

Article

# Crisscrossed Identities and Black Feminist Perspectives in Lucía Mbomío's Novel *Hija del camino* (2019)

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**Abstract:** Some claim there is a lack of attention to black studies in current literary and academic fields in Spain. Even though there is an emerging wave of Afro-Spanish writers in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, many of them denounce the struggle they experienced to see their stories published and state that Afro-Spanish literature is absent from Spanish universities' curricula. Among the recent black voices that have achieved recognition in Spain is journalist and writer Lucía Mbomío, who condemns, in her debut novel *Hija del camino* (2019), the traumatic experiences that black women undergo with racism and sexism in Spain. With the aim of giving representation to the literature of Afro-Spanish women writers, the present article analyzes Mbomío's novel from the perspective of black studies, black feminism, and cultural studies.

**Keywords:** cultural identity; racial identity; black studies; Spain; literature; feminism; Lucía Mbomío; *Hija del camino*

## 1. Introduction

The emergence of Afro-Hispanic literature has been considered a relatively recent phenomenon that attracted scholars' attention beginning in the last quarter of the twentieth century, highlighting prominent black Hispanic literary voices who put the search for black identity at the core of their writings. Even though the term Afro-Hispanic is under continuous consideration and re-definition, especially in Latin America, it seems that the field shows a significant and striking lack of attention in current literary and academic fields in Spain. With recent waves of Sub-Saharan migrations to the peninsula, first generation black writers have begun to claim a particular Afro-Spanish identity that deals with their need to be concurrently black and Spanish and who denounce their experiences with racism and sexism in this country. This emerging twenty-first-century wave of Afro-Spanish writers has been called "the revolution of Afro-Spanish literature" (Martínez 2017), and among these new black voices, Lucía Mbomío stands out as one of the most prominent black Spanish writers, having become one of the leading counter-hegemonic voices to criticize extant racism and gender discrimination of the black woman in Spain today. In order to analyze the literature of Afro-Spanish women writers as defiant discourses from the perspective of hybrid identities and double discrimination by race and gender, the present article aims to analyze Mbomío's debut novel, *Hija del camino* (2019).

Lucía Asué Mbomío Rubio (1981–), known as Lucía Mbomío, is one of the most influential voices of the black community in Spain. A Madrid-born journalist and writer, she appeared on 2013 Thomson Reuters' list of the 30 most relevant Afro-Europeans (Mbomío 2019) and *El País's* blog "África no es un país" [Africa is not a country] selected her as one of the most outstanding African women of the year (Jurado 2017). She has worked for various Spanish television channels (TVE, Telemadrid and Antena 3); she writes a column for *El País* entitled "Barrionalismos" (Mbomío 2018–2020) and contributes to the digital magazines *Afrofeminas* and *Mundo Negro*. In 2017, she published her first non-fiction book, *Las que se atrevieron*, a collection of six stories from white women who



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married men from Equatorial Guinea (EG). Her first novel, *Hija del camino* (2019), deals with racial identity, feminism, and racism in Spain and is considered one of the most relevant texts within the emerging field of Afro-Spanish literature; Netflix Spain will make a series of the book (Ayén 2021).

## 2. Afro-Spanish Literature: Theorizing Black Studies in Spain

Considering Mbomío an Afro-Spanish writer has been contested by the author herself, who frequently questions her own identity (Mbomío 2015). This derives from the yet unsettled debate around the term Afro-Spanish, often utilized by black Spanish writers themselves for being Spanish by birth, nationality, or settlement and black by racial heritage, who most often show, through the exercise of testimonial and fictional representation, the complex and harsh reality of the black community in Spain. These are the voices of the black diaspora<sup>1</sup> that currently make visible the discourses of racism and discrimination, often silenced or ignored in this national context. Most specifically, these authors write about conflicts of cultural and racial identity and about the problems of prejudice and exclusion that they suffer as a consequence of the unrecognized institutional racism in Spanish culture. Some of the best-known Spain-based authors in this vein include Remei Sipi Mayo (EG), Agnès Agbotón (Benin), Trifonia Melibea Obono (EG), Desirée-Bela Lobedde (Spain), Silvia Albert Sopale (Spain), or Deborah Ekoka (Spain). Other masculine voices include Yeison García (Colombia), Edjanga Jones Ndjoli (Spain), and the reputed writers and scholars Donato Ndong (EG) and Justo Bolekia Boleká (EG). In this regard, Mbomío's book will continue with this emerging trend.

As we can see, there is a talented black community in Spain that claims their need to see themselves represented as black citizens in all the cultural, academic, and intellectual spheres of this country. Hence the importance, as writer Yeison García reported, of the existence of an Afro-Spanish literary movement, since it is difficult for individual novelists—or writers—to gain visibility on their own (in Arsène Yao 2016). It is the African communities, through joint initiatives, that putting pressure on the institutions can “empoderar a la comunidad negra a través del conocimiento” [empower the black community through knowledge], or in this case, literary production (Arsène Yao 2016).

Postcolonial migratory processes towards Spain have been relatively recent—with the first relevant wave in the 1990s (Valero-Matas et al. 2014)<sup>2</sup>—especially when compared to other colonial countries of continental Europe and Great Britain, which—since the middle of the 20th century and as a consequence of decolonization and independence processes in Africa and Asia—began to receive citizens from their former colonies. Historically, Spain has had a long racist heritage, going through a process of whitening since 1492 with the Conquest of Granada, the expulsion of Jews and Moors, and the exclusion of the Roma nation, a community that for centuries remained the only racialized community in the territory and more concretely in the south (Andalusia). However, recent immigration waves of the black *other* in postcolonial Spain, the incipient and insufficient institutional response to integration, and the ambition of this country to overcome its marginalization within Europe have perpetuated states of discrimination, racism, and exclusion of the *other* of color in Spain.

