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Poéticas e Políticas da Autorrepresentação na Fotografia
Africana e Afrodescendente em Portugal

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POETICS AND POLITICS OF SELF-REPRESENTATION IN PHOTOGRAPHY BY AFRICANS AND PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT IN PORTUGAL

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses contemporary processes of decolonising the gaze and achieving visual self-determination in photography by Africans and People of African Descent in Portugal, viewing the image as a contested site where representation, memory, and visual culture intersect. The discussion is grounded in a phenomenon currently observable in Portugal and in various global contexts: the impulse towards the emancipation of the gaze among these subjects and their assertion of a place within visual cultures as a claim to equity in intercultural dialogues. This process manifests in the production of visual narratives as a form of struggle for visibility, recognition, and historical reparation — strategies here conceptualised as “self-representation” and “self-reparation” in contemporary photography. Drawing on a critique of photography as a colonial technology of control and erasure, supported by authors such as Hall, Mirzoeff, Azoulay, Sealy, and hooks, the article examines the exhibitions *Africa: See You, See Me!* and *Álbuns de Família*, as well as the artistic works of José Sérgio and Marta Pinto Machado, which activate self-representation as a strategy for constructing new collective sensibilities and contesting the position of the Black population within Portuguese visual culture, thereby positioning photography as a gesture of self-inscription and the reinvention of the common. The text concludes that both the exhibitions and the analysed works share an ethical and political solidarity, united by a common aspiration for visibility, recognition, and justice.

KEYWORDS

contemporary photography, decolonisation, self-representation, archive, memory

POÉTICAS E POLÍTICAS DA AUTORREPRESENTAÇÃO NA FOTOGRAFIA AFRICANA E AFRODESCENDENTE EM PORTUGAL

RESUMO

O artigo analisa processos contemporâneos de descolonização do olhar e de autodeterminação visual na fotografia africana e afrodescendente em Portugal, entendendo a imagem como um campo de disputa em torno da representação, da memória e da cultura visual. A discussão proposta tem como base um fenômeno que ocorre atualmente em Portugal e em diversos locais do mundo: o impulso de emancipação do olhar desses sujeitos e seu reposicionamento nas culturas visuais como reivindicação à equanimidade nos diálogos interculturais. Esse processo se manifesta na produção de narrativas visuais como forma de luta por visibilidade, reconhecimento e reparação histórica, estratégias que chamamos aqui de “autorrepresentação” e “autorreparação” na fotografia contemporânea. Partindo da crítica à fotografia como tecnologia colonial de controle e apagamento, apoiada em autores como Hall, Mirzoeff, Azoulay, Sealy e hooks, o artigo analisa as exposições *Africa: See You, See Me!* e *Álbuns de Família*, e os trabalhos artísticos de José Sérgio e Marta Pinto Machado, que ativam a autorrepresentação como estratégia para construir novas sensibilidades coletivas e disputar o lugar da população negra na cultura visual portuguesa, posicionando a fotografia como gesto de autoinscrição e reinvenção do comum. O texto conclui que

tanto as exposições quanto os trabalhos analisados compartilham uma espécie de solidariedade ética e política, que se conectam entre si pelo anseio de visibilidade, reconhecimento e justiça.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

fotografia contemporânea, descolonização, autorrepresentação, arquivo, memória

INTRODUCTION

This article examines processes of decolonising the gaze in contemporary photography by Africans and People of African Descent in Portugal, as well as the visual self-determination of subjects who, throughout the colonial period, were denied control over their own representation as the “other”. Drawing on the premise that photography has historically functioned as a technology of social control, violence, and erasure, and that the image constitutes a contested site of power, the text highlights contemporary processes of producing and circulating visual narratives that offer alternative perspectives on Africans and People of African Descent as the “other” in Portugal¹.

Part of the discussion is grounded in a phenomenon currently observable in Portugal and in various global contexts: the impulse towards the emancipation of the gaze among these subjects and their assertion of a place within visual cultures, framed as a claim for equity in intercultural dialogues. This process manifests in the production of visual narratives as a form of struggle for visibility, recognition, and historical reparation — strategies here referred to as “self-representation” and “self-reparation” in contemporary photography. Such experiences occur in the context of a proliferation, particularly over the past two decades, of initiatives such as the global directives of the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024), which seek to recognise the existence and value of the cultural and artistic expressions of Africans and People of African Descent as gestures of rapprochement and historical reparation.

The text begins by briefly contextualising photography as a colonial apparatus, its destabilisation, and its appropriation as a technology of emancipation, in line with current debates on representation, memory, and decolonisation in the field of photography. It then discusses two recent curatorial experiences that form part of the ongoing movements for the emancipation of the gaze and historical reparation, reflecting a Portuguese perspective on Africa and the diaspora: *Africa: See You, See Me!*, held in Lisbon in 2010, and *Álbuns de Família* (Family Albums), also held in Lisbon in 2024. The discussion subsequently explores visibility and reparation from another angle — the production of

¹ This discussion draws on ongoing research on intercultural communication and self-representation in contemporary photography, focusing specifically on the work of Africans and People of African Descent in Portugal, entitled “Intercultural Communication in Contemporary Photography”. It forms part of a broader research project conducted in Brazil, funded by the Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development. The research in Brazil, “Intercultural Communication and the Convergence of Worlds and Knowledge in Contemporary Brazilian Indigenous Photography”, examines processes of intercultural communication in contemporary Indigenous photography and analyses self-representation as a strategy in these communities’ struggles for their rights.

visual narratives emerging from the lived experiences of African and African-descendant artists in Portugal: José Sérgio, a Mozambican based in Porto, and Marta Pinto Machado, a Portuguese artist of Cape Verdean origin based in Braga².

