the FEBRUARY journal

Places of Sanctuary in the Artistic Work of Liz Johnson Artur

Dzifa Peters
Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Lisbon

This item has been published in Issue 01-02 'On Behalf of Silence, Seeking Sanctuary,' edited by Shura Dogadaeva and Andrei Zavadski.

To cite this item: Peters D (2023) Places of Sanctuary in the Artistic Work of Liz Johnson Artur. *The February Journal*, 01-02: 271-288.
DOI: 10.35074/FJ.2023.52.43.014

To link to this item: https://doi.org/10.35074/FJ.2023.52.43.014

Published: 28 February 2023

ISSN-2940-5181
thefebruaryjournal.org
Berlin, Tabor Collective

Places of Sanctuary in the Artistic Work of Liz Johnson Artur

Dzifa Peters

This essay deals with the concept of sanctuary in relation to Afrodiasporic and postmigrant formations of identity. It discusses coexisting and alternating cultural identities through the work of Russian-Ghanaian artist and photographer Liz Johnson Artur, who has been accumulating her *Black Balloon Archive* of Black culture and diasporic identities for the past 30 years, travelling through different countries, lifestyles, and classes. The idea of the sanctuary as a place of refuge, safety, and hospitality has informed the discourse around diasporic migration in a postcolonial world for many decades. Comparatively analyzing the politics of representation and discourses on agency through Johnson Artur's cross-cultural and intimate photographic practice, this essay explores her articulation of conditional shelters, demarcations of diasporic identities, and ultimately the archive itself as a place of sanctuary.

Keywords: Afrodiaspora, postmigrant, identity, coexistence, shelter, archive

The Archive as Sanctuary

Besides working as a photojournalist and an editorial fashion photographer, Russian-Ghanian photographer Liz Johnson Artur has developed an autonomous artistic practice. The photographs she has been taking for her *Black Balloon Archive* for over 30 years[1] while travelling to the US, Russia, Europe, and Africa portray individual characters and groups who belong to Black communities, thereby revealing cultures of local and diasporic Blackness and contributing to the idea of a continuous archive of Black representation.

This essay characterizes Johnson Artur's *Black Balloon Archive* as a place of sanctuary that fosters conditional shelters for Black and Afrodiasporic identities and their representation. This continuously growing archive is bound up with the idea of a sanctuary as a placeholder for a home, a home that welcomes, provides safety and hospitality. This hospitality derives from Johnson Artur's intimate encounters with the subjects she portrays. In addition to presenting individual stories, these moments of intimacy and interpersonal contact incorporate basic human comfort. Johnson Artur's

photographic practice provides and exchanges a moment of shelter with people during their live encounter, culminating in giving their image a place of refuge in her archive. In an interview, Johnson Artur connects the practical task of building a photographic archive with the broader question of representing diasporic identities.

> 'One of the things [you have to think of] as a photographer is how to preserve the negatives. That's a big issue. I scan my work but at the same time, it's the negatives that are really the base of my work. I think it's great that there are people who try to build something that will actually last. When [a body of work] lasts it also gains a different stature, it doesn't just become, "Oh yeah, we have a little bit of Black representation in that part of the collection"' (Pasipanodya 2018).

Johnson Artur revels in the physicality of her photographs, which is part of the reason why she continues shooting on film. She also engages with notions of value and responsibility, envisioning the archive as an architecture that preserves and 'keeps things safe from misuse' (Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis 2020). This organic, non-linear architecture is a living archive that grows and that the artist lives with and forms into artistic reflections in numerous boxes of prints and sketchbooks. De-hierarchizing individual photographs by refraining from labelling them with title, time, date, or place, which in her understanding do not 'say anything about the human being' (Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis 2020), she instead 'keeps everyone on the same level' (Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 2020) and embraces personal conversations with her audience contextualizing her work.

Her articulation of conditional shelters on the one hand and demarcation of diasporic identities on the other visualize and humbly command complex negotiations of diasporic, postcolonial identities and embrace an idea of the archive itself as a place of sanctuary.[2] Within the photographic realm, Johnson Artur contextualizes the diasporization of cultural identities by providing their representation a place in time and space in her archive. Here, her interview reflections about gentrified neighborhoods in London indicate what kind of gap she seeks to fill with her archive:

> 'There's a cafe that I really like in the market here. I've been going there for 20 years. And you can eat well, and drink, chill out and watch TV, all for five pounds. That must sound really simple but it's very important to have these places in a city like London, in a community like Brixton. Places like that are getting eaten up' (McIntyre 2016).

