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AN AESTHETICS OF VULNERABILITY: CRITICAL APPROACHES TO
CONTEMPORARY AFRODESCENDANT PORTUGUESE LITERATURE

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Resumen

Esta disertación examina la relación entre la vulnerabilidad colonial y la producción literaria afrodescendiente en Portugal, centrándose en cómo los autores e las autoras afrodescendientes contemporáneas critican y reutilizan las narrativas tradicionales de opresión incrustadas en el archivo colonial. El colonialismo occidental no solo fue un sistema de extracción y explotación de pueblos y tierras, sino también un proyecto estético basado en estereotipos modernos que deshumanizaron y borraron las subjetividades, historias y cuerpos de los colonizados. Un elemento central del archivo imperial es la representación de las poblaciones colonizadas como inherentemente vulnerables y expuestas a la violencia, especialmente los sujetos negros, quienes, dentro de estos marcos, son recurrentemente reducidos a ‘escenas de subyugación’, despojados de agencia y de cualquier capacidad de auto-representación. Estas ideologías estéticas, que posicionan a los cuerpos negros meramente como sitios de daño o abandono, reflejan una gramática racializada más amplia dentro de la modernidad que perpetúa los valores coloniales en la literatura portuguesa tradicional y la memoria social.

Con el creciente interés en la reciente expansión de la literatura afrodescendiente en Portugal y una perspectiva crítica sobre las narrativas post-imperiales que abordan de manera inadecuada el pasado colonial de África, este estudio explora cómo seis novelas de autores afrodescendientes portugueses articulan la vulnerabilidad corporal, enunciativa y de la memoria como un sitio de apropiación indebida. Las novelas seleccionadas—*O canto da Moreia* de Luísa Semedo, *Essa dama bate bué* de Yara Nakahanda Monteiro, *Debaixo da nossa pele: uma viagem* de Joaquim Arena, y tres obras de Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida: *Luanda*, *Lisboa*, *Paraíso*, *Maremoto* y *As Telefones*—cuestionan los regímenes raciales de representación dentro del canon literario nacional. Basándose en teorías feministas negras y decoloniales, que sitúan la vulnerabilidad dentro de historias específicas de opresión en lugar de como una condición humana universal, esta tesis sostiene que la vulnerabilidad en estas obras se reivindica desde los marcos coloniales, convirtiéndose en una base para expresiones subversivas contra los regímenes contemporáneos de representación necropolítica.

Metodológicamente, el estudio lleva a cabo una *close reading* de cuatro elementos ficcionales—temporalidad, caracterización, estética del lenguaje y espacialidad—para examinar cómo las narrativas de apropiación indebida de daño colonial y neoliberal contrarrestan la precariedad que el colonialismo impone a los cuerpos y memorias negras. Este análisis revela una contraestética de la vulnerabilidad, donde los protagonistas, a pesar de su exposición a la violencia, resisten la objetificación pasiva. Al desafiar las estéticas modernas antinegras, estas novelas establecen ‘gramáticas decoloniales’ que afirman la agencia, la interioridad y la subjetividad de los personajes negros dentro de la literatura portuguesa, ofreciendo modos alternativos de auto-representación que desafían y subvierten la historicidad y el poder colonial.

Abstract

This dissertation examines the relationship between colonial vulnerability and Afrodescendant literary production in Portugal, focusing on how contemporary Afrodescendant authors critique and repurpose traditional narratives of oppression embedded in the colonial archive. Western colonialism was not only a system of extraction and exploitation of both peoples and lands but also an aesthetic project built on modern stereotypes that dehumanized and erased the subjectivities, histories, and bodies of the colonized. Central to the imperial archive is the depiction of colonized populations as inherently vulnerable and exposed to violence, especially Black subjects who, within these frameworks, are recurrently reduced to ‘scenes of subjugation,’ stripped of agency and any capacity for self-representation. These aesthetic ideologies, which position Black bodies merely as sites of harm or dereliction, reflect a broader racialized grammar within modernity that perpetuates colonial values in traditional Portuguese literature and social memory.

With increasing interest in the recent expansion of Afrodescendant literature in Portugal and a critical lens on post-imperial narratives that inadequately address Africa’s colonial past, this study explores how six novels by Portuguese Afrodescendant authors articulate corporeal, enunciative, and memory vulnerability as a site of misappropriation. The selected novels—Luísa Semedo’s *O canto da Moreia*, Yara Nakahanda Monteiro’s *Essa dama bate bué*, Joaquim Arena’s *Debaixo da nossa pele: uma viagem*, and three works by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, specifically *Luanda*, *Lisboa*, *Paraíso*, *Maremoto*, and *As Telefones*—question the racial regimes of representation within the national literary canon. Drawing on Black and decolonial feminist theories, which situate vulnerability within specific histories of oppression rather than as a universal human condition, this thesis argues that vulnerability in these works is reclaimed from colonial frameworks, becoming a foundation for subversive expressions against contemporary necropolitical regimes of representation.

Methodologically, the study undertakes a close reading of four fictional elements—temporality, characterization, language aesthetics, and spatiality—to examine how misappropriated narratives of colonial and neoliberal injury and harm counteract the precarity colonialism imposes on Black bodies and memories. This analysis reveals a counter-aesthetic of vulnerability, where the protagonists, despite their exposure to violence, resist passive objectification. By challenging anti-Black modern aesthetics, these novels establish ‘decolonial grammars’ that affirm the agency, inwardness, and subjectivity of Black characters within Portuguese literature, offering alternative modes of self-representation that defy and subvert colonial historicity and power.

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Vento na cara, chuva na alma
Leva, lava, deixa
Para outro chão, deixa só respiração
Poeiras de luz, pingos de prata
Coisas nossas, nossas só
Condensação até para onde for
Sempre vai maior

Sara Tavares, *Onda de som*

Can you bear to look at this?

Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*

Cruelty is formal.

Steve McQueen, dialogue with Stuart Comer

Dignity is to know that you are responsible for one, for ten, for a thousand people. It is our capacity to love ourselves and to love that Other—that irresponsible one—to prevent him from deploying his madness even more and, with him, to save what is left to salvage of this poor world.

Houria Bouteldja, *Whites, Jews, and Us: Toward a Politics of Revolutionary Love*

Preface – Who Are My Neighbours?

Na posse de um corpo saudável é tentador imaginar que o nosso corpo é indistinguível do das pessoas que amamos. A vida é mais dura do que esta ideia. Se deixarmos de ser capazes de o fazer, talvez não possamos mesmo voltar a andar pelas pernas de quem nos ama.

Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, *Ajudar a cair*

In June 2020, I first held Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida's *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* in my hands. I was in Lisbon for a research period for my master's thesis when the COVID-19 pandemic erupted earlier that year, upending plans, rerouting journeys, and displacing bodies. By late May, unable to keep up with the rising costs of the city centre, I moved to a new accommodation in Odivelas, one of Lisbon's outermost hamlets. On the edge of the Portuguese capital, I gradually immersed myself in contemporary Afrodescendant Portuguese literature—the focus of this thesis—about which I knew little but which, to my surprise, helped me understand the place that, for a few months, had become 'my place.' I encountered stories of family silences, of characters absent from the pages of 'classic' Portuguese literary tradition, of young generations searching for roots, of diasporic journeys between Portuguese-speaking Africa and Portugal, of precarious and abandoned lives at the edges of Lisbon, of entrenched racism and systemic exclusion, of the search for affection, of pirates and concealed histories, and of small, banal, daily gestures of beauty and care in the constant search for a way home. These stories made me reflect on the life paths of my neighbours and friends in the neighbourhood—people I was coming to know despite the pandemic. Slowly, I realized that in the pandemic's context—where social, racial, gender, class, and health disparities were starkly exposed, determining who, as philosopher Judith Butler (2012) puts it, was entitled to a 'good life' and who was not—we were neighbours, but we were not treated as equals.

The stories I read led me to reflect on how, despite our proximity, we were different bodies in relation, embedded within a specific space and time—the end of Portuguese colonialism and the consequent diasporic processes. Our bodies were traversed by distinct regimes of historicity, each shaping our fates, living conditions, and opportunities in its own way. I understood that the colonial past hadn't left the streets of Lisbon; it was still

there, living among us. We shared the same space, yet that space starkly remarked our radical differences. I was a privileged white gay Italian postgraduate student in Lisbon with a department scholarship conducting research. My privilege shielded me from the harm which ‘that’ small part of Portugal was enduring during the pandemic. In this context of shared vulnerability, I was less vulnerable than some of my neighbours and friends, precisely because of that privilege—one I cannot separate from or escape: my whiteness. It became clear to me that whiteness draws a line, marking our differentiated exposure to vulnerability and violence.

Reflecting on whiteness within a context of vulnerability meant, first and foremost, confronting a series of issues that caused (and continue to cause) discomfort regarding the space I was occupying: the intersection between academic knowledge and the peripheral space from which I was consciously thinking. I understood that merely engaging ‘critically’ with racism, colonialism, inequality, oppression, and literary representation was insufficient. Instead, it required a radical self-interrogation, recognizing my role within a system of knowledge-power that always risks reproducing the hierarchies and exclusions we claim to dismantle. Aware that ‘scientific discourse’ is never neutral, I realized that I had to confront my own position, to speak from a specific place—my whiteness—as an uncomfortable site of enunciation. This discomfort, I understood, needed to be transformed into an ongoing practice of heightened awareness. I chose to make this awareness a foundation of my work, a structuring part of the constant effort to decolonize the knowledge I was trying to elaborate. As Brazilian journalist and writer Eliane Brum (2021, 18) observes, some bodies ‘exist violently’ in the world from birth, regardless of their individual moral conduct, ethical beliefs, or personal histories. As a male student white and privileged, I too ‘existed violently’ in Odivelas; and I still do now as a doctoral candidate within the system I inhabit and within the realities my reflections may or may not impact. In Odivelas, while reflecting on the intersection of vulnerability, bodies, and memory in the post-imperial context and their situated representations in literature, I continuously questioned the implicit ‘violence’ of my white body within the power structures of society and academia. I also recognized the need to make explicit the privilege of whiteness in relation to the very issues I sought to understand—issues that are now central to this doctoral dissertation.

How do we, with our privileged bodies, relate to those lives and experiences whose suffering is, in part, shaped by the very ways in which we ‘exist violently’ in the world? And above all, how can we think about “the pain of others,” to borrow Susan Sontag’s

(2003) well-known expression, without falling into the trap of a false and homogenizing subsumption of pain through a sterile exercise of empathy? Current pedagogies and practices often encourage us to respond to the pain of others by identifying with it through empathy, without truly considering the social position we occupy. In this way, empathy becomes a narcissistic exercise of self-soothing—a passive identification with suffering that, in truth, does not belong to us and is often perpetuated by our tacit involvement in the systems that produce it. Indeed, engaging with vulnerability, particularly the vulnerability of others, carries this inherent risk. In this work, my aim is to maintain a critical and self-aware distance from the false comfort of empathy and instead practice what Marianne Hirsch (2016, 84) calls suspicious forms of solidarity, that is, “a response working against an appropriative empathy, enabled by incongruities that leave space between past and present, self and other, open without blurring these boundaries and homogenising suffering.” Aware that I may not fully escape such a logic, I aim to make this work an exercise in suspicious solidarity, standing before the pain of others—a pain to which my own violent white existence has, in some way, contributed. This is the guiding refection of my research, from its embryonic stages to its final phase.

Amid a global crisis, and from my life in Odivelas, I began to reflect on what it means to be a body exposed to the contingencies of life, history, and politics—especially when the conditions needed to sustain that life are absent, when the safety nets that ‘cushion our fall’ disappear beneath our feet. In Odivelas, during a pandemic that affected bodies—particularly the weakest ones, bodies exhausted, abandoned, and worn down by an oppressive and exclusionary system—I began to reflect on the concept of vulnerability. I thought especially about the relationality that vulnerability creates between different bodies, within a space and time ‘officially’ marked by the end of Portuguese colonial oppression in Africa. It is this relationality of bodies in contemporary Afrodescendant Portuguese literature that shapes my critical and ‘po-ehitic’ reflections on vulnerability: its limits, ambiguities, as well as its ethical, poetic, and imaginative potential in rethinking life after oppression.

It was through my situated experience in Odivelas, and my relationships with both my neighbours, friends and the characters in the literature I was discovering—at a moment in history when our vulnerabilities were laid bare, though in radically different ways—that I began to reflect critically on the intersection of vulnerability, Afrodescendant Portuguese literature, colonial regimes of representation, and Black and decolonial feminist thought. This intersection guided my three years of doctoral research,

and it is this exploration that I now present—a reading of recent Afrodescendant Portuguese literature, focusing on the literary trope of vulnerability and its representations through a Black and decolonial feminist critical lens. A reading that is perhaps partial and imperfect, yet open to cosmovisions enriched and nourished by rooted and long-standing decolonial pathways, non-hegemonic epistemologies, and alternative literary representations.

Introduction

sonhar mas sem saber
e escrever para esquecer

raquellima, “ser poeta é ser mais baixo”
(from *Ingenuidade Inocência Ignorância*)

This thesis investigates the relationship between the concept of vulnerability—primarily as defined by Black and decolonial feminist standpoints—and the regimes of colonial historicity shaping the material, social, cultural, and political life of African and Afrodescendant populations in Portugal. Specifically, it examines how this relationship is represented in literature, in a corpus of six novels by contemporary Portuguese Afrodescendant authors. Given the recent rise of Afrodescendant literature in Portugal, emerging in the early 2000s and intensifying over the past decade, this literary movement critically challenges the traditional Portuguese literary canon, particularly the racial regimes of representation that continue to loom over national literature. Historically, these regimes have portrayed Black subjects through recurring patterns of violent Western colonial aesthetics, relying on stereotypes that objectify, dehumanize, and erase their subjectivities, bodies, ancestry, and memories. Thus, the representation of the vulnerability of colonized peoples has been central to the imperial archive, which harbours a schizophrenic need to depict those subjects solely in their precarious, bare existence, most exposed to the total violence of colonial exploitation. Black feminists like Saidiya Hartman (2007) and Denise Ferreira da Silva (2022) describe this recurrence in the archive as “scenes of subjugation,” where the wounded captive body is viewed only through its corporeal oppression and annihilation. These depictions are part of a broader aesthetic grammar of modernity, in which Black subjects exist merely as aberrations, mistranslations, or signs of dereliction, excluded from any possible form of self-representation beyond the narrative of harm and precariousness.

In contrast, my work seeks to analyse how the theme of vulnerability has been redefined both theoretically and methodologically beyond the subjugation of the colonial archive. Theoretical insights are drawn from a range of feminist thought, from key figures like Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero to perspectives from Black, decolonial, and Global South feminisms. I trace the ‘ethical turn’ that the concept of vulnerability has

undergone in feminist discourses, which now radically rejects the violence inherent in the current neoliberal system. This system is structurally individualistic, autonomous, and independent, distancing and excluding any body that requires relational support in conditions of vulnerability—often perceived solely as personal failure rather than the result of structured policies of abandonment and neglect. Within this framework, vulnerability is tied not only to neoliberalism but also to neocolonialism. In fact, Black and decolonial feminist perspectives reject the universalization of vulnerability, situating the concept within specific regimes of historicity whose effects persist into the present. Vulnerability, in this context, becomes the condition from which Black and decolonial feminisms have built networks of resistance and continuous struggle against colonial necropolitical regimes. These movements transform the colonial wound into an act of misappropriation, repurposing it for their own survival. Thus, by engaging with decolonial worldviews, the concept of vulnerability becomes a foundation for rethinking—or entirely dismantling—the violent world shaped by colonial modernity, in which aesthetics served as a tool of cultural and representational domination.

Methodologically, the analysis is based on close readings of a corpus of six novels to examine how the misappropriation of racial accounts of injury can counteract the precarity imposed on bodies and memories by colonial history and its contemporary reconfigurations in the colonality of power. Building on this misappropriation of injury, I argue that the selected novels offer a counter-aesthetic of vulnerability. While they depict the protagonists' exposure to violence, this vulnerability is not reduced to passivity or objectification under colonality. Instead, these texts propose 'decolonial grammars,' in which the protagonists assert their agency and subjectivity 'despite precarity.' By rejecting modern aesthetics—structurally anti-Black—they introduce new modes of expression that explore the restitution of inwardness of Black characters in Portuguese literature.

In this introductory chapter, I offer a brief overview of the recent rise of Afrodescendant Portuguese literature. I explain my focus on the literary representation of vulnerability, outline the criteria used to select six fictional texts for close reading and analysis, and present the research questions that oriented my investigation and the writing of this dissertation. Lastly, I provide a general summary of the subsequent chapters.

A Haunted House: Approaching Afrodescendant Portuguese Literature

“Se eu te ensinar como se apanha um fantasma, abrirei a porta da minha casa, para que nela entres,”¹ writes Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida (2021, 9) in *Os Gestos*. A ghost, an “unfinished business” (Rushdie 1989, ebook), becomes visible when one steps, for example, into a haunted house.

Since 2006, another ‘door’ has opened in contemporary Portuguese literature. The novel *A Verdade de Chindo Luz*, by Cape Verdean-born author Joaquim Arena, serves as a temporal gateway, granting visibility—both socially and in relation to the narrow national literary canon—to the historically ‘silenced’ lives of Africans and Afrodescendant communities in Portugal. In this recent body of literature, a space for self-representation emerges for an Afrodescendant generation grappling with the memories and spectres of an unresolved recent past: the Portuguese colonial oppression in the African continent. The authors of this body of literature are the sons and daughters of earlier Afro-diasporic generations, as well as the offspring of mixed-race families who eventually ‘returned’² to Portugal after the fall of the empire. Consequently, this ‘second generation’—a somewhat contentious term that will be further examined in the thesis—consists of writers (born or raised in Portugal) who draw upon their personal and family histories as valuable material for their work. Though they did not directly experience this recent past, it continues to influence both intimate family memories and a broader collective memory of the African diaspora, deeply rooted in the violence of the transatlantic slave trade, the development of the colonial occupation and exploitation, and the more recent legacies of independence, democratization, and decolonization. The Carnation Revolution of April 25, 1974,³ which led to the independence of Angola, Cape

¹ “If I teach you how to catch a ghost, I’ll open the door to my house for you to enter” (my translation).

² The independence of Portugal’s African colonies in 1975 led to the repatriation of over half a million Portuguese citizens, mainly from Angola and Mozambique. Many returned after relinquishing their possessions, due to political uncertainties and the threat of civil conflict. Their personal identification with the former colonial powers also influenced their decision to return. These *retornados* faced the challenge of starting anew in Portugal, which had significant societal and economic impacts. Key issues included housing shortages, financial instability, and a limited job market. For those born in the colonies, who had never lived in Portugal, the notion of ‘return’ was particularly complex and contradictory, raising identity concerns. According to Doris Wieser (2022, 151), the term *retornado* did not differentiate between those born in Portugal who had moved to the colonies and later returned, and those born in the colonies as Black or mixed-race descendants of Portuguese settlers, despite the latter never having lived in Portugal. As a result, non-white *retornados* often faced tortuous and traumatic experiences, confronting their visible ethnic ‘otherness’ upon arrival. These individuals remained ‘others’ in the eyes of the white majority, often mistaken for immigrants from other countries and struggling to form complex identities in response to societal and institutional racism, as well as to family and emotional disruptions.

³ On this date, marking the end of a thirteen-year War of Independence (1961–1974) between Portugal and its five former African colonies, a significant political shift took place. The Estado Novo, the authoritarian regime that had ruled Portugal from 1933 to 1974—first under António de Oliveira Salazar and later

Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and São Tomé and Príncipe in 1975, accelerated the processes of decolonization, as well as the diaspora and exile to Portugal. Indeed, the ensuing civil conflicts in three of these nations,⁴ inflicted enduring wounds both in Portugal and in the affected African countries.

The initial critical readings of Arena's work, as well as those of Afrodescendant authors who began publishing shortly thereafter, framed this 'new literature' in Portugal as a literature of immigration. This interpretation thus led to interpreting this production as a body systematically positioned 'outside' the Portuguese literary system, mainly due to the 'non-whiteness' of their authors. Consequently, this body of literature was not viewed as a rupture in the regime of silence imposed by centuries of colonial oppression, but rather as an expression of 'new subjectivities' linked to seemingly 'recent' migratory routes. These perspectives obscured Portugal's deep historical ties with the African continent and, in a 'post-imperial' and 'democratic' moment of national identity crisis and reconfiguration shaped by globalization and African diasporas, denied any compatibility between 'Blackness' and 'Portugueseness.' In short, these early critical positions overlooked how the emergence of Afrodescendant literature sought to emphasize the transformation of Portugal's human landscape as an essential part of its evolving national identity.

These perspectives overlooked the cultural contributions of Black women and men in Portugal who had long resisted colonial oppression. Figures such as Isabel Afonso, who in the 16th century defied the Inquisition and participated in women's sociability networks in the Bay of Setúbal, and the group of Black women cleaners who protested in Lisbon in 1717, represent early forms of resistance. Another example is the Black generation that, between Lisbon and the Pan-Africanist network, organized and fought against colonial racism and exclusion in Portugal between 1911 and 1933. Central figures

Marcelo Caetano—came to an end. The catalyst for this transformative moment was the Carnation Revolution, led by a group of left-wing military officers from the *Movimento das Forças Armadas* (MFA). This revolution became a pivotal moment in Portugal's history, ushering in the restoration of democratic governance.

⁴ These conflicts erupted immediately after Portugal's decolonization and the subsequent Independence of its former colonies. A confluence of historical factors, including the geopolitical interests of Western nations during the Cold War, played a pivotal role in fuelling these conflicts. Additionally, political instability in the newly independent nations was partly driven by internal disputes between the factions that had led the struggle for Independence. Two of the most protracted and devastating civil wars occurred in Angola (1975–2002), between the MPLA and UNITA, and in Mozambique (1977–1992), between FRELIMO and RENAMO. In Guinea-Bissau, the civil conflict known as the Guerra de 7 de Junho lasted for one year (1998–1999), yet its political history remains plagued by a series of ongoing coups d'état. These prolonged conflicts had numerous consequences, including a substantial rise in displacements to Portugal, particularly from Angola and Mozambique, as political exiles sought refuge.

in anti-colonial poetic thought, such as Alda do Espírito Santo and Noémia de Sousa, along with 20th-century authors like António Cruz and Mário José Domingues, were already experimenting with creating a distinct Black Portuguese literary voice. By recognizing this often-silenced Black genealogy in the country's cultural history and colonial archives, contemporary Portuguese Afrodescendant critics, scholars, activists, and artists—Cristina Roldão, Iolanda Évora, Inocência Mata, José Augusto Pereira, Joacine Katar Moreira, and Zia Soares, among others—reinterpret the artistic and literary productions of younger Afrodescendant generations. They view these works as a historical, political, and cultural continuation that seeks to make visible the long-standing African and Afrodescendant presence in Portugal, where these individuals were active participants rather than exceptions or passive bodies rendered voiceless and emotionally empty by colonial regimes of representation.