In this sense (and despite the historical contact and geographical proximity between Spain and Africa), the black *other* has been socially, institutionally, and conceptually removed from the Hispanocentric and self-assumed whiteness of Spain. Moreover, the ignorance about black Africa is such that African studies are practically absent from Spanish academic circles, as Mercedes Jabardo and M<sup>a</sup> Soledad Vieitez point out in “África Subsahariana y Diáspora Africana: Género, Desarrollo, Mujeres y Feminismos” (Jabardo Velasco and Vieitez Cerdeño 2006). More specifically, black literary studies in Spain are non-existent in the philological field, as stated by Maya G. Vinuesa in “Negotiating Afro-European Literary Borders: The Inclusion of African Spanish and African British Literatures in Spanish Universities” (Vinuesa 2020). It is precisely the absence of black academic studies in Spain that has contributed to perpetuating the hegemony of a European identity through

“the lens of white subjectivity” (Espinoza Garrido et al. 2020, p. 7), as well as the ignorance and the reproduction of images of victimization, backwardness, and discrimination of the black *other* (Jabardo Velasco and Vieitez Cerdeño 2006, p. 166).

Regarding the condition of black studies in the diaspora in this country, Vinuesa (2020) states that, although there is a growing interest in reforming the curricula and integrating subjects related to Afro-European literature in English departments in Spain, the presence of Afro-Spanish studies in Spanish Literature departments is non-existent (pp. 294–95). In her statistical analysis of the state of black studies in Spain today, Vinuesa shows “the context of the growing interest in African British literature and the near absence of African Spanish literature on the higher education syllabus” (Espinoza Garrido et al. 2020, p. 20). In her own words, “Afro-European British literatures are taught at Spanish universities, but perhaps surprisingly, neither Hispanophone African literatures in general nor African Spanish literature in particular feature prominently in this development” (Vinuesa 2020, p. 294). Moreover, Vinuesa indicates that even Equatoguinean writers with distinguished international reputations such as Donato Ndongo, Justo Bolekia Boleká—an academic at the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE)—and Francisco Zamora Lobo remain invisible in Spanish universities or for the Spanish literary establishment (p. 295). Literally, they have been “erased from Spain’s public knowledge” (p. 295). The reason why authors from Equatorial Guinea and their descendants are not represented in the academic field is, as Vinuesa argues, “the issue of institutional and epistemological racism in Spanish universities” (p. 299).

For her part, Natalia Álvarez Méndez, in *Palabras desencadenadas: Aproximación a la teoría literaria postcolonial y a la escritura hispano-negroafricana* (Álvarez Méndez 2010), talks about the Equatoguinean writers who are read, or should be read, within postcolonial Hispanic studies. Still, there is a gap regarding the Spaniards of African descent, children of the first migrants but born in Spain, the country from which and for which they write. The term used for these literatures is Afro-Spanish literatures, which are “rarely found in Spanish research papers” (Vinuesa 2020, p. 298).

In this sense, the historian Antumi Toasijé and the writer Lucía Mbomío denounce structural racism in Spain and the fact that Afro-Spanish voices are completely absent from Spanish politics and institutions (Vinuesa 2020, p. 297). However, what are the implications of this systematic exclusion of Afro-Spanish literature from the Spanish university system and from research in Spain? First, it is due to the complete suppression of the African presence in Spanish historiography (Espinoza Garrido et al. 2020, p. 20), but also to the recent immigration from sub-Saharan Africa in Spain and the often sensationalist and stereotyped representations of Africans and their supposedly massive entry into Spain as portrayed by the media, photographs, documentaries, and films (Vinuesa 2020, p. 296). Along these lines, Julia Borst (2020) also ensures that the perpetuation of racism and degrading stereotypes towards the considered “foreign” African in Spain have been reinforced due to the public image of migration from sub-Saharan Africa today, to the point that “these pictures prevail in a master narrative on African migrants in Spanish society” (p. 189). While the debate on the colonizing role of Spain in the Americas and its consequences has always been present both in the consciousness of Spanish society and in academic studies, the role of Spain in the colonization and exploitation of Africa has been absent, “illustrat[ing] the widespread ignorance about the entangled histories of Spain and the African continent” (Borst 2020, p. 190). As a consequence, “migrants and Spaniards of African descent are generally excluded [ . . . ] they are considered temporary guests and—in both a literal and a symbolic sense—‘foreign bodies’” (p. 191). Borst continues to say:

These snapshots are indicative of a wider discriminating discourse that seeks to deny both Spaniards of African descent *and* African migrants the mere idea of Afrospanish identities. It perpetuates a Eurocentric vision of Spain [...] that ignores the continuity of Black presences throughout the country’s history. (p. 191)

In recent years, many voices have begun to claim a properly Afro-Spanish identity and denounce the situation of racism, discrimination, rejection, stereotyping, and inequality in the black community. Among all of them, Afro-Spanish women have had special relevance in this wave of self-representation, expression, and empowerment. As Jabardo and Vieitez already advanced (Jabardo Velasco and Vieitez Cerdeño 2006), women have played a fundamental role in these decolonization processes, especially in the black diasporas, and have led liberation, empowerment, and development activities: “Las estrategias de resistencia femeninas y feministas [ . . . ] unen aspectos tan relevantes como aquellos de desarrollo, cultura, identidad o género, entre otros posibles” [Feminist strategies of resistance [ . . . ] unite aspects as relevant as those of development, culture, identity or gender, among others possibilities] (Jabardo Velasco and Vieitez Cerdeño 2006, p. 166). Much of the political activism and resistance strategies of the African community rely on women’s voices as an element of active mobilization; it is precisely women who put the most pressure on rights and legislation, the authors claim (p. 176).

