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Coping to Survive?
A Study of Female "Afro-Diasporic" Actors of Spain

Abstract

Recent critical debates have begun to take account of Spain's relevance for questions pertaining to diasporic experiences in general and, to some extent, those specific to African diasporic figures. Undoubtedly news headlines of boatloads of African immigrants landing on Spain's shores have drawn attention to the country's relevance to immigration debates. However, apart from these recent headline-grabbing movements, other legal and legitimate migrations also exist and have lasted much longer. As a country that has, for a long time, erroneously been considered racially homogenous, it is important to examine the experience of the descendants of African migrants whose presence there precludes the publicity-pulling stories of illegal immigrants arriving dead or alive at the country's shores.

This article specifically explores and reflects upon the ways by which these Afro-Spaniards, specifically female Afro-Spaniards whose existence, until recently, was hardly acknowledged, negotiate their survival in Spain. What subject positions are cultural actors who bear marks that distinguish them to be of "Afro" extraction forced to assume within Spain's socio-cultural and political ambit? What coping mechanisms or strategies must female Afro-Spaniards employ in the face of gestures that seek to silence, question, or even negate their presence within the space they call home? What impact do these strategies, in turn, have on their future actions and their interactions with the other? Beyond the traditional media readily deemed "appropriate" for critical reflection, but which scantily carries the experiences of these individuals, the study largely draws on and examines "new" or non-traditional media forms that equally contribute to the meaning-making process and provide reference points for critical contemplation. These include such media as blogs, YouTube videos, online news sources, interviews, music, and anecdotes. By this, the paper seeks to explore the subversive value to be derived from their inclusion with the "canon" in much the same way as, by taking a stance and asserting their

relevance, "Afro-Spanish" subjects shake the very core of established paradigms. Ultimately, these varied reference points for analyses provide the basis for a more comprehensive conceptualization of Spain's socio-cultural setup and the "Afro-Spanish" experience as a whole.

News headlines of boatloads of African immigrants landing on Spain's shores or bodies of perished African souls washed ashore have drawn attention to the continued attraction the country has for prospective immigrants, especially those who see it as an easy route to enter Europe undocumented. However, more historical migrations that were both legal and legitimate also took place and have been much longer lasting than the recent phenomena. In other cases, such as those of immigrant offspring born in Spain, the presence of Afro-Spaniards is not a question of migration at all. As Spain is a country sometimes erroneously considered to be racially homogenous, it is important to examine the experiences and coping strategies of Afro-descendant Spaniards whose circumstances are largely occluded in that country and vary significantly from those that mainstream media is wont to portray. Spain's migratory patterns have generally been characterized as unique. Migratory flows of people of color into Spain did not rise to notable levels until after the 1990s. According to Afro-Europe, International Blog, by 2010 Spain had about 683,000 migrants of African descent, representing 1.5% of the population, and just over 10% of foreigners according to the High Council of Black Communities [Alto Consejo de las Comunidades Negras]. This figure is quite striking and reflects a general trend in increased migration of people of color to Europe in general (Aixelà-Cabré 2020). However, people of African descent were living in Spain before the 1990s: The Council of Black Communities reports that, in 1998, there were some 77,000 Afro-descendant migrants and, in 2009, about 7,500 descendants of Africans were born in Spain.

In 2010 the number of migrants from Equatorial Guinea, the only Spanish speaking country south of the Sahara, was estimated by Afro-Europe to be a little over 23,000 people. It is the African country with the third biggest group of African migrants in Spain, after Senegal (47,000) and Nigeria (35,000). Compared to that of those other two countries, migration from Equatorial Guinea has been very different. In

the first place, as a former colony of Spain, Equatorial Guinea at a time was considered to be a Spanish province. Thus, its peoples were "entitled" to all the rights of citizenship enjoyed on the peninsula. With the attainment of independence and subsequent declaration of the country as "materia reservada" by General Franco's regime, these rights were lost. Subsequently, with the resultant dictatorship that came on the heels of gaining independence, many Equatorial Guineans found themselves caught in limbo in Spain: out of status within Spain yet unable to go back to Equatorial Guinea. Still, a good number of people fled into exile and settled in Spain. Today, it is argued that perhaps Equatoguineans represent the most integrated Black community of African descent in Spain, comprising not only a second generation but a third one as well (Aixelà-Cabré 2020).