Since most of Johnson Artur's photographs were taken in London, which has been home to her and her studio for years, her artistic practice involves negotiating urban space in order to showcase how neighborhoods have been developed into places of shelter for diasporic communities. This is emphasized once more by the fact that Johnson Artur often selects site-specific images for exhibitions, occasionally creating actual sanctuaries as exhibitions both tactilely and spatially as well as metaphorically.

Finding One's Counterparts

Johnson Artur's work fosters a particular form of intimacy with the subjects portrayed. Starting out with an approach that meets her protagonists on equal footing, her initial endeavor before taking the photograph is to actually encounter others. She says,

> 'I want to meet people and see different things—taking a photograph allows me to do that. I try to get inside the cultures and moments that I capture, I want to look people in the eye and take the picture in the way they would like to be seen. All I hope is that I catch as much as I can and that one of these pictures touches someone' (Alemoru 2019).

This initial 'touch,' the first contact with her subjects, becomes visible in the aura of the photograph and conveys a great deal of intimacy in the sense of personal experience and interpersonal exchange. Being a woman of color who did not grow up in a Black community allows Johnson Artur to enter an intimate dialogue with her protagonists as counterparts who share similar experiences. In capturing moments of their everyday lives, she enables an authentic dialogue between herself and these people. This dialogical situation is particularly relevant in the context of people of color because it addresses the ordeal of 'double-consciousness' as articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903). His concept describes an inner conflict arising from the African American perspective of being degraded as inferior, as opposed to the dominant white culture. In this perspective, the double-conscious Black individual looks at themself through the eyes of a white society, 'measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity' (Du Bois 1903: 5).

To combat double-consciousness, Johnson Artur uses her 'Black lens': a mode of constructive disagreement throughout her project that 'strip[s] away the unbalanced power dynamics of the authorial gaze and instead create[s] a humanizing subject-photographer encounter' (Pasipanodya 2018). In Johnson Artur's own words, 'representation is really important in this struggle. You have to stand up and do something—and people *are* fighting what's happening' (McIntyre 2016). This activist attitude towards representation was again emphasized in the group exhibition in 2016 at Lothringer13 Halle in Munich titled *A thousand and x little actions*, which was a reference to Du Bois.[3]

Johnson Artur's project can be understood as an iteration of the cultural projects that go beyond imperialism, slavery, and colonialism called for by Paul Gilroy in his *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993). In this work, Gilroy talks about a Black Atlantic musical culture that incorporated elements from African, American, British, and Caribbean cultures in a hybrid mix of cultural identity: a counterculture of modernity (Gilroy 1993). Johnson Artur's own counterculture originates in creating bonds with her protagonists, many of whom also come from emerging cosmopolitan diasporic environments. As such, her photographs constitute a visual record

of what Tina M. Campt (Barnard Center for Research on Women 2019) describes as 'the creative links of relation, affiliation and affirmation forged by racialized communities in and between their multiple sites of dwelling.' This notion of affiliation marks the bridge between the biographical—even if not in the literal sense, as Johnson Artur's work is not autobiographical—and the dialogical.

While rarely providing detailed background information about the people these photographic portraits introduce, Johnson Artur produces an imaginative sentiment that affirms their real-life stories. Hers is a form of photographic storytelling grounded in collaborative exchange, since genuine self-representation is a concern on both sides of the camera. 'I'm not trying to find anything that is exceptional; my needs are to see Black people represented on a purely everyday level,' she says (Pasipanodya 2018). Here, it is of outmost importance to the artist to restrain from any form of generic or homogenizing classification of her subjects. She is thereby contributing to a broader undoing of stereotypical representation of Black subjects and Black identity, which has most recently been reinvigorated by the Black Lives Matter movement.[4] Her respect for photographic subjects and investment in what I would call a curious form of sobriety are encapsulated in Johnson Artur's description of her protagonists as 'a lot of different people' (Sinclair Scott 2021). While originally it was a perceived lack of representation of Black people in public media and art that drove her to produce an archive of Black culture, the crucial effort of her work lies in representing a broad range of images that chart a visual terrain of diversity and multiplicity, but also of mediocracy.

Legacies of Hybridity and Ambivalence

In what follows, I will discuss three photographs taken by Liz Johnson Artur for her *Black Balloon Archive*, all of which feature elderly women of color. I chose elderly women of color from her body of work because they provide unconventional examples of multiplicity, difference, heterogeneity, and intersectionality in urban contexts, especially when juxtaposed with one another. They also speak to Johnson Artur's own persona, being a Black woman of color herself. Scrutinizing Black representation is crucial to understanding Afrodiasporic identities since Black bodies have historically been underrepresented in Western visual culture. According to Stuart Hall (1997), who analyzed the socio-political role of representation in media images and the public sphere, representation gives meaning through the way in which subjects and objects are represented. In fact, in Hall's reasoning, there is no meaning until something is represented, as representation is constitutive of the event.[5] In this sense, Johnson Artur fills a gap and gives meaning by providing counter-representations of equivalized Black bodies in contemporary urban spaces of the photographic realm.