Since the beginning of the 2000s,<sup>3</sup> some publications by authors who define themselves as Afro-Spanish began to be seen, but it was not until 2015 when a boom of publications by Afro-Spanish or Afro-descendant authors occurred, which has been called “La revolución de la literatura afroespañola” [the revolution of Afro-Spanish literature] (Martínez 2017). Among them, we find, for example, Agnès Agboton and her testimonial novel *Más allá del mar de arena* (Agboton 2005), Ángela Nzambi and her stories reminiscent of oral tradition, *Biyaare* (Stars) (Nzambi 2015) and *Mayimbo* (Walks) (Nzambi 2019)—the latter, winner of National Prize for African Literatures (2019)—, Trifonia Melibea Obono and her novels *La bastarda* (Obono 2016b) and *Herencia de Bindendee* (Obono 2016a), Desirée Bela-Lobedde’s novelized autobiography *Ser mujer negra en España* (Bela-Lobedde 2018), the collection of testimonial stories edited by Deborah Ekoka (2019), *Metamba Miago: Relatos y saberes de mujeres afroespañolas*, the play *No es país para negras* (Albert Sopale 2018) by playwright Silvia Albert Sopale, and the novel analyzed here *Hija del camino* (Mbomío 2019) by Lucía Mbomío.

The analysis of Mbomío’s semi-autobiographical novel illustrates the author’s personal issues of identity, family ties, institutional racism, and discrimination that women from the black diaspora in Spain frequently suffer. Two principal axes guide the analysis of the present contribution. These will be the theories of black identity in the diaspora, the “double consciousness” as developed by W.E.B. Du Bois in his study *The Illustrated Souls of Black Folk* (Du Bois [1903] 2005), and the concepts of “alienation and otherness” as developed by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon [1952] 1986). Questions on identity will also be exemplified in the novel through Paul Gilroy’s formation of “the black Atlantic” and the migrant as an intercultural and transnational hybrid as developed in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Gilroy 1993). Similarly, the theories in black feminism that denounce a double discrimination of black women by both their gender and race will be used to analyse Mbomío’s novel, following the readings of bell hooks in *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (hooks [1981] 1992) and Patricia Collins in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Collins 2000).

### 3. Lucía Mbomío’s *Hija del camino* (2019)

A partially autobiographical work on racial identity, migration, racism, search, and loneliness, *Hija del camino* tells the story of Sandra Nnom, a young Afro-Spanish native of Alcorcón (Madrid),<sup>4</sup> with a white Spanish mother and a black father from Equatorial Guinea, who, despite being born and raised in Spain, feels torn between two worlds in which she does not quite fit, always on the sidelines, neither from here nor there. Although set in London, we find a novel that, divided into scenic digressions in no particular chronological order, transports us, through thoughts and memories, to different times and spaces in the protagonist’s life. Narrated in the third person, the novel describes the experiences of the young woman through her childhood and youth, recounting her memories in a neighborhood school and later at university. She participates in the Erasmus program in

Portugal, ends up working in Equatorial Guinea for a few months, and finally lands in London, where she works and studies to improve her English.

The author has recognized that the protagonist, Sandra Nnom, has a lot of herself, but it is not her. The character is based on many of her personal experiences, on spaces and journeys that she herself has made or known—from Madrid to Coimbra, from Coimbra to Malabo, and from Malabo to London—and on people she has met, but others are invented (Mbomio 2019 quoted in Nerín 2019). In addition, she ensures that many of these experiences and anecdotes are so common that they could have happened to any racialized person in Spain (Mbomio 2019 quoted in Gómez Ruiz 2019).<sup>5</sup>

Special is the relationship with her sister, Sara, and her parents, from whom Sandra has inherited two very different cultures that seem hardly complementary. She recounts the ups and downs of her relationships with friends—the white ones who rarely understand her and the black ones with whom she feels at home; with her partners—relationships also determined by the racial dimension—as well as the different friends she makes and the people she meets on her “camino”. The protagonist relates her experiences with racism in Spain, from the racist insults she suffered as a child at school to the public hate attacks that took place in the 1990s by neo-Nazi groups—for instance, the famous case of Lucrecia Pérez, murdered in 1992, the first recognized victim of racism in Spain. Sandra has to work twice as hard to get a minimum of recognition, and that is, “para estar donde estoy, he tenido que esforzarme mucho. Tú partes de cero y yo empiezo en negativo, teniendo que demostrar que no soy lo que los demás imaginan” [to be where I am, I have had to work hard. You start from zero and I start negative, having to prove that I am not what others imagine] (Mbomio 2019, p. 66). Sandra’s character undergoes an internal evolution; she grows more mature and surer of herself, aware of her own blackness, femininity, and Guinean Spanishness. The protagonist, as well as the novel in general, are examples of personal struggle, of how not to fade away on the hard road that is rebuilding one’s identity, of how to reinvent or rediscover oneself to move forward, despite the fact that circumstances seem impossible to face. In this regard, the novel portrays the “desazón, [de] confusión y [de] conflicto interno entre ser y/o estar por necesidad de hacerse, una suerte de exaltación ilusa por situarse y para encajar dentro de una sociedad que habla por ti” [the uneasiness, confusion, and internal conflict of being out of necessity, a kind of delusional exaltation for positioning yourself and for fitting into a society that speaks for you] (Angone 2022, p. 4).

