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Afro-Ascendencia: From Colonial Slavehood to Contemporary Sainthood in Harmonia Rosales, Fabiola Jean-Louis, and Firelei Báez's Interventions on the Afro-Diasporic Visual Legacy and Beyond

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Afro-ascendencia: Visual Reclamation and Liberatory Futurities

Lei Edmonds

Introduction

How do communities reconcile living within structures for which they were never calibrated? In a society where every aspect of life is stratified and spectacle-driven—echoing the pseudoscientific obsessions of Louis Agassiz and the exploitative performances of P.T. Barnum—the very act of maintaining a coherent sense of self becomes an act of resistance (Wallis 2). This existential stratification served as the caryatid upon which the Old Dominant buttressed itself—a defunct concept in the New Codominant, where power structures are still being reshaped but continue to uphold colonial legacies. The dominant social order continues to deny marginalized groups their rightful claim to belonging through inherited, self-renewing colonial logics.

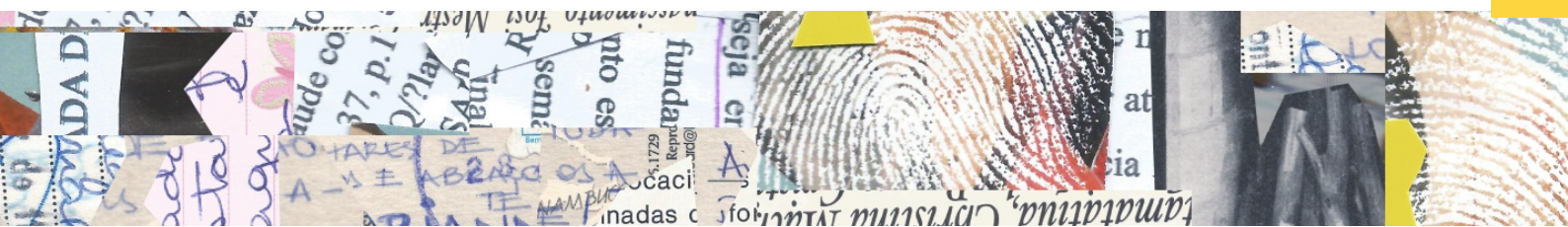
Within this archive, the image of the Afro-descendant body occupies a fraught position. Classical and colonial visual regimes constructed Black and Brown peoples as embodiments of alterity, peril, and subhumanity. These depictions rendered Black and Brown bodies as irredeemably ‘other,’ creating a dehumanizing gaze that contemporary artists now strive to repair, subvert, and reimagine. This gaze not only represented Afro-descendant life but actively constructed it as less-than-human.

Harmonia Rosales, Fabiola Jean-Louis, and Firelei Báez work backward to enable us to imagine forward by deconstructing the terms of subhumanity of the past so “people could be cleansed and redeemed of the detritus of difficult life” (Estes 64). They draw and drain the energy/power of the colonial evil so that it may be returned to the womb or creative belly of these Creators to be “transformed and reissued, hopefully in less contentious states” (Estes 64).

Through acts of revision, reclamation, and re-visioning, they assume a creative burden akin to what Clarissa Pinkola Estés describes in *Women Who Run with Wolves*—drawing from Jung’s theories of God-consciousness—as the work of the sin-eater: one who absorbs the detritus of inherited harm in order to cleanse a future not yet lived. These artists sing over the bones of visual historiography. After a rigorous process of incubation, they return to the dead past, make it malleable, and deliver it back into the world transformed. Their artworks drain the colonial image of its violence, returning its energy to a creative womb where it can be refashioned into something capacious, dignifying, and new. Through these acts of reclamation and transformation, these artists embody what I term *Afro-ascendencia*—a process of lifting Afro-descendants beyond their historical subjugation to create a new visual language for a liberated future.

The visual beyond becomes, in this sense, the quintessence of subaltern redemption. Contemporary Afro-descendant artists invert art-historical constructions of Blackness to create a visual rhetoric that articulates a theory of liberation grounded in historiography yet oriented toward futurity. Through their interventions—layering, overlay, mimicry, and subterfuge—artists of color exorcize the colonial gaze and redeem the representational space that once consigned them to abjection. This creative violence restores the humanity stripped from Afro-descendant peoples, complicating linear narratives of the past while conjuring new possibilities for the future.

Afro-ascendencia is the intersection of a post-canonical visual culture that reconciles past misrepresentations, addresses present conditions, and gestures toward future potentialities. This research, therefore, asks:



- What constitutes a Black visual legacy, and what might a Black visual *beyond* look like?
- How has coloniality been installed psychologically through visual culture?
- What is the power of nonverbal, optical storytelling for Afro-descendant communities?
- How might artists imagine spheres of existence—academic, institutional, cosmological—that do not require perpetual contestation with antiquity?
- Can shattered stereotypes be recomposed to construct a freer self and a freer future?

Ultimately, Afro-ascendencia encompasses what is ancestral and futuristic, human and divine, earthly and ethereal, theoretical and practical. It is a renaissance of the Afro-descendant body within the visual field, a canonization and crowning of the colored subject that unsettles the binary of saint/slave and generates new modes of being. These artists have crowned in heaven that which was condemned to hell in the legacy of visual culture.

Methodology

This study employs formal analysis as the primary method for articulating the framework of Afro-ascendencia, focusing on how contemporary Afro-descendant artists challenge dominant narratives surrounding representation, identity, spirituality, and belonging. While artworks can be examined as physical objects, sensorial experiences, and cultural artifacts, this article prioritizes the latter two dimensions—attending to the visual, visceral, and symbolic registers through which meaning is constructed.

