

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Africans in Europe: The Culture of Exile and Emigration from Equatorial Guinea to Spain by MICHAEL UGARTE

Review by: SEBASTIAAN FABER

Source: *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, Año 65, No. 2 (December 2012), pp. 250-252

Published by: University of Pennsylvania Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41679842>

Accessed: 11-11-2019 22:44 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

University of Pennsylvania Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Revista Hispánica Moderna*

example, as a process of colonization? That the formal structures of fiction exhibit a certain coloniality is an important argument, and one to which Pinet alludes in the conclusion: “Atlas and novel use the structure of islands, of an archipelago . . . to organize in a colonial manner, in an imperial manner, all of the geography and literature available for their assemblages” (162). Such questions do not detract from this important book, but suggest productive paths for future research. Beyond the field of medieval Spanish literature, *Archipelagoes* is an original contribution to broader debates on the history of fiction.

DANIEL NEMSER, *University of Michigan*

MICHAEL UGARTE. *Africans in Europe: The Culture of Exile and Emigration from Equatorial Guinea to Spain*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2010. 201 pp.

The United Nations has called the twentieth century the century of displacement; and it's hard indeed to think of any region on earth that, over the past 100 years, has not been affected by massive movements of people forced to leave their homes in response to natural, political, or economic crises and disasters. “Exile,” Michael Ugarte writes in *Africans in Europe*, “is more and more blatantly a human condition” (29). Social scientists have long studied migration and refugee patterns as topics in their own right, of course. But for some reason humanists still tend to treat displacement as a nagging anomaly, beholden as we are to the legacy of philology and its investment in a Romantic ideology of organicity. Many of our disciplinary structures—including the way we organize academic fields, specializations, and core curricula—continue to rely on the default assumption of the writer or artist who produces her work in her home environment and her home language. As a result, exiles, immigrants, and refugees never cease posing bureaucratic and institutional problems: Should U.S. Latino literature be part of American or Latin American Studies? Who gets to teach Jorge Semprún, the Spanish or the French professor? Does or doesn't Cristina Peri Rossi belong in a survey course on twentieth-century Peninsular literature?

This is why opening up institutional space for the study of displaced cultures—and cultures of displacement—is one of the most urgent and effective ways to rethink the way we organize our teaching and research. Michael Ugarte did this for Peninsular Studies twenty years ago; his *Shifting Ground* (1989) spearheaded a theoretically astute approach to Spanish Republican exile literature, showing that, more than being a mere appendix to Spanish cultural history, intellectual exile destabilizes the very foundations of traditional literary studies. His new book, *Africans in Europe: The Culture of Exile and Emigration from Equatorial Guinea to Spain*, is just as ground-breaking. Once more, Ugarte manages to pry open the field in order to make room for a group of writers who tend to be written out of Spanish cultural history altogether: émigrés and exiles from Equatorial Guinea, Spain's only colony in Central Africa. And once again, Ugarte invites us to question some of the most basic assumptions informing our academic practice.

Equatorial Guinea, which is roughly the size of Massachusetts and has a popu-

lation of less than 700,000, is a country of paradoxes. Largely thanks to its immense oil reserves, it now boasts both the highest per capita income in Africa (globally, it is in the top 30). But it also has one of the continent's worst human-rights records. Its history is one of endless transitions and displacements. Its independence from Spain in 1968 was preceded by centuries of exploitative colonial rule at the hands of different imperial powers, which considered the area as both a source and a destination for slaves and former slaves. The hard-fought independence from dictatorial Spain was ironically followed by two bloody dictatorships (the regimes of Francisco Macías Nguema, 1970–79, and his nephew Teodoro Obiang, 1979-present), which have left thousands of victims and made life for artists and writers exceedingly difficult. Many have ended up seeking refuge in Spain—a Spain that is as ignorant of their country as it is uninterested in it.

Ugarte's first chapter deals with theoretical and conceptual matters, while a short second chapter provides a general outline of the political and cultural history of Equatorial Guinea. The remainder of the book presents close readings of a dozen core texts. Beginning with writings from the colonial period—which Ugarte shows to be more ambivalent about Spain than the exalted Hispanist rhetoric would seem to suggest—they include three major works by Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo, including his recent novel *El metro* (2007); literary responses to the Macías dictatorship (Francisco Zamora, Joaquín Mbomío, Justo Bolekia); texts, particularly poetry, from dissident writers within Equatorial Guinea that can be considered inner exiles (Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel, José Siale, Maximiliano Nkogo); and women writers (María Nsue Angüe).