In the realm of essays and fiction, Joaquim Arena's *A verdade de Chindo Luz* (2006) marked a foundational text in this literary tradition. Arena later published *Debaixo da nossa pele: uma viagem* (2017) and *Siriaco e Mister Charles* (2022), further contributing to the Afrodescendant literary landscape. Grada Kilomba, a Portuguese interdisciplinary artist of São Toméan and Angolan descent, published her groundbreaking doctoral thesis, *Plantation Memories* (2008), in Germany, offering a pioneering analysis of the psychological effects of everyday racism in Europe. In fiction, *Depois de morrer aconteceram-me muitas coisas* (2009) by Ricardo Adolfo, a Portuguese writer of Angolan descent, stood out, followed by *Estórias de amor para meninos de cor* (2011) by Angolan writer Kalaf Epalanga, who later achieved international recognition with *Também os brancos sabem dançar* (2017). That same year, Aida Gomes, an Angolan author, made her mark with *Os pretos de pousaflores*, which explores the 'return' to Portugal from the perspective of Afrodescendant offsprings. In nonfiction, Cape Verdean-born Portuguese historian Sónia Vaz Borges published *Na Pó Di Spera* (2014), documenting the history of three Afro-diasporic *bairros* along the Estrada Militar, on the outskirts of Lisbon, and their struggles for housing and community-building amidst racial exclusion from the centre. In 2015, Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, an Angolan-born Portuguese writer, gained international recognition with *Esse cabelo*, a novel that expanded discussions on the African diaspora in Portugal beyond national borders. Almeida's body of work is currently one of the most extensive within this literary field. Other notable works include *Um preto muito português* (2017) by Telma Tvon, *Essa dama bate bué* (2018) by Yara

Nakahanda Monteiro, *O canto da moreia* (2019) by Luísa Semedo, and *As novas identidades portuguesas* (2020) and *A bagagem da imigração* (2023) by Patrícia Moreira.

The production of fiction and non-fiction is complemented by a significant body of poetry, beginning with the collective poetry anthology *Didjiu – A Herança do Ouvido* (2017), edited by Carla Fernandes. This poetic output has been continued by poets such as Matamba Joaquim with *O Sul Sem Ti* (2017), Bernardate Pinheiro and Matamba Joaquim with *Dois Corvos Amarelos* (2018), Gisela Casimiro with the collections *Erosão* (2018) and *Giz* (2023), Raquel Lima with *Ingenuidade Inocência Ignorância* (2019), and Yara Nakahanda Monteiro with *Memórias Aparições Arritmias* (2021).⁵

This is by no means intended as a definitive overview. Many other authors have published or are currently producing significant works that will continue to expand this body of literature in the coming years.

Although this literary movement has intensified over the past two decades, at the beginning of the 2000s relatively little criticism has been produced in Portugal on Afrodescendant authors. When I began researching for this project more than three years ago, there were only a few critical works available. Notable examples include contributions in periodicals by Isabel Lucas (2015), Inocência Mata (2018), and Marta Lança (2011) in various texts for the electronic journal *Buala*, as well as academic work from figures like Sheila Khan (2015), Sandra Sousa (2017), Federica Lupati (2019), and Margarida Calafate Ribeiro (2020b). Additionally, it was interesting to observe how Brazilian perspectives, such as those of Rosangela Sarteschi (2019), Bianca Gonçalves (2019), and Emerson Inácio (2021), considered the emergence of this literature in comparison to the longer-established history and literary criticism surrounding Afro-Brazilian cultural productions. However, over the past three years, the landscape has changed significantly: many scholars, researchers and students from universities

⁵ It is also important to acknowledge the increasing influence of Afrodescendant theatre in Portugal, which is making significant and unprecedented contributions to the traditional Portuguese theatre scene. António Pinto Ribeiro (2020) underscores the importance of Teatro Griot in Lisbon, founded in 2012 as one of the pioneering Afrodescendant theatre companies. Teatro Griot examines the colonial past and its enduring effects through “decolonization and ‘dewerterisation’ programs inspired by Latin American and African thinkers” (Pinto Ribeiro 2020, 336, my translation). Cristina Roldão (2019, online) also highlights initiatives such as GTOLX – Grupo de Teatro do Oprimido de Lisboa (2002) and the theatre group Peles Negras Máscaras Negras, both led by Black women. Moreover, collaborations between Afrodescendant women writers and scriptwriters are emerging in the theatrical and audiovisual sectors. Notable examples include adaptations of Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida’s texts by Zia Soares in productions such as *Pérola sem rapariga* (2023) and *O coro dos assombrados* (2023), as well as the partnership between Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida and Marco Martins in the performance *Pêndulo* (2023). These collaborations also extend into film, with projects like the screenplays for short films *Caminho para as estrelas* (2022) and *A Ilha* (2022) by Yara Nakahanda Monteiro and Mónica Miranda.

worldwide have shown increasing interest in Portuguese literature by Afrodescendant authors. A recent example is the collective volume *Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida: Tecelã de mundos passados e presentes* (2023), edited by Sheila Khan and Sandra Sousa, which is entirely dedicated to Almeida's literature.

In approaching these texts, which are diverse in themes, characters, spaces, geographies, creative processes, and aesthetic choices, I began to pay particular attention to those novels that, in my view, convey a poetic urgency to narrate alternative stories about characters in vulnerable and precarious situations. These narratives depict protagonists whose trajectories lead them to experience vulnerability and precarity—both physically and in terms of vulnerability proportionated by an absence of family, genealogical or ancestral memory—stemming from the enduring impacts of colonial oppression and its contemporary outcomes. In some of these texts, I observed how authors strive to deepen the inner lives of characters that were either absent from the pages of traditional Portuguese literature, or that the regimes of colonial representations had totally distorted, emptied, mocked, flattened, objectified and stereotyped, trivialising—thus naturalising—their exposure to pain, suffering, and to a life that could only exist in the dimension of precariousness. A life, as per Afro-Brazilian philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva (2022), perpetually reduced to the colonial figure of the 'wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation.' Consequently, I began to concentrate on texts that, while maintaining awareness of regimes of historicity, seek to restore the 'inwardness' of subjectivities that have finally become protagonists of their own stories, as noted by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida (2023), despite their conditions of vulnerability.

In this sense, in *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, I found a compelling framework to explore the connection between regimes of historicity, the induction into violent precariousness, and alternative systems of representation. In this alternative system, the characters, despite the precarity they endure, reveal an inner life that transcends the oppression typically portrayed in colonial archives. From this novel, I began to reflect on how certain works within this body of literature give depth to characters' inner worlds, 'in spite of' the vulnerability they experience. These texts move beyond the mere representation of oppression, which is the sole lens of representability through which Black subjectivities are viewed in the colonial archive, focusing instead on the complexity, ambiguity, opacity, dignity, and beauty of the characters' inwardness.

Furthermore, in exploring theoretical and methodological approaches, I discovered a notable lack of research addressing the intersection of vulnerability and Afrodescendant

literary representations. However, the essays “Vulnerabilidade Masculinas, Vidas Precárias” (2023) by Claudia Pazos Alonso and “Deficiência, Racialização, e Colonialidade em Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso” (2023) by Daniel F. Silva provided valuable insights that helped shape my thinking. These works, focusing on Almeida’s novel through the lens of vulnerability, precarity, race, disability and feminist criticism, allowed me to expand my analysis to other texts that resonate with similar themes and aesthetic choices.

A ‘Vulnerable’ Corpus

Building on these initial reflections and contextualizations, my research focuses on identifying a corpus of texts that might enable me to examine the relationship between Portuguese colonial history, conditions of vulnerability, and Afrodescendant literary counter-representations, leading to the formulation of specific research questions. This search results in a corpus of six novels, which I divide into two subgroups based on selection criteria. The first group includes *O canto da moreia* (2019) by Luísa Semedo and *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* (2018) and *Maremoto* (2021) by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida. The second group comprises *Essa dama bate bué* (2018) by Yara Nakahanda Monteiro, *Debaixo da nossa pele: uma viagem* (2017) by Joaquim Arena, and *As Telefones* (2020) by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida.

The selection and subdivision of these texts is based on shared characteristics, primarily following four key criteria: temporality, identity issues concerning vulnerability, spatial configurations, and linguistic and aesthetic experimentation.

The first common factor in selecting these novels is their treatment of temporality. These texts are set within a timeframe spanning from the final years of the Portuguese empire in Africa—specifically in Angola and Cape Verde—to the present day. However, as they explore the characters’ stories, they implicitly extend into a much deeper temporal dimension, rooted in the distant origins of colonial history, demonstrating how the protagonists’ current circumstances continually interact with specific regimes of oppressive historicity. Through a collective reading of these six novels, I notice that time shifts from a linear, sequential construct to a circular one, where past, present, and future are constantly reinscribed during the moment of narration through a spiral of events. This circularity becomes an early defining feature, in my view, that challenges modern paradigms of separability, determinacy, and sequentiality, which tend to frame coloniality as a concluded event rather than an ongoing spacetime continuum.

From a temporal and spatial perspective, the first three novels in the corpus—*O canto da moreia*, *Luanda*, *Lisboa*, *Paraíso*, and *Maremoto*—portray characters who experience the end of colonialism in Angola and Cape Verde. Following Independence, these characters relocate to Lisbon, pursuing the false promise of assimilation and belonging in the former colonizer's country. Instead, they are confronted with a hostile reality that gradually leads them into precarious lives. In terms of identity, these novels delve into the historical figures of the *assimilados* in their various nuances and complexities. Due to the precariousness experienced by their bodies, these characters must confront an identity shaped by their vulnerable condition in exile and diaspora. Moreover, they are also forced to question the notion of 'imperial citizenship,' which, during colonial times, falsely promised them belonging in Portugal. Aesthetically, these novels disrupt the formal and narrative structures of 'classical' Western texts, reconfiguring them through an Afrodescendant lens. They employ meta-narrative techniques of self-writing and self-narration as embodied practices, offering testimony to those at risk of disappearing amid the violence of precarious existence.

The second group of novels—*Essa dama bate bué*, *Debaixo da nossa pele: uma viagem*, and *As Telefones*—shifts focus to the children of those who directly witnessed the colonial past. These novels follow their post-imperial journeys as they seek to reclaim their past, roots, and diasporic identities in the absence of dialogue with previous generations. This absence appears, somehow, to be symbolized by the motif of the 'absent body' of the witnesses. The characters experience vulnerability not only through the body but also through the absence of memory, which obstructs the formation of a coherent identity. Temporally, these novels are set in the present, yet this contemporaneity is haunted by the unresolved return of the past as an unfinished temporality. Unlike the first group, where characters are 'immobilized' in Lisbon, these novels explore broader geographies, reflecting a quest for roots that transcends the capital and opens paths for reconnection with ancestral heritage. These spatial explorations include the '*Portugal profundo*' of slave descendants, diasporic transits and familial ties between Angola and Portugal, and the '*Angola profunda*' in search of lost genealogies. In their pursuit of identity, these texts aesthetically express a need for new languages—through experimentation, disruption, and reinvention of literary forms.

This selection of criteria is not intended as a rigid or definitive framework but rather as a means of identifying common elements that enable a cohesive reading of these novels and prompt inquiry into the questions raised by the texts themselves. By identifying this

corpus, I formulate three research questions that guide my work—both in terms of developing a theoretical and methodological approach and in exploring the Afro-Portuguese cultural-historical context and the novels I sought to analyse.

The first issue concerns the concept of vulnerability itself. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, vulnerability—primarily understood as the exposure of the body to harm, but also as the possibility of receiving care—was revisited across numerous fields (political, ethical, and moral), aiming to rethink our interconnectedness through the shared corporeality to which, as the virus revealed, we were all inevitably exposed. The pandemic, in other words, reminded us of our collective vulnerability. However, I soon realized that this universalization of the concept was often uncritical, flattening, and simplistic—or even instrumentalized to serve privileged social groups or specific political purposes. It was from this realization that I began to reflect on vulnerability, not only in its limitations and ambiguities but also in its potential when viewed through the ‘situated’ dimension of each body, bound to distinct regimes of historicity. From this perspective, it became clear that the pandemic rendered certain subjects radically more vulnerable than others.

A few weeks after the outbreak of the pandemic, philosopher Achille Mbembe (2020, online) published an article entitled “The Universal Right to Breathe,” in which he highlighted how, despite affecting the entire global population, the pandemic led to a “premature cessation of breathing” predominantly for those in the most precarious conditions—people whose lungs were already weakened by an undignified life. In doing so, he critiqued the notion of a universalized exposure to disease. This call for a universal right to breathe helped me visualize, through the figure of lungs more or less vulnerable to illness, the multiple layers of oppression disproportionately affecting racialized, gendered, colonized, and impoverished bodies. From this conception of ‘situated vulnerability,’ my first research question emerges: how could be structured a theoretical and methodological approach to examine how this ‘situated vulnerability’—rooted in the long history of Portuguese colonial oppression—is configured in the specific context of Portuguese Afrodescendant experiences and, in turn, represented in the selected novels?

The answer to this first question emerges quite naturally. As I explored which strands of critical theory had examined the concept of vulnerability with greater depth, attention, and complexity, I realized that feminist thought offered the most fitting response to the questions posed by my research. Specifically, the intersection of close reading, as a methodological approach, with feminist theory—particularly Black and decolonial

feminisms—provide the theoretical-methodological lens through which I can frame my work. This combination allows me to engage more meaningfully with the complexities of vulnerability in the texts I will analyse.

The second question emerged when I observed that much of the research being published on this literature tended to focus predominantly on content, particularly on the exploration of ‘postcolonial identities,’ while often overlooking the aesthetic and ‘formal’ elements of the texts. I felt that there was a noticeable gap in analysis that connected the lived experience of Blackness in Portugal with the aesthetic dimensions of this literature. This absence of attention to how form and content intersected in these works called for a more integrated approach to their analysis.

This observation arises from engaging with the work of Black intellectuals. Artists, and scholars from the Luso-Afro-Brazilian diaspora, and beyond, argue that colonial modernity has operated not only at ideological, political, cultural, and geographical levels but also at the aesthetic level. Through processes of objectification, stereotyping, mockery, flattening, brutalization, eroticization, and exoticization, Black subjects—reduced to mere objects—are placed within what David Lloyd (2019) refers to as the modern “racial regime of representation,” where they exist solely as aberrations, mistranslations, or derelictions. In modernity, aesthetics and formalism, detached from political engagement and confined to the sole realm of contemplation—where white subjects dictate aesthetic norms for the ‘ordered’ world—become tools for sustaining racial hierarchies, even within the realm of representation. Within this racial regime of representation, the Black subject exists only in the dimension of ‘no-body,’ denied both body and mind, violently represented by others, and continually stripped of any capacity for conscious aesthetic judgment, interest, or creativity. This critique has driven many Black artists to reimagine the Black artistic dimension in order to challenge the violent aesthetic grammar of modernity.

Building on this observation—which, as I will demonstrate, forms part of my theoretical-methodological framework—I question whether the four criteria I use to select these texts (temporality, identity issues in relation to vulnerability, spatial configurations, and aesthetic reformulations) might together constitute an ‘aesthetics of vulnerability,’ or more precisely, a ‘counter-aesthetics of vulnerability,’ in which the centrality of the vulnerability experienced by the characters—situated within their specific regimes of historicity—would not fall into the traps of the racial regime of representation, as well as it would allow for a non-objectified portrayal. Thus, I reflect whether this ‘counter-

aesthetics of vulnerability’ could, as Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida (2023) asserts, allow to restore and represent what colonial history has denied: the inwardness of Black people. In other words, can this ‘counter-aesthetics of vulnerability,’ in these six novels, assert the right to an inner life, despite the wounds inflicted by colonialism and beyond the reductive representation of the ‘wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation’ typically found in (neo)colonial archives? More specifically, can a ‘counter-aesthetics of vulnerability’ demonstrate the necessity of closely binding content to form, signalling a conscious refusal to adhere to the racialized regimes of representation of modernity?

A third aspect these six novels prompt me to reflect on is the concept of the colonial wound—an element that, in different ways, emerges across all the texts—and its (im)possibility of redress and healing. During my research, I observed a growing critical tendency—including in my initial readings—that often places an undue expectation on Black art to offer solutions or healing for this wound. In other words, Black artistic productions are frequently expected to be restorative, transformative, or cathartic in response to the wound of colonial violence, much like how Black individuals are often called upon to provide answers and solutions to the racist violence they endure. As Grada Kilomba (2010, 126) aptly notes, “racism is not a personal problem, but a structural and institutional *white* problem that Black people experience.” Expecting these texts, *a priori*, to ‘repair’ past wounds imposes problematic demands on both the literature and its creators. In my view, this expectation risks obscuring the structural nature of colonial injuries by placing the burden of resolution on those who have been historically affected, instead of addressing the root causes of the violence itself.

Thus, I question whether, in these novels, the relationship between Blackness and aesthetics is inherently framed, as many critics suggest, as a refuge, a means of healing, or even a path to emancipation from the violence of the anti-Black world. Alternatively, do these texts resist offering easy or immediate solutions to a wound with complex, deep, and often unintelligible roots? I read this corpus as a counter-proposal to the ‘simplified’ understanding of the wound, which often burdens Afrodescendant literature with the responsibility of acting as a balm or suture for a lacerated social and political body. This expectation risks positioning these works at the service of the very historical and aesthetic regimes that caused the wound in the first place. Thus, my final research question emerges: Do these texts offer a cure for the colonial wound, or do they, rather, choose to ‘stay with the wound’ (to adapt Donna Haraway’s famous expression), co-existing with the ghosts—an ever-present motif in these novels—instead of exorcising them? Do they

seek to complicate the notions of reparation and restitution, offering not solutions but problematizations of the lingering tensions? Rather than viewing these texts as inherently capable of repairing the world between Africa and Portugal, is it possible to dwell on other figurations that the novels propose—such as implication, ambivalence, residue, trace, absence, spectre, ruination, displacement, and occupation—as figurations that disassemble the ‘pure’ and ‘ordered’ colonial grammars and reassemble new ones that seek to ‘give mind and body’ to Afro-diasporic representations?

It is from this corpus and these guiding research questions that I orient and structure my doctoral work.

Chapter Summaries

The title of my thesis, *An Aesthetics of Vulnerability*, intentionally reflects the ambiguity inherent in the concept of vulnerability. On one hand, my work takes a critical stance toward the representation of Afrodescendant vulnerability, particularly when it is subjected to the racial regime of representation, where vulnerability is often instrumentalized for contemporary neocolonial and neoliberal purposes. On the other hand, through the analysis of the six novels mentioned, I imagine the potential for counter-representations in which vulnerability, while not removable, is re-signified through misappropriating acts against the colonial and racial accounts of injury. These new representations seek to restore dignity and visibility to subjects who previously did not appear as ‘representative possibilities’ within Portuguese literary realm.

My dissertation is divided into two parts. In the first part, I deepen my research focus through methodological and theoretical approaches that unravel the complexity and stratification of the concept of vulnerability. Additionally, I provide a detailed contextual analysis within both historiographical and literary spheres to highlight the existence of specific hegemonic discourses rooted in the enduring Portuguese colonial mentality. These discourses generate bodily and enunciative vulnerabilities for the Afrodescendant groups. Thus, I also show how the emergence of Afrodescendant Portuguese literature responds to these hegemonic and oppressive dynamics.

In Chapter 1, I present my methodological and theoretical approaches, arguing that Afrodescendant vulnerability in literature offers an alternative ‘grammatical’ framework to the colonial archive. Methodologically, I assert that close readings informed by Black critical perspectives on the literary representation of vulnerability must address both content and formal elements of the texts. This entails a critical examination of how the

plot's significance interacts with alternative aesthetic forms of representation that challenge the existing racial regime of representation. I also reflect on the four criteria—temporality, identity issues related to vulnerability, spatial configurations, and aesthetic formulations—that, in my perspective, could define an 'aesthetics of vulnerability' within the novels and present the analytic approach through which I will combine these criteria throughout the close reading. These four elements are integral to the process defined by Rizvana Bradley and Denise Ferreira da Silva (2021) as "re/de/composition." This process entails the ongoing re-examination of artworks across all their compositional aspects to identify the elements that 'de/form' hegemonic regimes of racial and colonial representation. In other words, by examining temporality, identity, spatiality, and aesthetics, I will 're/de/compose' the six novels to uncover their (de)constructive efforts against these regimes of representation. Theoretically, the chapter draws on contemporary insights from Black Studies, Critical Race Theory, and decolonial thought, utilizing these frameworks to comprehend the lasting effects of coloniality on social groups historically subjected to global violence. I underscore the vital contributions of Black and decolonial feminist criticisms in refining and expanding the concepts of vulnerability and precarity. These standpoints advocate for a 'po-ethical' stance against colonial violence and provide an imaginative framework for rethinking humanism beyond the pervasive violence of coloniality, thereby envisioning vulnerability as a tool that could 'undo the world' as it is. Lastly, I investigate the intersections between vulnerability and postmemory as they pertain to the Afrodescendant Portuguese generation. This analysis serves as a bridge between the methodological and theoretical discussions, offering a more nuanced perspective on this literary strand before moving on to the subsequent chapter.

Chapter 2 critically analyses the historical and literary contexts surrounding the emergence of Afrodescendant Portuguese literature, highlighting how Black history and literature serve as counter-archives, counter-memories, and counter-narratives that challenge exclusionary hegemonic discourses in contemporary Portugal. By juxtaposing Eduardo Lourenço's portrayal of colonialism as an 'unthought' reality with Grada Kilomba's analysis of racism as a structurally 'unconscious' attitude, the chapter examines how neo-Luso-tropicalist rhetoric and historical aphasia perpetuate a glorified view of Portugal's colonial past, hindering its ability to articulate this violent history on a collective level. As a result, Portuguese colonialism and racism remain systematically shapeless and unintelligible, failing to awaken a collective and national critical consciousness among the white population regarding the past. In the historical section,

the chapter addresses the concept of the ‘colonial archive’ and the contemporary reimagining of a ‘Black Portuguese library’ by Black Portuguese scholars. This new historiography challenges the violent aesthetics of the colonial archive and asserts ‘Afrodescendancy’ as a category that confronts the legacies of ‘imperial citizenship’ and modern systemic discrimination. The second part of the chapter focuses on the critical emergence of Afrodescendant Portuguese literature as a form of cultural recognition. This literature resists colonial disqualification and deconstructs the Portuguese literary canon and language. The chapter concludes by examining how Afrodescendant literature interrogates national belonging through three key motifs of the African diaspora—ghosts and limbo, the use of language as a tangible response to the material effects of vulnerability, and the racialized body’s vulnerability in the diasporic space. These motifs underpin the chapter’s proposal of a ‘poethics and aesthetics of vulnerability,’ a framework that informs the close readings of novels in the following chapters.