Figure 1 shows an older woman of color in front of a store window presumably in London or New York. The portrait is half-sized,

in color, and in horizontal format. The lady is centered in the image. She leans against a windowpane behind which we recognize Prada and Burberry advertisements. She wears a bright red knitted sweater over a light collared shirt and a headband in her afro-textured hair. Her sweater is bright in color but, upon closer inspection, very used in texture, just as her face is warm and round but sprinkled with wrinkles. Her face is turned away from the camera; her gaze is pensive and stern, thinking about or observing something. A poetic melancholy and a subtle bitterness are reflected in the woman's gaze and the overall setting. Her body language fluctuates between tranquility and discomfort.

These ambiguities echo Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of ambivalence, which describes a moment or state of uncertainty, a coexistence of 'attraction and repulsion' (Young 1994: 161) between colonizer and colonized. The way the colonized alternate between resistance and compliance disturbs and weakens colonial authority, which depends on an orderly power relation (Bhabha 1994). In an interview, Bhabha draws a connection from colonial history via the diaspora of migrants to today's metropolises:

> 'The material legacy of this repressed history is inscribed in the return of post-colonial peoples to the metropolis. Their very presence there changes the politics of the metropolis, its cultural ideologies and its intellectual traditions, because they—as a people who have been recipients of a colonial cultural experience—displace some of the great metropolitan narratives of progress and law and order, and question the authority and authenticity of those narratives' (Rutherford 1990: 218).

The backdrop of the high-end fashion model with her sleek but cozy winter looks and wavy blond hair strands echoes the longstanding lack of representation of Black beauty in Westernized beauty standards. The lack of representation of the Black body in global visuality then becomes a call for self-presentation in Johnson Artur's photographs. 'What I do is people [...] But it's those people who are my neighbors. And it's those people who I don't see anywhere represented,' she says ('Liz Johnson Artur' 2019). Johnson Artur allows for the externalization of self-representation by providing an archive as a stage for the underrepresented—those whose social identities are subject to the overlapping or intersecting systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination that Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) spoke about. Johnson Artur incorporates the intersectionality of her subject's multiple identities as a woman, a migrant, and a citizen and gives meaning to her presence by elevating her representation in color against a pale background.

The existence of the Black diaspora is often attributed to the scattering of people by colonialism (and slavery), which has largely informed its representation—including stereotyping—and the representation of Black people in general. As an underlying heritage, the colonial past is embedded in many of today's Afrodiasporic narratives. This leaves Black subjects in a continuous and challenging position of otherness.[6] One relevant conception of otherness was articulated by Homi Bhabha with his 1994 concept of hybridity: a critique of the concept of pure race and culture and an

Figure 1. From Liz Johnson Artur, *Black Balloon Archive*, 1970—present. © Liz Johnson Artur, all rights reserved, used with permission.

examination of how colonized cultures perform in a colonial situation, hybridity describes how the colonized create new cultural forms in an act of resistance, where creative and subversive means face the colonial power as a political force of identity. 'Hybridity' has since been criticized for its vagueness, just as Bhabha himself criticized 'multiculturalism' for flattening and disguising power relationships: 'Multiculturalism represented an attempt both to respond to and to control the dynamic process of the articulation of cultural difference administering a *consensus* based on a norm that propagates cultural diversity' (Bhabha in an interview with Rutherford 1990: 208—209).

Returning to Johnson Artur's photograph in Figure 1, the notions of hybridity and ambivalence are already indicated by means of the relocation of the subject to the Western metropolis. Not only does the notion of the Afrodiaspora imply hybridizations in various forms in Johnson Artur's work: it also encourages her in a practice that 'explores black British identity in all its aspects, also showing the evolving hybridity, attuned to those points where cultures clash and overlap' (Simpson 2019). The legacies of hybridity are reconfigured and enacted in the photographic encounter by juxtaposing different cultural identities in postcolonial realms today. Nevertheless, there is a lack of terminology for identifying the specific characteristics of hybrid identities that we must address. It is apparent that ambivalence itself implies oscillations of identity over time, just as hybrid identities encompass a million different and diverging stories, faces and identities that seek to be identified.