Each artwork is examined through a process of description, interpretation, and evaluation, situating its formal qualities within semiotic, iconographic, and, where relevant, religious frameworks. This holistic approach treats each piece as a constellation of interconnected components, rather than fragmenting its aesthetic, historical, and psychological dimensions. When necessary, comparative connections are drawn between contemporary works and earlier pieces from the canonical archive—not to reinforce hierarchical

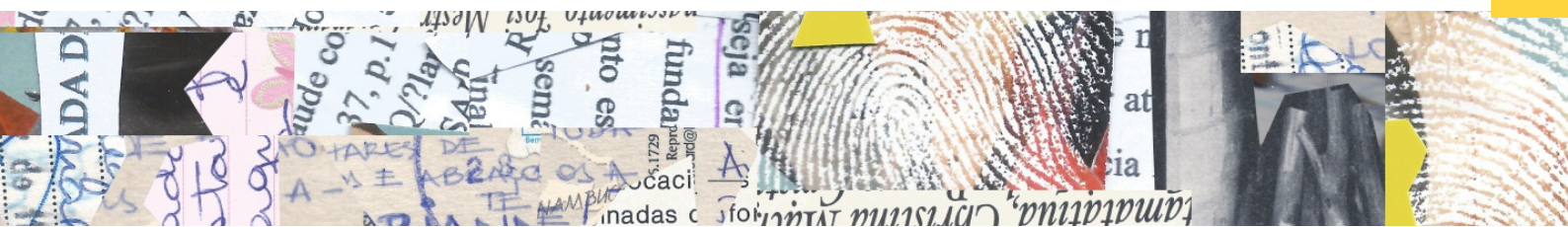
genealogies, but to highlight the disruption and distance *that Afro-ascendencia* introduces.

This methodology is further enriched by the lens of *créolité*, which foregrounds hybridity, world-building, and the generative possibilities that emerge when cultures, languages, and genealogies come into contact. As articulated in Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant's *In Praise of Creoleness*, creolization constitutes not merely a cultural mixture but a conscious mode of being—one that resonates with the spatiotemporal elasticity found in the oeuvres of Rosales, Jean-Louis, and Báez (Barnabé 90).

In situating Afro-ascendencia within this broader critical landscape, this study engages the substantial body of scholarship that has interrogated the Eurocentrism of art history—work by Tatiana Flores, Krista Thompson, Arturo Lindsay, Genevieve Hyacinthe, among others. Rather than replicating these interventions, the present analysis extends them by applying their insights at the level of close visual interpretation, attending to the archetypal, cosmological, and psycho-spiritual registers through which Afro-diasporic artists operate. Accordingly, while the primary emphasis remains on formal and interpretive analysis, these readings are informed by and positioned in dialogue with existing critical frameworks surrounding Afro-diasporic art, gender, and coloniality.

Critical Race Theory and womanist methodologies, such as the wise words from Pauli Murray who wrote:

And since, as a human being, I cannot allow myself to be fragmented into Negro at one time, woman at another, or worker at another. I must find a unifying principle in all these movements to which I can adhere. This, it seems to me, is not only good politics but also may be the price of survival. (1967 letter to Dr. Kathryn F. Clarenbach, Former Chair of the National Board of NOW).



further informs this approach, emphasizing that theoretical and lived experience cannot be partitioned without compromising survival. In attending to these intertwined systems of meaning, this article situates Afro-ascendencia as both a theoretical intervention and a lived practice of resistance, reclamation, and creative sovereignty.

Format

European colonial regimes, in their invention of racial, sexual, and spiritual categories, constructed interlocking systems that justified their violent remaking of the world. Anchored in the triad of *God, Glory, and Gold*, colonizers imposed structures that reorganized every dimension of reality—material, visual, linguistic, and cosmological. This article does not attempt to catalogue all the mechanisms of colonialism; instead, it focuses on the optical pedagogies that taught people of color to internalize and reproduce the logics of their own subjugation. In classical art history, such images function as *exemplum virtutis*—models of behavior designed to enforce routine, unquestioned compliance. This project, however, proposes an inversion of that logic, appropriating colonial and classical visual tools to imagine more liberatory paradigms.

The article is organized into three sections, each of which strategically reclaims and reconfigures colonial frameworks:

Section 1: GOD(S) examines Harmonia Rosales’s use of classical techniques and her interrogation of the master narrative, particularly through her painting *Still We Rise*. Her reappropriation of Renaissance forms demonstrates how Afro-descendant figures can inhabit and redefine the very structures that once excluded them.

Section 2: GLORY analyzes one of Fabiola Jean-Louis’s transformative paper textiles, photography, and installation works. Jean-Louis reanimates the visual language of European nobility to expose its entanglement with the histories of enslavement, femininity, and racial hierarchy, while aligning with longstanding

cultural practices of Black sovereignty and self-fashioning.

Section 3: GOULD explores a mixed-media work of Firelei Báez, which intervenes in histories of geography, nationhood, and diaspora. Through rupturing and refashioning inherited visual lineages, Báez articulates regenerative cosmological and cartographic possibilities for Afro-diasporic subjects.

Section 1 | God(s)

Building on bell hooks’ assertion that “[i]f one could make a people lose touch with their capacity to create, lose sight of their will and their power to make art, then the work of subjugation, of colonization, is complete. Such work can be undone only by acts of concrete reclamation” (hooks 389-391). Extending this insight, one might contend that by severing people from the Gods innate to them, the work of abjection is completed as well. The paternal function of God and the redemptive façade of Christianity in the procedure of colonization were enacted through militant and missionary technique. This expansion of Christianity coerced people to worship a God who did not resemble them. When both oppressors and the oppressed pray to the same God, whose prayers are answered? What becomes of a people forced to deify a monotheistic figure in place of a generations-old pantheon of gods and goddesses?

This section establishes an index of Afro-ascendance as a counter-narrative within the master narrative, restorative rather than merely resistive. Rosales, like the other artists discussed here, does not refuse history; she engages it, offering an alternative. Through reproduction—both figurative, in contemplating (re)birth, and literal, in reinterpreting Michelangelo’s works—Rosales approximates divine experiences as imminent and transcendent for Afro-ascendants. Her practice mirrors the historical labor of Afro-descendants: learning from the past, striving for growth, and cultivating a personified mitosis that better society. Her interventions embody



existential maturity and wisdom gained through dialectical contemplation of the past and present, oriented toward a reconciled future.