The discussion of the exhibitions and the practices of these artists converges in this text to examine struggles for the emancipation of the gaze, drawing on the work of bell hooks, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Ariella Azoulay, and Tina Campt. The selection of the aforementioned exhibitions is warranted by their specific engagement with the question of self-representation from an institutional perspective, allowing the article to address both the contributions and limitations of such initiatives. The choice of the two artists is justified by the fact that both explore, in their work, self-representation and the recovery of memory as part of an emancipatory strategy — referred to here as “self-reparation” — and by their attention to the gestures of the subjects involved, whose gaze bears the imprint of their own experiences and reflections derived from their lived experiences in Portugal.

DECOLONISING PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE GAZE

Photography is far from a neutral medium that objectively represents reality. It modulates and constructs realities and identities, seeking to legitimise cultural and historical power relations that establish hegemonies and strategically produce various forms of erasure (Anjos, 2021; Maldonado, 2024). Susan Sontag (1977/2004) was among the first photographic theorists to address these issues, highlighting — even from a broad perspective — how photography reinforces relations of control and objectification by placing the photographer in a position of power over the subject and by legitimising dominant narratives.

When considering the colonial history, however, it becomes apparent that these processes of control and objectification took on far more specific characteristics. Analysing the use of photography in this context, contemporary visual studies scholars such as Mark Sealy (2019), Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011), and bell hooks (1992/2019) reiterate Sontag’s identification of aspects of control, while emphasising their racialised nature.

Within photography, various authors demonstrate its close relationship with modern-colonial processes and their regimes of authority, with race functioning as a foundational element of these regimes. Stuart Hall (2013, 2013/2016) addresses the role of race in constructing social stigmas and stereotypes associated with Black people as a form of social control. Mirzoeff (2011) describes this regime of authority as part of “visuality”, a mechanism that regulates who can be seen and under what conditions. Joaquín Barriandos (2019) terms this regime of representation the “coloniality of seeing”, responsible for constructing the racialised/colonised “other”, perceived as a threat or as a subject to be civilised. Mark Sealy (2019) argues that photography consolidated

² Analyses of the work of these artists, with whom the author had the opportunity to converse personally, draw on Tina Campt’s (2017) method of “listening to images”. This method attends not only to the direct observation of images and archives, but also to the elements that are not immediately present within the image yet constitute it. These elements emerge through contextual data regarding the production of the images and fragments of the artists’ histories — not to explain the images, but also to the elements that, though absent from immediate view, form an integral part of the image.

a hierarchical relationship that positioned the Western photographer and viewer in a place of superiority, reducing the depicted individual to a catalogued and dehumanised object. Finally, bell hooks (1992/2019) demonstrates how stigmatising images of Blackness reinforce notions of White racial superiority and legitimise desires for domination and subjugation.

This critical perspective has also been rich in demonstrating possibilities for insurgency and resistance against these forms of power. Hall (2013/2016), for example, addresses not only the refusal and reversal of stigmas and stereotypes but also the potential for “contesting a racialised regime of representation” (p. 211). Sealy (2019) proposes “decolonising the camera” to challenge the hegemony of the Western gaze, promoting a reconfiguration of visual narratives and a more plural, emancipated, and inclusive perspective. Mirzoeff (2011) introduces the concept of the “right to look”, framed as a claim for the redistribution of representational authority and understood as part of a right to reality conceived as a “common” in formation. hooks (1992/2019) develops the notion of the “oppositional gaze”, which refuses to identify with the perspective of Whiteness, constituting a critical consciousness in relation to images and serving as a crucial mechanism for creating experiences of looking as a form of resistance and for producing new regimes of visibility.

These forms of insurgency in critical thought on images are evident today across a range of practices in contemporary art, as well as in photography and cinema by Africans and People of African Descent. This article argues that self-representation in photography can be considered, in the context of current struggles over visibility and memory, an insurgent and emancipatory practice, in which Black bodies cease to be objects of the camera and instead position themselves as subjects who look back — challenging dominant forms of representation and asserting their own place in history.

SELF-REPRESENTATION AND SELF-REPARATION AS AESTHETIC AND POLITICAL ACTIONS

At the outset of research on African and African-descendant artists and photographers in Portugal, initiatives such as Hangar (<https://hangar.com.pt/>) and União Negra das Artes (UNA; <https://uniaonegradadasartes.pt/automapeamento/>) emerged. The latter brings together artists working across a range of media (music, theatre, cinema, photography, and mixed media), including Marta Pinto Machado, who is mentioned later in this article.

A review of the UNA website reveals the prominence of the term “self-mapping”. It poses the following questions: “who are we within the cultural sector in Portugal?”, “what do we do and in which artistic fields?”, and, finally, “what is our legacy in Portuguese art?”. Founded in 2021, UNA defines itself as an initiative operating within the framework of anti-racist struggle and the affirmation of Blackness in Portugal, with an emphasis on the diverse manifestations and recent debates surrounding the claim for human rights, the decolonisation of knowledge, and the valorisation of the artistic and cultural legacy shaped by Black individuals. This initiative emerges within a more favourable institutional

context for historical reparation, in which greater pressure can be exerted on cultural institutions that have hitherto complied only minimally, if at all, with directives of the United Nations concerning racial equality and the promotion of diversity, or with the regulations of the Arts Support Program, which, through Ordinance No. 146/2021 (Portaria n.º 146/2021, 2021), provides for the integration of ethnic-racial diversity as a criterion in arts funding calls, functioning as a guiding instrument for more inclusive cultural policies.

In defining itself as a space that seeks to transform the Portuguese cultural sector by making it more just and representative, UNA recognises the need to align the struggle for institutional representativeness in the arts with broader anti-racist efforts. This case illustrates that the act of placing oneself on the scene and making oneself visible constitutes part of a process referred to here as the “politics of self-representation”. These politics are not limited to the creation of images or representations of the self, but rather involve collective processes of self-inscription and the production of narratives that perform — on the terms of the subjects involved — their own experiences and political imaginaries in the struggle for rights and visibility.

