover the – political, social – reasons for such a difference. Another compelling topic for further analysis is the ambivalent discussion of belonging and contradictory (re-)positionings within European and / or African contexts in many blogs, which frequently goes hand in hand with negotiating the terms used to denominate this “in-between” of Afrodiasporic identity constructions in a European context. Within the Afrofeminist

context, it would be also challenging to take a closer look at its entanglements and differences with regard to European Feminist movements, criticized, as our examples have shown, for perpetrating a “white” hegemony. Moreover, it would be promising to look into the entanglements of writing in cyberspace and theoretical and / or literary writing as many online activists have recently published printed texts as for instance Desirée Bela-Lobedde (*Ser mujer negra en España*, 2018), Lucía Mbomío Rubio (*Hija del camino*, 2019), Kiyémis (*À nos humanités révoltées*, 2018), MWASI (*Afrofem*, 2018), Antoinette Torres Soler (*Vivieno en modo afroféminas*, 2018) or Espérance Hakuzwimana Ripanti (*E poi basta. Manifesto di una donna nera italiana*, 2019). The rising digital presence of Afrodiasporic voices in Europe has become so wide and varied that it is calling to be echoed in increasing studies on the topic.

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