Harmonia Rosales

Harmonia Rosales (b. 1984) is an Afro-Cuban American artist from Chicago, currently based in Los Angeles. Working primarily in classical painting, she depicts women and people of color in roles of power and beauty, drawing inspiration from ancient myths, Afro-Cuban culture, and Renaissance masters. Her work destabilizes notions of artistic “fact,” departing from exclusively European or African traditions in favor of Creolized, Afro-diasporic survival strategies.

Scholars have widely observed that Harmonia Rosales’s body of work reconfigures canonical Western religious and mythological imagery to center Black female subjectivity and diasporic identity, such as observed in Elsa Mercado’s “A Conversation with Harmonia Rosales” in *Afro-Hispanic Review* (152-160). Existing scholarship, including work by Efeoghene Igor Coleman and Natalie McCann, has emphasized Rosales’ interventions into representation and canon formation. Building on these readings, this analysis underscores how her work engages Afro-spiritual and cosmological frameworks as sites of epistemic resistance, while also staging a deeper rupture in which dominant knowledge systems are not simply revised but destabilized, giving way to reconstituted forms of meaning grounded in diasporic cultural inheritance and spiritual knowledge.

Rosales’ ambidextrous artistry centers Afro-descendant female empowerment within Classical European technique, honoring the African diaspora. Fascinated by Renaissance masters yet critical of their Eurocentric hierarchies and idealizations of subordinate women, her intent is not mere replication but the creation of harmony between historically opposed dichotomies. Her Afro-Cuban heritage and ancestral knowledge inform her compositions, as does lived experience: she is a mother, navigating

identity and society, and her children inspire her portrayals of coexistence in a world indebted to Africa as much as to Europe. Through her figures, she interrogates the historical and contemporary condition of Afro-descendant women.

Still, We Rise



Fig. 1. Harmonia Rosales, *Still We Rise*, 2021, oil and gold on canvas, 60 × 55 in.

When spoken aloud, the title *Still We Rise* exceeds a mere vocal exercise. It operates as a form of linguistic and symbolic reclamation; its repetition enacts a process of release, as if expelling the residues of colonial violence under which communities have been historically submerged or buried.

Rosales’ *Still We Rise*, extends the logic of Afro-ascendancy by charting the interlaced levels and cycles of existence that culminate in a transcendental state of being. At first glance, the eye registers a multiplicity of Black figures, each crowned with a lucent golden circle—an emblem of haloed sanctity. These bodies inhabit an indeterminate, celestial realm where Black subjects float freely and engage in both secular and sacred exchange. Here, the threshold between the terrestrial and the divine collapses; earthly hierarchies cannot withstand the altitude of this vision. Upon closer study, however, the composition reveals a discernible triptych of foreground, middle-passage, and celestial backdrop.

In the beleaguered foreground, humanity unfolds under siege. Black bodies are chained, collared, flogged, and hanged. White figures—some brandishing whips, others corralling Black bodies—commit atrocities that are as historical as they are ongoing. To the bottom right, a woman in blue traverses the turbulent waters amid shipwrecked bodies: Yemaya, present all along in the Middle Passage, witnessing the displacement and demise of those thrown overboard. The scene also includes the visual rhetoric of conquest—Europeans landing ashore, initiating the dual conquest of coastal land and Black flesh. Bodies aquatic and corporeal alike become sites of violation.

In the middle ground, scantily clothed bodies rise—floating, flying, ascending. To the right, sculptural artifacts and busts are also lifted upward, as if reclaimed for celestial safekeeping. To the left, partially risen figures reach back to pull others up, enacting a visual theology of communal ascendance. Central to this liminal zone stand a man and a woman—Adam and Eve—recast in Blackness, surrounded by the spiritual presence of Orishas such as Ochún, Obbatalá, and Oya.

Two militant forces intervene visibly in this coming-into-deification: Ogun, Orisha of war, stands beside Adam burning a Confederate flag—an act of iconoclastic reckoning—while Elegguá, guardian of the crossroads, holds the ladder that bridges the physical and the spiritual realms. Only Black bodies ascend this ladder; the few white figures below remain absorbed in their own domination, unable—or unwilling—to recognize the divine recursion unfolding before them. They, too, will face divine judgment in time. In life as in death, no one escapes this terminal evaluation, but Rosales makes clear that the first to rise are those who bore the weight of the world's colonial sins.

In the beatific backdrop, celestial beings intermix with mortals in consecratory transition. Two dominant sacred symbols—one African, one European—hover in dialogic tension. *The ankh,*

an ancient Kemetic symbol of life, reproduction, and cosmic continuity, functions as a portal of genesis. Its presence is crucial: reproduction, both literal and metaphoric, is central to Rosales' praxis of Afro-ascendance. The Catholic cross appears on the opposite side, a symbol of sacrificial life and resurrection. The absence of a crucified figure invites reflection on resurrection's primacy over suffering.

Both symbols ascend toward Oshumare, the iridescent Orisha who unites earth and sky. Oshumare's serpentine form—encompassing all colors—embodies equilibrium: between Orisha and human, masculine and feminine, superior and inferior, life and afterlife. As the Orisha responsible for returning rainwater to the heavens, Oshumare signifies the cyclical return of earthly beings to their spiritual point of origin. Comfortingly, the only hell Rosales represents is the one already experienced on earth; transcendence becomes the rightful inheritance of Black people through Yorùbá cosmology.



Fig. 2. Michelangelo, *Il Giudizio Universale*, 1536–41, fresco, 13.7 × 12 m, Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.

Still We Rise is Rosales' adaptation of Michaelangelo's *Il Giudizio Universale* (The Last Judgment). Instead of reiterating Christian teleology, she reframes judgment through an

Afro-diasporic cosmology that honors ancestral sacrifice. In Michelangelo's fresco, feet hover at the pinnacle—often interpreted as Christ or God, gendered and white. Here, Rosales substitutes not a single white divinity but a constellation of Black celestial beings whose names, stories, and presence are fully known.