From this perspective, UNA, among other initiatives, can be understood as an expression of a politics of self-representation, but also as a form of “self-reparation” — not as an attempt to resolve, independently, the social and subjective consequences of intercultural asymmetries, but as a collective gesture of an existential and political nature, which Oliveira et al. (2021) describe as “inventive forms of existential affirmation”. Like self-representation, self-reparation may be understood as an expression of what Mirzoeff (2011) terms the “right to look”. These are emancipatory practices that seek not only to secure recognition of rights but also to reposition subjects as part of the shared common from which they have been — and continue to be — excluded, insofar as they are not recognised as equals.

It is within the framework of these struggles for visibility, recognition, and emancipation that institutional curatorial initiatives in Portugal can be understood, such as the exhibitions *Africa: See You, See Me!* and *Álbuns de Família*, as well as the artistic productions of José Sérgio and Marta Pinto Machado, which are examined in the following section.

AFRICA: SEE YOU, SEE ME! AND ÁLBUNS DE FAMÍLIA: TWO INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON SELF-REPRESENTATION

The exhibition *Africa: See You, See Me!* was held from October to 28 November 2010 in Lisbon, at the Pavilhão Preto of the Museu da Cidade (now Palácio Pimenta), as part of the project *AFRICA.CONT*, funded by the Lisbon City Council³. It was curated by the Nigerian Awam Amkpa (2012), professor of theatre, cinema, and African studies at New York University, who states in the introductory text that the exhibition portrays “the

³ The project envisaged the construction of a Contemporary African Art Centre in the city, as well as the exhibition of the show in various African countries. However, the project was discontinued in 2012 due to a lack of resources, according to the cultural platform PPorto dos Museus on 29 June 2012 (*Câmara Municipal de Lisboa Desistiu do Projecto Africa.cont*, 2012). Further information on the project can be accessed at <https://www.buala.org/pt/etiquetas/africacont>.

history of African photography and its influence on non-African imaginings of Africa and the African diaspora in all their diversity” (p. 10).

The catalogue begins this photographic history with colonial representations, including ethnographic portraits that depict Africa as a jungle populated by “primitives”. Criticism of this perspective is evident in the texts of the curator and coordinator of the project *AFRICA.CONT*, José António Fernandes Dias, who draws attention to the place that this photography occupies within the context of colonial representations in Africa.

In light of the gradual decolonisation of photography over the last 70 years, as Africans began to narrate themselves, Awam Amkpa (2012) poses two questions:

how do we, as Africans, see and imagine ourselves, and how do we want others to see us? How do we overcome the demeaning images of Africans and create new representations — simultaneously critical and celebratory, artistic and documentary — to convey, through Africans themselves, their histories of intervention and determination to reinvent their worlds? (p. 10)

Rather than attempting to answer these questions directly, the exhibition sought to translate such reflections by presenting two sets of images. The first set comprises studio portraits, portraits of Africans, and images of everyday life, produced by African photographers. These images demonstrate the changes that photography underwent on the continent as photographers began to master and subvert the visual conventions inherited from the colonial past, creating their own references. Within these subversions and inventions, we observe the production of portraits negotiated with the subjects, enabling the construction of identities that are not fixed but self-reflexive and continually evolving. The second set consists of photographs of Africa and Africans, taken by non-African photographers, in dialogue with African artists. This dialogue is likely referenced in the catalogue subtitle, *Influências Africanas na Fotografia Contemporânea* (African Influences in Contemporary Photography). Examples of such influences include Marco Ambrosio’s portraits of African migrants in Italy, inspired by the style of prominent portraitists such as the Malian Seydou Keïta⁴. The difference lies in the fact that these photographers’ gaze no longer follows the colonial visual grammar, which classifies, hierarchises, and assigns “lesser” significance to subjects and places. Their gaze now draws on the contemporary vision of Africans themselves to construct scenes in which the humanity of the subjects is not denied, and in which these representations constitute one narrative among many possible constructions.

These images, together with the accompanying critical texts, allow, on one hand, a connection between the exhibition and the aspirations for self-determination and self-representation discussed earlier. This occurs through the exhibition’s and texts’ self-reflexive tone, which seeks to demonstrate how photography — African and non-African — can be transformed into an ally in constructing alternative ways of seeing and representing,

⁴ Keïta, together with other African photographers, challenged the stigmatising representations of Africans as “primitive” during the 1950s and 1960s, creating representations in collaboration with the subjects themselves. Through these representations, the subjects constructed forms of self-inscription within their social scenes.

echoing the thought of authors such as Mirzoeff, Azoulay, and hooks. On the other hand, the exhibition is an institutional initiative situated within a horizon of historical reparation, which implies considering both its possibilities and its limitations. Granting a prominent Black African curator autonomy to conceive an exhibition that critically addresses the colonial past through photography certainly does not reconcile the past. However, it highlights the contests surrounding the politics of representation and their object: the asymmetries and inequalities they embody.

Despite being one of the largest exhibitions of its kind in Portugal, it is evident, as demonstrated by initiatives such as UNA, that these contests and inequalities are far from resolved, reflecting the enduring consequences of the colonial past in the present. Although many cultural institutions acknowledge racial asymmetries discursively, they often fail to address them structurally. On the contrary, institutions claiming to remedy such asymmetries may, in practice, continue to perpetuate colonial continuities through tokenisation and cultural extractivism.

Almost 15 years later, another major photographic exhibition on self-representation took place in Lisbon, in a context marked both by the advancement of discussions on racism and decolonisation in Portugal and by growing hostility towards immigrants. The exhibition, *Álbuns de Família*, offers a detailed perspective on the memories of the African diaspora, produced by Africans and People of African Descent residing in the region that hosts the largest part of this population in the country.

The exhibition ran from 28 April to 30 November 2024, in one of the most symbolic spaces of Portuguese colonialism: the Padrão dos Descobrimentos. Organised by Inocência Mata and Filipa Lowndes Vicente, it featured participation from Africans and People of African Descent living in Greater Lisbon since 1975, the year of African independence. According to Mata, the aim was to make visible those who, although frequently perceived as foreigners, were born in or had lived in Portugal for decades, constituting part of the nation itself (*Exposição Sobre a Diáspora Africana em Portugal Quer Contrariar Arquivos Oficiais*, 2024). For Vicente, the exhibition constitutes an act of “challenging and deconstructing the Portuguese colonial archive (...) immensely powerful” (*Exposição Sobre a Diáspora Africana em Portugal Quer Contrariar Arquivos Oficiais*, 2024, para. 10), given that public and private archives are replete with photographs of Black people under colonial conditions of violence and inequality.