Diasporic Identities

Figure 2 depicts a woman of color standing in the middle of a public street. An online post by Johnson Artur locates it on Rye Lane Peckham, London, and explains her personal connection to the photograph: 'It's been my high

street for the last 20 years. On a sunny day its full of colors, lots of soul and plenty of bargains. Don't go by what you hear, come and check it out for yourself' (Johnson Artur n.d.). The lady is centered in the image. She is portrayed almost full-length and her posture and gaze, though frontal, are slightly tilted away from the camera. She is standing still and seems to pause, holding a grocery bag with her left arm. Her right arm is angled and holding onto a small handbag on her shoulder. She wears a garment with an African pattern that indicates an Islamic background. It covers her full body and serves as a headwrap that is additionally supported by a veil scarf around her head. In her immediate surroundings, we can see various small shops and two other people to her left, a younger woman and a man of color who seem to be heading home after grocery shopping just like the protagonist and who indicate a culturally diverse Black community in the area. Her gaze is thoughtful and sober, her body language between possibly fatigued and determined to move along. How has cultural discourse negotiated the relationship of diasporic Black minorities to ethnicity?

Figure 2. From Liz Johnson Artur, *Black Balloon Archive*, 1970—present. © Liz Johnson Artur, all rights reserved, used with permission.

In Stuart Hall's *New Ethnicities* (1989), he introduces black minorities in Britain as a new generation with postcolonial identities. This collective identity is based on the notion of color—being people of color—and unifies multiple ethnic backgrounds and religions. Standing in opposition to white domination and oppression in the British system at the time, this identity inspired many to political action in the struggle for access to social and economic resources. Later, in his influential essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Hall (1996) describes cultural identities as unfixed entities that 'undergo constant transformation,' while the formation of identity articulates

itself as 'not an essence but a positioning' (p. 37). As he specifically turns to his own Caribbean, European, and American identity, he takes up Bhabha's (1994) ideas in a 'conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity' (Hall 1994: 235) and Glissant's (1990) idea of creolization, a process of intermixing and cultural exchange. What Hall (1996) encourages in his own case is to be 'able to speak from all three identities' (p. 37). While acknowledging the multiplicity of hybrid diasporic identities, Hall emphasizes the importance of always claiming one's cultural-political representation. Figure 2 reveals an act of resistance to European norms and representation of Afrodiasporic cultural identity that is first and foremost embedded in her clothing of Islamic African tradition, which is interpolated into European urbanity.[7]

Johnson Artur, who also has substantial experience as an editorial fashion photographer and appreciates the element of 'style' in her work (Les Rencontres d'Arles 2021), makes visible the visual-cultural codes of contemporary subcultures. The diasporic anti-heroes portrayed in her world meet in urban and public spaces, anonymous architectures, or natural environmental surroundings that suggest scenes of everyday familiarity. These works use pose, staging and self-staging to negotiate and investigate postcolonial and diasporic identities. Since the protagonists portrayed are used to their surroundings—enacting their daily lives, meeting friends—they appear to be acting in an autofictional manner, taking on no role but their own. They are in fact representing themselves and thus literally playing themselves. The gestures, postures, and facial expressions of their social interactions as well as their clothing are informed by prior postcolonial narratives, diasporic memories, and a global contemporary lifestyle that imposes equal consumerism onto diverging contexts. Figure 2 exemplifies Stuart Hall's discussion on ethnicities and cultural identities of the 1990s, hybridity as a form of cultural difference, and contemporary specificities of auto-fictional acts and performative codes. By means of these subversive performative codes, the subject is showing themselves as they want to be seen, reconfiguring a new visual reality that is embraced by the artist. In a mode of hospitality, Johnson Artur provides them with a place of refuge in her photographic archive.

The Postmigrant Condition

In the case of Johnson Artur's work, the hybridity and new ethnicities of her subjects are perpetually implied. However, the complexity of a contemporary politics of identity requires substantial distinctions between the various forms of hybridity and otherness that her work displays. Johnson Artur says:

> 'It's important for human beings to show variety. It is very important to not see people as just one group. There is no one group: there are people migrating and setting roots in places [everywhere] and you have to see them as individual stories' (Pasipanodya 2018).

The proposal of this essay lies in introducing new terminologies within a spectrum of identity that represent oscillating forms within hybridity. These 'spectral identities'[8] therefore include cultural identities that fluctuate, coexist, and alternate. Postmigrant subjects seize multiple coexisting cultural perspectives, skillful means of empowerment that counteract the humiliation of double-consciousness. In Johnson Artur's photographic practice, a combination of both the diasporic and the postmigrant identities can be found. Hence, the postmigrant condition is an inconclusive one. On the one hand, the term helps to understand and differentiate between migratory individuals and their descendants; on the other hand, the 'post' prefix indicates the notion of an afterlife of the migratory condition itself, which could apply to first generation emigrants as well as literally everyone living in a society with a history of migration. In this relation, the postmigrant condition (Schramm, Pultz Moslund and Ring Petersen 2019) 'means acknowledging that we have already reached a point where migration experiences shape society as a whole, not just some individuals with an immigrant background' (Espahangizi 2015). A postmigrant herself, Johnson Artur acknowledges this notion of a postmigrant society by means of equivalizing her subjects and humanizing their otherness.