At the bottom of both works lie the consequences of earthly suffering: Christ's crucifixion in Michelangelo; the wounds, scars, and historical trauma of enslavement in Rosales. In Christianity, Jesus bears the sacrificial burden for humanity. In *Still We Rise*, the burden is borne by generations of Black people, whose suffering becomes the site of cosmic recompense. Rosales amplifies a theology of reversal—the last shall indeed be first—foregrounding the sacrifices of ancestors so that descendants might transcend the historical darkness of the Americas.

Section 2 | Glory

History is often said to belong to the victor, but Afro-ascendencia insists that the archive is not fixed—it can be seized, rewritten, and made answerable to those it once excluded. This act of reclamation resonates with Edwidge Danticat's longing for a future in which her daughters inherit both possibility and sovereignty, their "crowns... already bought and paid for." Jean-Louis' work enacts precisely this vision. Rather than imagining futurity as the belated inheritance of the historically victimized, she asserts that the future still belongs to a victor—just not the conventional one.

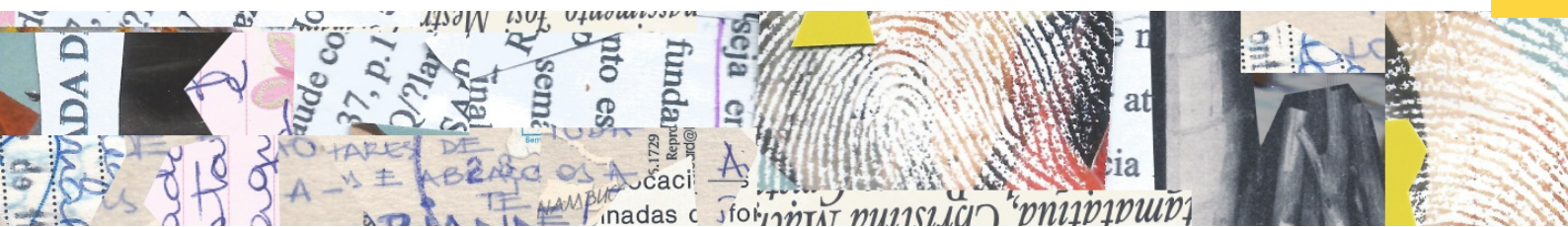
Fabiola Jean-Louis' deployment of Afro-ascendencia refashions past misrepresentations into present reconstructions that center women of color in regal, sovereign states of being. This section examines how her work dialogues with the imagined royal subject and challenges the historical record to account for the absence—the deliberate erasure—of Black and Brown women from dominant national narratives. By addressing this absence, Jean-Louis illuminates contributions and interior worlds that mainstream histories

have ignored, suppressed, or distorted. Her use of portraiture is especially subversive. Portraiture was historically a technology of power—the mechanism through which nobility inscribed itself into the visual archive of Western art. By appropriating this genre and placing Black women at its center, Jean-Louis confronts the crown and court on their own terrain. In doing so, she asserts the necessity of an inclusive historical imagination, one in which the visual grammar of sovereignty is no longer racially predetermined. Her intervention stages not only a critique but a visceral encounter: a demand that viewers reckon with the erasures, omissions, and violences that underpin Euro-American historical memory.

Fabiola Jean-Louis

Fabiola Jean-Louis, a Haitian-American conceptual artist and paper sculptor, revitalizes neglected histories with works that breathe life into the silenced, the forgotten, and the deliberately obscured. Born in Pòtoprens, Ayiti (b. 1978), and now based in Brooklyn, she works across mediums to craft images that challenge hegemonic portrayals of the past, particularly those involving Black women.

Jean-Louis' work transcends aesthetics. It summons dialogue about race, gender, sovereignty, and the mechanics of historical power. Paper—fragile, ubiquitous, and historically the substrate of official record-keeping—becomes in her hands a medium of transmutation. Its very vulnerability echoes the precarity of the lives she honors, even as its transformation into regal garments proclaims resilience and beauty. Jean-Louis is, in this sense, a sartorial architect of freedom and Afrofuturity: alchemizing the vestiges of the past, interrogating the spirit, and restoring dignity to generations circumscribed by historical violence. Scholarship on Fabiola Jean-Louis has emphasized her engagement with Afro-diasporic history and the visual language of European aristocratic portraiture, as discussed in Hélène Valance's analysis of her work.



Each portrait begins with the design and construction of an elaborate paper garment, worn by a model and ultimately staged for the camera. The photographic image becomes a site where time bends: the past and present coexist, and the future enters as an imagined possibility. Her practice is a speculative visual historiography—one that opens questions rather than resolves them, permitting ambiguity to remain productively suspended. While existing scholarship has emphasized identity and representation in Jean-Louis' work, this analysis foregrounds the unresolved tension between gendered transgression and racialized histories of violence.

Conquistadora



Fig. 3. Fabiola Jean-Louis, *Conquistador I*, 2017, archival pigment print, <https://www.fabiolajeanolouis.com/rewriting-history-color-prints>

In *Conquistador I*, Jean-Louis presents a solitary figure who emerges from a shadowed, indeterminate space, bathed in the dramatic chiaroscuro of Baroque lighting, evoking the emotional intensity of historical theater. The figure's Iberian attire grounds her within a familiar colonial visual lexicon, yet Jean-Louis

deliberately avoids the common tropes associated with empire: there are no armored horsemen, no plundered treasures, and no overt depictions of violence. Instead, the figure stands motionless, isolated—a frozen moment in time, suspended between the violence of colonial conquest and the tentative space of reclamation. This stillness evokes the psychological trauma response of freeze—a liminal moment, caught between histories of violence and the potential for redefinition. Through this stark, almost unnatural stillness, Jean-Louis speaks to the historical silencing of marginalized bodies, whose labor and lives were integral to the colonial project, yet erased from the dominant narrative of conquest.