Indeed, to “challenge” the colonial archive is not an innocuous act and should be understood as a refusal of domination and exclusionary practices. As bell hooks (1992/2019), Ariella Azoulay (2019/2024), and Tina Campt (2017) have demonstrated, archives are more than mere collections of documents; they are spaces that reflect and reinforce structures of power. They are technologies that selectively and intentionally construct narratives and representations, shaping how we see and understand the world and the “other”. Therefore, when Africans and People of African Descent are asked to share personal memories they themselves have produced, following the affective grammar of family albums, it allows other perspectives to emerge and alternative imaginings to circulate among these people.

The exhibition was structured around six thematic sections, each addressing different forms of self-representation. These include: images of the diaspora before 1975; autobiographical texts and photographs by authors such as Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida; family photographs narrating personal trajectories; collections created by studio and itinerant photographers; works by contemporary artists such as Mónica de Miranda, René Tavares, and Marta Pinto Machado, which challenge the colonial archive through personal archives; and family digital images produced and shared on social media.

The arrangement of these sets of self-representations, interventions, and reflections on the practice of memory construction and forms of self-inscription can be seen as a political gesture. Firstly, because it constitutes a form of historical reparation, reinforcing the “right to look” (Mirzoeff, 2011) and the “oppositional gaze” (hooks, 1992/2019). Secondly, because it entails the creation of new archives capable of cultivating a collective sensibility that affirms the value of African and People of African Descent existence.

These processes of creating and affirming new collective sensibilities are understood by hooks (2009/2022) as ways of inventing worlds in which Black individuals are seen — and see themselves — as full subjects of visibility and of society. She develops this argument through the notion of “belonging”, which encompasses an affective and political dimension, articulated through the body, community, and territory. For hooks, it is essential to recognise the close relationship between representation, place, and existence; in this sense, belonging also entails the right to be seen, to have one’s humanity recognised, and to claim one’s space within visual culture and the society one lives in.

It is this dimension of belonging that strengthens a collective self-imagination in the exhibition of autobiographical images in *Álbuns de Família*. By intersecting two histories — the African diaspora in Lisbon and photography as visual autobiography — the exhibition seeks to demonstrate how personal stories intersect with collective, political, national, and international histories. At the same time, it illustrates that constructing dialogues and bonds in new territories and cultures is always an experience traversed by asymmetries (Walsh, 2019), particularly in postcolonial contexts. Making these invisible histories visible and recognising them as part of society constitutes a first step in negotiating more balanced relations between different worlds.

As two intersecting perspectives that converge on self-representation, *Africa: See You, See Me!* and *Álbuns de Família* contribute to these negotiations through the institutional recognition of narrative production, which operates as a form of struggle for the right to humanity and existence. However, it is important to note that both correspond only to one side of the construction of a “commons”. To contribute effectively to intercultural dialogue under equitable conditions, it is also necessary to recognise the value of narratives and reflections produced directly and intentionally by participants, on their own terms. This is precisely what is examined in the following analysis of the works of José Sérgio and Marta Pinto Machado.

VISIBILITY AND SELF-REPRESENTATION IN THE IMAGES OF JOSÉ SÉRGIO

José Sérgio is a Mozambican journalist and photographer who has been based in Portugal for over 25 years and currently resides in Porto. He was born in Maputo, where he studied photography at the Centre for Photography Documentation and Training and joined the photography team of the National Institute for Educational Development of Mozambique from 1989 to 1994. During this period, he also worked as a photojournalist for *Jornal de Notícias* and *Desafio*. Since 2018, he has developed a personal research practice focused on themes such as migration, African and African-descendant communities, and the relations between Portugal and Africa. This research resulted in two exhibitions: *A Viagem que Guerra Junqueiro Nunca Fez* (The Journey That Guerra Junqueiro Never Made; 2019) and *Presentes! Africanos e Afrodescendentes no Porto* (Present! Africans and People of African Descent in Porto; 2020). His work came to the attention of colleagues at the University of Minho, who were aware of his interest in engaging with African and African-descendant photographers in the region. Contact was established via Instagram, followed by a meeting in Porto on 10 October, at the café Cenáculo, in Campo Lindo. During this meeting, José Sérgio recounted the development of the exhibition *Presentes!* and his earlier work on Guerra Junqueiro.

A Viagem que Guerra Junqueiro Nunca Fez emerged without a predetermined intention. The evocative title derives from the fact that the Casa-Museu Guerra Junqueiro invited José Sérgio to participate in a group exhibition centred on the figure of the renowned poet of Portuguese realism. It was agreed that he would develop a photographic project based on Junqueiro's archive held by the museum.

While researching the poet's life, José Sérgio discovered a curious fact: in 1890, Junqueiro had been elected twice as a deputy for the district of Quelimane, despite never having been in that country. As a Mozambican, this striking detail sparked his interest. Noting further that none of the items in the writer's archive referred to Mozambique, he decided to combine them poetically with elements of Mozambican culture, thus fictitiously transporting Guerra Junqueiro to Mozambique. The outcome was the exhibition.

In an interview conducted on 10 October 2025, José Sérgio explained that he selected various objects from Junqueiro's archive and related them to aspects of Mozambique connected to his own experiences or imagination, producing a total of 33 photographs presented in the exhibition. This is the case of the image of a pineapple protected by a helmet that had belonged to Guerra Junqueiro (Figure 1).