Looking at Johnson Artur's work overall, her series on mixed-race Afro-Russians might stand out as closest to her personal sanctuary. She decided to document other Russians of color after her first contact with her father in 2010:

> 'Most black Russians I met in Moscow and St Petersburg had also grown up without their fathers. Some had been fostered or grown up in children's homes and had never met their mothers. But we all agreed that we felt Russian as well as African' ('Afro-Russian photographer...' 2016).

Despite having grown up in different contexts and having different relationships with their African heritage, the artist and her subjects share a 'struggle against a commonly encountered resistance.' 'Those who grew up and live in Russia still have to justify on a daily basis the fact that they are Russians too' ('Black in the USSR' 2016), supporting this essay's assertion that we must differentialize Afrodiasporic and postmigrant identities. In contemporary conditions of postmigration, multitudes of identities call for a renegotiation of postcolonial heritage and diasporic memories in a contemporary globalized culture. 'Hybridity' and 'ambivalence' are still prominent terms in postcolonial discourse but require a reconfiguration and specification of different characteristics: oscillating forms of identity within a spectrum of identity, *spectral identities*, which incorporate coexisting and alternating cultural identities and perspectives of today's societies of polyculture. Johnson Artur herself is a postmigrant in various contexts. Her specific situation of Blackness while growing up is best reflected in her label as 'a white negro' (Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 2020); she notes that she grew up thinking that 'I don't have what it takes to call myself Black' (Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 2020). In contrast, the cosmopolitanism

and ephemeral transcultural entanglements present in her work incorporate the coexistence of cultural identities that move beyond the colonial legacies of empire, which remains a challenge.

Asphalt People

Figure 3 is a black-and-white full-body vertical portrait of an older black woman posing on a street in front of a wall. She is in the middle of the photograph, and the focus is solely on her, without giving much information about her surroundings, apart from a slightly tilted display of a paved and patinated sidewalk sprinkled with cigarette ends and hints of overpainted square fields on the back wall. The lady wears a fancy hooded and belted street parka over patterned leggings with platform sneakers and knee-high socks. A cap over a hood covers her ears; of her two pairs of sunglasses, one covers her eyes while the other rests on her cap. An ornamented scarf loosely hangs around her neck and a spacious handbag from her shoulder. She wears a ring on almost every finger. In her right hand, she coolly holds a lit cigarette. In her other hand rests a bouquet of fake flowers and a closed transparent umbrella. This lady seems prepared for any type of uncomfortable and rainy weather. Soldierly, almost androgynous, she wears her kit to protect herself while moving freely through the city. Her sense of style is creative, fancy, and individualistic, almost juvenilely not-giving-a-damn; she looks right back into the camera lens, in a countervisual manner (Mirzoeff 2011). Everything from her flower-power patterns and athleisure wear to her ornate accessories and facial expression, including her mouth, seems, 'Capture me in my coolness; I do what I want.'

The idea of representation in Johnson Artur's work is intrinsically connected to the concept of agency and performativity within a socio-cultural and photographic context. *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Ariella Azoulay's (2008) argument for photography's power to endow individuals with political agency, has become a key reference for visual culture and postcolonial studies. Here, the civil contract consists in the possibility for anyone, even those without citizenship in a given place, to enact a form of agency or resistance by utilizing the photographic medium as a political tool.[9] Azoulay insists that the meaning of photography is inherent not in the photograph itself as an autonomous object, but rather in the *performative* reconstruction of the photograph as an 'event.' She also discusses the reciprocal relationship between the photographer and the photographed, claiming that photographic authorship and its intentions will always be visible in the image itself.