The pillow supporting a scroll, a traditionally neutral object, takes on subversive significance in this context. Historically, in depictions of conquest, such objects were used to display trophies of subjugation: treasures or conquered goods placed upon pillows as symbols of imperial dominance. Here, the figure, both subject and object, simultaneously holds and receives power. She becomes the conduit through which a new reading of power is proposed—not through dominance or overt violence, but through a complex interaction of presence, vulnerability, and ambiguity. The figure's gaze becomes a powerful focal point. In contrast to traditional portraits of conquistadors (see fig. 4 and 5), wherein figures assert dominance through physical posture and martial prowess while refusing any emotional engagement with the viewer, Jean-Louis' subject meets viewers' eyes with a piercing, wary, and evaluative stare. This gaze challenges the viewer's expectations and complicates the viewer's role within the historical framework: This gaze challenges the viewer's expectations and complicates the viewer's role of power. The work raises questions regarding whether the viewer is implicated as a conspirator in the colonial past or invited to be a co-participant in the reshaping of that narrative.



Fig. 4. Unknown artist, engraving of Hernán Cortés, 19th century, in *Book of America*, by R. Cronau.



Fig. 5. Unknown artist, *Portrait of the Spanish Conquistador Hernán Cortés*, 16th century CE, White House Historical Association

The question of power and presence is further heightened by the interplay of shadows and spatial ambiguity. The lack of defined spatial context complicates the figure's identity—there is no clear division between foreground and background, creating a sense of both intimacy and distance. This disorientation reinforces the tension at the heart of the work: a refusal to settle on a single narrative of historical dominance. Viewers are left to question: whose freedom is at stake in this image, and by what standard is it measured?

Gender and coloniality, as inseparable forces, form the crux of Jean-Louis' interrogation. The figure is not a traditional conquistador but a conquistadora—a transformation that shifts the gendered paradigm and highlights the performative nature of identity within patriarchal and imperial systems. The suffix -a not only feminizes the figure but subtly reframes the historical narrative by emphasizing the resilience required of women to navigate—and often subvert—the rigid structures of both empire and gender. Jean-Louis also references historical figures such as Catalina de Erauso (see fig. 6), known as La Monja Alférez, whose life has often been read through the lens of gender transgression. Yet Erauso's participation in Spanish imperial campaigns in Peru complicates any straightforward recuperation: their navigation of gendered disguise operated not outside colonial power, but within and in service of it. Read in this light, the invocation of Erauso introduces a deliberate tension, underscoring how gender nonconformity can coexist with—and even reinforce—structures of domination. In this way, *Conquistador I* does not offer a simple genealogy of resistance, but instead situates itself within a more fraught historical terrain, where strategies of survival and expressions of identity are entangled with the very systems they appear to resist. This tension ultimately sharpens the work's engagement with the broader historical and contemporary legacies of Black and Brown women who, in both literal and figurative senses, have navigated exclusionary spaces by asserting their presence and authority.



Fig. 6. Juan van der Hamen y Leon, *Retrato de Doña Catalina de Erauso. La monja alferez*, c.1626, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo

The tensions surrounding figures such as Catalina de Erauso ultimately clarify the stakes of Jean-Louis' intervention. While Erauso's story can be situated within a broader genealogy of gender nonconformity, it does not map easily onto histories of racial resistance; rather, it emerges from and participates in the structures of colonial domination that produced racial hierarchy. In this sense, *Conquistador I* resists the construction of a seamless lineage between past and present forms of transgression, instead exposing the uneven and often conflicting inheritances that shape contemporary understandings of identity. Gendered subversion, the work suggests, does not necessarily align with—and may even contradict—the project of racial justice. At the same time, Jean-Louis does not abandon the insights of gender-based analysis; rather, she extends them, undertaking the more difficult task of holding gender and racial histories in tension. By refusing to privilege only those figures who can be easily recuperated as icons of resistance, Jean-Louis performs a kind of double work, insisting on an intersectional framework that accounts for the racialized violence within which such gendered transgressions have occurred.

The sitter's sartorial choices deepen this gendered discourse. The use of dark, traditionally masculine tones alongside lighter, more traditionally feminine colors speaks to the

ongoing performance of power. Clothing and accessories, long seen as markers of wealth and status, here become tools not just of concealment but of agency. Through dress, the figure asserts her ability to navigate and contest colonial hierarchies, using her attire as both armor and signal of resilience. The figure's garments, which would traditionally signify submission to patriarchal and imperial norms, instead become a means of negotiating visibility, status, and strength.

Through this photographic reimagining of the Baroque, Jean-Louis gives form to an embodied *Afro-ascendencia*. The figure she presents is not a traditional conqueror nor a vanquished subject within colonial discourse; she occupies a space of ambiguity and transgression that challenges the binary frameworks of power and subjugation. By embodying the aesthetic language of conquest—through her pose, attire, and the ceremonial nature of her presence—Jean-Louis transforms symbols of imperial power and violence into sites of introspection, agency, and historical reclamation. Her presence is an act of resistance against the erasure of the ancestral and collective memory, asserting continuity through embodied defiance.

The sitter's ambiguous posture—her poised yet uncertain expression, the quiet declaration written upon the pillow—resonates as a monumental testament to survival and resilience. This seemingly fragile moment, caught between historical moments of conquest and the silence imposed upon marginalized bodies, becomes an object of performative monumentality. The paper, pose, and mise-en-scène of the photograph do not merely represent history; they engage with it dynamically, inviting us to reimagine and re-situate the past. The figure does not merely symbolize survival; she embodies it, showing how history, far from being erased, is being rewritten by those previously excluded from its pages.

In this encounter, the viewer is forced to reckon with the ongoing legacies of power, colonial violence, and gendered resistance.