In spite of the long history of the existence of Afro-descendant peoples legally in Spain, their lives and stories largely remain outside the purview of traditional, mainstream media and communication networks. In an anthropological study on Africans in Europe, Toasijé (2009) demonstrates how engrained this practice is when he submits that

> it is not only the past African achievements in Spain that have no recognition, even the most recent contributions of the Equatorial-Guinean gift to Spain in scientific research, politics, literature, and many other aspects of modern Spain have not been recognized. (2009: 349)

He further underscores the institutionalization of this phenomenon when he affirms

> José Maria Aznar Lopez, Spanish president from 1996 to 2004, stamped his imprint on the ending of the African contribution in Spain by criminalizing immigration in official discourses such as the 'Seville Sommet' of the 21st and the 22nd of June, 2002. (Ibid.: 350)

Correlatively, the predominant images mainstream media is wont to show are of African immigrants illegally flooding entry points in makeshift boats. More serious instances of what plays out on the news show drowning victims in need of rescue, or washed-up bodies of prospective African immigrants who have perished at sea in an attempt to reach

Spain. The following observation by Toasijé further underscores this practice:

> The anomalous concentration of information regarding nonregular immigration as a kind of new crime on television, press, and radio shows the fact that Europe in general and Spain in particular, because of racist myths forged in slavery and colonial eras, fear African migration. (Toasijé 2009: 351)

These images undoubtedly portray Africans as "aliens" trying to force their way into a foreign space and leave a lasting impression especially on people who see themselves as the country's "natives".

Additionally, most mainstream media portrayals of Africa, characterized by famine and destitution, violence and wars, and abject poverty, often constitute the only images seen of people of African descent. Consequently, it can be argued that "native" Spaniards extrapolate the desperation that such scenes depict onto people of color in general in spite of the differences in the circumstances that account for their presence in Spain. Whatever the excuse or explanation that may be ascribed, the fact remains that Afro-Spaniards have to wade through a host of unpleasant experiences and endure treatments that, being inimical to their well-being as a people, require they adopt coping measures to survive. As we take a close look at some of the actions, inactions, behaviors, attitudes, pronouncements, and practices that affect the welfare of Afro-Spaniards, it is necessary to first examine the media through which their experiences are made known.

The media by which the experiences of female Afro-Spaniards are exposed are varied and usually fall outside the scope of mainstream or "official" locations of discourse. It can be projected that such media, outside the "canon", co-opt for themselves the "authority" denied them in the mainstream. Thus they remain free of the "influence" or, if you will, censorship that would have been brought to bear on them. These alternate media generally eschew the filters that mainstream media may apply or enforce on communicating these experiences. The stories and experiences predominantly found in new media forms such as blogs, YouTube videos, interviews, documentaries, Instagram, Twitter create

spaces for self-expression and auto-reflection, where the hitherto silencing, subjugation, and occlusion of Afro-Spaniard voices is questioned and ultimately reversed. As this study seeks to underscore, while alternate media provide different means, and sometimes the only means by which these experiences are revealed, they also serve as useful avenues for examining the coping strategies employed.

Stress and coping theories

Stress has been identified as a key factor in requiring coping strategies. As H.W. Krohne (2002) notes, the term was first used in physics to analyze the problem of how manmade structures must be designed to carry heavy loads and resist deformation by external force. Thus, stress referred to external pressure or force applied to a structure. The term has been co-opted into the behavioral sciences and, with this switch, experienced a change of use. Within the behavioral sciences, the term now generally denotes bodily processes created by circumstances that place physical or psychological demands on an individual (Selye 1976). These external forces that impose themselves on the body or individual are termed stressors (McGrath 1982). Although significant, these descriptions of stress have been found to be inadequate. A key deficiency is that these descriptions dwell solely on external factors without taking into account the cognitive mediation or internal processes the individual undergoes that make the external events stressful to the individual. In other words, the external stimuli that are exerted on an individual cannot in and of themselves constitute stress. Rather, certain (pre-existing) conditions within the individual would need to come into play for the external force to be stressful. These conditions may include level of maturity, personal outlook, previous experiences, emotional state, and goals, etc.

Lazarus (1993) proposes a more comprehensive theory involving an individual's appraisal of the significance of what is happening for their well-being and coping, that is, the efforts in thought and action to manage specific demands. Stress is therefore seen as a relational concept and not as a specific kind of external stimulation or a specific pattern of physiological, behavioral, or subjective reactions. Rather, it is

viewed as a relationship ('transaction', or negotiation) between individuals and their environment. Consequent to evaluating a situation, different kinds of stress arise. These are generally identified as harmful, threatening, and challenging. Harm refers to the psychological damage or loss that has already occurred. Threat is the anticipation that harm may be imminent. Challenge arises from demands that a person feels confident about mastering. Determining factors of these different kinds of stress are closely related to specific emotional reactions. Lazarus (1993) distinguishes 15 basic emotions, some negative – anger, fright, anxiety, guilt, shame, sadness, envy, jealousy, and disgust. Positive emotions included here are happiness, pride, relief, and love. Hope and compassion are two emotions that are seen to have mixed valence.