At the same time, the presence of the camera plays its part in provoking performative utterances. In fact, we are all actors, when we are—like the camera apparatus prescribes—accustomed to watching ourselves through the eye of the other, or, in this relation, the camera lens. In the same vein, Laura Levin (2009) points out in her review essay 'The Performative Force of Photography' that 'the ontology of photography is

intrinsically linked to performance,' (p. 328) while also referring to Roland Barthes (1981), who, in his milestone *Camera Lucida,* claimed that 'what founds the nature of photography is the pose' (p. 78).[10] In a later work, Levin (2014) discusses the idea of photography and performativity in relation to her concept of camouflage, where she situates identity and mimesis along with performance. Levin argues for the political potential of camouflage as an empowering photographic tool, noting that the bodies of women, people of color, and other marginalized persons are often proximate to backgrounds and intentionally connected to properties of space. In Johnson Artur's portrait, there is a visual synchronicity between the background wall with its overpainted color fields and the woman's parka pattern, an equally generous square design. Adaptability to a street environment is conveyed here. The symbiosis of the woman and the asphalt jungle appears quirky and odd, yet authentic. The agency that emerges from this photographic event enables Johnson Artur to pull together her remaining archive as an act of resistance towards stereotyping and in favor of freedom of expression within a spectrum of Black identities.

Figure 3. From Liz Johnson Artur, *Black Balloon Archive*, 1970—present. © Liz Johnson Artur, all rights reserved, used with permission.

The Exhibition as Sanctuary

Returning to the idea of the archive as a sanctuary, Johnson Artur's show *Dusha* (the Russian word for 'soul') was her first ever solo museum exhibition. It premiered at the Brooklyn Museum in 2019 and featured photographs, videos, and sketchbooks selected from the ongoing *Black Balloon Archive*. While the notion of the sanctuary is incorporated in the photographic objects themselves, it also echoes in some of Johnson Artur's other exhibition designs, such as her show *If you know the beginning, the end is no trouble* at South London Gallery in 2019. Her first UK solo exhibition (surprising, given that Johnson Artur has built up her archive for over 30 years), it features a great number of unframed, medium-size works presented on wooden and bamboo display structures (Figure 4 and 5). While the display structures and their natural materials embody the aesthetics of a tropical island refuge, the idea of a sanctuary is further reinforced by the arrangement and architecture of a womb/cave-like center where photographs are accumulated.

Johnson Artur's affection for the physicality of photographs is again revealed in the materiality and phenomenology of her exhibition, where bamboo, leather, wood, and hair are incorporated into sculptural displays. She also prints on these materials and on different types of paper and textiles, which highlights the photograph as a cultural material object

Figures 4 and 5. Installation views of Liz Johnson Artur's *If you know the beginning, the end is no trouble* at the South London Gallery, 2019. © Liz Johnson Artur, all rights reserved, used with permission.

that has a physical presence: 'I want to touch things. I believe there is a textile, visual appreciation that I have' (Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis 2020). This goes back to her initial approach while taking her photographs—often shooting only one of each subject—where she claims to 'not just use my eyes when I take photographs, I engage with people. I use my hands and my ears. It is very much tactile' (Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis 2020).

Much as Johnson Artur's work follows different people, articulating the notion of a spectrum and hybridity as difference, she uses heterogeneity in the design of her exhibitions, hybrid spaces comprising several different sanctuaries. Here, Johnson Artur frames the show as a book with different chapters, each with a different section in the exhibition: a Peckham Lane chapter, a community chapter, an LGBTQ chapter, etc. The photographer uses bamboo as a sanctuary construction element, or, in her own words, 'a building stone for creating my own space in a space' (South London Gallery 2019). The artist's work recreates important spaces of community in the Afrodiaspora such as churches and social gatherings, reenacting their collectivity in a live program that included performances and concerts.

Conclusion

In the examples of Liz Johnson Artur's *Black Balloon Archive* (1970—present), the postmigrant subject remains a multifaceted one and the postmigrant society negotiates ephemeral transcultural entanglements. While Homi Bhabha's 'hybridity' and 'ambivalence' are still prominent in postcolonial discourse, they must be reconfigured to adequately specify today's identities fluctuating between postcolonial heritage, diasporic memories, and a contemporary globalized culture. I have introduced the terminology of 'spectral identities,' i.e. oscillating forms within a spectrum of identity, to capture coexisting and alternating cultural identities of today's societies of polyculture. While superficial concepts of 'multiculturalism' have been rightfully critiqued, the dispersed notion of the polyculture demands new ways to discuss contemporary culture.

Johnson Artur creates a stage for her subjects' auto-fictional acts and performative codes, enabling forms of agency and resistance while embracing their heterogeneity, difference, intersectionality, and multiplicity in the humanizing act of elevating the 'other.' Johnson Artur, whose monograph with Bierke Verlag was named one of the *New York Times*'s 'Best Photo Books 2016,' combines all these aspects with authenticity and a great sense of intimacy. Finally, a photograph always reveals the photographer behind the camera: travelling through different countries, lifestyles, and classes, Liz Johnson Artur herself emerges as a postmigrant artist who finds a place of sanctuary in her *Black Balloon Archive*.