The second part of the thesis is dedicated to the close reading of the selected corpus. This section is divided into two distinct chapters to underscore the different ways in which the legacy of colonial oppression is inscribed in the years following Independence and decolonization (Chapter 3 – *Present Past*), as well as its continued influence on the present for the post-imperial, non-witness generation (Chapter 4 – *Past Present*). Both chapters follow a similar organizational framework, that is, they ‘re/de/compose’ the novels through the key elements that ‘de/form’ their structures in comparison to the colonial representational regimes. These elements include: the introduction of significant new characters, who finally appear as ‘representative possibilities’ within the Portuguese tradition; the aesthetic choices that shape the telling of their ‘vulnerable’ stories of persistence ‘despite precarity,’ resisting the racial regime of representation, which, on the other hand, tends to depict these characters as perpetually subjugated to oppression; and the spatial configurations that encapsulate the total violence inflicted upon both people and lands. These spatial and subjective vulnerabilities intertwine, creating a ‘po-ethic’ cohesion between the characters and the spaces they occupy.

Chapter 3 examines *O canto da moreia* by Luísa Semedo and *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* and *Maremoto* by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, and specifically the literary representations of the *assimilado* and the African soldier within the Portuguese colonial army, tracing their diasporic journeys from Angola and Cape Verde to post-25 April Portugal. Despite being falsely promised the status of ‘imperial citizens,’ they end up in Lisbon, where they face increasing marginalization and ultimately lead precarious lives

in the city's suburbs and streets. The novels highlight the corporeal vulnerable dimension of racialized, sick, dis-abled, and addicted bodies, reflecting on the impact on the body when deprived of the structures needed to sustain life. These themes are intricately connected to the formal elements of the texts, which reflect on how depicting the embodied consequences of such conditions. On an aesthetic level, the chapter explores the use of language and narrative form, with particular attention to characters' self-representation through meta-narrative devices such as diaries, letters, and phone calls. Thus, self-writing is conceptualized as the "Black residuum" (Bradley 2023), a persistent materiality that resists total violence. These meta-narrative tools challenge the stereotypical notion that impoverished and vulnerable individuals lack a rich inner life or consciousness. The third aspect of the re/de/composition process focuses on space and spatial configurations. Alongside the vulnerable characters, a 'vulnerable Lisbon' also emerges in these novels. The relationship between vulnerable characters and vulnerable spaces will be analysed in light of the shared wound between racialized people and the lands they inhabit, within the context of ongoing coloniality. Lisbon is thus portrayed in its most dire and precarious form, becoming a powerful embodied metaphor for the failure to achieve meaningful socio-political transformation after decolonization and democratization.

Chapter 4 explores *Essa dama bate bué* by Yara Nakahanda Monteiro, *Debaixo da nossa pele: uma viagem* by Joaquim Arena, and *As Telefones* by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, with a specific focus on the vulnerability stemming from the absence of genealogical and ancestral memories of the colonial past and the impact of diaspora, particularly on the characters' search for identity. This generates what I call 'memory vulnerability,' which is portrayed in the novels through the material and symbolic motif of the 'absent body' of the witness generation. In works by Almeida and Monteiro, this absence is embodied by a distant, missing mother caught between Portugal and Angola; in Arena's novel, it reflects the lost genealogy of the descendants of an enslaved community in Portugal's Sado Valley. The silence of past generations creates vulnerability in the present, raising the challenge, for the characters, of making absence, traces, ruination, and disappearance tangible without transforming them into deceptive presences. Thus, the chapter introduces the children of the 'diaspora' (Monteiro 2019) and of the 'exilic experience' (Mata 2022) as new characters, examining how this absence shapes their identity formation. It also analyses the aesthetic experimentation in these novels, which seek new forms of expression—or 'decolonial grammars'—to convey the

inner worlds of characters grappling with memory vulnerability. Almeida's novel uses phone calls as a specific literary genre to shape the inner relationships of distant diasporic subjects—specifically, mother and daughter—through language. Monteiro's work emphasizes the reappropriation of previously forbidden Angolan languages as a form of linguistic occupation and resistance to enunciative vulnerability. Arena's narrative employs 'critical fabulation' to challenge Portugal's imperial archive of slavery, aiming to reveal the inner lives of the last enslaved communities beyond violence, humiliation, and oppression. Finally, the chapter focuses on the alternative maps and geographies—both real and imagined—within diasporic networks, which intersect with the characters' 'memory vulnerability' and identity quests. By moving beyond capital cities like Lisbon and Luanda to explore overlooked regions such as the Sado Valley in Portugal and areas outside Luanda in Angola, as well as imaginative geographies shaped by dislocation, the novels reveal how Portugal's and Europe's histories, along with the characters' identity, remain incomplete and misleading without recognizing the foundational role of African countries.

Drawing from the insights explored in the various chapters, the concluding section will address the three research questions posed in this introduction by engaging with three central concepts: the 'negativity' of Black art in relation to themes of wounding and redress; mourning as an act of (failed) reconciliation and the recognition of dignity; and hospitality in literature as a radical act of countering the politics of abandonment, extreme precarization, and exclusion. Through these concepts, I aim to weave together the threads of this work and offer a deeper reflection on their broader implications.

Part I – Approaching Vulnerability: Methodologies, Theories, and Contexts

Chapter 1 – Remaining Vulnerable: Methodological, Theoretical, and Poethical Approaches to the Literary Representation of Vulnerability

Nevertheless, she did/does cry, a cry that resonates now in distant galaxies and reverberates in each and every particle of everything that has come into existence since then. Resonating in every atom, every crack, every bit and piece that constitutes the world, echoing total violence, it reaches the world where it fractures the form of the subjectum along with its architectures.

Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt*

1.1 Scene: Violent Care and Alternative Grammars

Luís Vaz de Camões, celebrated as the poet-prophet of Lusitanian ‘conquests’ and their resulting ruins, died on June 10, 1580, in conditions of extreme poverty and neglect. Despite this, two early biographers briefly mention individuals who cared for him in his final days. Manuel de Faria e Sousa, a prominent Camonian biographer (also known for forgeries), noted in the 1688 edition of *Rimas Varias de Luis de Camoens* that a mixed-race woman named Barbara, aware of his dire state, provided him with meagre sustenance, offering food scraps and what little money she could gather.⁶ Conversely, the canonist priest Pedro de Mariz recounts the presence of an enslaved man named Jau, originally ‘acquired’ in India and called António, who begged on the streets of Lisbon to support the poet’s fragile existence. After Jau’s death, Camões’ survival grew increasingly precarious.⁷

With the rise of Portuguese Romanticism, the connection between Camões and Jau—whether real or imagined—was vividly depicted in numerous paintings. This relationship was also celebrated by Almeida Garrett in his work *Camões* (1825) and by

⁶ “Vióse reduzido un Hombre que solo fue mayor que todos ellos juntos, a acetar de personas comunes los quatro reales, y los dós, y aun el real para no morir de hambre. Que digo el real de persnas comunes? Acetava el plato de asqueroso mantenimiento que se anda a vender por las puertas de los miserables en Lisboa. Una Mulata deste trato (llamavase Barbara), sabiendo sus miserias, le dava muchas vezes un plato de lo que iba vendiendo, y a vezes algun dinero de lo vendido; y acètava-lo èl” (Sousa in Gomes 2019, 68).

⁷ “Era mancebo quando fizera os cantos, farto e namorado, querido e estimado e cheio de muitos favores e mercês de amigos e de damas, com que o calor poético aumentava. E que agora não tinha contentamento nem espírito para nada. Porque ali estava o seu jau, que lhe pedia duas moedas para carvão, e ele não tinha para lhas dar. [...] Se não tivera hum Jau, chamado António, que da India trouxe, que de noyte pedia esmola para o ajudar a sustentar, não podera aturar a vida; como se viu, tanto que o Jau morreu, não durará ele muitos meses!” (Mariz in Gomes 2019, 70).

Gomes Leal in the poem *A fome de Camões* (1880). In contrast, there is little trace of Barbara's presence, except perhaps in the famous Camonian poem "Aquela cativa," written in the traditional *medida velha* style. Scholars such as Teófilo Braga, José Leite de Vasconcelos, and Carolina Michaëlis de Vasconcelos have made efforts to reconstruct a tenuous genealogical connection to this figure.

In 1835, French artist Joseph Léon de Lestang-Parade painted *Mort du Camoens* (figure 1), one of the few works in a series depicting the poet's death that includes both a man, likely representing Jau, and a female figure. The painting features a Black man and a woman, reflecting the colonial aesthetic of the time, where they are portrayed attending to a white man and 'accompanying' him on his final journey.



Figure 1 – Joseph Léon de Lestang-Parade, *Mort du Camoens* (1835)

Modern art has always been, according to Jean-Michel Ganteau (2015, 18), a privileged site for both the representation and the expression of vulnerability: "the human body is exposed, and the presentation of the vulnerable individual is flaunted to present allegories of relational humanity." In Lestang-Parade's painting, a striking aesthetic connection emerges between the exposure of the bodies and their portrayal of vulnerability, highlighted by a paradoxical symbolism. This symbolism centres on the complex interdependence between master and servant, colonizer and colonized, perpetrator and victim. Camões, depicted in a state of overt vulnerability, relies entirely

on the care of his two servants, who, in turn, are bound to him by the systemic forces of colonial oppression. The act of Jau kissing Camões' hand—likely the same hand that separated the servants from their homeland—carries a distressing symbolic weight. This gesture, both paradoxical and haunting, embodies contradiction, perversity, and ambiguity, encapsulating the intricate dynamics of power, dependence, and exploitation within the colonial context and in relations to those subjects who endured the total violence of the oppression at both a material and symbolic level.

This painting leaves no room for interpreting the interdependence of human beings confronting finitude as 'harmonious' or 'innocent,' as romanticized by the Portuguese Romantic tradition. Instead, it aligns closely with the 19th-century colonial rhetoric that portrays the 'Other' as either a savage threat to the white man or a compliant figure wholly devoted to their master, as exemplified here. When we consider Camões' death alongside the possible existence—whether factual or imagined—of the two servants mentioned in these (in)consistent biographical accounts and benignly depicted by Lestang-Parade, a glaring absence becomes evident. This absence underscores the scarcity of archival records on the real lives of Black and Afrodescendant individuals in Portugal and the lack of their first-person narratives beyond the colonial archives. In this concern, Afro-american writer and scholar Saidiya Hartman (2008, 2) states that the colonial archive is always "a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore's life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history."

Shifting the critical focus from Camões to Jau and Barbara, particularly when colonial archival sources are either silent or depict scenes of violent subjugation of the captive wounded body, necessitates an alternative methodological approach that prioritizes critical fiction over strict reliance on the colonial archive and deconstruction of traditional Western forms over an aesthetics of modernity that has forged, nourished and sustained what David Lloyd (2019, 7) calls as "racial regime of representation." One such approach is critical storytelling, or "critical fabulation," as introduced by Saidiya Hartman. This method involves deconstructing traditional historical narratives found in archives—always characterized by the modern spacetime coordinates of separability, determinacy, and sequentiality—and instead constructing narratives that critically address the absence, the silence, and the *residuum* of violence embedded within the colonial historical record. It is a narrative "written with and against the archive" (Hartman 2008, 12), imagining what might have been the lives of Jau and Barbara beyond their time

‘caring’ for Camões and beyond their exposure to the total violence of slavery. The aim is not to ‘recover’ these enslaved characters, but to envision and create a more complete and nuanced understanding of their lives, and, more specifically, their ‘inner life’: “The intent of this practice is not to give voice to the slave, but rather to imagine what cannot be verified, a realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death—social and corporeal death—and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance” (Hartman 2008, 12).

Lestang-Parade’s painting, along with the sparse details provided by biographers, evokes unease not merely because of its depiction of the poet’s death, but more so due to its notable omissions: the lives of those who, whether out of duty or choice, ‘care for us’ in our final moments. *La Mort du Camões* serves as an unsettling phantasmagoria, mirroring the present in how the depiction, reading, and interpretation of Black lives remain rooted in the modern aesthetics of racial regimes of representation.

The shadow cast by this painting unsettlingly embodies a profound concept: the accounts of injury stemming from colonial history, which endure in contemporary coloniality through ongoing vulnerability and exposure to a deeply precarious existence. To what extent does this shadow continue to loom over post-25 April Portugal? What can critical fabulation regarding Barbara and Jau in relation to Camões reveal about contemporary Afrodescendant vulnerability in literature? By aiding the elderly poet in his final moments, with little recognition for their efforts, the story of Barbara and Jau inevitably reflects themes of violence, dispossession, bereavement, abandonment, solitude, and precariousness. Yet, something endures from their narrative. In the words of Hartman (2008, 4), “how does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?” This question leads me to consider how we can engage with narratives of vulnerability without perpetuating and reinforcing the same patterns of harm. In this chapter, I outline my methodological and theoretical approach to argue that vulnerability in literature can offer an alternative ‘grammatical’ framework to the colonial archive—specifically, to the modern forms and aesthetics of racial regimes of representation—by engaging in radical acts of misappropriation of racial injury as a means of confronting the enduring wounds of colonialism.

Methodologically, I demonstrate that a close reading based on Black critical perspectives on the literary representation of vulnerability must engage with both the content and formal elements of the text. Such an approach allows for a ‘sensing’ of the vulnerability embodied by the characters and their narratives throughout the work. This

involves critically attending to the interplay between the significance conveyed through the plot and the disruptive means of representation which ‘de/form’ the text. Theoretically, the chapter engages with contemporary reflections in Black Studies, Critical Race Theory and decolonial thought as interpretive tools for understanding the enduring impact of coloniality on social groups historically subjected to global violence. I also contend that Black and decolonial feminist criticism are crucial for deepening and broadening the understanding of vulnerability and precarity. These standpoints promote a ‘po-ethical’ approach that challenges colonial violence and offer a ‘po-ethical’ perspective for reimagining humanism beyond the persistent violence of coloniality. In this way, vulnerability is envisioned as a means of undoing the existing world forged by modernity. In the final section, I explore the intersections between vulnerability and postmemory in relation to the Afrodescendant Portuguese generation. This analysis serves as a bridge between the methodological and theoretical discussions, providing a more nuanced perspective before transitioning to Chapter 2. In the forthcoming chapter, the Afrodescendant Portuguese context will be critically examined to understand how hegemonic discourses and practices create specific vulnerabilities within these communities and how these issues are reflected in literary texts.

1.2 Vulnerability as a Method

Vulnerability, due to its polysemic nature, is often regarded as an ambiguous concept, commonly associated with precarity, fragility, insecurity, weakness, and finitude—an ambiguity rooted in its etymology. Despite its abstract appearance, vulnerability carries a tangible materiality and corporeality. Derived from the Latin *vulnerabilis* (Maragno 2018, 15), vulnerability is clearly “a question of skin” (Cavarero 2016, 158), indicating a direct link to a physical breach in the dermis—a tearing of flesh. Thus, vulnerability inherently invokes violence, referring to the embodied predisposition of living beings to injury, or as a body open to harm (Pigliaru 2015, 241). However, the same root *vulnus* also gives rise to the now obsolete adjective ‘vulnerary,’ from the Latin *vulnerarius*, meaning “used for or useful in healing wounds” (Merriam-Webster 2023). Francesca Consolaro (2009, 45-46) notes that through the Germanic root *vel*, the term alludes to glabrous, bare skin in its most exposed state. Feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero (2016, 159-160) argues that when vulnerability is seen as pure nakedness, the violence of the wound recedes, revealing a tender, defenceless skin “that inspires caresses.” This touch opens a dimension of vulnerability beyond violence: the possibility of care. In other words, as Estelle

Ferrarese (2016a, 13) argues, “the notion of vulnerability presumes more than the susceptibility to certain wrongs; it implies that they can be prevented.”

Building on this etymological foundation, which reveals the complexity of vulnerability, Judith Butler, a leading feminist philosopher on the topic, argues in both *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997a) and *Excitable Speech* (1997b) that vulnerability appears as an ambivalent figure, as a paradoxical nexus of constitutive possibilities between exploitability and agency. In this direction, my study interrogates the ‘constitutive possibilities’ of the *vulnus* by applying a close reading methodology to explore how vulnerability is represented in some works of contemporary Afrodescendant Portuguese fiction. My analysis applies a feminist close reading to vulnerability, focusing on two key issues: the portrayal of vulnerability as a critique of the racial violence produced by coloniality in Portugal, and the exploration of the forms of relationality—bodies in relation within a given time and space—that emerge in the aftermath of what Achille Mbembe (2021) terms the ‘dark night’ of colonial oppression. Despite differing perspectives within feminist discourse (to be explored in the subsequent section on vulnerability as feminist theory), this study approaches vulnerability as a specific historically induced condition that exposes Black subjects to the ‘total violence’ perpetrated by the exploitative mechanisms of Colonial/Racial/Capital intersection. This view, as articulated by Afro-Brazilian feminist philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva (2022), considers the Colonial/Racial/Capital both as a painful matrix and as the enduring legacy of the ‘known’ Western colonial world we inhabit. While denouncing this total violence, vulnerability also encapsulates the complex intertwining of corporeality and relationality that arises in the aftermath of oppression. This necessitates a rethinking of ‘bodies in relation’ within the Portuguese social, historical, cultural, and political context, emphasizing one’s undeniable interdependence while situating it within a framework marked by the subtle violence of contemporary coloniality of power.

1.2.1 A Black Critique of Form: An Aesthetics of Vulnerability in Literature

To clarify my methodological approach, it is essential to examine two key components: first, the relationship between racial violence and form (in our case, language), and second, the way these elements combine together in modern aesthetics to shape the so called “racial regime of representation.” As a response, recent Black critics, mainly in the fields of the arts and media studies, have engaged in proposing methodological alternatives in order to approach, read and understand Black cultural productions.

In her recent book *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthetics and the Critique of Form* (2023), Rizvana Bradley argues that aesthetics has always been indispensable to modernity, particularly in its manifestations of colonial brutality, extractivism, and exploitation. Bradley contends that by separating the political from the aesthetic, modernity is marked by a reliance on formalism—an emphasis on form, structure, and order in art and culture—which elevates the white subject to the status of a ‘universal’ subject, thereby establishing the ‘aesthetic rules’ of the ordered, known, Western world. Simon Gikandi (1997, online) supports this thesis, stating that “the aesthetic derives much of its authority from its ability to claim autonomy from the historical, social, or cultural event and thus from the consciousness of a sovereign subject.”

As a result, this formalism has historically been employed to construct and sustain racial hierarchies. In this context, aesthetics is not a neutral domain but a tool used in modernity’s racial projects. The aesthetic judgments that have shaped modernity are deeply embedded in colonial and racial discourses, where the categorization of art and culture often parallels the racial categorization of populations. Consequently, aesthetics as a foundational structure of modernity has contributed to what David Lloyd (2019, 7) describes as a “racial regime of representation,” which underpins the contemporary antiblack world. In this sense, “representation regulates the distribution of racial identifications along a developmental trajectory: The Savage or Primitive and the Negro or Black remain on the threshold of an unrealized humanity, still subject to affect and to the force of nature, not yet capable of representation, not yet apt for freedom and civility” (Lloyd 2019, 7). As a result, and following Denise Ferreira da Silva’s (2022) argument, the Black subject is thus perpetually relegated to the ‘scene of nature,’ a condition that continuously disqualifies sub-Saharan Africans and diasporic populations from any form of conscious aesthetic judgment, interest, or capacity.

In this framework, both Denise Ferreira da Silva and Rizvana Bradley have theorized the ‘author’ of this racial regime of representation as “*homo aestheticus*,” a subject synonymous with the “totalizing onto-epistemology of the human” (Bradley, Ferreira da Silva 2021, online). The *homo aestheticus* thus sustains the racial regime of modern aesthetics by imposing a visual and sensory order that reflects the broader racialized social order. From this perspective, the modern world is understood as a process of formalization, wherein antiblack violence occurs within and through this order of forms. Thus, as Bradley (2023, 14) asserts, aesthetics becomes “a matter of life and

death,” or as Calvin Warren (2019, 357) puts it, “pure form is the consequence of perfect death, black death.”

To counter ‘deadly’ modern aesthetics, according to Jamaican author Sylvia Wynter (1992), Black cultural and radical productions have long been engaged in rethinking aesthetics. Black artistic expressions, in this context, perform a recursive deconstruction of the relationship between Blackness, modern aesthetics, and its forms. However, this deconstruction cannot entirely evade the representational violence inherent in the racial regime of aesthetics. In fact, Rizvana Bradley’s thesis underscores the aporia of Blackness, arguing that while Blackness cannot be represented within modernity’s aesthetic regime, it is nonetheless foundational to every act of representation. This raises a critical question: “How do we think black art against the grain of an aesthetic grammar within which blackness may only ever appear as an aberration, mistranslation, or, more precisely, dereliction?” (Rizvana 2023, 9).

To address this question, Bradley draws on Afro-American feminist Hortense J. Spillers, asserting that Black artistic expressions occupy a space between ‘nonbeing’—the erasure of existence imposed by the racial regime—and existence itself. Bradley explains: “These forms emerge from an existence that is neither inside nor outside the racial regime through which representation coheres, but rather an existence which is made to ‘cut the border,’ as Spillers might say. It is in this cut—between existence and nonbeing— that black aesthesis emerges” (Bradley 2023, 19). Given that Black radical theory consistently emphasizes that Blackness ‘precedes’ modernity, Bradley introduces the term “anteaesthetics” to describe Black artistic expressions, demonstrating that “the anteriority of Blackness constitutes the condition of (im)possibility for the aesthetic as such” (Bradley 2023, 19). The Middle Passage, slavery, horrific subjugation, genealogical dispersal, and violent racism all embody a long history of colonial and racial expropriation from one’s own body, pushed towards disappearance. This displacement compels Black artists to continuously descend into the realm of the impossible in order to confront the issue of “what happens in the absence of a body” (Bradley 2023, 31). For this reason, Bradley replaces the term ‘Black aesthetics’ with ‘Black aesthesis,’ to emphasize that such aesthetics “is neither ontological nor phenomenological but rather the vertiginous rupture of modernity’s aesthetic relays between being, body-subject, and world” (Bradley 2023, 32).