Presenting a more synthesized conceptualization, Susan Folkman defines stress as "a situation that is appraised by the individual as personally significant and as having demands that exceed the person's resources for coping" (Folkman 2010: 902). As she further expounds, determining whether a situation is stressful can only be achieved by appraising or evaluating it to determine its significance. She identifies primary appraisal, shaped by a person's beliefs, values, and goals, and secondary appraisal, referring to the person's evaluation of the coping options. The options are determined by both the situation, such as whether there are opportunities for controlling the outcome, and by the person's physical, psychological, material, and spiritual resources for coping. In her view, whether a situation is considered as harmful or as a loss, a threat, or a challenge depends on the two forms of appraisal, which in turn, generate emotions. Anger or sadness are associated with loss appraisals; anxiety and fear are associated with threat appraisals; and anxiety mixed with excitement is associated with challenge appraisals. Folkman concludes that the personal quality of the appraisal process explains why a given event can have different meanings for different individuals.

With respect to coping, Folkman defines it as:

> [T]he thoughts and behaviors people use to manage the internal and external demands of stressful events. Stress and coping theory originally posited two kinds of coping: problem-focused coping, such as planful problem-solving, to address the problem causing distress using strategies such

> as information gathering and decision making; and emotion-focused coping to regulate negative emotion using strategies such as distancing, seeking emotion support and escape-avoidance. (2010: 702)

Furthermore, Folkman identifies an additional kind of coping – meaning-focused coping – which regulates positive emotions. According to her, meaning-focused coping draws on deeply held values and beliefs in the form of strategies such as goal revision, strengths gained from life experience, and reordering priorities. As she reveals:

> The various types of coping often work in tandem, such that the regulation of anxiety (emotion-focused coping), will allow the person to concentrate on making a decision (problem-focused coping), which in turn is informed by a review of underlying values and goals (meaning-focused coping). Ideally, there would be independence among these processes so as to permit prediction. In reality, however, we are looking at a dynamic system of processes that are highly interactive. (Ibid.)

This exposition clearly establishes the close association between coping and stress. Stressful events invariably call for a reaction in one form or another based on an individual's underlying temperament and his or her assessment of the situation. Logically, and as will be surmised from the experiences of Afro-Spaniards presented here, individuals may react differently and employ different coping mechanisms to the same external aggravation. In the same vein, what may be distressful for one person may not be the case for another, what one person may assess to be a threat may be seen to be a challenge for another at a given material moment. Does this situation imply that an occurrence, a pronouncement, or an experience in and of itself cannot be evaluated to be stressful or traumatic and requires that some measure of coping is applied?

In the context of the foregoing, what pertains to Afro-Spaniards, especially female Afro-Spaniards living in Spain? What subject positions are they forced to assume within Spain's socio-cultural and political ambit? What measures does the female Afro-Spaniard draw on to cope with the situation?

In an opinion piece entitled "Racism is alive and kicking in Spain and is not just a US problem" (June 2, 2020), Laurence Dollimore, digital editor of *The Olive Press*, a leading expatriate newspaper in Spain,

brings into focus the stories of several Afro-descendant peoples who have experienced racist behavior in Spain. As he rightly points out, "[p]eople like to imagine Spain as a liberal paradise with sun, sea, and sangria, but its racism continues to be an open secret – or a well-known fact that no-one is bothered to deal with" (2020: np). One example he cites is how routinely hundreds of teenagers use blackface in their Balthazar costumes during the annual Three Kings parade that dates back to 1880s. Since blackface depicts an extremely racist and painful history and, while perpetuating demeaning stereotypes of black people, also reinforces notions of white supremacy (Harmeet Kaur 2019), its enduring reach and normalization in Spain is rather telling. Dollimore's article further mentions other racially discriminatory acts such as the refusal of entry into establishments with a "no blacks" policy, name calling on the streets and at sporting events, and the denial of rental space to Afro-descendant people. The observation Dollimore makes to the effect that, "while the chances of seeing acts of racism are lowered, entrenched racism is very much still real" (2.6.2020) goes a long way to showing the pervasive nature of the problem Afro-Spaniards are confronted with.

Presenting a different perspective, in an article entitled "Tú, yo, los otros", Cynthia García (2020), journalism graduate and regular contributor to the online magazine *Afroféminas,* submits that a systematic and institutional racism exists "que se aprende desde la cuna" [that one discovers from birth], and it is manifested daily. For this reason, "no te sorprendes porque lo has escuchado toda tu vida y aprendes que tienen el poder y la palabra de designarte como quieran mientras ignoran tu voz y le quitan valor" [you are not surprised because you have heard it all your life and you learn that they have the power and the say to call you anything they want while they ignore your voice and diminish its value]. As she indicates, not only do Afro-descendant people suffer affronts to their person, they are also ignored, their experiences are not valued, and their voices are not heard. Thus, the denial of the existence of racism in Spain is a practice that seeks not only to silence the voices of the people who suffer it but also to render them invisible within society.