1. The title *'Black Balloons' Archive* is a reference to the 1969 song 'Black Balloons' by Syl Johnson.
2. The meaning of 'archive' comes from the Greek *arkheion*: a house, a domicile, an address; the residence of the superiormagistrates, the archons, those who commanded (Derrida 1995).
3. 'It is, in fine, the atmosphere of the land, the thought and feeling, the thousand and one little actions which go to make up life. In any community or nation it is these little things which are most elusive to the grasp and yet most essential to any clear conception of the group life taken as a whole' (Dubois 1903: 136).
4. The Black Lives Matter movement began in 2013 with the use of the hashtag #blacklivesmatter by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of African-American teen Trayvon Martin 17 months earlier in February 2012. It gained worldwide attention in 2020 following the protests around the police killing of George Floyd.
5. Hall also states that the conceptual tools that we use individually are deeply connected to language as communication that externalizes, legitimizes, and naturalizes meaning as a conceptual tool of the collective. In this sense, to create new forms and new possibilities of meaning requires a temporary fix within language and signs that becomes constitutive of discourse.
6. Otherness describes a state of difference of an individual or group that is constructed on the basis of power relations, in which the dominant subordinates another on the basis of difference. In the context of the postcolonial, the imperial identification of the self is closely interlinked to the alterity of the colonized subject by means of othering in terms of a marginalization (Spivak 1985a). In this context, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak critiques and develops Antonio Gramsci's idea of the subaltern within postcolonial studies. For Spivak, the subaltern describes a presumably inferior group in hegemonic settings that lacks self-determination, as the subaltern's identity and inferiority is defined by its difference from the superior imperialist (Spivak 1985b).
7. Muslim culture has been identified as the new cultural 'other' within Europe in Postmigration Studies (Römhild 2021).
8. 'Spectral' entails both the notion of the spectrum as in a prism as well as the spectre in hauntology. Although both are relevant to photography and postcolonial discourse and future discussion, this essay focuses on the idea of the spectrum for the time being.
9. As an example, Azoulay refers to the Palestinian non-citizens of Israel and their utilization of photography as a medium of agency.
10. Levin further elaborates on the performative encounter between spectator and image, which she sees in connection to the 'affective turn' in the humanities and the social sciences. 'These authors privilege the doing aspects of photography, asking how images exceed their frames and directly affect their viewers. In this respect, these works attempt to present

a "history of looking" in the tradition of *Camera Lucida*, offering an account of the emotional experience of the spectator encountering the photograph, the individual that, according to Barthes, becomes "the measure of photographic knowledge"' (Levin 2009: 329).

Bibliography

1. Afro-Russian Photographer Captures Images of Black People in Europe, US and Africa (2016, 17 April) *Afrorepublic*, afrorepublic.blogspot.com/2016/04/afro-russian-photographer-captures.html (29/01/2023).
2. Alemoru K (2019) Kaleidoscope: Q&A with Photographer Liz Johnson Artur. *Google Arts and Culture*, artsandculture.google.com/story/MgURp-Br0PRUKQ (29/01/2023).
3. Azoulay A (2008) *The Civil Contract of Photography.* New York, Zone Books.
4. Barnard Center for Research on Women (2019, 17 July) African Diasporic Countervisualities. *YouTube*, youtube.com/watch?v=4XgYQvx9bJA. Panel discussion originally held in February 2019, New York.
5. Barthes R (1981) *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography.* New York, Hill and Wang.
6. Bhabha HK (1994) *The Location of Culture.* London, Routledge.
7. Black in the USSR: The Children of Soviet Africa search for their own identity (2016, 4 February). *The Calvert Journal*, calvertjournal.com/features/show/5388/red-africa-afrorussians-black-ussr-portraits-generation-identity (29/01/2023).
8. Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis (2020, 10 February) Artist Talk: Liz Johnson Artur. *YouTube*, youtube.com/watch?v=GzWW8uMtepc (29/01/2023).
9. Crenshaw K (1989) Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1): 139—167.
10. Derrida J (1995) Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression, Prenowitz E (trans). *Diacritics*, *25*(2): 9—63.
11. Du Bois WEB (1903) *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago, A. C. McClurg & Co.
12. Espahangizi K (2015, 28 April) 'Schweiz hat eine Bringschuld': Interview with Kijan Espahangizi. *Tagblatt Online*, www.tagblatt.ch/panorama/schweiz-hat-eine-bringschuld--ld.935674 (10/01/2019).
13. Gaonkar AM, Ost Hansen AS, Post HC, and Schramm M (eds) (2021) *Postmigration: Art, Culture, and Politics in Contemporary Europe*. Bielefeld, Transcript.
14. Gilroy P (1993) *The Black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.
15. Glissant É (1990) *Poetics of relation*. Paris, Gallimard.
16. Hall S (1989) New Ethnicities. In: Morley D and Chen KH (eds), *Critical*