Figure 1. *Helmet with pineapple, from the series A Viagem que Guerra Junqueiro Nunca Fez, 2019*

Credits. José Sérgio, 2019

In the image, the helmet with the pineapple rests on a colourful textile — also a common element in Mozambique — and is set against a black background. The use of these elements is not arbitrary; rather, it forms part of a strategy of re-signifying objects in order to assign them a new narrative function. The combination of the helmet and the pineapple conceptually establishes an imaginative link between Junqueiro and Mozambique. The textile and the black background visually isolate these two elements, displacing them from their original contexts and situating them within an imaginative setting that reinforces the idea of an imagined journey.

Other images in the exhibition follow this strategy of isolating objects through a black background, as seen in Figure 2, where the statue of the writer is combined with pieces of opened coconuts — another element that constructs an imaginative connection between him and Mozambique.

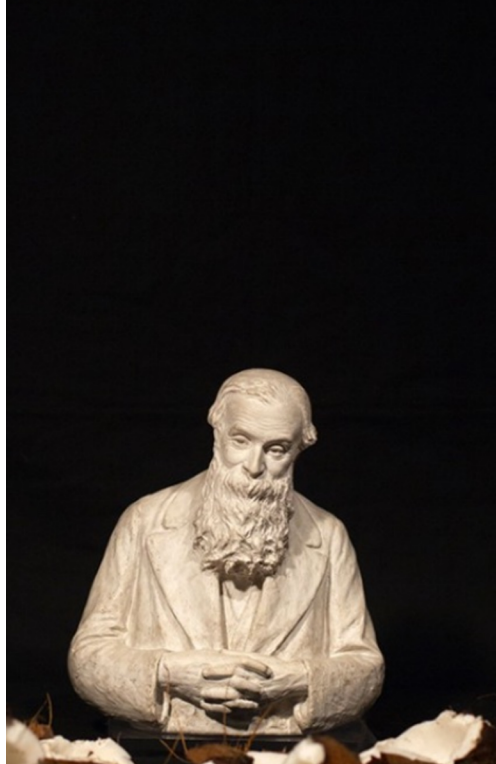


Figure 2. Photograph from the series *A Viagem que Guerra Junqueiro Nunca Fez*, 2019

Credits. José Sérgio, 2019

However, there are images (Figure 3) in which the element that displaces meaning is the same one that enables the imaginative encounter between Junqueiro and Mozambique — in this case, the colourful textile, widely used in Mozambique and known as *capulana*.



Figure 3. Photograph from the series *A Viagem que Guerra Junqueiro Nunca Fez*, 2019

Credits. José Sérgio, 2019

In the images in which the *capulana* simultaneously functions as a linking element and as a visual isolator — displacing the meanings of the objects and repositioning them within another space of signification — Junqueiro's journey acquires a distinctive materiality, constructed directly between the two symbolically displaced objects.

It is through these juxtapositions and reconfigurations that José Sérgio transforms such combinations into a poetic gesture that is also political. Although the series does not strictly constitute an act of self-representation, it establishes a critical intercultural dialogue that questions the logic of power that enabled a Portuguese public figure to occupy, on two occasions, a political office in a country he had never visited and with which he had no connection. More than symbolically remedying a historical “oversight”, the imagined journey created by José Sérgio exposes it. This exposure may be understood as a gesture that positions the Mozambican artist as a subject of enunciation — one who contests narratives and their meanings and introduces alternative perspectives within this intercultural dialogue.

This gesture of positioning can also be observed in his subsequent work, *Presentes! Africanos e Afrodescendentes no Porto*, which constitutes another form of intervention, this time addressing the invisibility of African and People of African Descent in the city of Porto.

José Sérgio explained that the idea for the exhibition, held in 2020, arose from his unease at hearing Portuguese friends claim that there were no Black Africans in the city since his arrival in Porto from Lisbon. Although official statistics⁵ are scarce, Lisbon is known to concentrate a large proportion of the African diaspora, and, consequently, within the Portuguese imaginary, Black Africans are primarily associated with Lisbon. However, it is also well established — as noted in one of the texts included in the exhibition catalogue *Álbuns de Família* — that the presence of Africans in Portugal dates back to the 15th century (Mata, 2025, p. 25).

It was while travelling on the metro that José Sérgio encountered this presence. He reported that he sought statistical and official data on the presence of Black individuals in Porto through public institutions, consulates and representations of African countries, and universities, but found none. This led him to undertake his own inventory of this presence, to demonstrate that Black Africans were indeed present in the city. He then began approaching and speaking with Black individuals he encountered in the street, asking whether he could photograph them — not all agreed. Others, by contrast, expressed enthusiasm about the possibility of making the African dimension of the city visible. Gradually, the project took shape, requiring approximately two years to complete.

During this period, José Sérgio visited, interacted with, and photographed around 80 individuals from Gambia, Mali, Cape Verde, Brazil, Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea-Conakry, Senegal, Mozambique, Cuba, São Tomé and Príncipe, Côte d'Ivoire, and Portugal, whether in the street, in their homes, workplaces, or leisure spaces. These included older people, adults, young people, children, teachers, artists, activists, doctors, chefs, students, hairdressers, and athletes — individuals who were native-born,

⁵ Some data can be found in Gabinete de Estratégia e Estudos (2023).

long-term residents, or recent arrivals — who gradually revealed to him a Black Porto that had previously remained unseen.

In addition to the conversations, José Sérgio interviewed these individuals, which allowed him to verify that most of them live under disadvantageous conditions:

non-White people in Portugal have to struggle more than others to be seen; they have to prove they are capable and on the same level. Despite the repeated cliché that opportunities are equal for everyone, in reality, they are not. On the ground, one perceives that they are not. Moreover, this is why it is necessary to give visibility to these people, to this issue. (Maia, 2023, para. 29)

The process of constructing the photographic records was also an essential part of the work, which always followed a protocol. In the first meeting, the photographer and the prospective subject would converse and exchange impressions; in the second, José Sérgio would film a standardised interview, which he hoped would eventually become a documentary. Photography would only take place once all the information had been collected. The portraits were created collaboratively, horizontalising the relationship between photographer and subject, thus establishing an affective and respectful relationship, radically different from the forms of the old colonial records. José Sérgio also asked the subjects to choose the location and manner in which they wished to be seen and photographed, giving the images a performative and self-imaginative quality reminiscent of Seydou Keïta's studio portraits and certain contemporary appropriations of his style, as seen in the exhibition *Africa: See You, See Me!*

The resulting self-representations were almost always posed portraits, exuding a sense of pride in “being from Porto” and forming a multifaceted sample of the “Afro-Portuense” — members of a large and heterogeneous community that remains largely invisible and unrecognised. The outcome of these processes of exchange and sensitive listening culminated in the exhibition, held from October to December 2020 at Mira Forum, an important cultural centre in Porto. The exhibition featured around 40 medium-format photographs printed on banners suspended from the gallery's ceiling, requiring viewers to walk among them to see the works and sensorially reproducing the photographer's own perambulations through the city during the creation process (Figure 4).