Without delving into the compelling details of Bradley’s dense and complex argument, I find her thesis crucial in shaping my methodology. My approach involves a

close reading of selected Portuguese Afrodescendant texts to examine how vulnerability at a content level—which has been the primary focus of Lusophone critical scholarship—interacts with the text’s formation, particularly its aesthetics, an aspect that has received little critical attention. This interaction, I argue, contributes to the development of specific ‘decolonial grammars’ within this literary expression. In this endeavour, I draw upon the insights of Rizvana Bradley and Denise Ferreira da Silva as articulated in their collective essay “Four Theses on Aesthetics”:

Black Aesthetics—that is, that which fosters, facilitates, and modulates ‘black enunciation’—signals another site for the analysis of artistic creation, collective existence, and political practice. As such, it provides the basis for a project that militates against and serially undermines the modern liberal political architecture, in its violent post-Enlightenment configuration and operations, as well as the fascistic doubles that liberalism at once requires, solicits, and half-heartedly decries. Black Aesthetics is an utterance that, in its immanent derangement of modernity’s grammar, marks and is marked by the art of passage without coordinates or arrival, the art of life in departure (Rizvana, Ferreira da Silva 2021, online).

In other words, Black studies, Critical Race Theory, and Black feminism all argue that Blackness is always a critique of modern forms. Through its coerced labour and forced visibility due to racial violence, Blackness subtends the creation and re-creation of new forms within the ‘cut of the border’ of the modern world.

As I will argue in the next chapter, Portuguese Afrodescendant literature faces two primary challenges. On one hand, it must confront the ‘formal’ violence of the colonial past, which has been ‘sweetened’ by (neo)Luso-tropicalist rhetoric. On the other hand, it must grapple with what Portuguese philosopher Eduardo Lourenço describes as the ‘unthought’ of Portuguese colonialism, as well as the theme of racism as a Portuguese unconscious, as articulated by Afro-Portuguese artist Grada Kilomba. The unthought of the colonial past erases history, memory, violence, and their associated forms, rendering them abstract, formless, and therefore ‘unthinkable’ and ‘unconscious.’ The texts I will analyse strive to give ‘form’ to this Portuguese unthought and unconscious, but in a way that diverges from the aesthetic formalism of modernity. Their goal, I argue, is to create an Afro-Portuguese form—a Black Portuguese aesthetics—that critically addresses that past, that violence, and the consequent vulnerabilities. This literary operation, as I interpret it, mirrors what Hortense J. Spillers suggests in *Black, White, and in Color* (2003, 85), where the recourse to form can be “pre-eminently useful” when employed as

a tool for its own deconstruction and destruction. In other words, I argue that recent Afro-Portuguese aesthetic forms in literature attempt to deconstruct the violent colonial formalizations embedded in the Portuguese canon and its canonicity.

As previously mentioned, vulnerability is etymologically linked to violence, which itself has a complex relationship with representability. The connection between violence and its representability has been extensively explored in Continental philosophy and literary criticism.⁸ Scholars have highlighted the problematic nature of representing violence, given its boundless and amorphous essence—what philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2018, vii) describes as “protean” nature of violence—and the limited forms available to adequately convey its multidirectional impact. By considering vulnerability an *ante*, as a state of radical openness of the body that precedes any violent act—namely, the ‘possibility’ for the body to be both wounded and cared for—it becomes a possibility of articulating the tangible and perceptible aspects of violence. What I am arguing here is that vulnerability ‘precedes’ violence because it embodies the brief, fleeting moment of openness when the body is exposed to the impending act of violence. This moment of exposure attempts to capture the enormity of violence, thereby enabling a partial, residual representation.

Feminist scholars who have developed critical frameworks based on alterity, care theory, trauma theory, and affect theory have frequently turned to literature as a means to underscore the distinctive ability of literary texts, different from philosophical ones, to engage with the concepts of vulnerability and violence. Notable figures in this regard include Martha Nussbaum, Adriana Cavarero, Judith Butler, Olivia Guaraldo, bell hooks, and Denise Ferreira da Silva, among others: “it seems as though fiction were the privileged space in which vulnerability is thematised and expressed, through human exposure to fate, *peripeteia*, or simply relational hitches” (Ganteau 2015, 17). Contemplating the interplay between these philosophical inquiries regarding vulnerability within the realm of literature, certain scholars, primarily within the Anglophone academic domain, have sought to formulate critical interpretations of both modern and

⁸ Among the various texts that could be cited, particularly relevant for a methodological perspective are works such as Arendt’s *On Violence* (1969), Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” (1996), and Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003). I also refer to recent contributions on violence and media representations such as Scarparo and McDonald’s *Violent Depictions: Representing Violence Across Cultures* (2007), Nestrovski and Seligmann-Silva’s *Catástrofe e representação* (2000), António Sousa Ribeiro’s *Representações da violência* (2013), and Ginzburg’s *Literatura, violência e melancolia* (2017). What these perspectives have in common is that, when facing the increase of urban and social violence, the aesthetics of the text changes radically, mainly because, quoting Karl Erik Schøllhammer (2009, 28, my translation), “violence, due to its extreme *unrepresentability*, challenged the poetic efforts of writers.”

contemporary fiction by employing a methodological lens centred on a ‘poetics of vulnerability.’ In his work, Jean-Michel Ganteau introduces the notion of an “aesthetics of vulnerability,” underpinned by the following rationale: “My hypothesis that fiction, and essentially the novel and the short story (perhaps more than film or TV series, for instance), favour and welcome a concentration of vulnerable thought and feeling that is both represented and performed textually. This is what leads me to see contemporary fiction as one of the privileged *loci* of vulnerability” (Ganteau 2015, 25). Although Ganteau’s suggestion move inside the realm of modern aesthetics, what interests me is the attention he draws on the ‘performative side’ of vulnerability throughout the ‘form of the text,’ beyond a mere content analysis. To contemplate a textual analysis grounded in vulnerability as a method involves, as I consider it, interpreting vulnerability as a specific ‘counter-form of enunciation,’ as a specific ‘grammatical’ disposition throughout the literary language. In the case of this study, I will argue that the specific ‘enunciative counter-form’ conveyed by vulnerability in the selected Afrodescendant corpus means providing a ‘decolonial grammar’ that composes, recomposes and decomposes the texts in order to counter that modern grammar of Portuguese colonial violence that characterized cultural production under the Portuguese racial regime of representation. In other words, I argue that Afrodescendant vulnerability within the text ‘gives form’ to the unthinkable and unconscious in order to attempt to decompose and deconstruct their inherent violent modern grammar.

To achieve this, I outline four key criteria that constitute the foundation of my close reading methodology for interpreting the ‘decolonial grammars’ presented in the selected fictional texts. The first criterion emphasizes the vital connection between the narrative and its broader contextual environment, highlighting that violence and its aesthetic representation are always situated within specific temporal, spatial, and historical frameworks. To avoid reinforcing the modern spacetime division characterized by separability, determinacy, and sequentially, I will demonstrate the historical and spatial continuities that shape hegemonic discourses influencing how violence and vulnerability are portrayed in the text. The second criterion involves analysing the emergence of characters historically excluded as ‘representative possibilities’ within the Portuguese literary canon to understand the vulnerabilities imposed on their bodies and memories. The third criterion addresses the aesthetic choices these texts make to challenge conventional Portuguese modern grammars. I will examine recurring figures of speech, tropes, and experimental techniques that create aesthetic coherence between the text’s

thematic content and formal elements. Special focus will be given to narrators and narrative styles, particularly how the story is told and how shifts in narrative perspective convey vulnerability. Attention will also be paid to the blending and experimentation with literary genres as a response to the limitations of adhering strictly to ‘classic’ aesthetic forms in storytelling. The fourth criterion links vulnerable bodies and memories to the territoriality they inhabit. Colonial violence not only exploited enslaved labour and bodies but also drained their Native lands and the spaces to which they were confined during forced diasporic dislocations. The close relationship between vulnerable bodies, memories, and the territories they occupy forms the final cohesive element, establishing a counter-aesthetic of vulnerability.

In accordance with these criteria, Chapter 2 will provide an in-depth analysis of the historical, social, and cultural context of Afrodescendancy in Portugal, focusing on the hegemonic discourses and practices rooted in the colonial period and their enduring legacies that the texts critically interrogate. These discourses and practices highlight the unequal distribution of vulnerability in terms of corporeality, personal and collective memory, as well as spatial inequities. The chapter will also explore the specific aesthetics formulated by Afrodescendant Portuguese writers, particularly recent theories on diasporic literature advanced by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida. This focus will help to identify the distinctive tropes that constitute the ‘decolonial grammars’ of Afrodescendant Portuguese literature.

Chapters 3 and 4 will then perform close readings of the selected novels, employing an analytical approach grounded in the process of “re/de/composition” of the four fictional elements that, in my view, make up these works. Rizvana Bradley and Denise Ferreira da Silva describe “re/de/composition” as the continuous re-examination of artworks in all their compositional aspects, revealing the “contaminated assemblage of citations and de/formations” (Bradley, Ferreira da Silva 2021, online) that constitute these works. Through variation, alteration, contamination, disruption, and ‘de/formation,’ these artworks challenge modern and hegemonic forms of racial representation. Thus, my analysis will ‘re/de/compose’ the fictional elements that constitute the novels in order to envision a possible aesthetics of vulnerability that counter those regimes throughout the texts.

In both chapters, I will analyse the introduction of new characters who contrast with the canonical protagonists of Portuguese literature. These characters’ vulnerabilities—whether bodily, spatial, or mnemonic—are shaped by colonialism and colonality. In

some cases, this vulnerability also arises from a complex history of entanglement with the very oppressive system they confront, as we will see with the figure of the '*assimilado*.' A second focus of analysis is the linguistic strategies each novel employs to articulate these characters' experiences of vulnerability. This includes the use of figurative language, motifs, narrative structures, genre blending and inventions, and multimedia elements such as illustrations and photographs, which together form 'decolonial grammars' that aesthetically diverge from traditional Portuguese representations. The third trope examined through this process of re/de/composition is the close relationship between vulnerable characters and the spaces they inhabit, traverse, or are confined to. This relationship offers a 'po-ethical' reflection on how embodied and mnemonic vulnerabilities are embedded within a broader map of exploitation that extends beyond human beings to include non-humans and the environment, reflecting the pervasive impact of the total violence inherent in modern colonial history.

1.3 Vulnerability as a Theory

After having outlined the methodology, I will now delve into specific theoretical considerations crucial for exploring the dense concept of vulnerability in our current global, neoliberal context marked by a stark coloniality. These discussions will serve to elucidate critical perspectives that will underpin subsequent reflections that will appear along the analysis of the corpus. Specifically, I aim to examine how feminist criticisms, particularly those stemming from Black, decolonial and Southern standpoints, interpret vulnerability and its connection to the current Colonial/Racial/Capital mechanism of exploitation and marginalization.

1.3.1 Vulnerability Culture: Frames of Neoliberal, Global, and Violent Coloniality

While vulnerability and interdependence have been recognized as fundamental aspects of embodied existence—marking all living beings as inherently exposed to both harm and care within a web of corporeal and social relations—feminist philosophers like Adriana Cavarero (2009) and Judith Butler (2004) argue that this ontological reality has been systematically suppressed by Western modernity. Philosophical frameworks such as

Kant's autonomous individual,⁹ Hobbes' Leviathan¹⁰ or Locke's property system¹¹ systematically erased vulnerability through Sovereign politics. These models delegate to the Sovereign State the authority to offer protection from external entities (the 'Others'), 'mitigate' harm, and determine who is deemed worthy of life based on Western perceived degrees of 'humanity.' By positioning the state as the arbiter of others' vulnerability, these frameworks reduce vulnerability to mere fragility or weakness, framing it as a deficit that renders individuals dependent and incapable of self-governance.

As a historical consequence, individuals labeled as 'vulnerable' have often been marginalized and systematically excluded from public spaces and any form of social contract, as Lucia Re also observes: "si tratta di quei soggetti che sono concepiti come *deboli e inferiori*, ovvero—nelle diverse fasi storiche—le donne, i minori, i folli, gli indigenti, i detenuti, i colonizzati, gli schiavi, gli omosessuali, le persone con disabilità, gli anziani, ecc."¹² (Re 2018, 10). In this context, the Sovereign State treats the lives of 'vulnerable' individuals as objects of direct intervention, subjecting them to rigid control and reducing them to a state of absolute immediacy. Historically, these 'vulnerable' individuals—read: those made vulnerable—have been, and continue to be, reduced to lives deemed either dispensable or exploitable in the name of an 'immune' system that provides protection only to those sheltered under the wings of the State-Leviathan. In so doing, Roberto Esposito (2011, 14) states that "it is as if politics needed to deprive life of any qualitative dimension, to render it *only life, pure life, or bare life*"¹³ in order to relate

⁹ Kant is regarded as the modern era theorist of an autonomous, free and rational self, who masters his inclinations and who "does not need others to incline lovingly toward him" (Cavarero 2016, 26).

¹⁰ In Chapter XI of *Leviathan*, Hobbes states that "Desire of Ease, and sensual Delight, disposeth men to obey a common Power: Because by such Desires, a man doth abandon the protection might be hoped for his own Industry and labour. Fear of Death, and Wounds, disposeth to the same; and for the same reason" (1965, 76). Under the 'shelter' and 'safeguard' offered by the Leviathan, which represents the Sovereign State, vulnerability appears to be effectively severed from the political fabric. It is no longer regarded as an inherent characteristic of individuals within society but is instead ascribed solely to external enemies who possess the potential to inflict mortal harm upon the population protected by the Leviathan. Consequently, a new type of individual is constructed, whose primary objective becomes self-preservation and autonomy. These individuals are willing to engage in a "sacrificial mechanism" (Esposito 2009, 14) that involves a willingness to sacrifice themselves in return for the security promised by the Leviathan, thereby eliminating their vulnerability. For further reflections on the connection between the Leviathan and vulnerability, see Cavarero (2009), Furia (2020), Pulcini (1996; 2013), and Whitney (2011).

¹¹ Locke posits that vulnerability is fundamentally tied to the concept of 'property.' Thus, security does not primarily stem from the Leviathan's direct safeguarding of the community against the uncertainties of life. Instead, it arises through the individual's direct defence of their own body-property against external entities often characterized in terms of Otherness. For further reflections on this issue, see Cavarero (1987), Santoro (1996), and Corradetti (2022).

¹² "These are those subjects who are conceived of as *weak* and *inferior*, that is—in different historical phases—women, minors, the insane, the destitute, convicts, the colonised, slaves, homosexuals, people with disabilities, the elderly, etc." (my translation).

¹³ Esposito's argument is strictly connected to Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life." Agamben proposes the concept of "bare life" drawing inspiration from the Benjaminian notion of "das bloß Leben"

to it.” That is why the life of those made ‘vulnerable’ by the State have been reduced into nude biological forms with the aim of exploiting them outside the rule of law. This often results in the public abandonment of their vulnerable lives.

Applying this framework to the Portuguese context, which will be further explored in the next chapter, provides valuable insight into how abandonment has profoundly affected the African and Afrodescendant population, both after the abolition of slavery and following the events of April 25, 1974. After slavery was abolished, no reparative policies were enacted, leading to the complete neglect of former enslaved, who were left without support to navigate their newfound ‘freedom.’ This lack of assistance rendered them vulnerable to extreme precarity. A similar fate befell the African and Afrodescendant diasporic communities that migrated to Portugal after the Carnation Revolution. Despite centuries of colonial exploitation and oppression, as well as a 13-year-long armed struggle for independence followed by civil wars, no reparative or restitution policies were implemented in the newly established ‘democratic’ Portugal. Consequently, large segments of these communities were forced to live in conditions of extreme precarity on the outskirts of major urban centres, with men exploited in construction work and women in domestic labour and cleaning jobs. While overt manifestations of violence, such as racism and discrimination, are evident, it is the pervasive sense of abandonment that particularly concerns me—an invisible yet powerful force that deprives lives of support and care precisely when they are most vulnerable, having already been stripped of everything by the country’s own history.

“Che cosa ci dice questo accostamento tra violenza estrema e vulnerabilità?”¹⁴ asks feminist philosopher Olivia Guaraldo (2018, 59). Recent critical feminist perspectives argue that globalization, neoliberalism, and contemporary coloniality are central frameworks for analysing contemporary vulnerability and its exposure to violence.

and analysing the figure of the *homo sacer*. The *homo sacer*—an archaic figure of the Roman law, “the one whom the people have judged on account of a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide” (Agamben 1998, 71)—is a non-disposable yet killable form of life that precedes both the divine and human right, that is, ‘bare’ life exposed to abandonment and unpunishable violence. This form of life encapsulates Agamben’s fundamental interpretation of vulnerability across the span of Western history. He contends that the entwinement of life and its vulnerability within the realm of politics is not a product of the Modern state but has been a foundational aspect of sovereign power since its ancient inception. What stands out in Agamben’s anti-Foucauldian observation is that the bare life does not immediately inherently signify dominion over someone’s existence or the ‘normalization’ of violence through a legal framework. Rather, it signifies the deliberate decision of public abandonment of one’s life (Agamben 1998, 29). And it is exactly this ‘abandonment’ that characterises the most pervasive, yet almost imperceptible, relation between vulnerability and violence.

¹⁴ “What does this juxtaposition of extreme violence and vulnerability tell us?” (my translation).

Globalization, with its widespread and complex effects, has become what Marcel Mauss (1990) termed a “total social fact.” Neoliberalism, meanwhile, marks a new phase of capitalism, defined by the privatization of public goods and services, financial deregulation, the abandonment of redistributive policies, the commodification of human needs, the use of technical solutions for social issues, the dominance of market-driven language promoting profit, and the intensification of extractivist practices.

While liberal modernity promoted a model of individual independence as the normative path to personal fulfilment, aiming to eradicate vulnerability as a source of harm, neoliberalism exacerbates and pathologizes vulnerability. It perpetuates the “myth of autonomy” (Fineman 2004), which values self-reliance and independence as key to a ‘good life.’ The ideal neoliberal subject is autonomous, self-sufficient, entrepreneurial, competitive, and highly responsible for self-management (Verza 2018; The Care Collective 2020; Vergès 2022). Historically, these traits have been gendered male, connoted as white, and associated with able-bodiedness, leading to the marginalization and pathologization of those who do not fit this model. In contrast, vulnerability, interdependence, and care—concepts often gendered female, racialized, and linked to disability—are systematically excluded from neoliberalism’s political vocabulary.

In the foreword to the Italian translation of *The Care Manifesto*, Sara R. Farris (2021, 9) states that “il neoliberismo uccide, e uccide soprattutto *i dannati della terra*, per dirla con Frantz Fanon, le cui vite sembrano più sacrificabili delle altre.”¹⁵ The disposability of vulnerable lives then becomes the red thread that ties globalisation and neoliberalism along with neocolonialism and contemporary coloniality—or else, as defined by Anibal Quijano in the Latin American context (1992), “coloniality of power.”

Colonial domination based its control and power over several populations around one specific axis: race and racial discrimination. “The racial axis has a colonial origin and character,” writes Quijano (2000, 533), “but it has proven to be more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix it was established.” In her seminal work *Unpayable Debt* (2022), Afro-Brazilian scholar Denise Ferreira da Silva further explores the issue of coloniality, building on the ideas emerging from the so-called ‘decolonial turn.’ She identifies separability, determinacy, and sequentiality as the three onto-epistemological pillars of modern thought and as foundational to the post-Enlightenment episteme. Ferreira da Silva focuses on slavery and the concept of the captive body as property, which

¹⁵ “Neoliberalism kills, and especially *the wretched of the earth*, as Frantz Fanon puts it, whose lives appear more disposable than others” (my translation).

she argues are central ‘matters’ that shaped what she terms the Colonial/Racial/Capital triad. This triad exposes the captive body to ‘total violence,’ resulting in the complete dispossession of the subject as a racialized being and of her total value through the total exploitation of her slave work.

In my view, Ferreira da Silva’s groundbreaking insights address two primary concerns: the Black feminist materialist critique of Marx’s theories on property, and how separability, determinacy, and sequentiality sustain a false Western narrative that suggests the colonial system and ideology ended with abolitions and independences.

Regarding the first issue, Ferreira da Silva contends that the labour of the captive, embodied in the goods she produces, does not generate capital in the conventional Marxist reading:

Whatever she makes, whatever contains a piece of her is not to be counted as wealth. And yet she is right there. [...] It is not only that her labor—the expenditure of her body—creates something that is then separated from her as an object of use and brought to the market to become a commodity. No, she is always there, within it, and never alone. That piece of fabric is also a singular composite that gathers the labor and the calor of everything found in the expropriated Native lands where the iron ore or gold was extracted or the cotton grown. From this transduction alone [...] it is possible to consider her person to matter both ethically and economically (Ferreira da Silva 2022, 258).

In other words, the philosopher argues that colonialism profits not only from primitive accumulation but also from the essence of the captive, which remains inseparable from the material wealth she produces—wealth that persists today yet is not recognized as capital. This materiality, embedded in the wealth, exposes the most perverse mechanisms of expropriation of total surplus, which is not fully acknowledged as part of capital itself. While Blackness consistently and continuously serves as a marker of a social condition that ‘signifies’ slavery, it also reveals how the productive capacity of the expropriated and enslaved African continues to generate surplus value in the contemporary global context.

Concerning the second issue, Ferreira da Silva explains that separability, determinacy, and sequentiality serve as categories imposed by Western modernity to avoid acknowledging the ‘spacetime continuum’ of ongoing exploitation of Native lands and both former and new enslaved peoples. Drawing from a grounded decolonial epistemological standpoint, she differentiates between colonialism/colonization—a specific, albeit long-lasting, historical period—and coloniality, an ongoing process rooted

in entrenched modern onto-epistemological principles. Taking into account the ‘materiality’ left by the captive in the wealth from which she was expropriated, Ferreira da Silva (2022, 264) asserts that “materiality takes many forms and works according to what these projects do, and we cannot merely wish away the organic and the historical, for their marks (as those of torture) constitute the *known* world in which we exist.”