The opening scene takes place in London, very far from the neighborhood where Sandra grew up as a form of escaping Spain, as she admits: “lejos de los suyos por decisión propia” [away from their own by choice] (Mbomio 2019, p. 12). Sandra remembers when, in elementary school, she was given the opportunity to correspond with children from other countries, and her Dutch pen pal, Max, sent her a photo of his class where Sandra could see other black children. Sandra thought that going abroad could be the solution because she did not quite fit in Spain: “en realidad, le daba igual qué país fuera con tal de que no fuera el suyo” [actually, she did not care what country it was as long as it was not hers] (Mbomio 2019, p. 100). Later, in high school, she participated in an exchange program with a French school. She then traveled to Lyon, where she was surprised to see that black French boys sang the Marseillaise when they watched the French soccer team play, because “ella jamás había experimentado ese amor exacerbado hacia su patria o a los símbolos que la representaban” [she had never experienced that exacerbated love for her country or for the symbols that represented it] (Mbomio 2019, p. 119).

As an adult, at university, she went on Erasmus to Coimbra, Portugal, where she learned that not only were there more black people than in Spain, coming from the former Portuguese colonies, but that the Portuguese were also better informed than the Spanish about the colonial role of their country in the colonization of Africa (Mbomio 2019, p. 164). Upon returning to Madrid, she worked as a travel correspondent for a TV program that allowed her to move around the world—to Haiti, Panama, and Las Vegas. Finally, out of her need to discover her African heritage, she moved to Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, to work for a multinational oil company and live with her father’s family. It would be

in this land where they would call her a “foreign white” for the first time because of her fair mixed-race skin, and where she would end up feeling that this was not her homeland either: “Tú eres demasiado española” [you are too *Spanish*] (p. 243), “por tu color lo que te consideran es *ntangan*, que significa blanca, europea, que viene de fuera” [because of your color what they consider you is *ntangan*, which means white, European, who comes from outside] (p. 246).

Sandra’s trips to London, Coimbra, Madrid, or Malabo are to travel a path to find her destiny, her place in the world (Mbomío 2019, p. 315), although more than looking for her destiny, the protagonist wonders if it is not her own identity that she is looking for. Given the constant questions about her origins and about whether she is really Spanish—“¿De dónde eres?” “¿Española, española?” “¡Nadie lo diría!” [where are you from? Spanish, Spanish? Nobody would know!] (p. 19)—, Sandra sees her nationality questioned and therefore her identity becomes confused, uncertain, and disturbed, this even makes her feel “lejos y fuera de España, incluso cuando vivía allí” [far and outside of Spain, even when she lived there] (p. 20).

Odome Angone (Angone 2022), in her analysis of Mbomío’s *Hija del camino*, states that the novel deals with processes of self-recognition, as illustrated in the protagonist’s need to acknowledge her own identity and find her own voice in a society that rejects her (p. 3). However, most importantly, the novel aims at achieving an institutional acknowledgement of the black *other* in Spain and normalizing their presence in Spanish public spaces (p. 2), questioning therefore the current extant racism in this country, based on a racialized imaginary and on rigid images of individuals based on their skin tone (p. 3).

Mbomío’s own personal path in Spain has not been easy either: “Es muy difícil sentirse española cuando te extranjerizan continuamente” [it is very difficult to feel Spanish when they constantly render you foreign] (Mbomío in Grado 2019). This creates personalities in suspense, in a perpetual state of otherness associated with what she calls “patrias alternativas” [alternative homelands] that distance themselves from a specific citizenship. In this state of non-belonging, being racialized reinforces the feeling of “ser del camino” [being on the road] (Mbomío in Grado 2019) that is very common among many migrants, travelers who suffer uprooting, who go from one place to another trying to find the place to belong. When you are neither from one place nor another, then you are “una verdadera hija del camino, pertenec[es] a un limbo” [a true daughter of the road, you belong to a limbo] (Mbomío 2019 quoted in Gómez Ruiz 2019).

For Mbomío, and as illustrated in her character, Sandra, the skin is that element that eternally renders black women foreigners in Spain, something impossible to get rid of that determines all identity beyond nationality. Being a woman also seems decisive, since the meanings that society creates for mixed-race women stigmatize them forever. As Mbomío has affirmed, “hay un racismo de género”, since “la hipersexualización de los negros nos afecta más a nosotras” [there is a gender racism, [since] the hypersexualization of blacks affects us more] (Mbomío 2019 quoted in Nerín 2019). Static images are created about the black woman from which it is very difficult to free oneself, for example, stereotypes such as the caretaker or the cleaner; “y no es indigno”, she explains, “el problema es que solo te ubiquen allí” [it is not unworthy, the problem is that they only put you there] (Mbomío 2019 quoted in Nerín 2019), a fact that is very limiting and creates expectations that have to be constantly demolished.

*Hija del camino* is the story of a pilgrimage, of a search for a destination without knowing if it exists, of a belonging that may never arrive; it is the solitary search of her life on the road,

“el [ . . . ] que emprendió hacia sí misma” (Mbomío 2019, p. 152), “desconocía cuál era su sitio, su lugar en el mundo” (p. 315), “a lo mejor no se trata de moverse, piensa, sino de reconocerse. [ . . . ] Por eso, los migrantes y sus hijos son eternos errantes, aunque no se muevan. Son el puente que une, la frontera que separa”. (p. 360)

[... the road that she undertook towards herself [...], she did not know what her place was, her place in the world [...], maybe it is not about moving out, she thinks, but about recognizing oneself. [...]. For this reason, migrants and their children are eternal wanderers, even if they do not move. They are the bridge that unites, the border that separates].

### 3.1. *The Politics of Identity in Hija del camino*

If the novel has a central theme, it is the hybrid identity experienced by many racialized women in Spain through the personal narrative of the protagonist, Sandra Nnom. The analysis can be carried out from multiple perspectives, and among them, some concepts that have particular significance in the sphere of diasporic identities should be highlighted. For instance, the recurrent idea of being “on the road”—from its direct evocation in the title to the progressive journey that the protagonist makes throughout several cities and countries—warns of a constant wandering without destination. The idea of belonging is also key, since it seems that Sandra does not feel the rootedness that she longs for anywhere. She feels different in all contexts: “too” black in Europe and “too” white in Africa; she is openly insulted, discriminated against, or rejected.