Figure 4. View of the exhibition *Presentes!*, 2020

Credits. José Sérgio, 2020

In 2023, a book documenting the project was published, comprising 196 images that allow a more detailed view of the community's diversity and forms of integration in the city. Many of the images in the book highlight a sense of empowerment and “pride in being from Porto” (Figure 5 and Figure 6), which brings attention to the question of affective attachment that hooks (2009/2022) identifies in the connection between body, community, and territory. What José Sérgio's exhibition and book reveal, through these acts of self-representation, are expressions of that very articulation.

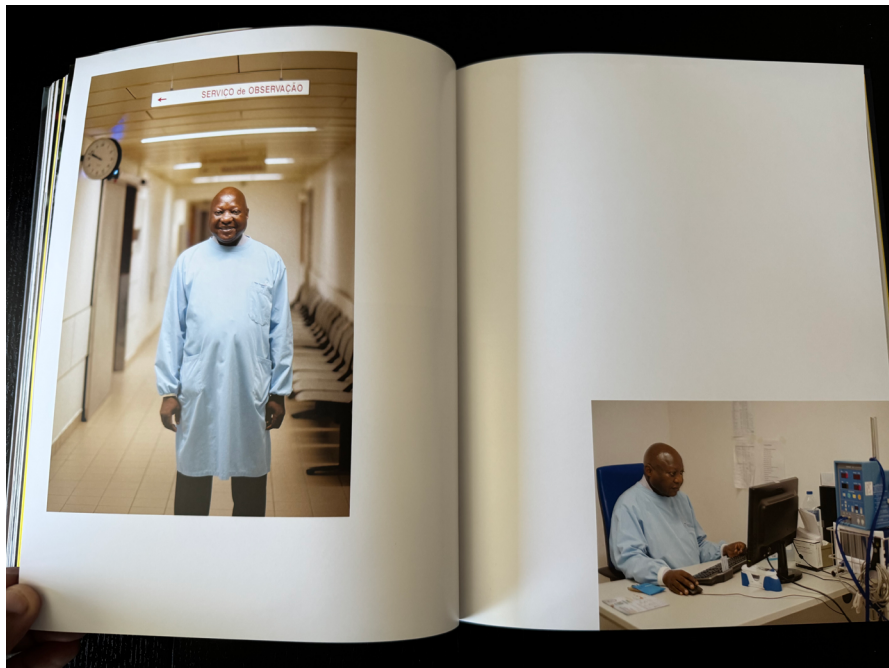


Figure 5. From the book *Presentes!*

Source. From *Presentes! Africanos e Afrodescendentes no Porto*, by J. Sérgio, 2023



Figure 6. From the book *Presentes!*

Source. From *Presentes! Africanos e Afrodescendentes no Porto*, by J. Sérgio, 2023

It is important to consider that this relationship with place — shaped by racial and diasporic conditions — is part of a process of political subjectivation, insofar as this “belonging” and “pride” are not given, but are constructed and negotiated in everyday life, consciously or unconsciously. In this process, forms of self-inscription, presence, circulation, occupation of public space, as well as boundaries, memories, visibility, rights, and forms of social recognition are negotiated.

In this sense, the exclamation mark in the exhibition title, *Presentes!* (also present in *Africa: See You, See Me!*) seems to express this self-reflective work, which forms part of what we call here “self-reparation”. In this context, self-reparation involves what Bárbara Altivo (2019) described as the production of “resistance and invention of life in the face of violence and within an emancipatory horizon to be achieved” (p. 48). Self-reparation refers to the possibility of establishing — through one’s own forms of enunciation and action — spaces of freedom and justice capable of responding to the conflicts and dissensions that constitute these asymmetries. What self-representations enable, as a politics of visibility and struggle, is the creation of spaces for self-reparation and experiences of encounter with the “other”, which allow the construction of a “common” in which the differences of each party receive equal recognition and the same right to enunciation and existence.

The politics of self-representation, as part of self-reparation strategies, can also be found in the work of the visual artist Marta Pinto Machado, who explores the relationships between memory, archive, subject, and territory, drawing on both family and official archives.

MEMORY AND CRITICAL FABULATION OF THE ARCHIVE IN MARTA PINTO MACHADO

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the work of Marta Pinto Machado (<https://martapintomachado.pt/>) was identified through the UNA website. She was part of the self-mapping of Black artists seeking to create spaces of visibility for their work and to strengthen the Black artistic scene in Portugal.

Marta is Portuguese, of Cape Verdean origin, and lives and works in Braga. She trained as an architect at the University of Minho, holds a master's degree in Photography from the School of Arts at the Catholic University of Porto, and is currently a doctoral candidate in History at NOVA University of Lisbon. Her artistic work examines the ambiguities of history and its relationship with the official narratives of the Western world, focusing on themes of colonialism, identity, and territory. Marta Pinto Machado is highly active in the cultural scene of Minho, participating in various events and residencies in the region, particularly in Braga, such as Contra-Quiosque, Festival Paraíso, and Encontros da Imagem. The first in-person meeting took place in September 2025 at Festival Paraíso (<https://braga25.pt/programa/paraiso-2/>), a multidisciplinary artistic programme in Braga that annually occupies different city spaces, where some of her works were discussed, and an interview was arranged.