In *Decolonialità e privilegio*, Rachele Borghi (2020) critically examines the concept of ‘coloniality’ in contemporary times, highlighting the limitations of the term ‘postcolonial.’ Coined in the late 1970s, ‘postcolonial’—inspired by the work of scholars like Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2002) in ‘subaltern studies’—has led to significant misconceptions. First, it is often misinterpreted temporally, as if the independence of the last colonized countries marked the definitive end of the colonial era and the beginning of a new worldview. Second, Borghi argues that postcolonial theories are limited by their focus on critiquing representations and intellectual production rooted in a Western academic episteme, primarily developed within institutional centres of knowledge and power. This has prevented postcolonialism from moving beyond academic discourse, perpetuating the illusion that colonial relations have ‘concluded.’ By labelling our era as ‘postcolonial,’ ongoing power imbalances are obscured, allowing contemporary forms of racism, imperialism, ‘total violence,’ and dispossession to infiltrate society unnoticed—what Borghi identifies as coloniality.

Coloniality, Borghi explains, represents thus the persistent legacy of the colonial mindset, which continues to shape the present. It is a form of pervasive violence, sometimes visible, sometimes imperceptible, that penetrates the crevices of everyday life and operates at both micro (individual, relational, emotional, health, professional) and macro (political, economic, cultural, societal) levels. This influence is exerted through categories such as race, privilege, knowledge/power, language, violence, speciesism, and gender.

As such, coloniality perpetuates an ongoing cycle of exploitation and violence against specific social groups; exploitation and violence which, as discussed by decolonial feminists Grada Kilomba (2010) and Françoise Vergès (2021), are the blueprint for contemporary spoliation stemming from colonial slavery. Within our global present, coloniality sustains the legacy of colonial slavery through mechanisms such as institutional and structural racism, labour exploitation (including outright slavery in many instances), and the widening wealth gap both between the global North and South and among racialized and non-racialized populations. Fanon’s ‘wretched of the earth,’ today,

are entire communities oppressed by a colonial and patriarchal ideology that “turned women, Black people, Indigenous people, and people from Asia and Africa into inferior beings marked by the absence of reason, beauty, or a mind capable of technical and scientific discovery” (Vergès 2021, 13). They collectively represent those who continue to bear the colonial historical burden of raciality, associated with ‘inner absence’ and existential destitution.

In *La dignité ou la mort* (2019), Norman Ajari reflects on the violence experienced by Black and Afrodescendant communities in Europe, highlighting the inadequacies in the theories of violence formulated by Western thinkers such as Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault. Despite their extensive work on the subject, these theorists largely overlooked the long history of genocide, looting, forced deportations, massacres, and pillaging perpetrated by the colonial system—particularly the most tragic colonial events of the 20th century. This legacy of violence continues to affect Afrodescendants and other marginalized communities. Ajari argues that this pervasive violence obstructs a nuanced understanding of the subtle, everyday violence endured by Black and Afrodescendant bodies. For these communities, the experience blurs the boundary between life and death, concealing the daily subjugation that enforces what Ajari (2019, 67) calls a ‘condition of indignity,’ which he connects to the broader ‘Black condition.’ He asserts that this condition mirrors the experiences of Black bodies across various nations in both the Global North and South within the ongoing context of coloniality in the global era. As decolonial feminist Françoise Vergès (2021, 16) aptly notes, this is “a coloniality that inherits the division of the world that Europe traced in the sixteenth Century and that has continually asserted through the sword, the pen, the faith, the whip, torture, threat, law, text, painting, and later, photography and cinema. It is a coloniality that establishes a politics of disposable life, of *humans as waste*.”

The ‘humans-as-waste’ axiom, alongside several contemporary forms of neoliberal necropolitics,¹⁶ profoundly shapes how vulnerability and precarity are distributed among

¹⁶ The Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe (2003) revisits the works of Arendt, Foucault, Agamben, Bataille, and Gilroy to trace a genealogy of death’s power, arguing that within the economy of biopower, racism regulates the distribution of death and enables the state’s murderous functions. He critiques Foucault’s concept of biopolitics for overlooking the persistent colonial terror perpetuated through the coloniality of power by urban militias, armed forces, and state institutions authorized to inflict violence on racialized populations. Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics underscores sovereignty as the ultimate power to determine who lives and who dies, assigning value to life within the framework of colonialism and coloniality. In current coloniality, this creates a regime of pervasive terror for racialized bodies, which are constantly surveilled and controlled. Brazilian intellectual Carla Akotirene (2018) expands this analysis, emphasizing that necropolitics impacts not only marginalized groups from the Global South but also

discriminated populations. To clarify this unequal distribution, I draw on Judith Butler's distinction between precariousness and precarity. In *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009, 28), Butler defines precariousness as a shared human condition, reflecting the inherent exposure of all human lives to material contingencies such as hunger, illness, and, above all, the affectable 'matter' of corporeality. Consequently, lives are inherently precarious, lacking any guarantee of safety and persistence. Precarity, on the contrary, refers to a politically induced condition that exacerbates vulnerability by unequally distributing wealth, power, privilege, exposure to violence, and protection within society. This inequality deprives certain groups of the basic conditions necessary for a 'good life,' subjecting them to heightened risks of harm, violence, and death. As a result, populations that are "racially and nationally conceptualized" (Butler 2009, 28) endure disproportionately high levels of violence and precarity.

As I have argued, this unequal distribution of vulnerability is deeply rooted in the colonial matrix of our global present, which manifests today as a "state of injury" (Mbembe 2003, 21), a "necropolitical abyss" (Preciado 2019, 86), and the wounded "*known world*" (Ferreira da Silva 2022, 264) in which we live. This wounded existence is marked by a spectral temporality, where the scars of the colonial past—metaphorically referred to as "open veins" by Eduardo Galeano in his work on Latin America (1971)—remain unhealed. As a result, the vulnerabilities of formerly colonized groups—racialized communities, women, queer and Indigenous peoples, and the poor—are repeatedly colonized through the ongoing exploitation of their different layers of vulnerability. This dynamic is captured in Sayak Valencia's concept of "necroempowerment," which she examines in *Gore Capitalism* (2018) while exploring the phenomenon of the "necroliberal society." Necroempowerment refers to the processes by which contexts of vulnerability or subalternity are perversely reconfigured into opportunities for action and self-empowerment through violent means (Valencia 2018, 191). Massimo Filippi (2015, 13) explains who benefits from this unequal distribution of vulnerability: "Abbiamo imparato che la serie *maschio, bianco, eterosessuale, occidentale, adulto, sano e benestante* è il risultato della messa al bando, colonizzante e de-umanizzante, delle donne, dei neri, dei gay, delle lesbiche e di chi pratica sessualità altre, dei barbari e dei selvaggi, degli infanti e dei vecchi, degli anormali e dei disabili, dei proletari, dei sottoproletari e dei poveri."¹⁷

individuals in the Global North, including migrants, diasporic communities, the poor, disabled, and queer persons.

¹⁷ "We have learnt that the *male, white, heterosexual, western, adult, healthy and wealthy* sequence is the result of the colonising and de-humanising banishment of women, blacks, gays, lesbians and those who

The consequences of this ‘dehumanizing banishment’ are evident in the shortened lifespans of these populations. Afflicted by weak, ailing, and suffering bodies, they are stripped of their past and seem devoid of future prospects. Precarity, in this context, seems to distort temporality, confining precarious lives to the realm of immanent present. For Black and Afrodescendant communities, and extendable to other marginalized social groups, this present is characterized by a constant “fear of losing their bodies” due to perpetual exposure to racial violence, as articulated by Afro-American writer Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015, 102). In this context of explicit violence against a vast range of the ‘wretched of the earth,’ Frantz Fanon’s assertion that “every ontology is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society” (1986, 109) becomes particularly resonant. I emphasize the term ‘ontology’ at both the individual and relational levels, as this is where vulnerability exerts its profound influence—whether as a force for corporeal vitality or destruction.

In essence, what I am contending here is that vulnerability is nowadays instrumentalized to perpetuate the colonial wound, keeping it open, unhealed, and continuously exploited within the frameworks of necroempowerment. This concatenation of theoretical and critical positioning, embedded within the violent processes of Western colonial history and legacies, leads me to consider what Walter Baroni and Gabriella Petti (2014) name as a tangible contemporary “vulnerability culture.” This culture borders on a dystopian vision wherein individuals made ‘vulnerable’ are characterized as traumatized subjects who can only exist through perpetually communicating their trauma and articulating their vulnerabilities: “Soggetti, dunque, che possono essere socialmente al mondo solo dicendosi deboli. Al limite, che possono esistere solo scomparendo come soggetti”¹⁸ (Barone, Petti 2014, 180). This culture unveils a system that instrumentalizes vulnerability for its necropolitical purposes (read: necroempowerment), all the while stripping it of its ontological significance and depoliticizing it.

In response to this contemporary ‘vulnerability culture,’ critical, ethical, political, and philosophical discourses have increasingly focused on vulnerability across various fields. This concept is examined not only for its fundamental ontological value but also for its ethical significance, emphasizing care and responsibility towards others. This perspective draws from 20th-century Jewish ethics (Rossetti 2018, 91), as seen in the

practice other sexualities, of barbarians and savages, of infants and the elderly, of abnormals and the disabled, of the proletariat, the underclass and the poor” (my translation).

¹⁸ “Subjects, then, who can only be socially in the world by saying they are weak. Who, at the extreme, can only exist by disappearing as subjects” (my translation).

works of thinkers like Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil, Emmanuele Lévinas, Hans Jonas, and Judith Butler. In parallel, vulnerability ethics are central to second- and third-wave feminisms, Southern, decolonial, and Black feminisms, queer movements, pacifist and non-violent groups, ecocriticism, critical animal studies, and no-global movements. Despite differing approaches, these movements share a common goal: to reimagine vulnerability beyond necroempowerment, viewing it as a generative force for new ethical frameworks, intersubjective relationships (intra- and interspecies, and with the environment), alternative ways of coexisting in response to systemic oppression, and radical projects of worldmaking.

Acknowledging the vulnerability inherent in both the bodies and memories of those impacted by past and present oppression requires a deep sense of responsibility for our interconnectedness with those lives. When faced with violence, the concepts of relationality, the unequal distribution of protection, and responsibility are critically reshaped in discussions of vulnerability. Although these ideas have long been central to critical discourse, they have been explored with particular depth and nuance within contemporary feminist theories and praxis. I position these feminist perspectives as a crucial theoretical framework for analysing vulnerability, violence, and their embodied manifestations, providing a grounded lens for my close reading of the selected novels in my corpus.

1.3.2 Scene: The (Im)possible Communion of Tears

On September 11, 2001, the collision of two planes with the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York marked a pivotal moment in Western history. The images of smoke, ash, and people leaping from the buildings to escape the flames became seared into collective memory, symbolizing a profound shift in interpretative paradigms. The trauma of this event prompted Judith Butler, in *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (2004), to take an ‘ethical turn’ by centring her philosophical inquiry on vulnerability and human precarity, thereby establishing these concepts as central to reimagining our ontological and political relations. The global impact of the attacks highlighted a shared experience of loss, enabling Butler to frame vulnerability and precarity as fundamental aspects of the human condition. This recognition compels us to understand that life must be made livable and, in the face of mortality, deemed worthy of mourning. For Butler, mourning becomes a vital practice, revealing the material interconnectedness of human lives and the ethical significance of this bond. Mourning

not only underscores our vulnerability to loss—both our own and that of others—but also affirms the inherent dignity of the lives we mourn. In this sense, grieving becomes a political act, acknowledging a shared corporeal reality, particularly in the face of violence. Butler positions vulnerability as a nonviolent alternative to the modern state’s tendencies towards immunity and identity-based logic. By bringing together tears and mourning for our dead, Butler (2004, xiv) suggests that we should address the following question: “what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?”.

“Le ciel nous vengera,”¹⁹ declared Louisa Yousfi’s father (2022, 45) the day before the Twin Towers fell—a symbolic expression of historical compensation for the violence Western powers inflicted on colonized populations. Yousfi, a French journalist of Algerian descent, member of the Party of the Indigenous of the Republic and author of the essay *Rester barbare* (2022), is part of the younger generation of the Algerian diaspora grappling with conflicting perspectives: her father’s celebration of imperialism’s symbolic downfall versus her own horror at the sight of burning bodies falling from the towers. On September 11, “l’Occident a fait une rencontre avec lui-même,”²⁰ (Yousfi 2022, 48) revealing, for her generation, that violence is the only means of connection under a racist Western order. Judith Butler’s call for a communion of tears, framed within the complex geopolitical and intergenerational dynamics shaped by decolonial and post-imperial migrations, thus becomes highly complex. Butler’s concept of a ‘livable life’ and ‘grievable death’ demands a radical geopolitical re-evaluation to be fully understood. As Yousfi (2022, 52) poignantly asks, “Combien de vies du Sud valent une vie occidentale?”²¹ The trauma of 9/11, though profound, remains insufficient to address centuries of suppressed mourning, unburied dead, and desecrated graves—legacies of colonialism, slavery, exploitation, deportation, and oppression. Addressing these historical horrors requires a far more comprehensive and nuanced approach:

Ces millions de morts non pleurées, nous les portons sur la conscience, précisément pour ne pas les avoir pleurées. Nous nous sommes surpris à vivre avec la conscience des victimes que l’Empire produit au nom de tous ceux qui jouissent de la vie en son sein. [...] Aucune image de la dévastation du Sud ne nous a empêchés de nous endormir le soir ni d’aimer nos enfants. Mais quand la dévastation arrive en Occident, tous nos déchirements intérieurs remontant. Pourquoi devrions-nous pleurer maintenant et pas avant, et pas les autres? L’Empire nous a

¹⁹ “Heaven will avenge us” (my translation).

²⁰ “The West met itself” (my translation).

²¹ “How many Southern lives are worth sacrificing for a Western life” (my translation).

asséchés à force de morts non pleurées, banalisées, et c'est asséchés qu'il nous trouve quand il réclame de nous voir compatir à son malheur (Yousfi 2022, 39).²²

The rationale behind Butler's shift to focus on vulnerability following the 9/11 attacks warrants examination. Why did mourning gain political significance, fostering coalitions and resistance to violence, only after this Western tragedy? The rise of the so-called 'vulnerability turn'²³ within Western academia at the start of the 21st century coincides with Western responses to its inner threatening challenges such as immigration, identity crises, political and economic instability, environmental issues, and recent global conflicts, including wars and the pandemic.

This raises a key question: Why does our reflection on vulnerability often arise only when Europe's 'smooth, white skin' is threatened? Louisa Yousfi's challenge is clear: Why not begin with the rupture of the 'global epidermis'—a metaphor for colonialism, slavery, genocide, and exploitation—as illustrated in Adriana Varejão's artistic work (figure 2)? Why not recognize the deep wound inflicted by colonialism, the slave trade, wars of conquest, exploitation, pillage, and the devastation of Native lands—wounds that continue to fuel the global accumulation of racial capital—as a starting point for mourning? Quoting Dionne Brand, Rizvana Bradley (2023, 34) reflects on the "anoriginary and unfinished" displacements caused by the Middle Passage, describing them as "a tear in the world." Thus, these Black and decolonial feminist perspectives urge us to reimagine vulnerability by acknowledging the wounds of colonialism and its enduring legacy. Reassessing these historical wounds deepens our understanding of/on

²² "We carry millions of unmourned dead on our conscience precisely because we did not mourn them. We now live with the conscience of victims, created by the Empire in the name of people who enjoy life inside of it. [...] No image of the devastation of the South prevented us from sleeping at night or loving our children. But when the devastation comes to the West, all our inner tears come flooding back. Why should we mourn now and not before, not the others? The empire has parched us through unmourned and trivialised dead, and it finds us drained when it asks us to sympathise with its woes" (my translation).

²³ The discussion on vulnerability has developed to the point where some critics, particularly within juridical discourse, have identified a significant 'vulnerability turn' in the 21st century (Fineman 2008; Morondo Taramundi 2018). This turn extends the examination of vulnerability beyond its philosophical dimension to include bioethical, juridical, and legal perspectives. As a result, vulnerability becomes a key concept for understanding socio-material and political structures, prompting a critical reassessment of neoliberal notions like agency, autonomy, self-sufficiency, and individual capacity. The vulnerability turn highlights the importance of recognizing vulnerability not as an inherent trait of the neoliberal subject but as something shaped by specific structural factors that create situated vulnerability. Unlike the neoliberal focus on individual responsibility, this perspective emphasizes the political, social, and juridical responsibility in supporting lives made vulnerable. Martha Fineman is widely credited with initiating this 'vulnerability turn' through her theory of the "vulnerable subject" (Fineman 2008), which critiques how U.S. legal systems often fail to protect social rights. However, Fineman's analysis is primarily situated within the U.S. context, which influences how her approach is received, applied, and critiqued in other areas and legal systems.

vulnerability as not only universal but also profoundly ‘situated.’ The central challenge is to reorient our understanding of modernity by recognizing how colonialism has divided the world into ‘human’ wounds, deemed worthy of protection, and ‘non-human’ wounds, condemned to perpetual bleeding and exploitation.



Figure 2 – Adriana Varejão, *Mapa de Lopo Homem II* (2004)

When viewed from these two perspectives, the traumas of September 11 and colonial history reveal complex insights into the value of life. How many lives have been lost, and how many tears have been shed? “À ce moment-là, on peut pleurer mais on ne peut décemment pas *pleurer ensemble*” (Yousfi 2022, 51).²⁴ Two women, two worlds; two intricate perspectives on vulnerability and mourning. The potential or (im)possibility of a shared mourning becomes both a connection and a point of division. These perspectives invite us to question the feasibility of universalizing vulnerability and mourning and to consider the standpoint from which we confront our own vulnerability and that of others. They also prompt reflection on the historical scars we carry. In this context, feminist discussions on vulnerability offer crucial insights.²⁵

²⁴ My translation of “We can cry at this stage, but we *can’t cry together* for the sake of decency” (my translation).

²⁵ It is important to clarify that my analysis does not capture the entire and vast range of feminist discourse on vulnerability. Different feminist frameworks, including materialist, poststructuralist, posthumanist, and Marxist approaches, each provide specific insights and conceptualizations of the complex relationships among vulnerability, dependence, care, neoliberalism, colonialism, and violence. For the sake of coherence, I will concentrate on the intersections between key issues such as racial harm, colonial trauma and erasure, body and memory, privilege and responsibility, racism, raciality and racial violence concerning the production and unequal distribution of vulnerability. Specifically, these connections draw from crucial decolonial and Black critical theories.

1.3.3 Toward a Black Feminist Poethics of Vulnerability

Western feminism, particularly after September 11, has increasingly focused on the themes of killable, ‘mutilatable,’ and torturable bodies, as illustrated in the works of Judith Butler (2004; 2009) and Adriana Cavarero (2009). Central to this discourse is the question of whose lives are deemed worthy of mourning. The current feminist discourse on vulnerability in Europe emerged during the 1990s, intersecting with issues of precarity and social exclusion. Within this framework, vulnerability refers specifically to lives considered disposable, subject to eviction or deportation, and abandoned to the unregulated forces of the market and political discrimination, particularly in relation to the rights of women, queer persons, sexual minorities, migrants, and Black communities.

In a similar direction, in many feminist perspectives, vulnerability has been thoroughly examined in the context of a critique of patriarchy, which is rooted in the control over women’s bodies. This control leaves women vulnerable to violence, including physical assault, rape, and forced pregnancies. From this standpoint, masculine domination is founded on securing unrestricted access to women’s bodies through social contracts, such as marriage, that historically guaranteed violence to be committed with impunity, thereby perpetuating women’s extreme vulnerable conditions.

The concept of vulnerability also permeates discussions surrounding reproductive labour, the work involved in meeting and caring for human needs. Materialist feminists of the 1970s highlighted that the very existence of the market depends on social relations that lie outside its formal structures—relations shaped by human vulnerability itself. The market not only draws upon these external resources, particularly moral resources that sustain social bonds and the care and production of embodied, needy human beings, but it also externalizes its waste, including both environmental pollutants and the ‘human waste’ of the sick, poor, disabled, and elderly within families. In all instances, women are burdened with the invisible labour of compensating for, soothing, and ‘caring for’ the vulnerabilities created or neglected by the market. On this basis, materialist feminists have critiqued the narrow, hegemonic definition of labour as limited to production alone, emphasizing that reproductive labour is fundamental to the creation of exchange value. A notable example of this critique is Silvia Federici’s seminal essay, *Wages Against Housework* (1975).

The conceptual frameworks emerging from these feminist perspectives collectively offer a transformative ontological paradigm centred on vulnerability and precarity. As summarized by feminist philosopher Estelle Ferrarese (2009, 604), this paradigm is

grounded in the idea of the relational subject as an alternative concept of subject founded on a distinct social ontology, challenging the neoliberal notion of “a rational and sovereign, always-already autonomous subject” requiring no connection with others, whether humans, non-humans, or environmental. Viewing violence as an intolerable scandal, these feminist standpoints advocate for the substitution of the violent individualistic neoliberal ontology with a ontology centred on vulnerability. This underscores the notion of a vulnerable human being who is susceptible to harm and violence: “la prospettiva della vulnerabilità, in altri termini, svela la tentazione genocidaria di ogni uso politico della violenza, che vuole le sue vittime sempre deboli. Non c’è dunque naturalità nell’uccidere l’altro in quanto vulnerabile, c’è semmai lo scandalo che *costituisce l’essenza dell’etica*” (Guaraldo 2018, 62).²⁶ These standpoints give birth, according to Adriana Cavarero (2009, 12), to a “*new embodied ontology, ontology of the human, or altruistic ethics*, and whose more or less hidden aspiration—according to some—is a new *humanism*.”

One of the central challenges—and most criticized aspects—of framing vulnerability as a universally shared condition is its tendency to “erase the radical vulnerability of *some*” (Ferrarese 2016b, 153). In contrast, scholars like Noémi Michel (in Ferrarese 2016b, 153) emphasize the importance of recognizing that our inherent vulnerability manifests in diverse and unequal ways, particularly in bodies more exposed to specific historical violences, such as those stemming from colonialism and racial oppression. Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds (2014, 7-9) address this issue in *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, where they distinguish between three types of vulnerability: inherent vulnerability, which is intrinsic to the human condition; situational vulnerability, which is context-specific; and pathogenic vulnerability, which results from sustained and systemic abuse, injustice, or oppression. This categorization highlights that, contrary to universalist views that tend to obscure specific forms of violence, vulnerability is always contextually grounded. As Estelle Ferrarese (2016, 154) argues, “the social world and ontological vulnerability must be thought of conjointly to demonstrate how they generate and co-produce one another.”