Echoing most of the issues raised in Dollimore's article, Sara Rosati, in an article for *El País* (January 18, 2017) entitled the "The

everyday racism black Spaniards face", examines a short video by Laura Robayna in which four young black Spaniards recount their experiences. The four Afro-Spaniards, Paula Prudencia Napi Collins, Moha Gerehou, Rubén H. Bermúdez, and Nayr Macedo, underscore the plight of young Afro-Spaniards who have to contend with questions, pronouncements, attitudes, and behaviors that ultimately destabilize their sense of self and belonging in society and force them to trigger coping measures. It is worth examining the responses that the four Afro-Spaniards in the video provide to the producers of the video who posed a series of questions including Why are you black? When did you realize you were black? Have you suffered discrimination? How do the media represent you? What do you want to change?

When 22-year-old political science student Nayr Macedo declares "we never decided that we were black, yellow or blue… It's other people who tell me I'm black", she strikes at the very core of the situation where an external force seeks to impose itself on and influence the thinking and perception that one has of oneself. It suggests that, effectively, it is other people who set out to define the identity of Afro-Spaniards, thereby denying or depriving them of the basic right of their self-determination. In most cases, Afro-Spaniards come into an awareness of their blackness and "difference" at an early age from the behavior of other children towards them in school. These may include the refusal to play with them, not being invited for play dates, and name-calling. Nayr Macedo recalls being called "una negra de mierda" [a shitty black girl] by kids in school and Moha Gerehou recounts being asked whether his skin runs when he takes a shower. For Ruben Bermudez, the song "Cola Cao" from the *Los conguitos* movie was sung at him by other kids. These episodes recounted by Nayr, Gerehou, and Ruben are aptly captured in Santiago Zannou's short film *Cara sucia* (2004) [Dirty Face]. Mateo, the main protagonist of the short film endures being laughed at, shunned, and taunted with shouts of "cara sucia" [dirty face] by children in his new school. As a result, he attempts to "clean" himself up by scrubbing his skin with cleaning agents. The turmoil and anguish that we see Mateo going through are definitely emotions that Nayr, Gerehou, and Ruben identify with and express in their submissions. Interestingly, *Cara sucia* was categorized under short fiction in nominations for the 19th edition of the Premio Goya. This categorization is reflective

of the institutionalization of the exclusionary practices that Afro-Spaniards have to endure at all stages of their lives. As young adolescents and young adults, Afro-Spaniards are confronted with discriminatory attitudes ranging from being denied entry into night clubs to being solicited on the streets, and being required to provide identification by the police when they, as male Afro-Spaniards, are seen with a Spanish girl.

Nayr Macedo talks about the time when a professor goes as far as to ask her "What's a black girl like you doing in university? Perhaps you should look for a husband because you shouldn't be here". The professor's question and subsequent remark are stress-inducing on many levels. They perpetuate the stereotype that Africans and African-descendant people are lacking in intellectual acumen. They also suggest that, as a (Afro-descended) woman, Nayr can only be accorded value through marriage. Still they seek to delimit where Nayr should be positioned within the society. Within the academic environment where the encounter takes place, the professor already occupies a position of authority with respect to his students. Therefore, with his pronouncements, he delegitimizes Nayr's own motives for attending the university and poses a threat to her academic success. These actions and other similar treatment, from others who see themselves as "natives" and thus belong to the material space more than the Afro-Spaniard, serve to destabilize the Afro-Spaniard's sense of selfhood. Undoubtedly, to overcome the odds she is confronted with, Nayr will have to adopt a coping mechanism. She can resolve to work extremely hard to prove her capability to the professor and do everything within her power to demonstrate to him that she indeed belongs to the university. On the other hand, she can decide not to deal with the situation and even withdraw from the university. Both actions constitute a means by which the student may deal with the situation, but whether she takes one course of action over the other depends on several factors, such as, her life goals, previous experiences, temperament, outlook on life, self-expectations, family support, etc.

In her book *Ser mujer negra en España* (2018) [Being a black woman in Spain], Desirée Bela-Lobedde recounts the incredulity people exhibit when she describes or identifies herself as a Spaniard. They are even more amazed to find out that she not only speaks Spanish but

is also fluent in Catalán. Bela-Lobedde, whose parents are from Equatorial Guinea, was born and raised in Barcelona, Spain and had no contact with her parents' country of origin until much later in her life. As she bemoans, people actually question why or how a black person would say she was a Spaniard: "Si eres española, ¿por qué eres negra?" [How come you are black if you are a Spaniard?; Bela-Lobedde 2018: 158]. The question perpetuates the erroneous assumption that one has to be white to be a Spaniard and refuses to accept Bela-Lobedde's affirmation of self-identity. This experience is echoed by Najat el Hachmi, Morrocan-born Spanish writer and winner of some of Catalan's most prestigious literary awards – *Premio Ramon Llull de novela* (2008), *Premio Sant Joan de narrativa* (2015), and recently the much-acclaimed *Premio Nadal* (2021). She notes that "la ciudadanía como la conocimos los hijos de los inmigrantes en Cataluña era a través de la catalanidad y ahora nos piden explicaciones a nosotros de por qué nos incorporamos a la catalanidad y no a otra cosa" [citizenship, as we the children of immigrants in Catalonia knew it, was through Catalannes and now they ask us to explain why we chose Catalan identity and nothing else; Corroto 12.09.2019]. Inherent in the questioning and demand for explanation in Bela-Lobedde's and Hachmi's examples is a non-acceptance of their self-identification. Furthermore, in rejecting their self-identification as Spaniards, the questioning subjects position themselves as the purveyors of knowledge. Ultimately, these questions seek to invalidate Bela-Lobedde's and Hachmi's status within Spanish society. Questions that inquire as to where Afro-Spaniards are from, when they arrived in Spain and/or when they are returning to their country are equally invalidating. They impose onto the Afro-Spanish subject a sense of unbelonging, illegitimacy, and instability.

