

“Color Differences?”

While visiting Brussels in June 2015, I visited the enlightening exhibition [White Ebony](#) on Albinism in Congo, displayed by [Patricia Willocq](#), a freelance photographer who has already made a name for herself on the world scene for her talent and social commitment as a Rights activist. The exhibition was inaugurated at the Halles St.Gery to celebrate the International Albinism Awareness Day proclaimed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights with the aim of focusing on the talents of people with albinism and to join in the struggle they face in fighting discrimination. Albinism is present in all societies and is the result of a recessive gene carried by both parents. The degree of acceptance varies across the world. In some areas, such as Africa, albino children are prone to facing bullying, prejudice and even violence due to stereotypes based on the color of their skin. It is actually very difficult to be a white African in a country where everyone is black. However, just as the “black continent” is certainly not the monochrome fixed in our stereotype, neither are the skin tones of its inhabitants. There is one variant, however, which stands out and which classifies bearers of this form as being misfits: very white skin, fair, colorless hair, blue or green eyes. Still today, the human body denoting difference is a compass which guides us negatively. Where superstition is part of everyday life and access to education is limited, it is frequently difficult to explain and lead to an understanding of the problem of albinism. In fact, beyond the well-known health problems faced by albinos such as skin cancer or vision problems, which will often lead to dropping out of school, the worst stigma is represented by false beliefs. There are many false beliefs on albinism. For some an albino child is the result of a spell cast by Gma Wata, a white mermaid who roams the Central African rivers. Others, however, believe the albino child bears and possesses beneficial powers. Whatever the belief, albinos are not treated as “normal” people. In many African countries people suffering from albinism may also suffer the most horrific atrocities. They are persecuted and are victims of ritual crimes. Civil rights activists have reported that hundreds of people, many of whom children, have been killed, mutilated or attacked in at least 25 African countries on the grounds that parts of their bodies confer magical powers. Many more cases are still undocumented due to the isolation of the victims, secrecy surrounding rituals, and indifference. Patricia Willocq has produced an amazing array of photographs taken in the heart of the Congo showing the true situation of people with albinism, problems regarding integration and their extraordinary courage in approaching their daily lives. Patricia’s works are engaging and empathetic, in bright colors screaming out a story which can leave no person indifferent as they catch the eye as if forcing the viewer to be drawn into the work. As can be seen from our blog, one of the focuses engaging us most is that of “Borders”: i.e. to be stopped by a border, passing a border, crossing borders. Our acronym BABE “Bodies across Borders” stresses the theme of our boundaries. What can we say, however, when do our bodies really become a boundary? We usually talk about physical borders, seen from a geographical point of view. Borders can be within or outside our bodies as well. They may be visible or invisible, but we must never forget that they are often mental too. While working on our research, important reflections have surfaced on the issue of color, on visible difference as being a possible border. These

questions bring to mind the prologue to [Lani Guinier](#) and [Gerald Torres](#)'s book "[The Miner's Canary](#)" in which the coauthors reflect on the legitimacy, or on the other hand, the danger hidden in the "colorblind norm" (meaning indifference or blindness in relation to the question of color) associated with perceiving the color of one's skin as a stigma. From their viewpoint the risk of approval (homologation) of differences, of invisibility, of an identity distortion (imbalance) is lurking around the corner. On these concerns Patricia Willocq is highly capable of representing so many different searches for identity and just as many borders in contrast one with the other and suggesting a key to interpreting, a way to go beyond the themes, to cross them, to invent new geographies and new maps. This subject is closely linked with origin, membership and identity. Patricia knew how to redesign the boundaries through her photographs in which we can see new possibilities and extraordinary openings. She has mapped generations: men and women, blood and affective ties. She has drawn new spaces between people by telling a story in which the albinos and their families can recognize and redefine themselves as Congolese people and stop being perceived as "weird". The photographer herself declares: "I remember as a child, I was absolutely fascinated with people with albinism. Twenty years later, this fascination is even more rooted in me than I thought. Nevertheless, this photo report is a testimony of hope, courage, love and success to give them the dignity they deserve".