This is a novel that denounces the existing racism in Spain, both visible and invisible, shedding light on all the naturalized micro-racisms that are rooted in a society that does not consider itself racist, everyday attitudes that go unnoticed by the white majority but that are deeply offensive to the black community. It is, finally, a novel of conscience, which, according to its author, is necessary for black people to develop on their own to fight against the known endorracism (Mbomío 2019, p. 170),<sup>6</sup> the perpetual alienation, the self-rejection, the not-recognizing-oneself, the not accepting oneself due to an unconscious integration of the colonial pattern of white superiority, and the subsequent “inferiority complex” that is created in the psyche of the black person (Fanon [1952] 1986, p. 12).

To begin with, the title of the novel, *Hija del camino*, refers to the pilgrimage of the protagonist and invites the reader to delve into the adventure that this path suggests, a path that the walker makes as they walk, being a subtle reference, intentional or not, to Antonio Machado’s poetics in its concept of life as a great journey and of the writer as the one who seeks his identity as opposed to the *other*. From the first pages of the novel, the characterization of Sandra as the traveler—the traveler or the pilgrim—is latent in the description of the opening scene. She has been in London for some time now, and she has not yet unpacked her suitcase, ready to leave immediately for any other place: “No se trata de pereza sino de tenerla dispuesta para partir de nuevo. A otra casa, a otra ciudad, a otro país” [It is not about laziness but about having it ready to leave again. To another house, another city, another country] (Mbomío 2019, p. 11).

Inevitable is the parallelism that exists between the notion of “camino”, as a search for identity from the perspective of the *other* in Mbomío’s novel, and Machado’s poetics of otherness. Armando López Castro, in his article “Antonio Machado y la búsqueda del otro” (López Castro 2006), affirms that the search for personal identity has been a universal theme in contemporary literature, and in particular in that of Machado (p. 27). In this search for identity, or the subjectivity of the self, the Machadian philosophy refers to a self that is incomplete, and is incomplete in relation to the *other*, which is why the self ends up adopting “una retórica de máscaras” [a rhetoric of masks] or “un yo-múltiple” [a multiple self] (Carreño 1976, p. 527) that ultimately generates a heterogeneous self (Caminero 1998, p. 90). The writer, for Machado, is one who imitates others and adopts a personality; he is one who faces two worlds, an internal one (private) and an external one (public), like an alienated being that is nothing but in opposition to the *other* (Carreño 1976, p. 527), thus confronting the intimate vision of the subjective self—as an inner voice of conscience or identity—in front of an external world with which it dialogues or that it confronts, creating a kind of “incertidumbre” or “inquietud permanente” [uncertainty or permanent restlessness] (Caminero 1998, p. 92). This refers to the feeling of being “eternal migrants” (Sipi Mayo 2019, p. 13), the walker on the road that relates to the emotion of rootlessness

and dislocation, of not belonging to any place, all of which is profoundly unsettling and alienating, it is being in permanent mental exclusion (p. 13) while having black skin, white masks.

*Hija del camino* is a novel that illustrates the idea of the walker on the road, the formation of the “black Atlantic”—for Paul Gilroy (1993, p. IX)—who builds a wandering identity in its migration through (post)colonial processes of displacement and dislocation, “a tradition in ceaseless motion” (Gilroy 1993, p. 122). In this way, the migrant shows “successive displacements, migrations, and journeys (forced and otherwise) which have come to constitute these black cultures’ special conditions of existence” (p. 111) and builds an identity that is based on and starts from “the experiences of travel” (p. 19), forming “the pattern of movement, transformation and relocation” (p. XI). According to the critic, the black person lives in a constant state of uncertainty that shakes their consciousness of being. Here, the feeling of otherness of the black individual in diaspora will have special relevance because, by not experiencing a stable belonging to any particular place, they will seek their way, their place, in a complex world.

In the search for identity, the protagonist of Mbomío’s novel expresses how she uses clothes as a disguise or as a “mask” in the construction of this “multiple self” in order to fit into the society that surrounds her; it seems that this is how she becomes someone different, another person: “Para la ocasión, Sandra se vistió de feliz, de joven, de abierta. [ . . . ] Miró y remiró en su perchero, cogiendo y lanzando con desprecio sobre la cama cada uno de sus ‘disfraces’” [For the occasion, Sandra dressed as happy, as young, as open [ . . . ] She looked and looked at her coat rack, taking and throwing each of her costumes on the bed with contempt] (Mbomío 2019, p. 13). The costumes or masks that Fanon defined in *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon [1952] 1986) are the attempts of the black person to become what they are not after having integrated a conception of identity alienated from themselves; this generates a distortion of the personality that confronts the individual with the outer world; it generates an identity with two dimensions, the one that shows in the presence of the white man (public) and the one that shows in privacy, without him (private): “The black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man [ . . . ] That this self-division is a direct result of colonial subjugation is beyond question” (Fanon [1952] 1986, p. 17). It will be precisely this unfolding personality, the “double consciousness” of Du Bois ([1903] 2005, p. 14), as illustrated in the novel through Sandra “[quien] vivía una doble vida, luchaba contra el racismo que encontraba fuera y también contra lo que era [ella misma]” [who lived a double life, who fought against the racism she found outside and also against her own self] (Mbomío 2019, p. 33).