As I have previously argued, vulnerability—both in its etymological roots and critical potential—invites an ethical response through the radical openness of care,

²⁶ “The perspective on vulnerability, in other words, reveals the genocidal temptation of any political use of violence, which always wants its victims to be weak. There is therefore no naturalness in killing the other as vulnerable; rather, there is the scandal that *constitutes the essence of ethics*” (my translation).

addressing the constant exposure to violence that life endures. Thus, the ethics of care emerges as another key feminist paradigm in response to life's vulnerability and precariousness. Building on studies of reproductive labour, care theorists have expanded these reflections—using a different vocabulary and adopting a more ethical lens—to examine the gendered and racial distribution of care work and the moral dispositions that sustain it, inspired by Carol Gilligan's foundational work *In a Different Voice* (1982). Beyond critiquing the "Feminine Mystique" (Friedan 1963), which confines care and caregiving to a gendered, domestic sphere, these discussions also highlight the inequitable distribution of care labour and the distortion of care within a neoliberal framework. From this perspective, care primarily involves nurturing the relationships that form our social fabric. As Caterina Botti (2022, 29) argues, care transcends mere acts of 'looking after someone;' it requires attentively listening to others and recognizing the vulnerability of the lives that coexist with ours.

Reflecting on the pain of September 11, Louisa Yousfi (2022, 51-52) highlights the challenge of sympathizing with the loss and suffering of others. Her critique questions emotions like empathy and prosociality, as well as the 'selective ways' we experience others' pain, given that these feelings are affected by the enduring colonial wounds that still divide the '*known* world' we live in. What does this say about our supposed sense of responsibility when we realize we grieve only for 'our own'?

In response to Western colonial violence, Yousfi introduces the feminist figuration of the 'barbarian,' a concept originally coined by Algerian writer Kateb Yacine. The barbarian resists the civilization imposed by the West, recognizing that conforming to Western norms requires participating in the same violence that has defined Western history. This 'civilization' demands bloodshed, perpetuating the violence enacted by Western powers. Therefore, to 'remain barbarian' is to reject the violence that civilization offers in exchange for assimilation or integration. Paraphrasing Yousfi's words (2022, 95), embracing the barbarian becomes an assertion of humanity and dignity without succumbing to the false benevolence of civilization and its 'perverse miserabilism.' Yousfi (2022, 96) further describes the barbarian as 'fragile like peace', symbolizing a recognition of her inner vulnerability while also challenging the civilizing system through resistance to violence. As such, she states that in this narrative negotiation, a new figure emerges—not that of the barbarian, but of what was thought to be missing: their soul. To remain barbarian, and to remain vulnerable, is to protect one's soul from the violence imposed by the West.

Yousfi's figuration paves the way for an examination of Southern, Black, and decolonial feminisms, concerning their own ways of interpreting vulnerability and precarity stemming from the colonial injury. I use the term 'Southern feminisms' to encompass the plural situated theoretical, geo-political, and 'po-ethical' perspectives rooted in feminist movements that arose in response to the violence of Western colonialism and the ongoing colonality of power imposed by the epistemologies of the Global North. These movements, including Black, Indigenous, Arab, and Asian feminisms, aim to rewrite the histories of marginalized communities, highlighting the contributions of women to anti-colonial struggles. They are also closely tied to the concept of 'decolonial feminisms,' which, as I intend them, not only stem from the inaugural decolonial paths forged by feminists in Central and South America—such as Gloria Anzaldúa, María Lugones, Ochy Curiel, Julieta Paredes, Lorena Cabnal, Lélia Gonzalez, Beatriz do Nascimento, Sueli Carneiro, and Djamila Ribeiro,—but also draw on the work of African feminists like Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí and Afro-diasporic thinkers like Françoise Vergès and Fatima El-Tayeb. Decolonial feminisms offer a comprehensive analysis of multiple forms of patriarchal, Western, colonial and neoliberal oppression, providing a multidimensional, intersectional, and interdisciplinary approach. As Françoise Vergès (2022, 24) notes, “this is not a new wave of feminism, but the continuation of the struggles for the emancipation of women in the Global South.” I make mine Roberto Esposito's assertion in an interview (Campbell, Luisetti 2010, 117), according to which a critical and self-reflective understanding of the West can only originate outside the West and its own conceptual frameworks, listening to a critical 'grammar' that differs from the West's own. Examining vulnerability and precarity as outcomes of the colonality of power requires following the long path of Southern decolonial feminisms movements, whose initial struggle and resistance strategy was that of 'having one's life saved' against oppression (Moïse 2019, 31). This external critique of the West allows for a re-evaluation of theoretical and epistemological approaches to vulnerability.

Critical Race Theory, along with Black studies and Black feminist criticism, converge on examining vulnerability and precarity through the lenses of race, raciality, and racial difference, intersecting with sexism, ethnocentrism, ableism, and anthropocentrism. These concepts are understood as products of colonial modernity, which have historically produced, and continue to produce, an injury for racialized populations. By addressing the experiences of racialized injury, Critical Black theories

offer a framework for rethinking vulnerability beyond the ‘hegemonic universal subject,’ which is implicitly marked as ‘white,’ ‘male,’ and ‘European.’

As many Black and decolonial feminists have argued, slavery is the matrix of our modernity, since “the total value produced by slave labor continues to sustain global capital.” (Ferreira da Silva 2015, 82) That modernity is where race is transformed into a discursive and ideological category that produces injuries. Black feminists Hortense J. Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Françoise Vergès, and Denise Ferreira da Silva all argue that the subjugation of the captive body during slavery represents the moment in which the enslaved are produced as ‘less-than-human,’ thus removing their vulnerability as an inherent aspect of the human nature. As Hortense J. Spillers (1987, 67) suggests, when the body is reduced to pure ‘flesh,’ it reaches what she calls “the zero degree of social conceptualization.” In this state, the individual (no longer recognized as such) becomes susceptible to enslavement, trafficking, abuse, fragmentation, and annihilation. Stripped of a ‘humanly woundable body,’ the flesh is reduced to a commodity, devoid of vulnerability. If there is no ontology, there is no vulnerability.²⁷ Since they are not ‘human,’ they are not vulnerable. Since they are not human, the Colonial/Racial/Capital mechanism can exploit their flesh far beyond any limits of suffering and pain. Regimes of historicity and raciality have thus proved that the categories of ‘human’ and ‘vulnerable’ are not universal categories, since universality coincides with the worldview of the white Western European social and political orders. Colonialism, slavery, and the perpetuation of coloniality have thus systematically denied entire populations the recognition of their humanity, subsequently excluding them from that ‘ethical position’ (‘acclaimed’ by Western feminisms) proportioned by the *vulnus*.

In her groundbreaking paper, “Accounts of Injury as Misappropriations of Race: Towards a Critical Black Politics of Vulnerability” (2016), Afrodescendant French scholar Noémi Michel analyses various works—essays, autofictions, and slam poetry—by Black artists and theorists such as Rocé (a French artist of Algerian descent), Audre Lorde, Saidiya Hartman, Achille Mbembe, and Frantz Fanon. Despite differing contexts and periods, Michel demonstrates that these works consistently highlight how

²⁷ For this reason, many perspectives within Black studies argue that the philosophy of ontology cannot adequately address Black existence. According to this view, Black individuals cannot fully ‘be’ in the world because ‘being-in-the-world’ requires an ontological status from which Black people are fundamentally excluded due to colonial hegemonic discourses and practices—precisely to maintain the coherence of modern ontology. In contrast to these radical positions, other critical perspectives, such as R. A. Judy’s arguments (in Bradley 2023, 11), emphasize a “*poiēsis* in Black,” or a “thinking-in-disorder,” which acknowledges a perpetual crisis in the concept of ontology as a fixed category without entirely rejecting it.

vulnerability for the Black subject manifests as a persistent injury rooted in violent racial differentiation. She argues that these discourses must be understood within a transcontinental network of public accounts of injuries experienced by those subjected to racial differentiation since the inception of modern racial history (Michel 2016, 250). In her close reading of the concept of ‘the injury of race’ in Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*,²⁸ Noémi Michel identifies two distinct forms of vulnerability exploited by racial dynamics. The first, a “bodily form of vulnerability,” arises from the ‘inescapable’ colonial connection between subjects and their bodies, which are constructed as “toxic, injured, and imprisoning” (Michel 2016, 250). The second, “enunciative vulnerability,” is characterized by the racialized forms of power which exploit “the possibility for subjects to be stabilized in a noisy and unintelligible position,” effectively depriving them of a voice. Consequently, racial subjugation produces both ‘suspended bodies’ and ‘muted positions,’ rendering subjects barely intelligible. These accounts of racialized injury illustrate how the exploitation of bodily and vocal vulnerabilities reinforces one another, creating a ‘vicious cycle’ that hinders racialized subjects from effectively denouncing the conditions of their oppression.

Michel describes this dual nature of racialized vulnerability as the ‘first text’ of racial discourse, referencing Achille Mbembe’s arguments in *Critique of Black Reason*. This ‘first text’ reflects how the category of Blackness is externally constructed by colonial ideologies and practices. In contrast, the ‘second text’ of racial discourse emerges from what Black subjects say about themselves, encompassing practices, expressions, and narratives that resist the harmful effects of racialization. While the dominant racial discourse imposes an identity, Michel argues that this ‘second text’ represents a self-declared identity. Through this narrative, those labelled as ‘Black’ assert their ability to transcend subjugation, affirm their belonging elsewhere, and emphasize that they cannot be found where they are expected to be, but “rather, where they are not thought of” (Michel 2016, 251).

Comparing this process to Judith Butler’s notion of vulnerability as a source both of exploitation and agency, Michel (2016, 251) states that colonial discourses, ideologies

²⁸ In analysing the various scenes of racial subjugation depicted in Fanon’s essay, Michel summarizes the different impacts of racial injury on the Black subject’s body as follows: “Objectification, imprisonment, toxicity, mutilation, disorientation, sensory overload, explosion, suspension, suspicion, isolation and dehumanization—within the Fanonian account, these many facets describe the unsustainable relation between the *Nègre* and his body. These facets qualify injurious materializations of subjection to racial difference. They attest to what it means to be reiterated as a *Nègre type y a bon banania*. [...] they all decline similar dimensions and effects of the injury of race” (Michel 2016, 250).

and practices ‘that wound’ can be decontextualized and recontextualized through another discourse, namely, “radical acts of public misappropriation.” The scholar examines a range of acts that ‘misappropriate’ race across colonial and post-imperial periods, focusing on how these acts seek to re-signify the body and voice of the Black subject beyond the ‘first text’ of racial discourse. These acts can be found in citational acts re-signified by anti-colonial and decolonial struggles, such as the ‘Calibanization’ of colonial languages after independence; in the reappropriation of racial slurs, like the N-word in many Anglophone countries or the Portuguese term *‘preto,’* re-signified by feminist scholar Lélia Gonzalez in Brazil and later by Afrodescendant artists in Portugal; in anti-colonial ‘underground forms’ of resistance, as seen in the complex histories of Afrodescendant counter-cultures in both former colonies and the diaspora; and in the ‘counterinvestment in the body’ (quoting Saidiya Hartman), which included (and still includes) everyday practices aimed at positively activating the body through counter-gestures, uses, movements, erotic expressions, caring rituals, and expressions of pleasure despite captivity and oppression. To this list we must add the extensive decolonial struggles of Native, maroon, and *quilombola* communities, rooted in fugitive liberation plans and in “all the initiatives, actions, gestures, songs, rituals that night or day, hidden or visible, represent a radical promise” (Vergès 2021, 22) against coloniality and oppression.

All these practices function as ‘counter-exploitations’ of the vulnerabilities produced by racial difference. By exposing and re-signifying their own bodily and enunciative vulnerabilities, these practices challenge the dehumanizing injuries imposed by racial difference, thereby opening up discursive and practical possibilities for establishing subjects with sustainable relationships to their bodies and intelligible voices. As Noémi Michel (2016, 256) puts it, “it seems that confessing injury can become, reversely, that which detaches us from the injury. When contextualized within the histories of resistance and from the perspective of subjects marked by racial difference, public accounts of injury disclose a promising politics of body and voice.” For example, this potentiality of vulnerability as both ‘exploitability and agency’ is remarked by Audre Lorde:

In the cause of silence, each of us draws the face of her own fear—fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation. But most of all, I think, we fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live. [...] Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible

through the depersonalization of racism. Even within the women's movement, we have had to fight, and still do, for that very *visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness*. For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson—that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings. [...] And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength (Lorde 1984, 42, emphasis added).

Here, Lorde shows how visibility (read: exposure) becomes at the same time the space where the body and the voice of the subject is most exposed to violence, as well as it becomes the only space for applying 'counter-exploitations' to racial difference.

According to decolonial and critical race studies, racialized forms of power persist despite decolonization and the formal dismantling of racial and colonial governance structures. This ongoing power continues to exploit the vulnerabilities of certain subjects. Simultaneously, 'misappropriations of race' remain a crucial form of resistance. In this context, Denise Ferreira da Silva's innovative feminist figuration of 'the wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation' is essential for understanding misappropriated acts against racialized vulnerability rooted in colonial modernity. Her framework builds on Hortense J. Spillers' theories of Black flesh and the captive body, as well as Saidiya Hartman's analysis of recurring terror and subjection in enslavement. Ferreira da Silva employs the figure of the 'wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation' to critically examine and challenge the Western 'social-scientific' category of Blackness, which reflects a white and Western perspective on Black bodies and subjectivities. The 'wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation' allows Ferreira da Silva to address the total violence experienced during slavery and its ongoing impact on Black existence. Additionally, because captivity is framed as a juridical scene, it offers a lens to view colonial and racial subjugation as modern political conditions. Ferreira da Silva uses this figuration to dismantle stereotypical portrayals of the captive body as passive and merely suffering. Instead, since this figure is determined and delimited by the scene of subjugation, she is always fighting against this condition. Thus, Ferreira da Silva proposes understanding Blackness not just through suffering but through 'poethical' terms—encompassing political, ethical, practical, and poetic dimensions (Ferreira da Silva 2022, 294). This approach illustrates how the wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation, as a figure of injury to race, transcends passivity and reappropriates subjugation to call for resistance.

According to Sara Ahmed (2004, 33), who reflects key perspectives from Black feminism, critical race theory, and decolonial thought, it is essential to pursue a “historically oriented study of racial injury” that views the past not as a site of passive suffering but as a space for counter-memory. These anti-colonial critiques challenge Western theoretical perspectives that have historically rendered uneven vulnerabilities as ‘universal.’ This critical approach illustrates the “double move from vulnerability towards injury, from sceptical reading of wounded attachment towards a listening to the history that hurts” (Michel 2016, 257).

As a result, vulnerability and precarity arising from racial difference can reveal, through their exposure, the potential for a ‘radical openness’ originating from specific spaces: the “margins” theorized by bell hooks (2014), the “borderlands” described by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), and the “fractured locus” outlined by María Lugones (2010, 753). These spaces, marked by deep pain and suffering due to a long history of deprivation and oppression perpetuated by the colonality of power, are also sites of ordinary beauty, knowledge, and resistance against the total violence imposed by Western modernity. They are both the *loci* where colonial injury occurs and the sites where resistance against total violence is asserted through misappropriation acts. As Vergès (2021, 22) notes, “their dreams, their hopes, their utopias, as well as the reasons for their defeats, remain spaces we can turn to in order to think about action.” Consequently, these spaces foster embedded and embodied decolonial epistemologies. Such epistemologies generate “border thinking” (Mignolo, Tlostanova 2006; Grosfoguel 2007; Lugones 2010; Icaza 2017), which is described as “a fracture of the epistemology of the zero point” (Icaza 2017, 29). This signifies a critical re-evaluation of the Colonial/Racial/Capital underpinnings of modernity and the present era, aiming to create a space for the emergence of alternative systems of knowledge. In this context, being “located in the margins” (hooks 2014, 150) involves transforming that painful space into a dimension for constructing epistemopolitical alliances and specific critical standpoints.²⁹ These perspectives focus on one’s ‘marginal’ vulnerability to scrutinize, much like the “outsider within” concept

²⁹ From my perspective, considering vulnerability as a theoretical framework and critical approach advanced by Southern, Black, and decolonial feminisms involves integrating the diverse insights of feminists, writers, activists, and philosophers with deeply embodied and situated experiences of vulnerability. Their communities’ humanity and their own status as active, living, and conscious subjects have consistently been undermined by a historical continuum of colonialism, patriarchy, neoliberalism, racial discrimination, and sexual oppression, which persists today. In response to the concept of a ‘universal vulnerability,’ these feminists advocate for political solidarity among individuals, groups, and communities that share specific conditions resulting from distinct forms of oppression.

proposed by Patricia Hill Collins (1986), the apparent invulnerability of the centre and to formulate responses to its oppressive mechanisms.

According to these epistemologies, conceptualizing vulnerability involves envisioning a politics of protection that acknowledges “the need to safeguard human beings (such as babies, children, the elderly, and others in vulnerable situations) without reducing them to victims or viewing weakness as a failing” (Vergès 2022, 16). This form of protection arises from a long history of “self-defence” against patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist oppression, as noted by Elsa Dorlin (2022). It takes seriously the profound intersectionality³⁰ of class, race, sex, gender, religion, and age among racialized populations, and is examined within the broader context of violence in all its various forms.

In addition to politicizing the concept of protection, these epistemologies advocate for the politicization of vulnerability itself. In the current neoliberal and neocolonial context, ‘vulnerable subjects’ are often subjected to distortion and stereotyping by the media and are pathologized through a healthcare system that marginalizes rather than supports them. This portrayal redefines the vulnerable as subjects of a new civilizing and paternalistic mission. As a result, vulnerability and care become increasingly entangled with neoliberal and neocolonial agendas (Giolo 2018; Verza 2018). From a decolonial feminist perspective, this issue arises because critical theory has frequently neglected frameworks of vulnerability that are rooted in structural poverty and the racialization of precarity. Consequently, the term has become broadly and abstractly conceptualized, losing its critical edge and its evident connection with the colonial past.

As I have argued, Black and decolonial perspectives have deepened and complexified the concept of vulnerability, moving beyond its traditionally exploitative dimension. These perspectives critically engage with historicity, the material conditions of life, and the injuries inflicted by racial difference to underscore vulnerability’s radical potential and agency. In this sense, according to Gloria Anzaldúa (2015, 88) wounds

³⁰ The concept of intersectionality, formally developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 and deeply rooted in a long and previous history of Black feminist thinking (Akotirene 2018), identifies the intersection point—not merely the sum—where various forms of oppression converge simultaneously. This convergence disrupts and penetrates the “layers of vulnerability” (Luna 2009), exposing individuals to State and societal violence. Black feminisms critique how Western feminisms have appropriated intersectionality, often using it to support the notion of a “false homogeneous vulnerability” (Akotirene 2018, 30, my translation). In contrast, intersectionality underscores the importance of acknowledging lived experiences of oppression in the pursuit of justice and historical reparations. As Akotirene (2018, 30, my translation) notes, “intersectionality is not the theoretical narrative of the excluded.” Instead, it focuses on analysing social relationships and the complexities of individuals entangled in a web of violent and oppressive interdependencies created by the inequities and disparities of colonial modernity.

become geographies of the self, maps the body, geopolitical dimensions, memories, emotional and interpersonal interactions. They offer temporal gateways and ethical spaces for confronting historical trauma. Wounds are the cracks that people from the margins, borderlands, and fractured *loci* cross on every day to establish connections with themselves, others, and the world that surrounds them. As a final part of my argumentation, I turn to vulnerability as a temporal gateway for Black, Native and decolonial epistemologies.

In order to reconnect past scenes of violent colonial subjugation to the current precarization of life for most of the racialized populations, Saidiya Hartman (2007, 17) elaborates the concept of “afterlife of slavery”, that is, “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” for those specific groups. Thus, vulnerability brings up the matter of Black temporalities and their racial injuries, namely reflecting on the past, present, and future of Black social life (Bost 2019, 1). For these groups, the harm experienced in the past, present, and the potential harm in the future converge into the figure of injury proportioned by race. These inquiries reveal that Black diasporic slavery and colonial trauma, characterized by its transhistorical, transgenerational, repetitive, and enduring nature, contributes to Black vulnerability both in the yet-to-come and in the not-yet-past experiences of this trauma. Nevertheless, this very vulnerability to racial injury, also serves as a gateway to respond to the total violence of racial difference. By interrogating and re-visioning the past and present, Black, Native and decolonial epistemologies also envision other kinds of future.

As Denise Ferreira da Silva argues, Black existence represents an alternate form of existence than the Enlightenment’s Human. However, rather than romanticize Human existence and lament its denial to Black people, Ferreira da Silva (2002, 47) uses this a-human existence to open “an onto-epistemological wormhole, through which an image of existence without separability, determinacy, and sequentially can be contemplated.” In other words, Blackness becomes as a way to “dismount modern thinking” (Ferreira da Silva 2022, 78). What emerges is that Southern, Black and decolonial feminisms work on the theme of vulnerability with a focus that is not only on the individual and social relations, but on a broader web of interdependence with the environment itself, also exploited by colonial history along with the human and non-human bodies that inhabit it. Thus, considering vulnerability as a ‘poethical’ tool involves reflecting on the necessity of moving “toward the end of this *world*, the *known* world” (Ferreira da Silva 2022, 17) in order to critically envision a post-violent society. Such a society, Vergès argues (2022,

14), is not utopically devoid of conflicts, but one that no longer collocates structural violence as its foundation, as well as it no longer normalizes and glorifies violence in all its manifestations. Via all these aspects, I make mine Denise Ferreira da Silva's (2015, 81) words by intending Black and decolonial feminisms as "Poethics of Blackness" that can "announce a whole range of possibilities for knowing, doing, and existing" beyond and without the violence of modernity and its categories and forms. Approaching vulnerability through a Black and decolonial feminist poethics involves, in my view, contemplating the (im)possibility of justice from the perspective of the subaltern racial subject. This perspective demands 'the end of the world' in which racial violence makes sense and is normalized. In other words, as Estelle Ferrarese (2016b, 158) suggests, vulnerability could serve as a critical tool "to undo the world as it is." I want to conclude this theoretical section by linking it to the methodological one. If the world itself is an aesthetic form—"a paradigm defined by the chiasmatic worldmaking of form and the form-making of world" (Bradley 2023, 45)—then considering a Black counter-aesthetics of vulnerability as a means of 'undoing the world as it is' also involves dismantling 'that' violent modern and colonial processes of both form-making and worldmaking.