In a video response to the question posted on her Youtube channel *Negra Flor* ¿Cómo vivir en España como una mujer negra? [How to live in Spain as a black woman?], Desirée Bela-Lobedde recounts a score of situations, attitudes, actions, and pronouncements which seek to negate and deny her place as a black woman within the society. Her comprehensive account of her experiences is accompanied by the measures she adopted to handle the circumstances. It is noteworthy that Bela-Lobedde exhibits a keen sense of understanding of her situation as an Afro-descendant woman in Spain. She observes that, as a minority

person living in Spain, one should expect that things will not be easy. This sense of understanding seems to condition her evaluation of and subsequent reaction to the potentially stressful episodes she is confronted with in her daily life. In Bela-Lobedde's opinion, Spain has a kind of racism which, although it cannot be described as blatant, is very present and manifests in subtle undertones, what she terms as "micro-agresiones" [micro-aggressions]. For example, a black woman is not expected to hold an administrative position in the public sector. She sees the situation as that in most racialized contexts, where black and minority women are often associated with domestic work or the service industry.

In an article that appeared in *El Diario* on January 21, 2016 "Racismos cotidianos: 'Para ser negra eres muy guapa'" [Everyday racisms: 'For a black woman you are very beautiful] Antoinette Torres Soler, cofounder of *Afroféminas*, an online journal that seeks to present a more holistic image of black women, makes the following affirmation which, while underscoring the point just made, highlights another aspect of the Afro-Spaniard's dilemma: "Se da por hecho que las mujeres negras somos vulnerables, que no tenemos estudios, que no somos de aquí..." [It is assumed that black women are vulnerable, we are not educated, we are not from here…]. As the title of Soler's article implies, black women are cast in a specific mold of appearance and are not expected to be endowed with beauty. Furthermore, the comment "para ser negra eres muy guapa" [for a black woman you are very beautiful] ignores that beauty is subjective and that its determination is not limited to a given set of criteria. The framing of what is supposed to be a compliment within the context of the words "para ser negra…" rather makes it denigrating. The identification of someone as being black, yellow, or white is a practice that overlooks the basic humanity of all people and forms the basis upon which a hierarchy in interrelations is created among people. For her part, Desirée Bela-Lobedde outlines another perspective to the expression that pervades the experience of female Afro-Spaniards, that is, the exoticization of the black woman or women of color. "La exotización reduce a cualquier mujer no blanca a la categoría de cosa, de menos persona; y por eso, sobre todo en el caso de las mujeres negras se comparan algunos de nuestros atributos con eso, con cosas" [Exoticization reduces any non-white woman to the category of

a thing, less of a human being; therefore, especially in the case of black women some of our features are compared with that, with things; Bela-Lobedde 2018: 102-103]. As she further submits, the issue is compounded by the fact that the person to whom the "compliment" is made is not expected to find anything wrong with it because it was said with the best of intentions.

If, as an adolescent, she experienced a more blatant form of racism or discriminatory treatment, as an adult, she finds that it is more subtle; it can be seen in the sexually suggestive looks that older men, for example, give her. Questions such as how long she has been living in Spain to be able to speak Castilian Spanish so well and people refusing to sit on the empty seat by her even though the bus is full and all seats are taken are some examples. Noteworthy is Bela-Lobedde's admission that perhaps, as an adolescent, she was more susceptible to the comments and attitudes that sought to denigrate her. This increased susceptibility implies that, having suffered such denigrating treatment since childhood, she has become less susceptible to its influence as an adult. It also means that, from an early age, she has had to adopt measures that have enabled her to cope and survive in a society where she is assailed at every turn by denigrating attitudes and situations. This idea is echoed by Sara Jiménez who, as a lawyer of Roma origin, confronts more if not most of the marginalizing attitudes Afro-descendant women face in Spain. As she affirms, "cuando eres tan discriminado en tu día a día parece que es lo normal. Llega un momento en que asimilas ser rechazado" [when you face so much discrimination in your daily life it appears to be the normal thing. There comes a time when you assimilate being rejected; in Sánchez 20.3.2017]. Similarly, Desirée Bela-Lobedde submits "[h]ace mucho que dejé de ofenderme por este tipo de cosas" [It's been a while since I stopped being offended by this kind of thing; Bela-Lobedde 2013a]. While painting a rather sad picture of the extent to which the marginalization of the Afro-descendant Spaniard is normalized, the comment also implies that the Afro-Spaniard is resigned to this fate.