With the evolution of the character, insecure Sandra, who initially shows a confused and disoriented personality, gains confidence and maturity. With her earned experience and travels, she grows to become aware of her own blackness and to unify all the different sides of her personality that live within herself: “Poco a poco va reconociendo todas y cada una de las identidades que creyó enfrentadas y que, sin embargo, conviven en ella cediéndose el turno” [Little by little, she is recognizing each and every one of the identities that she believed to be in conflict and that, nevertheless, coexist in her, giving each other the turn] (Mbomío 2019, p. 63). Likewise, it is also observed that initially Sandra and her sister Sara did not dare confront people when they called them not by their names but with descriptive or discriminatory appellations; as the characters matured and grew older, they began their struggle to vindicate themselves by their names, and “como una autoafirmación de su negritud [ . . . ] se tradujo en que le dijeran a la gente que preferían que las llamaran por su nombre” [as a self-affirmation of their blackness, it resulted in them telling people that they preferred to be called by their first names] (p. 129). Sandra’s evolution also shows in other scenes, such as how her black pride develops as she reads black authors. Sandra, an inveterate reader, initially leans towards white writers, but as the character progresses, other books call her attention, and her new references soon become Wole Soyinka, Walter Rodney, Donato Ndongo, Fredrick Douglass, Justo Bolekia, and Frantz Fanon (p. 62).

These readings will not only strengthen the protagonist's black consciousness, but they will also represent a reference to denounce existing racism and claim African identity and heritage. In particular, Spain is a country that denies racism within its borders and that on many occasions conceives itself as not racist, while it is. At least, that is the argument of Gabriela Sánchez in her article entitled "En España la gente no se considera racista, pero lo es" [In Spain, people do not consider themselves racist, but they are] (Sánchez 2017), where the author affirms that many Afro-descendants in Spain regularly experience racist attacks and daily discrimination. Sandra expresses herself along these lines: "buena parte de sus familiares y amigas, la mayoría blancas, negaban que existiera el racismo puesto que no lo padecían" [a good part of their relatives and friends, the majority white, denied that racism existed since they did not suffer from it] (Mbomío 2019, p. 65). In this sense, the protagonist denounces the following:

La autopercepción de este país es excelente. Nos vemos como un sitio amable, simpático, siempre de fiesta, sangría y siesta, y lo es, pero no solo eso. Cuando algunas personas cuestionamos esa imagen basándonos en nuestras experiencias vitales [ . . . ] nos regañáis. [ . . . ] Eso también es racismo.

(Mbomío 2019, pp. 66–67)

[The self-perception of this country is excellent. We see ourselves as a kind, friendly place, always partying, drinking, and napping, and it is, but not only that. When some people question that image based on our life experiences [ . . . ] you scold us. [ . . . ] That is also racism]

On some occasions Sandra remembers every time someone insulted her directly: "Vete a tu país" [Go back to your country] (Mbomío 2019, p. 29), but she also recalls countless cases of micro-racism that people are not aware of, since "no siempre se manifestaba con tanta crueldad. Había ocasiones en que era verbal, sutil y sin mala intención" [it was not always manifested with such cruelty. There were times when it was verbal, subtle, and without malice] (p. 25). This is, for example, described by Sandra in multiple instances in which strangers approach her to touch her hair or skin without her permission, or to say comments such as: "pues mira que guapas han salido las chicas, con lo negro que es el padre" [well, look how beautiful the girls have turned out, considering how black the father is] (p. 22). In high school, her first boyfriend, Dani, a blond, white boy, did not want to introduce her to his parents, and her own maternal grandfather, a white man from Puerto Béjar (a town in Salamanca), used to call both her and her sister "las negrillas" (p. 128).

The novel *Hija del camino* defines, then, the complex identity of the black person in diaspora. Fanon's dislocated colonial subject stands out (Bhabha 1986, p. XXII), where the subject does not recognize himself and does not recognize his own origin, causing transitory, insecure, disturbing, or unstable identities, a "double-consciousness" (Du Bois [1903] 2005, p. 14). Sandra is characterized as a traveler whose identity is formed in constant motion (Gilroy 1993, p. 122), a pilgrim, a nomad, a walker on the road whose identity seems to be in a perpetually latent state, as an "eternal migrant" (Sipi Mayo 2019, p. 13).

### 3.2. *The Black Female Body: Black Feminism in Hija del camino*

Black feminism and the politics of the black female body are other central themes in Mbomío's novel. Through her female characters, the author illustrates the external and internal aggressions that the black woman undergoes in her own body or because of her body. She creates the character of Sandra not only from the perspective of postcolonial racial identity but also from the perspective of black feminism, condemning the double discrimination by race and gender of black women in the diaspora. For bell hooks ([1981] 1992), "the two issues are inseparable [ . . . ] two factors determined my destiny, my having been born black and my having been born female" (p. 12). Researcher Odome Angone (2018), who specializes in Afro-Hispanic literatures, similarly stated that

la mujer negra es objeto de una discriminación interseccional por ser mujer (subalterneización por el género) y negra (racialización por su color), porque el

cuerpo es un territorio político y el suyo, vulnerado a menudo, es uno de los espacios de teatralización con más fantasías hipersexualizadas, retroalimentadas por el imaginario colonial. (p. 38)

[the black woman is the object of intersectional discrimination for being a woman (gender subalternization) and black (racialization because of her color), because the body is a political territory and hers, often violated, is one of the spaces of theatricalization with more hypersexualized fantasies, fed back by the colonial imaginary]

In the novel, physique and the concept of beauty acquire substantial significance since it is precisely because of these factors that Sandra and her sister Sara are discriminated against; but correspondingly, the characters also embody the internal struggle for women to assimilate the established white canons of beauty, to integrate and adopt an imposed and sometimes self-assumed aspirational aesthetics of femininity that not only confines them to rigid expectations and controlled images but also threatens their lives and wellbeing. Sandra and Sara's bodies, their skin, their hair, and their faces always seem to conflict with the environment that surrounds them; this is, at least, how they feel, and this is how Mbomío denounces the consequences of racism in Spanish society. Sandra narrates that she always felt ugly in every environment—ugly for being black—and that the concept of femininity was always determined by white canons. In the novel, people “alababa[n] su ‘tipazo’ [pero dicen . . . ] de cara no es nada guapa” [they praise her hot body, [but they say] her face is not pretty at all] (Mbomío 2019, p. 86).