Conquistador I offers no easy resolutions. Instead, it cultivates a space of productive tension where historical narratives are unsettled and reimagined. The work creates a space for Black and Brown women to assert their visibility and authority, forcing us to confront the complexities of their continued struggle for self-possession. In *Conquistador I*, Jean-Louis orchestrates a dialogue across time—one that illuminates the enduring, transgenerational stakes of survival, colonial legacies, and the reclamation of self-determination. The work does not provide closure; it invites engagement and critical reflection, ensuring that the conversation surrounding conquest, survival, and resistance remains open, ongoing, and unfinished.

Section 3 | Gould

The surname Gould, a variant of Gold, signals lineage, value, and transformation—three forces historically tied to colonial ambition. Gold was not merely a symbol but a central motive behind European explorations, driving the pursuit of power through plunder and human dispossession across Africa, the Americas, and Asia. Colonizers, seeking wealth and imperial dominance, claimed lands and peoples, sending treasures back to European crowns while perpetuating violence and erasure. As Leyda Oquendo Barrios asserts: “Somos las hijas de las más fuertes, de las que habiendo sido arrebatadas de su suelo, de sus familias y de sus costumbres, y mutiladas de las lenguas y de mucho de sus culturas, sobrevivieron” (Oquendo Barrios 158). Here, diasporic subjects emerge from lineages of survival—shaped by forced displacement, cultural rupture, and the silencing of language—yet sustained by enduring strength. Firelei Báez’s work responds to this painful inheritance, drawing from colonial archives to foreground Afro-diasporic subjectivity and reclaim the gilded lining within the cyclical destruction of colonialism. Her art offers a vision of regeneration, creating a space where legacies displaced by colonial violence can be remade and healed.

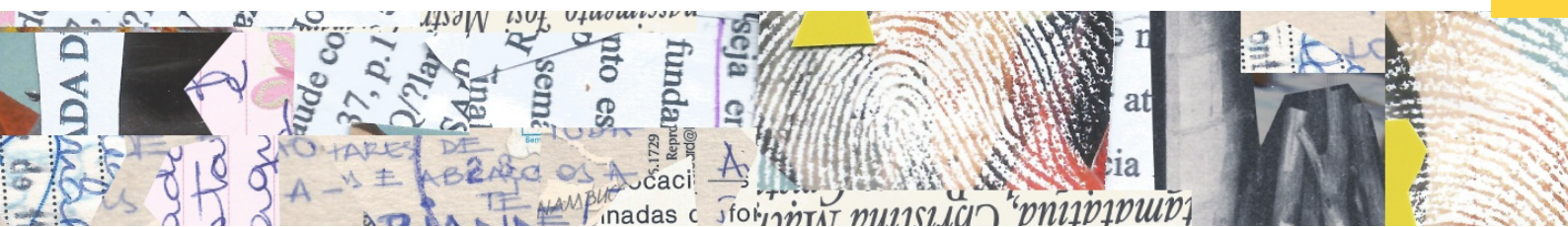
Scholarship on Firelei Báez has emphasized her engagement with Caribbean histories, colonial cartography, and the reimagining of Black and diasporic femininity. Building on these readings, this analysis foregrounds her use of spatial disruption and figuration to unsettle fixed historical narratives and articulate alternative modes of diasporic presence and belonging.

Báez’s artistic approach intervenes in the historical and visual landscape of colonialism, offering counter-narratives that center Afro-diasporic identities. Through a reworking of European documents and iconography, she creates auxiliary histories, filling spaces traditionally dominated by colonial power with representations of resilience and beauty. Her practice is not just a reclamation of history but an active reimagining of what it means to exist outside the constraints imposed by colonial structures. The art interrogates how life and art reflect the entrenchment of coloniality in visual culture, offering a dynamic vision of existence that is neither fractured nor diminished by the prejudice of colonialism.

By incorporating symbols of mixture, myth, and resilience, Báez’s works bring to the foreground a vision of identity that is whole and unbroken. In her vibrant portrayals, viewers see Afro-descendant lives as an ecosystem—each part creating a collective whole rather than being subjected to the fractured, reductive narratives imposed by colonial domination. Her art not only challenges the erasure of Afro-diasporic histories but also envisions a future that transcends colonial trauma, where the multiplicity of identities is embraced and celebrated.

Firelei Báez

Born in the Dominican Republic to a Dominican mother and Haitian father and raised in New York, Firelei Báez’s practice is shaped by intersecting histories of displacement, hybridity, and diasporic identity. Her formative experiences of duality—between nations, cultures, and languages—inform a multimedia practice that



navigates lineage, resilience, and reclamation. Educated at Cooper Union (BFA) and Hunter College (MFA), with a residency at Skowhegan, Báez fuses technical mastery with imaginative vision.

Cartography, portraiture, and landscape form the backbone of her work. She interweaves visual cues—hair textures, textiles, botanical motifs, folklore, mythical creatures, and literature—with symbols of resistance and autonomy. Central figures inhabit worlds where myth, ritual, and speculative futurity intersect. These figures are not passive—they are agents navigating histories, present realities, and imagined futures, asserting identity across diasporic continuities.

Game of Life



Fig. 7. Firelei Báez, *Untitled (Le Jeu Du Monde)*, 2020, Acrylic and oil on archival printed canvas, James Cohen Gallery, New York, NY

In *Le Jeu du Monde* (2020), Firelei Báez transforms an ostensibly historical, colonial artifact—the game map—into a radical act of decolonial resistance. The map, traditionally a tool of control and geopolitical conquest, is recast by Báez as a subversive site where power, identity, and narrative are redefined. At the center of this reimagined game stands the ciguapa, a mythic trickster figure from Dominican folklore, whose presence undermines both the symbolic and literal mappings of colonial dominance.

Through this intervention, Báez inverts the game's foundational logic, transforming a colonial instrument of control into a site of resistance and redefinition.



