

Hélène Amouzou: Photography as Home

This essay about the work of Togolese-born photographer Hélène Amouzou, exiled in Europe since she was a young woman, investigates the way she has used photography to construct, or reconstruct, a place for herself, image by image. After a brief biographical introduction, I'll try to understand how her photographs express this quest for identity, in their form as much as in their content. Though she does generally work in self portrait, we'll see that her work achieves a much larger import than mere autobiography. Indeed, raising questions of citizenship, of self possession and community, of the situation of the so-called "undocumented," and of the experience of immigrating as a woman, her work amplifies the very possibilities of the genre.

1. From Exile to Photography

Born in Togo in 1969, Hélène Amouzou was 23 when, following her husband to Benin, she left her country for the first time. That was more than twenty years ago. She looks back on those decades now with something close to disbelief, struggling to make sense of a journey that was, nevertheless, her own. It was a journey that left her with foggy and incomplete memories; a belated recognition of her own earlier political naiveté; and the conviction that if she had it all to do over again, she would never have left. Exile wasn't even her idea in the first place—it was her husband's. From Benin, he continued alone to Germany, where Hélène Amouzou would join him one year later. It was then that they learned to live undocumented, staying temporarily with friends and then at a refugee center, where their daughter was born in 1994. When their request for asylum was turned down, in 1997, Hélène Amouzou's husband went home. With no further news of him, she decided to leave Germany with her daughter and settle in Belgium. There began another long journey of everyday resistance as she tried to provide for her daughter and herself without legal status. She would be exploited by the gangs that profit from the undocumented, playing on their trust; spend a year working for a kind family as a nanny; until finally she was taken in by a convent. It would be eleven years before Hélène Amouzou and her daughter got their residence cards . . . in the same year, 2009, that *Between the Wallpaper and the Wall*, her first book of photographs, appeared.

Hélène's discovery of photography resulted from a similar combination of luck and tenacity. Looking for extracurricular activities for her daughter, she found art schools that taught music and visual arts to adults as well as children, and in 2003, she walked into Molenbeek Academy, named for its Brussels municipality.

(Her curiosity had been piqued by the video practice of a fellow churchgoer, and by her own desire to represent her environment, thoughts, and experiences in image.) Once in the academy's video and photography studio, though, she found herself uncomfortable with a self-portrait assignment. *It was unthinkable for me to pose, to appear in a photograph. It was beyond my reach.* The portraits of her daughter she submitted instead did not satisfy the instructors. But the value of the class inspired her to try again the following year. *I had no travel permit, I couldn't do anything. I couldn't do anything but go to those two studios. These two classes became a life for me, these three or four hours a time when nothing was forbidden. I went out. I met people. Little by little, it became a light that illuminated me.*

This “writing with light” (from the Greek *photos* and *graphein*) soon took precedence over video. In 2006, the photographer Nicolas Clément became head of the studio and assigned self portraits again. This time Hélène Amouzou took the assignment as a challenge. Starting with her hands and feet, she photographed herself in ways that kept her hidden. *I didn't want to be recognized*, she admits. It would take another year for her to develop the approach that produced a striking body of images shot in her attic. An abandoned living space, this attic held just a few pieces of furniture, with walls covered in faded, or even tattered, paper. It struck her as a metaphor for her own life. *I felt as if I'd found someone with my own story. This place where someone had lived, all of a sudden, became useless. I left home to save my life and ended up somewhere I didn't even exist.*

This is where Hélène finally finds her place—as the model for her own self portraits. At first she appears merely in blurs (Fig. 1), artifacts of the long exposure time she uses. The dematerialized body, leaving ghostly traces, gets at the invisibility to which people living without documentation are symbolically reduced. Sometimes the desolation of the setting is lightened by the model's graceful dress—but even then, peeling wallpaper and the attic's emptiness memorialize her losses. A suitcase, meanwhile, represents the photographer's fugitive status and yearning for freedom, her desire to escape her confining circumstances. Shooting in the attic becomes a kind of healing ritual whose creative force lets the photographer reinvent herself. This ritual found a place, too, in the darkroom of the Academy of Drawing and Visual Arts, where Hélène continued her apprenticeship. The darkroom became a bounded world in which no one could question her and she herself needed nothing. The motif of the suitcase also suggests this need for escape, even as it alludes to Hélène Amouzou's own actual displacements, to her exile the threat of a forced return. Formally, Hélène Amouzou's state of uncertainty comes through in her use of traces and blurs, often near her face or body. Their message is clear: the indifference of the world around

her makes her feel invisible. At the same time, they're evidence of the role that photography plays as her way of documenting an existence that the state refuses to recognize. It's literally a question of coming out of the shadows—an image realized by a subsequent suite of photographs shot in full daylight on her terrace. On her face, now finally revealed, is an expression of permanent anxiety—an anxiety at least partly concerned with the difficulty of adequately expressing that anxiety itself.