Writer Desirée Bela-Lobedde in *Ser mujer negra en España* (Bela-Lobedde 2018), condemns the fact that black women in Spain are not represented in the collective imaginary, and if they are not present, they do not exist, and if they do not exist, they cannot be found attractive, hence developing what she calls the “ugly complex”: “Ahí se empezó a fraguar en mí lo que ahora, en la edad adulta, designo como el Complejo de Fea” [there began to take shape in me what now, in adulthood, I call the Ugly Complex] (Bela-Lobedde 2018, p. 68). Bela-Lobedde continues to say that the white canon of beauty imposed on black women involves straightening their hair and lightening their skin (p. 73), constructing, therefore, an organic image of the black woman as ugly or unfeminine. Reactions to this construction of stereotypes and controlling images vary among women, Patricia Collins (2000) argued; some of them will fight back and “deconstruct the conceptual apparatus of the dominant group” such as Sojourner Truth in “Ain’t I a Woman?”, while others will accept and internalize the stereotypes (p. 27). Collins maintains that precisely those stereotypes and controlling images “lie at the heart of Black women’s oppression” (p. 81), but “the notion of Black women’s objectification as the Other is so complete that we become willing participants in our own oppression” (p. 99), which goes in line with the Fanonian motto of “turn white or disappear” (Fanon [1952] 1986, p. 100).

While white feminism has traditionally fought for equal rights for women and against the discrimination of gender—most specifically in Spain given its endemic sexism—, black feminism had to fight for the consideration of the black woman as a woman, following Truth’s claim “Ain’t I a woman?”. In Mbomío’s novel, as exemplified through her character Sandra, if white women start from scratch in their battle, black women depart from the negative because they first need to deconstruct imposed prejudices and expectations: “para estar donde estoy, he tenido que esforzarme mucho. Tú partes de cero y yo empiezo en negativo, teniendo que demostrar que no soy lo que los demás imaginan” [to be where I am, I have had to work hard. You start from zero and I start negative, having to prove that I am not what others imagine] (Mbomío 2019, p. 66). This reinforces the idea that while white women are discriminated against because of their gender, black women suffer double discrimination that situates them in a more disadvantaged position, even more so in Spain, where the situation is aggravated for women outside the norms of race, class, and binary definitions. In this regard and in line with Mbomío’s complaint, hooks claimed, in *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* ([1981] 1992), that “black women had to launch a campaign to defend their ‘virtue’” (p. 165).

The construction of the black body following the Fanonian axis of “turn white or disappear” has been integrated into the subconscious of the black person, who ultimately wants to achieve an impossible white ideal—using hair straighteners or lightening skin creams. There are several female characters in the novel who embody this psychological pattern and who adopt strategies that are harmful to their health, even to the point of putting their lives at risk. Sandra’s sister, Sara, suffers from bulimia, a disease that in this novel must be read in the context of racialized self-rejection, exemplifying the oppression of the black female body because of a delusional colonial consciousness or perverse otherness (Bhabha 1986, p. xv). It will be with time and with Sara’s gradual development of her racial pride that she overcomes this disorder.

Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga also reflected on eating disorders in African women because of colonialist subjugation in her novel *Nervous Conditions* (Dangarembga 1988)—title inspired by the introduction that Jean-Paul Sartre wrote to the work of Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon [1961] 1968) (Plasa 2000, p. 121). Here, Nyasha, a young teenager in 1960s Zimbabwe, suffers the iron grip of her father—male authority—in a culture marked by white standards that are imposed by British colonialism. Nyasha develops anorexia, a destructive symbol of the Western presence in African territory, “[thus] representing the condition of the native under colonialism” (Shaw 2007, p. 9). In *Hija del camino*, therefore, it is observed how Sara, like Nyasha, also personifies the pathological mechanisms of colonial domination through a white European eating disorder in the black female body.

Ironically, despite the demonstrated rejection that Mbomío’s characters suffer because of their bodies, we also find some men who actually like them, such is the case of Sandra’s high school boyfriend Dani. Still, Mbomío’s claim is that some of these white men feel more attracted to the black woman’s body as a hypersexualized and objectified fetish than for who they really are as a person. In the novel, one character states: “Pues a mí me encantan [las mujeres negras], tienen la piel tersa y ni un centímetro de celulitis” [well, I love [black women], they have smooth skin and not an inch of cellulite] (Mbomío 2019, p. 198). In this respect, one of the biggest criticisms that the novel makes is towards the construction of stereotyped and hypersexualized images of black women, such as “the sexy black woman” or the “prostitute” (p. 178). That is for Angone, the configuration of “La Negra” as a figure of otherness in a racialized collective imagination (Angone 2018, p. 13), and for Bela-Lobedde, the exoticization of the black body—“the ebony, chocolate, cinnamon skin”—reduces the black woman to the category of a thing (Bela-Lobedde 2018, pp. 102–3).