Fig. 8. Pierre Du Val, *Le Jeu du Monde dédié à Monsieur*, 1645, game map, <https://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY~8~1~246606~5515110:Le-Jeu-du-Monde-Game-of-the-World->

The game itself, with its rules of movement from the periphery to the center, mirrors the structure of European colonialism: the conquest of peripheral lands, their colonization, and the imposition of European authority at the heart of global politics. France, positioned at the center of the game map, historically represents the apex of imperial power, reinforcing the notion of the center as the locus of authority, control, and civilization. Yet in Báez's revision, the ciguapa, a figure of resistance, complexity, and hybridity, emerges as the central force. She disrupts the game's predetermined path by reconfiguring the rules entirely, symbolizing the ways in which Afro-descendant communities have not only survived colonial structures but have also reshaped them through acts of resilience, creativity, and transformation.

The symbolism embedded in Báez's reimagined game is multilayered and profound. By placing the ciguapa at the heart of this narrative, Báez re-envision the history of colonialism as a process not of linear progression, but of cyclical, regenerative resistance. The ciguapa embodies Afro-ascendancy, a concept that transcends colonial categorizations of race,

culture, and history. Her manipulated hair, wild and flowering, evokes a sense of hybridity and fluidity—signifying both the personal and collective empowerment that arises from Afro-descendant identities. This image of Afro-ascendancy resists the reductive and essentialist stereotypes that have historically been imposed upon Black and Indigenous peoples, positioning the ciguapa as an active agent of defiance who refuses to conform to the colonial logic of marginalization.

Báez's work can be read through the lens of *creolization*, as articulated by authors such as Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant in *In Praise of Creoleness*. The ciguapa's very existence—rooted in the blending of African, Indigenous, and European elements—embodies the transformative process of creolization. This hybridization becomes an act of resistance against the colonial project's attempts to categorize, divide, and hierarchize cultures. As the ciguapa weaves through the map's gameboard, she actively challenges colonial binaries of civilization/barbarism, center/periphery, and power/weakness. In doing so, Báez's intervention mirrors the creolization process itself, which refuses to be confined to preordained categories and instead insists on the regeneration of cultural identities outside of colonial frames of reference.

In this way, Báez's *Le Jeu du Monde* operates as a meta-textual critique of both colonial history and the contemporary systems of racial and social inequality that continue to govern the world. The map, as a spatial representation of power, mirrors the game of life—one in which the rules are rigged to favor white supremacy, colonial power, and the domination of Black bodies and histories. This echoes the narrative in *Lovecraft Country*, where the characters, like the ciguapa, navigate a world where systems of control are designed to maintain the subjugation of Black lives. In both Báez's work and the television adaptation, the game is not only rigged but also constantly challenged. Just as the characters in show resist their prescribed fate through acts of personal

agency, resilience, and redefinition, the ciguapa transforms the game itself—remaking the rules to allow for a new, regenerative cosmology where Afro-diasporic identities are central rather than peripheral.

This critique of colonial power is not merely intellectual or symbolic; it is also a practical intervention that invites viewers to reconsider the very way history is conceptualized, identity, and power. In this sense, Báez's reimagining of the game map offers a new model of ascendance. Rather than the conventional hierarchical rise to power associated with Western colonial logic, the ciguapa's ascent is through the reclamation of histories, myths, and lineages that have been erased or suppressed. She does not simply occupy the center of the map; she remakes the center itself—redefining the terms of visibility, agency, and empowerment.

The concept of regenerative cosmology, as proposed in *Le Jeu du Monde*, challenges the linear, Western models of progress and success that are so deeply embedded in colonial structures. Instead of a world where power is defined by the conquest of the center, Báez offers a world where Afro-diasporic identities are constantly regenerating, evolving, and resisting. The ciguapa's fluidity—her movement between myth, history, and identity—embodies this regenerative cosmology, a cosmology that does not move in a straight line but circulates, transforms, and transcends colonial frameworks. This is not just about reclaiming space for Black and Afro-descendant people within the existing colonial structure; it is about overturning that structure entirely and proposing new ways of being, knowing, and relating.

Báez's work can also be understood as a call to return to alternative, indigenous cosmologies—those that bypass Western constructs of success, progress, and achievement in favor of more holistic, community-based, and regenerative ways of understanding the world. This return to indigenous knowledge systems aligns with broader decolonial frameworks that

seek to recover and revitalize cultural practices, spiritual traditions, and worldviews that were once forcibly erased by European colonialism. By placing the ciguapa in the center of the map, Báez reclaims a world where Afro-diasporic peoples are not peripheral figures in the colonial project but central, active participants in the creation of new narratives and possibilities.

Ultimately, *Le Jeu du Monde* presents Afro-descendant identity as a fluid, rhizomatic process—one that resists fixed colonial definitions and instead regenerates through movement, memory, and transformation. Báez's intervention destabilizes the foundations of colonial power, offering a reimagined framework for history, identity, and resistance in which Afro-diasporic presence is not peripheral, but generative and central. The ciguapa is not simply a figure of rebellion, but a symbol of survival, creativity, and regeneration—a force that refuses to be bound by the colonial logics of domination. In this way, *Le Jeu du Monde* becomes not just a work of art, but a call to action: to reclaim, to renew, and to radically remake the world.

Conclusion

The works of Jean-Louis, Rosales, and Báez offer a compelling narrative of resistance and reclamation, confronting the long-standing colonial forces that have reduced Black and Brown bodies to objects of control. Through their art, these artists reimagine these bodies as sites of transformation, resistance, and spiritual sovereignty. They offer a powerful antidote to colonial trauma: the concept of *Afro-ascendencia*, a vision that elevates Afro-descendant identities beyond survival, into a realm of divine agency, cultural reclamation, and spiritual ascension.