The histories underlying some of the most well-known works, such as *Nôs Txon*, *Ceci N'Est Pas Francisco* (That Is Not Francisco), *Erosão* (Erosion), and *Beyond Solid Ground*, engage with archives and personal memory in the context of the African diaspora in Portugal, colonialism, and the intersections between geography and identity. The focus here is on the first two projects.

The project *Nôs Txôn*⁶ (<https://martapintomachado.pt/project/nos-txon>) explores, in the artist's words,

the relationship between subject and place when confronted with a new geography — in this specific case, that of a Cape Verdean woman — and her relation to the geography she inhabits, the experience of “place” in a disconnected geography, and the search for or constitution of identity.

“Nôs Txon” is a Cape Verdean expression meaning “our place”. The woman and the inhabited geography referred to are, respectively, her mother and her migratory experience in France before moving to Portugal.

Marta explained that, upon arriving in France from Cape Verde, her mother worked for several years as a domestic worker in a wealthy family's home. She began taking Polaroid-style photographs of herself at work, initially intending to send them to her family. Few photographs were actually sent; the practice became common because they were taken primarily for personal use rather than display.

Over time, these images became a kind of intimate diary, documenting the negotiations with the place of residence and work, and with the identity being constructed there.

⁶ Project published in 2022 as a book by the publisher Pierrot Le Fou: <https://pierrotlefou.pt/F22>.

Some of these selfies performed the new identity as a “domestic worker”. Gradually, however, the photographs of “la bonne” (the maid) gave way to images of a woman reinventing herself: photographs in which she appears, for example, in her bedroom, dressed to study or simply to feel beautiful (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Montage of images from the series *Nôs Txon*, 2019–2021

Credits. Marta Pinto Machado, 2019–2021

Marta Pinto Machado became aware of these images only in adulthood, which prompted her to create the series *Nôs Txon*, where she intervenes in the images by adding, beneath them, small typewritten texts on paper, through which the archives are “fabled”, that is, new meanings are generated for the images through brief commentary. The term “fabulation” is inspired by the philosophical concept of the same name by Deleuze and Guattari (1991/2009), which refers to the imaginative use of language (literary or pictorial, for example) that performs a poetic act of transformation. In this context, fabulating the archives through actions such as inscriptions on the image, erasures, additions, or photomontage implies producing something new from the archives, turning them into expressive objects that operate beyond denotation, both materially and symbolically. This strategy is common in contemporary art practices that approach archives and memory as sociocultural artefacts, within the framework of what art critic and historian Hal Foster (2004) called the “archival impulse”.

These interventions assume a highly particular role in the work, as the added texts are designed as if written by the artist’s mother, converting the archival objects from narrative and memory records into poetic and political objects (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Images from the series *Nôs Txon*, 2019–2021

Credits. Marta Pinto Machado, 2019–2021

In the first image, Maria's mother is in the kitchen, hair tied and wearing a work uniform. The added text references the work routine and a hypothetical conversation with a domestic worker in another household. In the second, she appears with loose hair, dressed to attend school, accompanied by the text: "when I went to school, I was myself and not 'la bonne'". In the third image, she appears against a neutral background "as herself", with the text: "I wanted to feel beautiful; the frustration of being a 'bonne' was enough. I told myself, 'I didn't come here to be anyone's bonne'".

Through these textual additions, the series explores the mother's migrant experience and her refusal to be reduced to a domestic worker. This is possibly what Marta Pinto Machado refers to when stating, on the project's website, that the work intends to "understand the revisited memory of the body as part of the landscape and of the reading of the subject in their insertion in place".

Indeed, in the work, being a domestic worker who studies, who did not emigrate "to be anyone's servant", and who wishes to "feel beautiful for herself" constitutes self-reflexive dimensions, indicating processes of negotiation that many immigrants experience upon arriving in a new country, often under precarious or invisible conditions. In *Nôs Txon*, Marta Pinto Machado situates these processes within a context in which subjective experience intertwines with life in a new geography and with labour and existential dynamics shaped by power relations that continue to operate between Europe and Africa as a colonial legacy. Individual experiences are thus articulated with those of other migrants, and at times even with the children of Africans born in Portugal, who, as the "other", are also subject to experiencing violence and exclusion.

The engagement with personal archive images in *Nôs Txon* closely aligns with what Tina Campt (2017) identified as the “listening to images”. This “listening” involves not only observing what the images depict but also attending to how they resonate — through silences, absences, and affective traces — that allow access to histories and subjectivities often eluding traditional visual and archival analyses. For Campt, photographic archives are spaces of tension between memory and erasure, capable of both recording and silencing.

Nôs Txon can thus be understood as a work of “listening” in Campt’s (2007) terms, activating the affective and political dimensions of African diaspora experiences through family archives. By critically reflecting through these archives, the series connects personal histories with broader historical, racial, class, and gendered experiences. Authorial representation serves as a strategy to highlight the processes involved in migratory and diasporic experiences, embedded in the memories of individuals whose lives and stories are often lost or erased over time across postcolonial geographies and displacements. This underscores the importance of exhibitions such as *Álbuns de Família* (in which Marta Pinto Machado participated alongside artists such as Mónica de Miranda), which make these lives and histories visible and reflect on the significance of their political and social recognition.

Another work by Marta Pinto Machado, addressing the issue of archives and erasures, is the video *Ceci N’Est Pas Francisco*, conceived and produced during an artistic residency in Braga as part of the programming of the Braga25 — Portuguese Capital of Culture event. In this work, rather than focusing on family archives and autobiographical materials, the artist engages with public archives to question official historiography, highlighting its partiality and incompleteness. Marta Pinto Machado discovered in the Braga District Archive a photograph of João Francisco Mendonça, a Black footballer who lived in Braga in the 1960s. She decided to investigate Francisco’s story but found only scattered fragments. For instance, it emerged that Francisco had attempted to obtain a passport to leave the country in 1961, and from that point onwards, no records exist regarding his fate. Confronted with these absences, Marta Pinto Machado proposed constructing an imagined story of Francisco, based on fragments from official archives, to address issues that were racially⁷ and politically silenced.