This framework underpins my theoretical approach to reading, understanding, and analysing the literary representation of vulnerability. In the final section of this chapter, I will explore the intersection of vulnerability and postmemory, which serves as an introduction to the core of my study: the literary production of the Afrodescendant Portuguese generation. This analysis focuses on how this generation engages with themes such as intergenerational trauma, racial injury, racialized vulnerability and precarity, and the artistic approach to wounds.

1.4 Coda: A Vulnerable Intersection with Literature and (Post)Memory

As discussed, vulnerability is deeply intertwined with a temporal dimension, revealing the complex relationships shaped by the macro-physical violence of colonialism and its persistence through the ongoing macro and micro-physical manifestations of coloniality. In Portugal, this violent coloniality is characterized by a spectral temporality that lingers after the African wars for Independence, the Carnation Revolution, the decolonization processes, and the exilic and diasporic movements resulting from civil conflicts in countries like Angola and Mozambique. Within this temporal framework, the past appears inescapable, as the unburied and unmourned dead resurface, haunting the nation.

To conclude this initial methodological and theoretical chapter, I aim to connect the concept of vulnerability with the issue of postmemory and, more broadly, with the trauma linked to the intergenerational transmission of violent and ancestral memories. This exploration will deepen the understanding of the specific tropes in this body of literature, which will be addressed in Chapter 2. Employing a close reading methodology that integrates vulnerability with postmemory allows for a nuanced examination of how Afrodescendant Portuguese literature interacts with ghosts and spectral temporalities. It does so by exploring both corporeal and memory vulnerability, with its textual embodiment serving as a creative reflection on the violence of the past and present.

In the following paragraphs, I will delve into the concept of postmemory and its formulations within the Portuguese context. Subsequently, I will explore its intersection with vulnerability and temporality, focusing particularly on Grada Kilomba's notion of 'plantation memories.'

1.4.1 Postmemories: A Portuguese Battleground

The issue of memory in contemporary Portugal has become a contentious battleground. Diverse and often conflicting memories clash—those of *retornados* and diasporic subjects, former Portuguese and African generals and soldiers from the wars of independence, survivors of Salazarist violence, those who stayed in Africa, those who returned, and those who fought for Independence and the Revolution on both the Portuguese and African sides. Adding to this complex landscape, the new generations of Portuguese Afrodescendants are actively engaging in the re-examination and questioning of these memories.

Portuguese scholars Iolanda Évora and Inocência Mata draw on Eduardo Galeano's metaphor of the 'open veins,' originally coined for Latin America, to describe the haunted temporality that pervades Portugal and its Black and Afrodescendant communities. This temporality is marked by a structural amnesia regarding the colonial past, leading to the persistent 'coloniality of power' embedded in Portuguese society. For Afrodescendants, this coloniality is deeply ingrained, manifesting in the enduring impacts of Portuguese colonial violence in Africa, including the Atlantic slave trade, land expropriation, exploitative and extractivist practices, cultural erasure, forced assimilation, and oppressive Luso-tropicalist policies. This historical violence was systematically designed to strip Black people of dignity and value. The persistence of coloniality underpins the pervasive "state of injury" (Mbembe 2003, 21) experienced by Black and Afrodescendant

communities. Évora and Mata argue that the recurrence of colonialist and racist structures in society, institutions, and spaces hinders the healing of this state of injury:

Essas cicatrizes são as veias do rio colonial que vêm desaguar num delta pós-colonial, banhando as múltiplas margens das diferentes realidades de portadores da herança colonial—seja as dos ex-colonizados que vivem em seus países, seja as daqueles que vivem nas ex-metrópoles coloniais e seus descendentes, a que temos vindo a designar como *afrodescendentes*: estes vivem este momento com as veias abertas, um estado que, note-se, é também partilhado pelos ex-colonizadores e seus descendentes (Évora, Mata 2022b, 46).³¹

As such, Mata and Évora (2022b, 52) affirms that “o Negro de Portugal lembra constantemente o passado colonial do país (como o do Brasil e dos Estados Unidos lembram o passado escravocrata) e se não se despe daquilo que o liga ao solo dos seus ancestrais, ele confronta a sociedade portuguesa na ideia da sua ‘estrangeiridade,’ alteridade e exterioridade.”³² At the same time, as Roberto Vecchi (2018, 18) points out, Portugal is undergoing a transitional phase, shifting from survivors to survivals—a transition between the “precariedade memorialista das últimas testemunhas”³³ of the tragic events of Portuguese colonialism in the 21th century and the (post)memory of subsequent generations. Drawing on the statements of Mata, Évora, and Vecchi, it becomes evident that the Afrodescendant generation faces a dual challenge. On one hand, they contend with ancestral legacies of colonial exploitation and the total violence of slavery, which situates them within a broader transcontinental and global diasporic context; on the other, they confront more recent and specific events such as wars of independence, decolonization, civil conflicts, and diasporic or exilic dislocations. Although these events are not directly experienced, they are transmitted through the testimonial memories of parents, grandparents, and ancestors, embedded within the ‘materiality’ of family memory. This ‘second-hand memory’ thus becomes an integral part of the everyday lives of newer generations.

³¹ “These scars are the veins of the colonial river that come to flow into a postcolonial delta, bathing the multiple banks of the different realities of the bearers of the colonial heritage—whether those of the ex-colonised living in their own countries, or those living in the former colonial metropolises and their descendants, whom we have been calling *Afrodescendants*: they live this moment with open veins, a state that, it should be noted, is also shared by the ex-colonisers and their descendants” (my translation).

³² “The Black person in Portugal constantly remembers the country’s colonial past (just as those in Brazil and the United States remember its slave-owning past) and if he doesn’t strip himself of what connects him to the soil of his ancestors, he confronts Portuguese society with the idea of his ‘foreignness,’ otherness, and outsidership” (my translation).

³³ “Precariousness of memory of the last witnesses” (my translation).

A key aspect of the literary output of the Afrodescendant Portuguese generation is the intergenerational memory that connects past and present. This memory is historical, as it has been disrupted by amnesic and aphasic disorders stemming from Portuguese political and cultural hegemony in the post-imperial period, as it will be discussed in the next chapter. It is also private, encompassing individual, emotional, and familial dimensions where historical conflicts and traumas intersect and influence the lives of Afrodescendants. Through literary exploration—an integral part of postmemory, as I will explain—authors reclaim this private memory, bringing it into public discourse and contributing to the collective effort to restore what colonialism historically denied them: dignity.

For the Afrodescendant population, the ‘open veins’ described by Mata and Évora represent more than racial accounts of injury experienced through bodily and enunciative vulnerability in public spaces of a structurally racist society. They also signify the denial of the right to fully remember the past. This denial extends beyond the national Luso-tropicalist narrative that glosses over history (as explored in the next chapter) to a deeper and more complex intergenerational silence, particularly between grandparents and parents—direct witnesses of colonial violence—and their descendants. As Fernanda Vilar (2022, 80) notes, a generational gap persists between diasporic and exilic communities and their descendants. In this gap, the witnessing generation often falls silent about their experiences transitioning from their birthplace to Portugal. For subsequent generations, this silence creates an almost inaccessible memory, shaping the (post)memory experience for the Afrodescendant writers under study. This inaccessibility, often worsened by family separations common in diaspora, contributes to the intergenerational trauma inflicted by colonial history, leaving descendants vulnerable also to memory.

Marianne Hirsch introduced the term ‘postmemory’ to describe the transmission of trauma from Holocaust survivors to their descendants, elaborated in *Family Frames* (1997) and *The Generation of Postmemory* (2012).³⁴ Initially termed “familial postmemory,” the concept refers to the way subsequent generations relate to the experiences of those who lived through collective trauma, which they ‘remember’ through

³⁴ António Sousa Ribeiro (2021b, 18) underscores that alongside Hirsch’s conceptualization, there exist parallel propositions by other scholars. For instance, Dominick LaCapra employs the term “secondary witness,” and James Edward Young, as well as Geoffrey Hartman, employ the concepts of “vicarious witness” and “adoptive witness,” respectively, with closely aligned meanings. Margarida Calafate Ribeiro (2021b, 203), on the other hand, emphasises the importance of studies such as those of Maurice Halbwachs and Astrid Erll on family memory as a space for the construction of a memory that is as individual and unique as it is collective and communal.

stories, images, and behaviours rather than direct recollection (Hirsch 2012, 41; 2008, 106). These indirect, emotionally charged memories often feel like personal experiences. Thus, postmemory connects to the past not through direct recollection but through imaginative engagement, projection, and creation. It emphasizes the indirect, ‘mediated’ nature of remembering, where narratives, photographs, and cultural artifacts—the materiality of the ‘archive’—play a crucial role in shaping understanding of traumatic pasts. These artifacts provide structure to memory processes that are inherently vulnerable. Consequently, postmemory is closely linked to art and literature, both of which engage with and manipulate language to process inherited trauma. Hirsch’s later work introduces ‘affiliative postmemory’ (2008, 115), which extends beyond the direct familial transfer of trauma to include individuals or groups who are somehow affected by the legacy of postmemory, broadening the scope to encompass a wider range of connections beyond the immediate family.

António Sousa Ribeiro (2021b, 17) notes that postmemory, initially applied to Holocaust memory, has significantly expanded along three main trajectories. First, it now recognizes that trauma can stem from prolonged exposure to structural or institutional violence, not just isolated historical event. Second, it acknowledges the latency of trauma, highlighting the delay between the traumatic event and its effects. Third, it emphasizes the transgenerational dimension of trauma, extending beyond just the second generation. While this expanded application of postmemory has been productive, it has also introduced ambiguities and critiques in theoretical discussions.³⁵

António Sousa Ribeiro (2021b, 24) critiques the term ‘second generation’ for its potential misrepresentation, as it implies not just a biological or biographical status but an active engagement with a legacy of painful memories. The scholar (Sousa Ribeiro 2021a, 11) also counters criticisms that depict the subject of postmemory as a passive recipient, arguing instead that such individuals are active participants who critically

³⁵ One critique of postmemory involves the problematic use of the prefix ‘post,’ which implies continuity between memory and postmemory, despite the two being conceptually distinct. This framing risks overlooking individual agency in the intergenerational transmission of trauma by focusing solely on ‘inherited’ memory. Additionally, the concept is criticized for its emphasis on familial and private domains, lacking a broader public or transgenerational scope, as noted by Sarlo (2012), who argues that it is inherently apolitical. Another critique questions the universality of postmemory, suggesting that applying it to diverse historical events may oversimplify the complexities of trauma transmission. This essentialization risks homogenizing group experiences, reducing postmemory to a stereotype that overlooks individual differences (Sousa Ribeiro 2021b, 21). Further, the instrumentalization of postmemory may reduce complex historical narratives to simplistic victim-perpetrator dichotomies, raising ethical concerns about the responsible engagement with sensitive historical material. These critiques highlight the limitations of postmemory and underscore the need to consider contextual and cultural factors when using it as an analytical tool.

rework and reconstruct representations of the past. This process involves ongoing intergenerational dialogues and negotiations in public spaces. Similarly, Felipe Cammaert (2021, 198) emphasizes the non-linear nature of transmission, noting that individuals can choose not to inherit a specific past. When they do engage with certain legacies, postmemory becomes an active process of reshaping history. This creates a new temporality where past events are symbolically integrated into the memory of indirect witnesses, who, through mediation and reinterpretation, critically engage with historical facts.

In the Portuguese context, António Sousa Ribeiro and Margarida Calafate Ribeiro (2018, online) highlight the importance of postmemory for understanding contemporary Portuguese society and its links to the colonial past, particularly in relation to major historical events of the 20th and 21st centuries.³⁶ To avoid trivializing the concept and to maintain the study's epistemological and methodological rigor, it is essential to emphasize the nuanced and specific reading of postmemory within an Afrodescendant perspective.

1.4.2 Afrodescendant Post(plantation)memories and Vulnerable Times

As argued, for the Afrodescendant generation, the past often appears as a spectral presence, marked more by silences and absences than by clear, articulated narratives. Freud (1955) suggests that addressing trauma therapeutically involves verbalizing and integrating it into a coherent narrative. However, this process can only progress if the emotional aspects of the trauma are not suppressed. Additionally, the testimonial nature of trauma requires dialogic relationships; without an interlocutor, transmission of the trauma cannot occur. António Sousa Ribeiro (2021b, 17) notes that the issue is the 'availability' and 'identity' of this interlocutor, pointing out that even when such interaction exists, the second generation often remains excluded. They are left with the challenging task of reconstructing a past shrouded in silence. Although the trauma may remain unspoken, silence itself carries remnants of that trauma, creating a spectral form

³⁶ In this framework, postmemory as an analytical tool aims to understand how subsequent generations, who did not directly experience the armed conflict in Africa or the collapse of the Portuguese empire, inherit and internalize the trauma and vulnerability of their parents. The research project *Os Filhos da Guerra Colonial: Pós-memória e Representações (2007-2011)* was crucial in theorizing postmemory within the context of the colonial conflict's legacy. Similarly, the recent European research project *Memoirs: Children of Empires and European Postmemories (2015-2021)*, coordinated by Margarida Calafate Ribeiro, utilized postmemory as a critical framework to analyse the memories and cultural representations of the second and third generations affected by the legacies of colonial empires in Portugal, France, and Belgium. The project's findings have made substantial contributions to the emerging field of Afrodescendant Portuguese literary and cultural studies.

of anguish for those who, while not directly affected by Portuguese colonial violence, experience its echoes within their families. Thus, invisibility and historical silence become the primary challenges for the second generation, shaping the initial aspects of Afrodescendant postmemory.

Recently, the concept of postmemory has been widely applied in the academic analysis of Portuguese Afrodescendant literature. In fact, many literary works actively reclaim history, often addressing the traumatic legacy of Portuguese colonialism in Africa. Consequently, postmemory remains a valuable framework for interpreting these texts, as they engage with present-day vulnerabilities rooted in historical racial accounts of injury. Given Portugal's colonial history, I argue that postmemory can be a relevant analytical tool for understanding a past marked by injury, whose effects continue to reverberate through the nation. However, it should be adapted to the specific concerns of Black and Afrodescendant communities in contemporary Portugal. To this end, I draw on Grada Kilomba's concept of "plantation memory" to deepen the understanding of postmemory and to situate it within the temporality shaped by racism and racialization.

In her book *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism*, Afro-Portuguese visual artist Grada Kilomba interprets everyday racism experienced by African and Afrodescendant communities as a form of violence which infiltrates corporeal, enunciative, interactional, cultural, social, and political practices and discourses. Kilomba (2008, 13) argues that this violence is rooted in a "chronology that is timeless." In fact, the term 'plantation memory' combines 'memory' with 'plantation' to evoke a collective history of racial oppression, insult, humiliation, and pain (Kilomba 2008, 132). The temporality of plantation memory highlights the haunted timelessness of the violent past reinscribed in the present. Everyday racism thus represents not only a restaging of colonial history but also a colonial trauma ingrained in the bodies and minds of Black individuals, often overlooked by official national memory.

Thus, everyday racism evokes this embodied plantation memory, which is "a violent shock that suddenly places the Black subject in a colonial scene where, as in a plantation scenario, one is imprisoned as the subordinate and exotic 'Other.' Unexpectedly, the past comes to coincide with the present, and the present is experienced as if one were in that agonizing past" (Kilomba 2008, 13). Grada Kilomba views the timelessness of everyday racism as a living bridge linking past Black exploitation with the present context of exclusion, invisibility, and subordination. This colonial legacy continues to define subjects of the African diaspora as "fractured identities" (Kilomba

2008, 112). The ongoing impact of trauma means that Black individuals, whether in Portugal or elsewhere in Europe, face not only personal and familial challenges within a predominantly white culture but also the collective historical trauma of enslavement and colonialism. This trauma is perpetuated through everyday racism, which consistently relegates Black individuals to a subordinate and exoticized status in relation to whiteness.

Another significant issue is the relegation of colonial violence only to the memories of those who directly experienced it—primarily the African diasporic individuals who later migrated to Portugal. Kilomba contends that institutional denial has prevented these personal, private memories from being integrated into a broader public and national narrative and critical debate about colonization, warfare, and decolonization. In fact, Margarida Calafate Ribeiro (2021a, 46) observes that upon settling in the former Metropolis, these formerly colonized subjects are immediately labelled as ‘immigrants,’ with their descendants categorized as ‘children of immigrants.’ Ribeiro argues, however, that these generations are “filhos e netos da colonização, antes de serem filhos da imigração” (Ribeiro 2021a, 46).³⁷ This indiscriminate use of the term ‘immigrant’ obscures the violent history of colonization and its lasting effects on these persons, while also evading public acknowledgment of Portugal’s responsibility for that past.

Therefore, on the one hand, Afrodescendant postmemory, akin to ‘familial memory,’ is often associated with the silence of the testimonial generation, reflecting the private and familial nature of their experiences during the transition from Africa to Portugal. On the other hand, this (failed) transmission is also linked to a broader, collective memory that extends beyond familial ties. This collective memory is shaped by the enduring effects of colonialism and is perpetuated by national amnesia, aphasia, and systemic racism in social, institutional, political, and cultural contexts. In this sense, Afrodescendant postmemory encapsulates what Marianne Hirsch (2012, 6) interprets as “a *structure* of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience.”

The concepts of trauma, plantation memory, and postmemory provide a lens for recognizing both the overlooked narratives within Portuguese colonial history and the lasting impacts of injury and injustice across generations. Plantation memory, in particular, highlights the persistence of racial injury from the past into the present, and the risk of projecting its negative impact into the future. This ongoing cycle, fuelled by persistent racism, obstructs healing and maintains colonial temporality. To address this, I

³⁷ “Children and grandchildren of colonisation, before being children of immigration” (my translation).

suggest examining vulnerability as a means to disrupt the chronological timelessness of plantation memory. By engaging with the poethical dimensions of vulnerability, we can potentially pave the way for alternative temporalities and new approaches to understanding and addressing historical accounts of injury.

To this end, I propose engaging with Marianne Hirsch's concept of "vulnerable times" as she reinterprets postmemory in relation to vulnerability, understood as a condition that is both collectively shared and specifically shaped by social, material, and historical conditions. In linking vulnerability with postmemory, Hirsch writes: "I have been trying to think about how the retrospective glance of trauma might be expanded and redirected to open alternate temporalities that might be more porous and future-oriented and that also might galvanize a sense of urgency about the need for change, now, in our contemporary moment. About how memory can be mobilized for a different future" (Hirsch 2016, 80). In this context, vulnerability introduces a break in the repetitive cycle of trauma. From the perspective of descendants, it signifies a proactive stance against the violence of the past—a conscious effort to challenge and resist inherited oppression. As Hirsch (2016, 80) notes, "unlike trauma, vulnerability shapes an open-ended temporality—that of the threshold of an alternate, reimagined reality."

In my analysis, the literary poethics of the Afrodescendant generation of writers in Portugal is rooted in the vulnerabilities inherited across familial, institutional, social, and cultural spheres. Earlier generations were in fact forced to suppress their memories and to keep their bodies—as political bodies—out of public spaces, while their literature was similarly marginalized, labelled only as Angolan, Mozambican, Cape Verdean, or other non-Portuguese literature. The subsequent generation, on the contrary, has turned the silence, amnesia, and erasure of the 'present' body from official historical narratives into the core of their artistic expression. Through literature, they engage in a 'politicization of vulnerability' by turning formless silence into disruptive artistic forms that, in different ways, counter past and current violence. This form of postmemory, expressed through literature, critically examines the mechanisms behind enduring racial injury. By centring vulnerability, it enables individuals and subsequent generations to take an active role in shaping their identities in order to counter and deconstruct colonial violent stereotypes and imposed identity. This is the potentiality of "vulnerable times," according to Hirsch (2012, 81): "Each past envisioned its own future in response to its own vulnerabilities, therefore vulnerable times can encompass many different historical moments and temporalities. If we think of vulnerability as a radical openness toward surprising

possibilities, then we might be able to engage it more creatively—as a space to work from as opposed to something only to be overcome.”

In conclusion, by embracing bodily, enunciative, and mnemonic vulnerability as forms of misappropriation, I argue that Afrodescendant Portuguese literature directly confronts the elusive and problematic subject of Portuguese colonialism, as well as its enduring legacies and consequences in contemporary times.

1.4.3 Vulnerability as Imaginative Rethinking in Literature

So far, I have outlined the scope of my research, defined my methodological approach, introduced the chosen works for analysis, and delved into contemporary Black and decolonial theories concerning the issue of vulnerability and representability in connections to historical injuries. In this concluding paragraph, I aim to elucidate how vulnerability can be envisioned, within the realm of Black representations, as a transformative potential in literature, by misappropriating passivity and turning the accounts of racial injury as a form of resistance to enduring oppression.

When approached without critical and careful scrutiny, the representation of vulnerability has been shown to perpetuate stigma against those experiencing precarious conditions. In fact, representing the vulnerability of others has, as Françoise Vergès (2022, 28) contends, become a problematic facet of the West’s purported civilizing mission and ‘white saviour complex,’ often manifesting as a form of paternalistic philanthropy. Instead of delving into the root causes behind specific vulnerabilities, this approach tends to perpetuate stereotypes and further marginalize affected individuals. Vergès aptly highlights the voyeuristic pleasure derived from showcasing others’ pain, particularly when precarious conditions are portrayed through a detached, abstract lens, typically in mainstream media or extractivist representations. Within these representations, “a racialized person is owed no respect; people can display their filth with no shame, exhibit elements of their private life, and even take pleasure in doing so as they get a kick out of contributing to racialized people’s humiliation, to the refusal to allow them their dignity” (Vergès 2022, 88).

In contrast, the texts examined in my analysis undertake a deep and critical exploration of vulnerability, intricately woven into both personal familial stories and broader collective experiences and memories affecting the African and Afrodescendant communities in Portugal. These texts offer profound insights into what it means to be exposed in a society rooted in the total violence of colonial exploitation, where everyday

accounts of racial injury highlight the persistence of this violent modern structure. Through the close reading based on re/de/compositions of content, characters, aesthetic forms, and spatial configurations, the six selected novels seek to unravel the mechanisms that underlie exposure to injury, revealing the intricate interplay between body, memory, space, and (hi)story. Within what I term an ‘aesthetics of vulnerability,’ this literature challenges modern (and specifically Portuguese) forms of representation, creating its own ‘grammars of pleasure and pain,’ to quote Caterina Botti (2022, 49), in an effort to reclaim what colonial history has taken away and what only Black people can restore: the inwardness and beauty of Black lives.