Dialogues in Cultural Studies. London, Routledge: 442—451.
17. Hall S (1994) Cultural Identity and Diaspora. In: Williams P and Chrisman L (eds), *Colonial discourse and postcolonial theory: a reader*. New York, Columbia University Press: 227—237.
18. Hall S (1997) *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London, Sage.
19. Johnson Artur L (n.d.) Rye Lane Peckham. *Citylikeyou*, citylikeyou.com/london/people/liz-johnson-artur/places/rye-lane-peckham (04/02/2023).
20. Les Rencontres d'Arles (2021, 27 October) Women in Motion award for photography 2021 Liz Johnson Artur (eng). *Vimeo*, vimeo.com/579641196 (29/01/2023).
21. Levin L (2009) The Performative Force of Photography. *Photography & Culture*, 2(3): 327—36.
22. Levin L (2014) *Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage, and the Art of Blending In*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.
23. Liz Johnson Artur: If you know the Beginning, the end is no trouble (2019). *South London Gallery*, southlondongallery.org/exhibitions/liz-johnson-artur (29/01/2023).
24. McIntyre N (2016, 29 September) Liz Johnson-Artur's Photos Celebrate Black Communities, Black Aesthetics, and Black Creativity. *i-D,* i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/j587y7/liz-johnson-arturs-photos-celebrate-black-communities-black-aesthetics-and-black-creativity (29/01/2023).
25. Mirzoeff N (2011) *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality.* Durham, Duke University Press.
26. Pasipanodya C (2018, 18 April) Hunger and Black Balloons: An Interview with Liz Johnson Artur. *Canadianart*, canadianart.ca/features/hunger-and-black-balloons-an-interview-with-liz-johnson-artur/ (29/01/2023).
27. Römhild R (2021) Postmigrant Europe: Discoveries beyond ethnic, national and colonial boundaries. In: Gaonkar AM et. al., *Postmigration*: 45—56.
28. Rosen M (2020, 24 March) Portraits that Capture Three Decades of Black Culture from the 80s on. *Huckmag*, huckmag.com/art-and-culture/art-2/portraits-that-capture-three-decades-of-black-culture (29/01/2023).
29. Rutherford J (1990) The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha. In: Rutherford J (ed), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference.* London, Lawrence and Wishart: 207—221.
30. Schramm M, Pultz Moslund S, and Ring Petersen A (eds) (2019) *Reframing Migration, Diversity and the Arts: The Postmigrant Condition.* New York, Routledge.
31. Sinclair Scott F (2021, 5 July) Style spotlight on Photographer Liz Johnson Artur. *CNN*, edition.cnn.com/style/article/liz-johnson-artur-photography/index.html (29/01/2023).
32. Simpson V (2019, 3 July) Liz Johnson Artur: If You Know the Beginning, the End Is No Trouble. *Studio International*, studiointernational.com/liz-johnson-artur-if-you-know-the-beginning-end-is-no-trouble-review-south-london-gallery (29/01/2023).

33. South London Gallery (2019, 1 November) Liz Johnson Artur: If you know the beginning, the end is no trouble | Artist interview. *YouTube,* youtube.com/watch?v=UUyeBVLqbc4 (29/01/2023).
34. Spivak GC (1985a) The Rani of Simur. In: Barker F, Hulme P, Iverson M, and Loxley D (eds), *Europe and Its Others: Proceedings of the Essex conference on the sociology of literature 1984*. Colchester, University of Essex: 51—128.
35. Spivak GC (1985b) *Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice*. In: *Wedge*, 7(8): 120—30.
36. Young JCR (1994) *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. London, Routledge.

Author's Bio

Dzifa Peters is a German-Ghanaian visual artist and a Ph.D. candidate in Culture Studies. She is working on her doctorate at The Lisbon Consortium/ Research Centre for Communication and Culture at Universidade Católica Portuguesa. She is a Visiting Doctoral Researcher at the Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture in Cotutelle with Justus-Liebig-Universität Giessen and works internationally as a freelance artist and curator. Her research project is funded by the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia and analyzes colonial, postcolonial, Afrodiasporic, and contemporary identities through the medium of photography, investigating alternations of coexisting cultural identities and perspectives.

E-mail: dzifa.peters@gmail.com.
ORCID: 0000-0002-8744-1823.