The work consists of an 11-minute, 33-second video composed of blocks of images interspersed with voice-over commentary. The video begins with a scene showing the artist examining the archives in search of information about Francisco, within a folder containing multiple identification portraits, each annotated with small notes (Figure 9).

⁷ At one point, the video shows an old Spanish matchbox that, on one side, bears a small text and the name of one of João Francisco’s brothers — Jorge Alberto — also a footballer. Jorge moved to Spain to play professionally at the end of the 1950s and became a naturalised Spanish citizen. On the other side, a caricature of Jorge appears, depicted as a Black monkey.



Figure 9. Frame from the video *Ceci N'est Pas Francisco*, 2025

Source. From *Ceci N'Est Pas Francisco*, by M. P. Machado, 2026, 00:00:01. YouTube.
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BA3sfG101FA>)

Comments follow regarding the lack of information and discrepancies in data concerning Francisco's 1961 passport application. At another point, drawing on a reference to the film *Operação Angola: Fugir Para Lutar* (Operation Angola: Escape to Fight; 2015) by Diana Andringa, it is suggested that Francisco may have intended to return to Angola to participate in his country's independence struggles. The film mentions a Francisco Mendonça, living in Braga, who was to be transported by members of a French non-governmental organization conducting an operation to help students from the Casa dos Estudantes do Império escape. He was expected to be taken to Spain, then to France, and possibly to Angola, though, according to the film, this did not occur. Faced with the lack of data confirming what actually happened, Marta Pinto Machado engages in fabulation:

a story of a flight that never took place. It is a non-story of Francisco. An implausible story. A story both particular and plural, from a time period that is unreachable and partially erased. A story in potential. Hannah Arendt questions: what is History when the actors — the people — are compelled to act under the imperial call to make History? What role do institutional archives play in socio-political memorialisation? What is left out, and how can such narratives exist in the public sphere? These potential stories, as Ariella Azoulay would say. The archive's time has already passed. Has it? Could it be an intellectual cliché doomed to repetition? Can a body be an archive?

For Marta Pinto Machado, the work constitutes the creation of a new archive, whose aim is not merely to preserve existing records but to resist erasure and assign

new meaning. These acts of resistance and creation reflect what Saidiya Hartman (2020) termed “critical fabulation”. Confronted with the impossibility of altering the past and the way it has been represented, Hartman argues that it is possible to change how the past is narrated in the present. This alternative imagining and recounting of events generates counterhistories — fictional narratives through which historical or archival elements can be appropriated, rearranged, and presented anew.

Marta Pinto Machado’s video embodies these processes of appropriation, enacting the desire to resist and retell the archive. Following Azoulay — cited in voice-over in the video — the artist undertakes a political act, refusing to accept history as a fixed and irreversible fact. Marta questions what became of Francisco: did he obtain his passport and cross the border? The outcome remains unknown. It is the archive’s incompleteness that allows Marta Pinto Machado to reimagine and retell Francisco’s story through critical fabulation. Her approach produces a “non-story” in which Francisco is not merely the fragmented, erased figure recorded in the archives. Faced with the impossibility of knowing his fate, all that remains is to say that the Francisco in the archives is not Francisco: *Ceci N’Est Pas Francisco*.

The video concludes with the image of a young Black boy seen from behind, standing before a floral fabric and looking sideways toward infinity. For Marta Pinto Machado, this gesture imagines an open-ended and more generous ending for Francisco’s non-story (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Frame from the video *Ceci N’Est Pas Francisco*, 2025

Source. From *Ceci N’est pas Francisco*, by M. P. Machado, 2026, 00:06:38. YouTube. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BA3sfG1o1FA>)

Like *Nôs Txon*, *Ceci N’Est Pas Francisco* intertwines archive, identity, geography, and the colonial past. However, it relies not on self-representation but on self-reparation,

closely related to it. Self-reparation is understood here not as an official or institutional act of historical reparation, as in the exhibition *Africa: See You, See Me!*, but as the gesture enacted by a Portuguese Afro-descendant artist who refuses the erasure of migrant African stories such as Francisco's and of countless others who came before and after him, including her mother. This ethical and political solidarity, though individual, is situated within a broader collective context of struggles and resistance, manifesting in distinct forms across times and places, connected by a shared pursuit of visibility, recognition, and justice, as exemplified by *Presentes!*, *Africa: See You, See Me!* and *Álbuns de Família*.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In light of the discussions developed, the article has shown that contemporary African and Afro-descendant photography in Portugal constitutes a strategic field of symbolic contestation, in which self-representation and self-reparation operate as inseparable aesthetic and political practices. The exhibitions *Africa: See You, See Me!* and *Álbuns de Família* demonstrate, at the institutional level, both the advances and the tensions inherent in the processes of decolonising the gaze, as they promote the visibility of historically silenced narratives while simultaneously revealing the structural limits of these same institutions in overcoming colonial continuities.

In turn, the works of José Sérgio and Marta Pinto Machado shift this discussion to the realm of situated experience, where image-making emerges as an implicated act of self-inscription and reinvention of the common. In José Sérgio's work, the construction of negotiated portraits and the poetic invention of visual narratives foreground Black presence as a concrete reality and assert belonging in Portuguese urban space. In Marta Pinto Machado's practice, the activation of personal and institutional archives through critical fabulation makes historical silences explicit. It proposes alternative ways of narrating the past, transforming absence into narrative potential.

Taken together, these experiences outline a shared ethic in which the image ceases to be a tool of objectification and becomes a device of agency, memory, and political imagination. Thus, both the curatorial and artistic practices examined converge toward the affirmation of a "right to look" that is not limited to visibility but implies the reconfiguration of conditions of enunciation and recognition. In this sense, self-representation, articulated with self-reparation, emerges as a fundamental gesture in the construction of new collective sensibilities and the rewriting of visual narratives, contributing to the formation of a more plural and genuinely shared common.

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