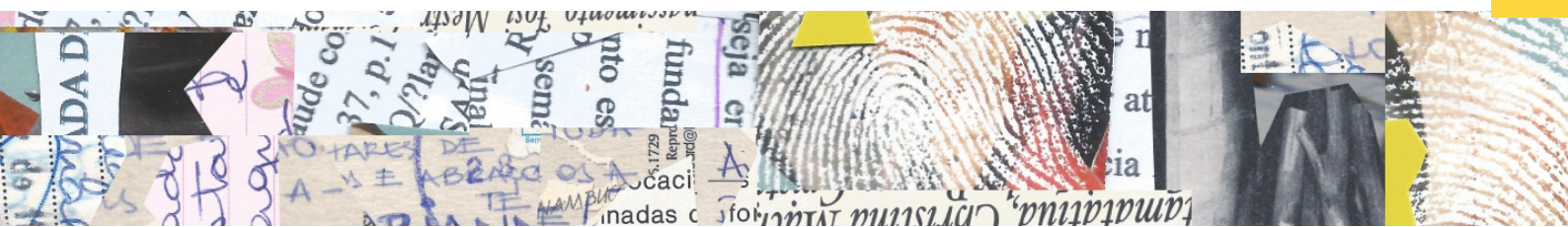
Afro-ascendencia is not merely a rejection of colonial histories, but a proactive engagement with the past to create a future rooted in empowerment. It signifies the spiritual, cultural, and intellectual elevation of Afro-descendant peoples, asserting their identities as central to the global narrative, not peripheral. Rosales'

reimagining of European art, Jean-Louis' tribute to Haitian revolutionary women, and Báez's exploration of colonial boundaries all embody this ascent, positioning Afro-descendant bodies as sovereign and immortal. These works elevate Black and Brown bodies beyond the reductive frameworks of colonialism, offering a transformative vision of identity that transcends the historical violence enacted upon them.

These artists demonstrate that Afro-ascendencia is not only a response to colonial legacies, but also an active creation of a future where Afro-descendant peoples are seen as sovereign, spiritual, and divine. In doing so, they challenge traditional art histories and structures, asserting that the very act of reclaiming space in visual culture is a form of radical ascension. This reclamation is not just an act of subverting colonial narratives but a reimagination of what it means to be an Afro-descendant in a world shaped by colonialism.

This article is an invitation, an opening of space for new interpretations and possibilities. It is a call to see art not just as an aesthetic object but as an act of resistance and regeneration. This is an invitation to engage not only with the works discussed here but with the broader process of decolonizing art and visual culture. The challenge ahead lies in amplifying these voices and continuing the work of cultural elevation in all fields. And while this document is a scholarly attempt to engage with the complexities of Afro-descendant art and *Afro-ascendencia*, it is, more importantly, a personal reflection on the power of seeing and naming. For in the act of seeing, Afro-descendants reclaim the power to reimagine their futures. This is the heart of *Afro-ascendencia*—an ongoing journey of reclamation, reimagination, and ascension. It is an invitation to look back, to look present, and to look ahead, with clarity and purpose.

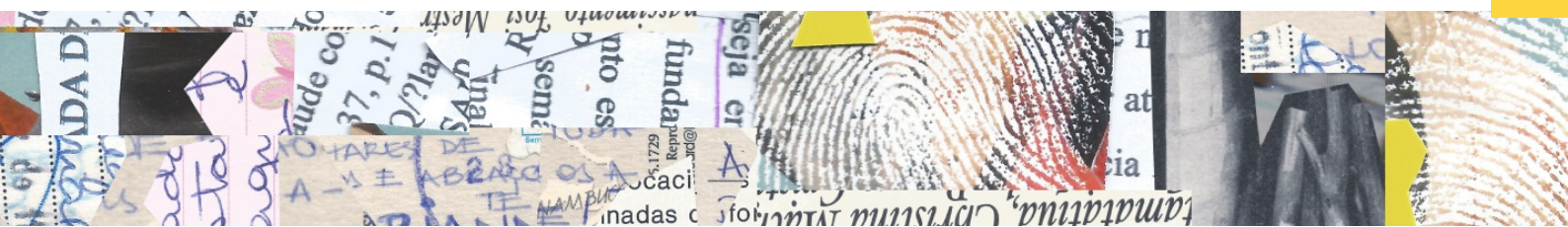
Afro-ascendencia, then, is not just about resistance but about transformation. It is about creating a new understanding of the Afro-descendant body—one that is divine, immortal, and uncontainable. As these artists continue to



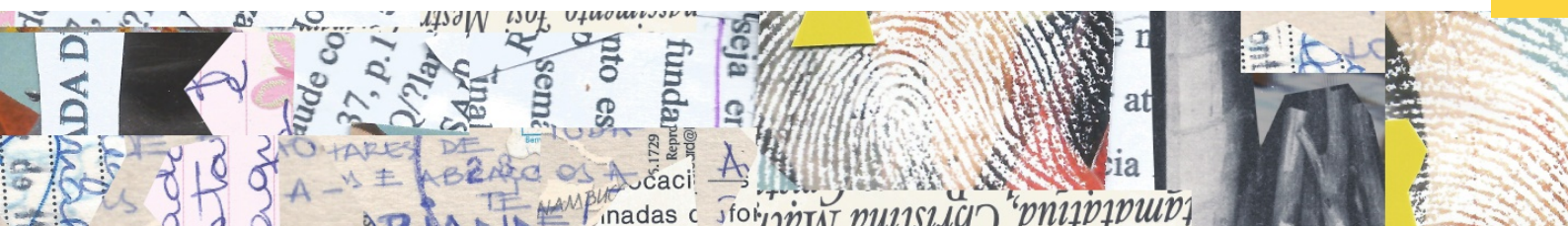
push the boundaries of art and history, they expand the frame of cultural visibility and invite us to reconsider the future, where Afro-descendant identities and legacies are recognized, celebrated, and elevated. In this expansive vision, viewers see that the work of these artists is not just about confronting the past, but about shaping a future that ascends from it—where the fullness of Afro-descendant identities is acknowledged as central to the global human experience. *Afro-ascendencia* is not just a journey of reclamation; it is an invitation to ascend, spiritually, culturally, and intellectually, toward a more inclusive and just world.

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