Africans in Europe is conceived as a much-needed primer for the many of us who are less than familiar with the budding field of Afro-Spanish studies—in which Ugarte has been a pioneer, along with Ndongo, Marvin Lewis, Silvia Bermúdez, Benita Sampedro, and Susan Martin-Márquez. As in *Shifting Ground*, Ugarte is not content with providing a broad historical-cultural context; his is also a theoretical, philosophical, and ethical project. In this instance, he uses the case of Equatorial-Guinean displacement in Spain and elsewhere to argue against too rigid a conceptual distinction between emigration—a social or sociological category—and exile, which has political and literary associations. Rather than holding on to differentiations like these, Ugarte argues in his first chapter, cultural critics are better served by a more hybrid conception of displacement, one that takes into account the individual and the collective, the cultural and the political, and the gains as much as the losses that come with displacement. This hybrid category he dubs *emixile*: “exile in all its senses including especially emigration and immigration, a category of displacement both specific and universal, a conception of exile that makes a theoretical gesture by its direct connection to an experience of human life, all life, however ‘terrifying’” (17). Seeing immigration from the perspective of exile allows us to better appreciate the “double consciousness” characteristic of intellectual displacement, the chronic tensions and conflicts in matters of loyalty, affiliation, and identity. Enriching the category of exile with that of immigration/emigration, on the other hand, “forces the consideration of a ‘face-to-face’ relationship between self and other.” For Ugarte, the category of *emixile* allows us to bring to the table an important

set of critical and philosophical concerns, ranging from postcolonial criticism to Levinas and de Certeau.

At the same time that he considers the displacement of Equatorial Guinean writers in a wider postcolonial context of African diaspora culture, Ugarte underscores—as he did in *Shifting Ground*—that we should resist the temptation to universalize the exile or émigré experience. Much depends, for instance, on the relationship between the home and host countries. It's one thing to leave a former imperial metropolis to end up exiled in one of its former colonies, as was the case for many Spanish Republicans in the wake of the Civil War. It's quite another to be displaced from a former colony to the metropolis. In both cases, factors that appear to facilitate integration and acceptance, such as shared language and culture, may well turn out to hamper them, laden as they are with post-colonial baggage: the “relationship between the previously colonizing reader and the previously colonized writer,” Ugarte remarks, is not an easy one (160–61).

Among Equatorial Guinean writers in Spain, Ugarte signals not only a highly ambivalent appreciation of the “positive” legacy of Spanish colonialism (clerical education, modernization, the “gift” of the imperial language, Castilian, in which most Guinean authors express themselves), but also an acute awareness of the continued weight of a *negative* legacy ranging from economic exploitation to forms of benign and malicious neglect. Among the latter, certainly, is the Spanish media's chronic *ninguneo* of events in Equatorial Guinea. Although the information blackout was initially imposed by the Franco regime—allowing much of Macías's repression to go unnoticed—the pattern continued after the transition to democracy. Spain, in this sense, is an exception within Europe. Elsewhere—in France, Britain, or the Netherlands—the intellectual Left has thought it important to reexamine their countries' colonial legacies, and made room for representatives of the former colonies, not only in the cultural market but also through its institutions of recognition such as academies and literary prizes. Not so in Spain, where Equatorial Guinea is “not as rooted in Spanish historical consciousness” (161).

Displaced writers and intellectuals often face major hurdles in their quest for publication, distribution, reviews, and recognition, in the public spheres of their home as much as their host country. In addition to their physical displacement, their work, too, is “deterritorialized.” For the Equatorial Guinean writer and intellectual in Spain, the most glaring and devastating manifestation of this kind of deterritorialization is not the censorship at home, but “neglect, a form of passive aggression” (157). Ugarte argues that this neglect has an ethical dimension in addition to an historical and commercial one. He agrees with Justo Bolekia that Spain and its intellectual elites, given Spain's role as colonizer, have a *responsibility* for helping promote Equatorial Guinean culture. This remarkable book shows that he believes this responsibility extends to academic Hispanists as well.

SEBASTIAAN FABER, *Oberlin College*