The artistic recognition her work wins will confirm the path H  l  ne Amouzou has chosen as a photographer, one concerned with exile both literal and figurative. Her improbable path of shows and prizes, in an artistic discipline in which she had hardly any background, begins in 2008 with the "Poze" competition, which culminates in an exhibit at the Brussels Palais des Beaux-Arts. But it's her show the following year at the Th  atre de Namur that introduces her to a larger public. This show will be accompanied by the publication of her photo book *Between the Wallpaper and the Wall*. (As if to emphasize how inextricable her art work has become from life, she will receive her residence card on the same day as the opening.) The Prix M  diatine, awarded annually to an emerging artist, will follow in 2010, and in 2011, H  l  ne Amouzou will be included in the Mus  e du Quai Branly's biennial, Photoquai. If her photo practice was a way to make herself real in her own eyes and in her daughter's, external recognition was a way of gaining foothold as a citizen in the public sphere. It's a question of breaking the dichotomy between public and private on which, as Ruth Lister writes in *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives*, the masculine notion of citizenship is based.

2. Images of a Condition: Photographs and Citizenship

H  l  ne Amouzou's photographs are deeply personal, but they speak just as surely to larger questions of citizenship, non-citizenship, and exile, and specifically to the female experience of these states. Her distinctive photographic voice gives expression to conditions currently shared by innumerable migrants. International immigration has been increasingly female since the 1970s, particularly in the last few years. One hundred million women leave their countries of origin every year, a figure amounting to roughly half the migrants in the world. As the sociologist Laurence Roulleau-Berger reminds us, *Individuals—in this case, migrant women—build up identities from a number of roles and associations linked to heterogeneous social spaces. ... The process of individuation involves both biographical bifurcations and the need for self-cultivation and self-government. Obviously social and economic inequality result in different degrees of access to self-government. We can distinguish*, she continues, "individuals by excess," who

have acquired living space, positions, and property—owners of themselves—and “individuals by default,” left out of the larger system or unable to insert themselves into protective groups, with little in the way of resources or support, somewhat less their own owners. We can suppose that there would be migrants who own themselves in this way and unprotected migrants who don’t. It seems to me that this quest to own oneself is at the heart of H  l  ne Amouzou’s photographic project. Severed as a young woman from any connection to her past or origins, she found herself dispossessed of her status as an individual, as a wife, and even as a citizen. Without official papers for nearly two decades as she saw to her daughter’s education—and represented, for her, the “individual” par excellence—H  l  ne used photography to achieve an existence for herself, visible and recognized, that could gratify her in her own right. We see this when she recounts that, after she started studying photography, she became able to greet her daughter after school with stories of what she herself had done that day. The testimony of her images and interviews corroborate this experience of migrant women, a sample of whose biographies were collected by Roulleau-Berger. *Among women without papers, she reports, and therefore in a situation of great social insecurity, some appear to be in a process of serious disaffiliation, losing themselves, becoming hidden, trapped in transient situations, often cut off from parents and children in their countries of origin. They find themselves caught between a denial of their existence and an attempt to achieve some status. They roam the streets, often forced by their irregular status to keep silent, classified as undesirable, constantly in fear of deportation. They live as silent motions that express only a given society’s intolerance of strangers.* H  l  ne asserts as much herself, when she says, *Having no residency card, I withdrew myself from normal life. I was afraid of being asked questions, that someone might even see on my face that I didn’t have papers and didn’t work. Socially I withdrew from everything. . . .* Photography classes thus took on a paramount importance for her and in her life as a mother in the home.

Expressing herself through photography, in her own name, is the way H  l  ne Amouzou achieved not only self-possession but *citizenship*, in the deepest sense of the term—the sense used by Dominique Colas. In ancient Greece, she tells us, it was the inscription of their names on official lists that guaranteed Athenian citizens their status. *Memberships, he writes, are always the results of speech acts. . . . Whether an individual’s name comes from his kinship group . . . or his nation; if some are denied signs of national belonging . . . and other given, like a viaticum, what we call temporary residence cards, that is, documents attesting to their absence on national registers; if some find themselves with a nationality they didn’t want and which they’d rather change, but which others seek but cannot obtain—all these inscriptions and erasures, and the logics that regulate them, say*

that man is only political insofar as he is an animal that speaks. And to conclude: Citizenship cannot be democratic unless it is supported and regulated by the belief that human identity lies in the shared possession of reason and language, and not in membership in some specified fraction of the human race.

The techniques of inscription and erasure Colas cites as expressions of human politics, the politics of an animal that speaks, strike me as being at the very heart of H el ene Amouzou's photography—the very heart of the marks which make this photographer the author, through images, of her own biography, and of those, unwritten and invisible, of the hundred million women who leave their countries of origin every year.

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