It can be argued that the apparent "acceptance" or resignation, as expressed in Jiménez's and Bela-Lobedde's statements, indicate a pragmatic approach to the derogatory experiences facing Afro-Spaniards. While an Afro-Spaniard may choose to adopt a confrontational coping

measure to deal with these external negative interferences, the varied forms in which they manifest and the frequency with which they occur make it nigh impossible for him or her to be able to respond to every single stressor. A response to every stressor would require an extraordinary amount of effort and time and prove to be counterproductive. As indicated in her videos, Bela-Lobedde resolves that "[no] me puedo quedar con lo negativo" [I cannot let the negativity weigh me down]. If she does, she will continue to feel diminished to the point of losing all self-worth. To counter the negativity, she also resolves that "tengo que hacerme valer" [I have to assert myself], and continue with her life. She even adopts a set of mantras, which she practically recites to herself everyday: "Que no ofenda quien quiere sino quien puede" [Offence is not caused by those who want to but by those who can] and the famous quote by Victor Hugo "Quien me insulta siempre no me ofende jamás" [Turn a deaf ear to offensive words]. She does not allow all those comments to affect her; otherwise she would be allowing others to control her life. That is not to say that a huge amount of effort and self-control is not required to face the many "micro-aggressions" that the Afro-Spaniard encounters at every turn. As Bela-Lobedde admits, it means being alert, being on guard all the time, and it takes a toll on her.

In an article titled "The individual and collective experiences of Afro-Spaniards" published in the online multimedia, multidisciplinary journal, *Afropean*, Eric MB makes the following assertion, which underscores the extra exigencies people of African descent born in Spain must endure:

> Vivir en España siendo un sujeto postcolonial racializado como negro resulta ser agotador. Cansa y agota el tener que dar tantas explicaciones sobre cosas que, para nosotras, las personas racializadas como "no-blancas" son más que obvias. En algunos casos concretos, no es de extrañar que sintamos un desarraigo absoluto hacia lo español como identidad.
> [Living in Spain as a postcolonial subject racialized as black is exhausting. It is tiring and draining to have to give so many explanations about things which, for us, persons racialized as "non-whites" are more than obvious. In some specific instances, it is not surprising that we feel a deep sense of disconnection towards Spanish as an identity.] (MB 30.11.2017)

From the comment quoted above, one can get a fair idea of how disconcerting it must be for Afro-Spaniards to have to explain their very existence in the only space that they know as home and have been raised in. Furthermore, it suggests that they have to live their lives like outcasts, as people ostracized from the very society they have grown up in. Consequently, even beyond suffering the effects of racial discrimination, they suffer a deeper consequence where their very being and existence is questioned and destabilized. Therefore, by resorting to "feeling a deep sense of disconnection to Spanish as an identity", Eric MB is expressing the kind of coping mechanism employed to endure the uncomfortable situation he is confronted with. If Afro-Spaniards have to endure this kind of treatment from an early age and have to adopt the coping strategy described, it is likely that, by the time they reach adulthood, their reactions will have become automated.

In commemoration of the International Day against Racism, the Spanish newspaper *El Diario* of March 20, 2017 features the experience of four Afro-descendant persons who have suffered racial abuse. That feature article also reveals some of the diverse ways by which Afro-Spaniards cope with practices that seek to undermine their self-worth and sense of belonging. In the first place, one observes that Winnie, one of the people affected "no tarda en encontrar los momentos racistas que permanecen en su memoria. Que le generaron preguntas, pero también culpas" [readily recalls racist episodes etched on her memory. Which raised many questions for her but also caused her guilt; Sánchez 20.3.2017]. She recalls an episode she suffered as an adolescent at the hands of her teacher and in front of her classmates. Although she does not relate the specific details of the incident, she describes her reaction as "[c]uando pasó, nunca lo relacioné con un episodio racista y concluí: 'será que soy tonta y no valgo'" [when it happened, I never linked it to a racist episode and concluded I must be stupid and not worthy; ibid.].