In order to fight stereotypes and reductionist positions of the black woman, it is important, according to Mbomío, for them to have references of other women who break with the stigmatized canons as projected in advertising, media, TV series, and music videos, because this is the only way young women of color will be able to imagine a different future for themselves, and they will be able to let go of the conception of what it means to be a black woman in a white society. In this sense, when in London, Sandra is astonished to see black women working in different jobs, from police officers to bank attendants, something that, if not rare, would be unthinkable in Spain: “y no se equivocaban, rara vez las jóvenes negras cuentan con modelos a las que imitar porque, aunque existen, apenas tienen visibilidad” [and they were not wrong, young black women rarely have role models because, although they exist, they are barely visible] (Mbomío 2019, p. 113). Angone (2018) argues that setting positive referents for the new generations is essential to decolonizing the black body so that afro-descendant and black communities, especially female children and adolescents, can see themselves positively reflected in inspiring and influential figures, far from violent, exclusive, and alienating images that racialize and marginalize them (p. 23). For Collins (2000), the reproduction of stereotypes and the perpetuation of the invisibility of black women lead to maintaining social inequalities and the continuation of the oppression of the black body (pp. 3–9), but it is by creating safe spaces of resistance that black women can fight back and deconstruct those imposed and controlling images. For

the critic, they need to make themselves heard and “produce social thought designed to oppose oppression. Not only does the form assumed by this thought diverge from standard academic theory—it can take the form of poetry, music, essays” and other literary practices (pp. 3–9). Collins insists on the right of black women to “define our own reality, establish our own identities, and name our history” (p. 72). Providing the opportunities for black women to speak freely, to tell their stories and define themselves so nobody else does it for them is an unequivocal way to fight oppression and enhance activism (p. 101).

hooks spoke out in this regard by asserting that black women who live in oppressive conditions most often acquire a political conscience that departs from their own ordinary life experiences, and it is this very same awareness that inspires them to develop strategies of resistance. The author pledges that it is necessary to find black voices who talk about the experiences lived by black voices, voices who can explain the black experience firsthand, to define their own reality and transform oppressive structures, as “language is also a place of struggle” (hooks 2015, p. 28).

#### 4. Conclusions

With the aim of analyzing the literature of Afro-Spanish women writers as subaltern and counter-hegemonic discourses from the perspective of intersected identities and the double discrimination by race and gender of the black woman in diaspora, the present article has analyzed Lucía Mbomío's *Hija del camino* (2019). Mbomío's novel illustrates the discourse of black identity and black feminism through a denunciation of sexist racism and the politicization of the black body and its significance. The writer shows that the stereotyping of black women, pigeonholed in sexualized and objectified images, as well as the inheritance of aesthetic canons that are installed in the unconscious of the black woman, perpetuate states of colonization and dominance both in the physical body and in female psychology, all of which result in traumatic experiences whose way out seems to be in writing, this being an act not only of public denunciation but also a metamorphic agent of liberation, empowerment, and expression.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In order to clarify the meaning of the terms “diaspora” and “diasporic discourses” as used in this article, it is necessary to acknowledge that the black Spanish women writers mentioned here are considered Afro-descendants of the Equatoguinean diaspora in Spain following Avtar Brah's concept of diasporic identities as defined in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (Brah 2005). Brah refers to all those who have migrated and their descendants, with multiple subjectivities that result in transcultural identities (Brah 2005, p. 209). For Brah, the concept of diaspora must be understood as a critique to essentialist discourses of fixed origins and identities, or in other words, it is necessary to recognize the “trajectories of different diasporas [plural]” (Brah 2005, p. 177). In this regard, the women writers mentioned in this paper are considered black writers in diaspora inasmuch as they are Spanish born or of Equatoguinean (and other) origins but settled in Spain, acknowledging, therefore, the multiple identities of black women in this country.
- <sup>2</sup> Since 1986, Spain went from being a territory of emigrants to becoming a country of immigration. The rate of growth has intensified since 1996 and especially exponentially since 2000. By 2010, one in eight people registered in Spain was a foreigner (Valero-Matas et al. 2014)
- <sup>3</sup> Black Studies in Spain began to gain visibility from the celebration of the First Pan-Africanist Conference in Barcelona in the year 2000, followed by the First Pan-Africanist Summit in Spain based at the Colegio Mayor de Nuestra Señora de África (Madrid) in 2003, and the successive Second Pan-Africanist Summit in 2005 held at UNED. The objective has been to “contrarrestar el discurso académico de las universidades y centros de enseñanza españoles que ignoran África o le dan un tratamiento puramente asistencial” [counteract the academic discourse of Spanish universities and higher education centers that ignore Africa or give it a purely satellite treatment] (Toasijé 2010, p. 17). Since then, there have been various events around the African community in

- Spain, such as, for example, the festivals *Afroconciencia* in Matadero, Madrid (since 2016), and *Black Barcelona* (since 2015) that combine conferences, music and black art.
- 4 The Afro-Spanish population centers in Spain are found mainly in Torrejón de Ardoz, Alcalá de Henares, Móstoles, Fuenlabrada, Getafe, Lavapiés, Carabanchel and Arganda del Rey (Toasijé 2010, p. 8).
- 5 The experiences narrated by Lucía Mbomío as illustrated through her character Sandra represent common and frequent claims among black women in Spain. However, even though these may be generalized experiences for racialized women, it cannot be stated that “all” black women have gone through the same experiences described in this paper. Some authors have warned against the oversimplification of the black experience, such is Yasmin Alibhai-Brown who declares in *Mixes Feelings: The Complex Lives of Mixed-Raced Britons* (Alibhai-Brown 2001) that “researchers have spent decades ‘proving’ that mixed-race people are confused, lost, marginal and potentially self-damaging or destructive, presumably because they do not have one clean identity. The response to this accumulated unwisdom has been to impose a single identity on those of dual or triple heritage, which feels to me like ignoble surrender” (Alibhai-Brown 2001, p. 113).
- 6 “Endorracism” is defined by Odome Angone as a form of self-hatred derived from the internationalization of the stereotypes that exist around what it is supposed to be black (Angone 2022, p. 6).

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