This statement exemplifies the acceptance of responsibility coping approach but also reflects an escape-avoidance mechanism. Whether consciously or not, she chooses to blame herself for the slight to her personhood and, in the process, does not confront her teacher or address the situation. The fact cannot be overlooked that, since the expression came from her teacher, Winnie found herself in an unequal power rela-

tion and her reaction or non-reaction would have far-reaching repercussions. Her remark that "[h]e vivido muchísimos episodios racistas de pequeña sin identificarlos" [I experienced many racist episodes as a little girl without identifying them as such; Sánchez 20.3.2017] reveals the extent to which she has had to internalize such external destabilizing affronts to her person. She recounts an episode when, as a young girl of nine years, she travelled on the bus with her aunt. Apparently older folk had entered the bus but, because she and her aunt had not seen them, they did not offer their seats. So people started making such disparaging remarks as "[e]n esos países tienen muy mala educación" [in those countries they have very bad manners; ibid.] to their hearing as if they did not understand Spanish. As she laments "[n]o importa que sea española" [never mind that I am a Spaniard; ibid.]. Here the assumption is immediately made that, having physical traits that categorize them to be of African descent, they could not be Spaniards and therefore could not understand Spanish. From all indications, neither Winnie nor the aunt with whom she was traveling on the bus responded to the remarks from the other passengers. It is not clearly stated whether Winnie and her aunt consciously decided to walk away from a potential confrontation with their accusers. Nevertheless, according to the criteria outlined in Lazarus' (1993) ways of coping questionnaire, their reaction or non-reaction constitutes a self-control or escape-evasion mechanism.

As an adult, Winnie recounts an episode at her workplace when, out of the blue, a client begins to touch her: "Me tocaba como si fuera una mascota. Después de decir que qué piel más suave, le daba vuelta a mi mano comentando que la palma era blanca." [She stroked me as if I were a pet. After saying how smooth my skin was, she turned over my hand commenting that my palm was white; Sánchez 20.3.2017]. Effectively her body is reified and becomes an object of study, but from all indications Winnie did not react in a physically negative way to the invasion of her personal space and the treatment of her body as an object of study. According to her, "[m]e recordó la época en la que los negros estaban en el circo" [it reminded me of the time when Black people were in the circus; ibid.]. This reaction is consistent with the one she exhibited as a student in the episode with her professor. As we can see, she did not call out or react in a verbally or physically violent way. Rather, she connects the event to a practice from the past. It could well

be that her reaction was necessary in order to preserve her job. It could also be that, as a black woman, she has grown used to a consistent pattern of experiencing demeaning attitudes and therefore let it pass. Then again, perhaps her mood at the time could have contributed to her non-reaction because Winnie admits that she usually does not remain silent in the face of such demeaning attitudes. As a member of the group *Empoderamiento Femenino Afrodescendiente en España* (EFAE) [*Female Afrodescendent Empowerment in Spain*], she sees the need to fight against the inherent racism in society so that it is not repeated rather than to normalize it. More importantly she finds it necessary to make more visible the existence of Afro-Spaniards.

Another Afro-Spaniard whose case is featured by the commemorative *El Diario* edition is Yasmin, whose most memorable episode of racist treatment was also at the hands of her professor and occurred in front of her classmates. On the day of the March 11, 2004 bombings in Spain her professor stated in class that she could well be a female suicide bomber, Muslims are terrorists and she should be ashamed of herself. Her reaction, "Yo me sentí fatal" [I felt terrible; Sánchez 20.3.2017], justly communicates the extent to which the pronouncement by her professor affected her. Since the statement came from a person in authority such as her professor, Yasmin is thrust into a situation of marginality in an unequal power relation. With these words, the professor, as an older person and also as someone from whom Yasmin is to acquire knowledge, literally isolates and pushes Yasmin to the margins. She is exemplified as an object of terror and a danger to society. Indirectly, he marks her as a person to be avoided, effectively ostracizing her. As Yasmin reports, one of the immediate consequences of the professor's remarks was name-calling and taunting from her classmates. With this huge emotional burden, she began to score bad grades, which further earned her more derision as being "mora" [moor]. Furthermore, after the episode, she was shunned and could not make any friends at school. In effect, Yasmin is stripped of any sense of belonging, a crucial aspect of the social set-up of any group of people. Like Winnie, Yasmin is currently a member of a group that fights discrimination and stereotypes against Muslims: *SOS Racismo*.

It can be gathered from Winnie and Yasmin's stories that, while they adopt a given coping measure to deal with the stressful situation at

the moment it occurs, they also adopt another that is expected to yield results over the long term. In that case, they adopt the self-control or escape-avoidance coping measure in their early years and resort to a planful problem-solving strategy in their later years. While, on an individual level, they may be seen to be avoiding confrontation and may appear not to be dealing with the aggressions exacted upon them, as members of the various advocacy groups, their work is aimed at fighting systemic discriminatory practices as a collective.

In an interview with the digital newspaper *AhoraEG* on March 2, 2020, Lucía Asué Mbomío, awarded the 2020 Human Rights by the *Asociación Pro Derechos Humanos de España* [*Pro-Human Rights Association of Spain*], reveals that as a result of being questioned so many times "cuánto cobra" [how much she charges] when she sets out to meet with someone on the street, she resorted to carrying a book on subsequent occasions: "Para que se vea que estoy leyendo" [For them to see that I am reading; *AhoraEG* 2.3.2020]. This conscious effort on her part to carry a book so that people see she is reading is a coping strategy aiming to forestall the assumption that she is a prostitute on the street and avoiding solicitation, undesirable comments, or questions. This constitutes a planful problem-solving measure that anticipates a probable situation and prepares to avert it. It also shows that she has learnt from past experiences and has developed a mechanism that will help her handle the situation. While people who deem themselves to be "native" to Spain only have to show up at a meeting point and do not have to take any anticipatory measures when they have to wait to meet friends on the street, the female Afro-Spaniard cannot afford that luxury. Should she just show up on the street and wait, she risks being taken for a prostitute and the likelihood of being propositioned is almost guaranteed.

In her interview with the digital newspaper *AhoraEG* on March 2, 2020, Lucía Asué Mbomío, underscores the pressure that Afro-descendant Spaniards have to bring to bear on themselves within the society:

> El punto de partida es sentir que tienes que demostrar más, desde que eres pequeña, para que te consideren igual que el resto. Eso no es justo, con todo, supongo que sirvió para forjar mi carácter y provocó que fuera bastante estudiosa.
> [The bottom line is you feel you have to do more, from childhood, to be considered equal to the rest. That is not fair; nevertheless, I suppose it has helped to form my character and caused me to be quite studious.] (*AhoraEG* 2.3.2020)

In some cases the conditions they encounter as Afro-descendant Spaniards contribute significantly in determining their career paths, as is the case with Lucía Asué Mbomio, who studied to become a journalist but also writes and dedicates a lot of time to fighting unjust, erroneous representations of Afro-descendant peoples in Spain:

> […] llevo ya algunos años denunciando, a través de charlas y artículos varios, cómo los medios de comunicación, las películas o la publicidad en España representan de forma poco fidedigna a las personas africanas y afrodescendientes, estigmatizándonos o re-estigmatizándonos.
> [For some years now I have been denouncing, through seminars and various articles, how the media, films or advertisements in Spain wrongly represent African and Afro-descended peoples, stigmatizing or re-stigmatizing us]. (Ibid.)

The same is true for Desirée Bela-Lobedde, whose decision to create *Negra flor,* now renamed *Desirée Bela*, make videos, and write blogs about black people's experiences was largely on account of being fed up with what she calls "aesthetic apartheid" within Spanish society, that is, the situation where the needs of Afro-descendant peoples are simply not catered for and, when available, cost far more than the regular products on the market. Bela-Lobedde contributes an interesting perspective when she observes that young people find it strange that she is black, lives in Spain, and is a Spaniard. In fact, they assume the right to determine how Spaniard the Afro-descendant person is: they go out of their way to make you feel different in a bad way, the level of education and the kind of work and positions that, as Afro-Spaniards, you are expected to hold. As an adolescent, there is the need to belong to a group, to have a worth, and not to be rejected so often. However, all too often, there is

a pervasiveness of hurtful comments and insinuations intended to communicate that the Afro-descendant person cannot be a Spaniard. Although these are experiences that make Afro-Spaniards mature and fast, they have to spend a great deal of their time casting off all the labels that have been put on them.

To a large extent, the advent of the internet has made it possible for socially conscious Afro-Spaniards to write about themselves, their experiences, and their aspirations not only as a counterpoint to the problematic representations in the mainstream media but also as a means of simply making their presence felt. In this case, writing a blog, recording a video, granting an interview, or even taking to Instagram become coping mechanisms to the extent that these actions, in the long run, seek to remedy a situation. In her article *in Afroféminas* "Tú, yo, los otros", cited earlier, Cynthia García (2020) goes as far as to submit that these are the only means by which the experiences of Afro-Spaniards can be made known.

Conclusion

Afro-diasporic female subjects find themselves in Spain for various reasons, they come with varied backgrounds, and with different socio-cultural baggage. They have different expectations, goals, interests, temperaments, ambitions, and worldviews, to name a few. They comprise a heterogeneous group whose idiosyncrasies reflect the dynamism that is life itself.

One may argue that it is a part of life for everybody to have to negotiate their way through situations of various kinds, and that, by being dynamic, life requires that one constantly adjusts and readjusts ones thinking, perception, actions, and reactions. Nevertheless, one cannot overlook the fact that the kind of attitudes and situations Afro-Spaniards are confronted with have their basis on the tone of their skin and demand a form of negotiating that goes over and beyond what the "average" person has to deal with. The overwhelming consensus from Afro-Spaniards and foreigners on the whole is that racism permeates the very fabric of Spanish society. As a logical consequence, it can be strongly argued that the life of the Afro-Spaniard, particularly the female Afro-

Spaniard in Spain, comprises a continuum of stressful, deprecating episodes that make the application of coping measures repeatedly necessary.

With the blogs, videoblogs, interviews, music, they become actors because they are forced to assume positions or personas that may be new to them or that they may be prepared or even not prepared for. They have to improvise and adapt to the situations that may confront them at any time. Failing that, they risk remaining an invisible presence in the space they rightfully belong to.

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