In my view, the corpus that I will be analysing aligns with Ankhi Mukherjee’s reflection in *Unseen City: the Psychic Lives of the Urban Poor*. In her inspiring work Mukherjee (2022, 24) states that “literature, like psychoanalysis, can allow an imaginative rethinking of affective life outside the deformations of colonial legacies and hierarchy, the determinations of neoliberal governments and free market discourse, or the violent resurgence, in recent times, of de-globalized ethnic nationalisms.” Through its effort of restoring an inner form of Black representation beyond the violence of colonial modernity, an aesthetics of vulnerability in Afrodescendent literature attempts to “disrupt the wordless, faceless image, the ‘image of the passive victim on display,’³⁸ as the first step toward countering the absent, abstracting, or aggressive vision complicit in its victimization” (Mukherje 2022, 22).

³⁸ In this passage, Mukherjee quotes Rey Chow (2003, 325).

Chapter 2 – Archaeologies and Genealogies: Unravelling History, Naming Literature

Onde estão os lisboetas? Onde estou? Quem és tu?

Kalaf Epalanga, *Minha pátria é a língua portuguesa*

My analysis thus far suggests that a materialist reconceptualization of the historical injury caused by colonialism requires examining vulnerability beyond its ontological dimensions. This approach allows for tracing the ‘historicity’ of several vulnerable states and their materializations in contemporary Portuguese society, specifically for the Afrodescendant population. Thus, this chapter critically examines the historical and literary contexts from which Afrodescendant Portuguese literature has recently emerged, with a particular focus on the hegemonic discourses rooted in the colonial era that continue to impact the community.

Echoing Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida’s (2023) recent critical formulations, colonialism is responsible for denying the inwardness of Black and diasporic individuals. Almeida, along with a broader collective of Afro-Atlantic diasporic artists spanning from Brazil to Africa, seeks to reclaim this inner life through artistic restitution. Building on this reflection, I structure my argument into two interconnected fields, drawing from contemporary Afrodescendant research: history and literature. Through an Afrodescendant perspective, history and literature highlight their porous boundaries and the intricate connections they form within the contemporary formation of ‘Afrodescendency’ as a category itself. They serve as counter-archives, counter-memories, and counter-narratives that challenge hegemonic discourses, which render history (particularly the colonial archive) and literature (especially the Portuguese canon) exclusionary categories for specific subjects in contemporary Portugal.

I begin my argumentation by juxtaposing Eduardo Lourenço’s portrayal of colonialism as an ‘unthought’ reality in Portuguese society—leading to aphasic discourses that perpetuate violence—with Grada Kilomba’s analysis of racism as a structurally ‘unconscious’ attitude rooted in an unacknowledged colonial exclusionary politics. This intersection highlights the current impasse in Portugal’s ability to ‘articulate’ its colonial history, due to the persistence of neo-Luso-tropicalist rhetoric that

glorifies this violent past. By analysing Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida's concept of the 'restitution of Black inwardness,' my argument focuses on historical and literary criticism to contextualize hegemonic discourses that perpetuate specific vulnerabilities for the Afrodescendant community, as well as the counter-practices aimed at gaining visibility and self-affirmation.

In the historical section, I explore the concept of the 'colonial archive' and the ways in which a contemporary 'Black Portuguese library' is being reimagined by Black scholars and researchers. This 'library' serves to provide Black historiography with a self-representative narrative that challenges the violent aesthetics of the modern colonial archive. By addressing the impact of colonialism on contemporary formulations of Portuguese citizenship, I will examine the concept of 'Afrodescendancy' as a current category that asserts a sense of belonging beyond the legacies of 'imperial citizenship' and exposes the systemic forms of discrimination endured by Afrodescendant populations today.

Given that literature is a cultural expression that interrogates national belonging, the second part of this chapter examines the critical debates surrounding the emergence of Afrodescendant Portuguese literature as a form of cultural recognition. This literature resists a long colonial history of disqualification and plays a deconstructive role in relation to both the Portuguese literary canon and language. I will conclude this chapter by exploring the intersection of diaspora and vulnerability in Afrodescendant Portuguese literature through three key tropes: the motifs of the ghost and limbo, which suggest the unresolved tensions that shape the emergence of new literary characters; the use of language as a tangible response to the material affects of vulnerability; and the intersection of the racialized body, its vulnerability, and its spatial positioning in the Portuguese diasporic geography. These elements form the foundation of what I call a 'poethics and aesthetics of vulnerability,' which will inform the subsequent close readings of the novels in the selected corpus.

2.1 Scene: Talking Stones and Dystopian Flights

"Este é o voo DT0003, que parte de Maputo e tem Lisboa como destino. Terá uma duração de vinte e quatro horas e estão previstas escalas em Luanda, São Tomé, Bissau e Praia. O vosso destino é Portugal, um destino já antigo. De 1444, se dermos qualquer crédito à

Crónica da Guiné, de Zurara.”³⁹ The prologue of Angolan playwright António Tomás’s *O Museu do Pau Preto* (in Falconi 2023, online) begins with the words of the hostess, Muxima. With profound insight into the past, present, and future of the African presence in Portugal, Muxima foretells the pivotal role that individuals from Portugal’s former colonies will come to play within the diaspora: they will find themselves working “já não como escravos [...] para construir Lisboa” (Tomás in Falconi 2023, online),⁴⁰ highlighting a historical spacetime continuum, now geographically dislocated outside the empire’s ‘ex-peripheries,’ that is reconfigured in the beating heart and invisible outskirts of post-imperial Lisbon. As a result, the map of the former Portuguese empire crosses with the map of post-Salazarist, postcolonial, and democratic Portugal. In this concern, Jessica Falconi writes that “tal como as antigas colónias participaram da construção e da edificação da modernidade ocidental e dos Impérios, do mesmo modo, na atualidade, os imigrantes são uma componente central da ‘construção’ da Europa contemporânea e pós-colonial” (Falconi 2023, online).⁴¹

In light of this statement, I believe it is important to emphasize one point: such critical positions often imply a deliberate willingness on the part of these diasporic subjects to participate in the reconstruction of democratic Portugal. However, as we will explore in this chapter and through the analysis of the novels, the reasons for the diaspora are varied, and the active choice to ‘rebuild’ the country that had subjugated them for centuries should not be seen as the primary motivation for displacement. Instead, it is more accurately viewed as the result of a recurring history of exploitation, reinforced by a discourse that focuses only on the former colonial metropolis and its ‘democratic’ reconstruction. Thus, this narrative overlooks the firsthand experiences of these subjects, who are frequently forced into construction and care work due to social and labour exclusion, perpetuating a colonial temporality embedded in that same regime of labour.

Fernando Luís Machado’s analysis of forty years (1960-2000) of African dislocation to Portugal identifies four distinct phases. The first phase, from the 1960s to 1975, was shaped by the Wars of Independence and decolonization, marked by a significant influx of Cape Verdean diasporic subjects primarily working in construction

³⁹ “This is flight DT0003, which departs from Maputo and is bound for Lisbon. It will last twenty-four hours and stops are planned in Luanda, São Tomé, Bissau and Praia. Your destination is Portugal, a long-standing destination. From 1444, if we give any credit to Zurara’s Chronicle of Guinea” (my translation).

⁴⁰ “Not as slaves [...] to construct Lisbon” (my translation).

⁴¹ “Just as the former colonies participated in the construction and building of Western modernity and empires, so today immigrants are a central component of the ‘construction’ of contemporary and post-colonial Europe” (my translation).

sites and cleaning tasks. The second phase, from 1975 to the late 1980s, emerged from the violent decolonization of former Portuguese African territories, leading to a more diverse range of ‘migrant’ origins and intersecting with the migration of *retornados*.⁴² The third phase, from the late 1980s to 2001, saw a surge in dislocation driven by civil conflicts in Portuguese-speaking African countries (PALOP) and Portugal’s labour demands. The final phase, from the 2000s onward, experienced a moderation in migration flows, with a shift towards family reunification rather than employment or health care, reflecting the impact of post-independence disruptions in the PALOP.

By the late 1990s, a pivotal moment bridged Portugal’s past and present: Lisbon’s 1998 *Exposição Internacional*. The event aimed to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the ‘Portuguese Discoveries,’ under the slogan “Os oceanos—uma herança para o futuro” (Ribeiro 2020, 78).⁴³ The Expo played a significant role in the urban revitalization and redevelopment of the city’s eastern part, marking the beginning of a new socio-economic and political era for the nation. The 1980s and 1990s were a delicate period of reconfiguration for Portugal, which became a member of the European Union in 1986. As part of this transition, there was a concerted effort to downplay, if not obscure, the spectres of its colonial past in Africa.

Eduardo Lourenço’s critical perspective remarked on the event’s contradictory nature, highlighting a specific Portuguese post-Regime policy: the unquestioning monumentalization of a bloodstained colonial history. “Toda a água do Tejo não chegará para branquear as torrentes de sangue que deram ao nosso século o seu rosto shakespeariano. [...] Por que milagre Lisboa se tornou o lugar de uma festa europeia destinada, simbolicamente, a apagar os nossos pesadelos, propondo-se concelebrar, à beira-Tejo, utopias salvadoras sob o signo do Mar?” (Lourenço 2014, 324).⁴⁴ Margarida Calafate Ribeiro (2020a, 77) highlights that beneath the imperial rhetoric, official historiography overlooks the crucial role played by African diasporic labourers in constructing the 1998 Expo. These workers, revealing a specific spacetime continuum,

⁴² Unlike the initial ‘wave,’ Machado does not categorize these individuals as labour migrants. Instead, he describes them as either persons who hold Portuguese citizenship who chose to remain in Portugal after independence, often including mixed-race individuals with relatively higher social status, or as the children of the ‘former immigrants’ born in Portugal—a group often referred to by sociologists using the contentious term ‘second-generation immigrants.’ Notably, the categories of diaspora and exile are not considered. I will explore this issue further in section 2.3.2, “Beyond Imperial Citizenship.”

⁴³ “The oceans—a legacy for the future” (my translation).

⁴⁴ “All the water in the Tagus won’t be enough to whiten the torrents of blood that have given our century its Shakespearean face. [...] By what miracle has Lisbon become the venue for a European festival symbolically designed to erase our nightmares, proposing to concelebrate, on the banks of the Tagus, saving utopias under the sign of the Sea?” (my translation).

were key contributors not only to the Expo's construction but also to the broader reconstruction of the post-imperial nation. In this context, Ribeiro refers to the work of Ângela Ferreira, a Mozambique-born artist who challenges Portugal's enduring colonial legacies. During Expo 98, Ferreira created the artwork *Kanimambo*, inscribed on traditional Portuguese pavement, featuring the Changana word for 'thank you.' This artwork pays tribute to those on the margins who played a crucial role in building the Portuguese 'democratic' nation, that is, the many African labourers—both men and women—who worked on construction sites and in cleaning services and whose contributions remained invisible, with their bodies hidden on the outskirts of major cities or in precarious housing within urban areas.

Luso-Angolan writer and poet Yara Nakahanda Monteiro (2023) asserts that “as pedras também falam,”⁴⁵ drawing attention to the historical violence hidden beneath the cold surfaces of Portuguese public monuments that ‘innocently’ celebrate a grand narrative of ‘geographic discoveries’ and ‘cordial contacts’ with various populations. To counter the silent and violent history embedded in the materiality of the city, both Ferreira and Monteiro seek to restore a vocal agency to these Portuguese stones. These stones symbolize the African and Afrodescendant historical presence in Portugal, which has been forcibly silenced yet remains undeniably evident. They reveal that the productive capacity of African populations—from historical slavery to contemporary forms of exploitation—continue to generate surplus value in contemporary Portugal. The materiality of this surplus value is embedded in the stones of Lisbon, and the city's so-called ‘democratic’ requalification in the 1990s serves as a recent example of a broader colonial history where the labour of African peoples was exploited to build and sustain the city, yet denied recognition. By ‘poetically’ invoking the vocal agency of these stones, Africans and Afrodescendant Portuguese today are demanding this long-overdue recognition.

In the same direction, Paulo de Medeiros (2021, 136) argues that it is essential to recognize that the African diaspora in Portugal represents a much older and deeply rooted presence, with historical origins dating back to the 16th century, intertwined with the formation of the Portuguese nation, the Empire, and the Atlantic slave trade. Contrary to the claims of Portuguese neo-Luso-tropicalist rhetoric,⁴⁶ this presence is not a ‘recent

⁴⁵ “Also the stones speak” (my translation).

⁴⁶ By neo-Luso-tropicalism, I refer to a set of hegemonic discourses and practices that revive and adapt colonialist Luso-tropicalist rhetoric for contemporary purposes, aligning it with the nationalist, colonialist,

phenomenon' but rather a long-standing history marked by dispossession, diaspora, exile, adaptation, and the continuous reconfiguration of culture and identity within Portugal. Uncovering this often-overlooked history allows for a deeper understanding of the unsettling continuity highlighted by hostess Muxima, linking the historical account of the landing in Lagos chronicled by Zurara to modern air routes connecting Maputo, Luanda, Praia, São Tomé, and Bissau with Lisbon.

To understand the 'innocent' erasure of violence from the official, 'formal,' and critical discourse on Portuguese colonial history in Africa, the next section will explore the complex relationship between colonialism as a deeply embedded 'unthought' in Portuguese history and the entrenched unconscious racism in Portuguese. By rendering colonialism 'non-thinkable' and hindering the critical processing of racism, the profound psychoanalytic implications of colonialism strip colonial violence of any intelligible form.

2.2 Amputations, Prostheses, and Aphasias: Unthinkable Colonialism, Unconscious Racism

In his essay "Entre Próspero e Caliban" (2006, 211), Boaventura de Sousa Santos explains that since the 17th century, Portugal has held a semi-peripheral position in the global capitalist and modern system—a status that continues to shape its social modernity and its subsequent integration into the European Union. Historically faced with a deficit in capitalist economic power, Portugal has compensated with an 'excess' of colonialism, using it as a palliative measure for its inherent economic, structural, and historical vulnerabilities.

Before their 15th-century 'maritime explorations,' the Portuguese were depicted in Northern European imagery as underdeveloped, indolent, violent, ignorant, superstitious, and irrational—traits similar to those later ascribed to colonized peoples (Santos 2006, 233). European travellers, traders, and clerics from England, France, and Germany described Lisbon as a decaying, 'mixed-race' city, sustained primarily by gold from the colonies. The population, marked by "cruzamento com negros" (Chaves in Santos 2006, 234),⁴⁷ became a target of scorn by other European colonial powers.

racist, and xenophobic currents emerging in Portugal within the context of globalization. I will further elaborate on this concept in the next section.

⁴⁷ "Crossbreeding with blacks" (my translation).

Along the centuries, Portugal's vulnerability was increasingly seen as an 'ontological' trait rather than a temporary condition. This 'ontological vulnerability' was particularly emphasized in the 19th century by figures like Almeida Garrett, Alexandre Herculano, and the '*Geração de 70*.' They feared that without its colonies, Portugal could disappear from the map. In response, Romantic-era mythologists depicted Portugal as a nation with resilient roots and a unique colonial destiny, masking its underlying fragility, especially after the loss of Brazil in 1822. This narrative emphasized the concept of 'immunity' as central to understanding Portugal's perceived destiny, portraying it as almost 'divinely' protected from any threat to its national identity.

It is important to note that the 'racial mingling' that once brought scorn to the Portuguese nation in the 15th and 16th centuries was later strategically reinterpreted through Luso-tropicalist theories advanced by Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre. Between 1951 and 1952, Freyre, with financial backing from the Estado Novo, conducted sociological research in the Portuguese African colonies. During a 1951 conference in Goa, Freyre introduced the term 'Luso-tropicalism' to describe the 'unique' characteristics shared across the Portuguese empire in Africa, Asia, and America, proposing the idea of a 'Luso-tropical community.' Luso-tropicalism emphasized traits such as cordiality, adaptability to tropical environments and their peoples, the hybrid identity of the Portuguese nation and culture, and the purported absence of racism and exploitation. Under the Estado Novo, these principles became central to the ideologies supporting discriminatory legislation and administration in the African colonies. Indeed, Luso-tropicalism was integrated into Portuguese rhetoric as a 'scientific discourse' that 'proved' the legitimacy of the empire in Africa, reinforcing the regime's false commitment to the construction of a 'racial democracy' through the empire. Celebrated as a policy of miscegenation,⁴⁸ Luso-tropicalism became a humanistic ideal that portrayed the Portuguese colonial system as 'exceptional' and 'distinctive,' contributing to the enduring narrative of Portugal as the *país dos brandos costumes*.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Luiz Filipe de Alencastro (2000, 353, my translation) employs the term *miscigenação* to characterize the "demographic outcome of a relationship of domination and exploitation." This term is distinguished from *mestiçagem*, as elucidated by the author, which refers to a nuanced social process contributing to the emergence of a society marked by significant cultural and ethnic amalgamation, as exemplified in the formation of the Brazilian society.

⁴⁹ From a transnational analytical perspective on the naming of different colonial realities, it is notable how several European nations have employed diverse rhetorical strategies to depict themselves as 'exceptional' and 'distinct,' specifically from the dominant British colonial model. France, for example, promoted the concept of the *mission civilisatrice*; Italy, the notion of *italiani brava gente*; and Portugal, Luso-tropicalism as a form of colonialism with a supposedly humanistic façade. In this context, a comparative approach, as advocated by European research programs like *Memoirs: Children of Empires and European*

With the rise of Salazarism and the intensified focus on colonial projects in the African continent,⁵⁰ colonialist discourse abandoned any ‘futuristic’ perspective. Instead, it adopted a regressive outlook, strategically framing the 16th century as the foundational era of an empire that Salazar’s regime claimed to perpetuate. Over time, colonial exhibitions, centenary celebrations, and unofficial cultural activities sought to create an ‘eternal present’ for the Portuguese nation, presenting it as a colonizing power *par excellence* and embedding this identity as a fundamental aspect of national self-perception.

The outset of the decolonization movements in Africa during the 1960s and the growing international and domestic pressures to end colonialism in the continent forced the Salazarist regime to find strategies to ‘conceal’ its colonial politics. To maintain control over its colonies, Salazar initiated what José Gil (1995) describes as a ‘rhetoric of invisibility,’ masking the term ‘colonialism’ in the country’s international discourse and intensifying the use of Luso-tropicalist theories to reshape the image of the Portuguese empire, crafting a specific linguistic strategies designed to obscure the colonial reality. As Cláudia Castelo (1998, 138) notes, the 1933 Constitution was amended in the 1950s, replacing the term *colónia* with *província ultramarina*. The Colonial Act was also revised, introducing the citizenship status of *assimilados*⁵¹ for indigenous populations and restructuring the hierarchy between *indígenas* and *não-indígenas*. Simultaneously, official discourse portrayed Portugal as a ‘multiracial community’ comprising ‘geographically distant territories’ inhabited by ‘ethnically diverse’ populations, all united by a common culture. This reframing is exemplified by the motto ‘*do Minho a Timor*,’ symbolizing ‘diversity’ within a single ‘multicultural’ Portugal. Even the Wars of

Postmemories, can help deconstruct these claims of ‘exceptionality,’ revealing a shared policy of occupation, exploitation, and subordination within the Western colonial system. Such analysis uncovers the commonality in the violent management of occupied territories and the dispossession of populations, thereby challenging the notion of exceptionalism in Western colonial practices.

⁵⁰ The demise of the First Portuguese Republic in May 1926 marked the onset of the Military Dictatorship spanning from 1926 to 1928, succeeded by the subsequent National Dictatorship until 1933. The culmination of this sequence was the establishment of the Estado Novo dictatorship under the leadership of António de Oliveira Salazar. This series of authoritarian regimes led to the curtailment of civil liberties within mainland Portugal and instigated a pivotal transformation in the colonial experience across Africa.

⁵¹ The designation *assimilado* was employed to categorize Black Africans and *mestiços* who, according to the criteria established by colonial authorities, were deemed to have effectively assimilated Portuguese language, culture, work, and beliefs. In theory, individuals accorded this status were entitled to the privileges and rights associated with Portuguese citizenship, thereby exempting them from certain obligations imposed on the majority of African indigenous, such as forced labour. Thus, labour—whether as forced labour imposed on *indígenas* or as work performed by assimilated subjects for the colonial elite—emerges as the primary instrument of social organization, control and hierarchies. The formal abolition of the *assimilado* status took place in 1961. For a comprehensive exploration of this historical figure and its literary portrayals, consult Chapter 3.

Independence (1961-1974) were subject to this linguistic strategy, as Roberto Vecchi (2010, 140) observes; official documents from the Salazarist regime avoid any direct mention of a bloody war, referring instead to terrorist attacks against ‘Portugal’s unity.’ Thus, the Salazarist and Luso-tropicalist linguistic strategy allowed the regime to ‘speak about’ colonialism, while at the same time concealing it completely.

If the silence inherent in verbal expression delineates the phantasmagorical nature of colonial reality, a similar reticence persists in the language of the ‘*descolonização-relâmpago*’ following the events of April 25. Eduardo Lourenço identifies the profound contradictions in post-Salazarist and postcolonial discourses. While the Portuguese considered themselves ‘quintessential colonialists’ due to the ‘Luso-tropicalist cordiality,’ they also paradoxically projected an image of excellence by advocating their swift and exemplary decolonization, declaring it a decolonization ‘without problems’ (Lourenço 2014, 190). In other words, Portuguese considered themselves both perfect colonizers and perfect ‘decolonizers.’ Describing the postcolonial and democratic era in Portugal as a ‘reality without problems’ underscores a historical lack of critical awareness regarding the past that has shaped the present. This deficiency in critical scrutiny perpetuates the colonialist rhetoric of neglect and invisibility within democratic Portugal. Eduardo Lourenço terms this phenomenon the ‘colonial unthought’—a pervasive aspect of Portuguese identity that historically lacks the linguistic and psychological tools for identification, definition, and subsequent critical reflection on the colonial trauma. This ‘unthought’ is marked by an ‘excess of content’ and an almost total ‘absence of form’: “Depois do 25 de Abril, o conteúdo da nossa relação típica Metrópole-Colónias alterou-se, e felizmente, no único sentido justo em que podia ser alterado. Mas a *forma*, o estilo do nosso comportamento enquanto colonizador metropolitano, continua a depender de uma estrutura mental análoga” (Lourenço 2014, 191).⁵² Thus, the colonial ‘unthought’ becomes a way to suppress a ghost that haunts the ‘innocent dreams’ of the nation.

What emerges from this framework is that the national consciousness is rooted in the impossibility of ‘thinking’ Portuguese colonialism. As a consequence, the failure to scrutinize the historical narrative extends to the neglect of problematizing the languages, codes, and representations that are subsequently employed to articulate this historical

⁵² “After April 25, the content of our typical Metropolis-Colonies relationship changed, and fortunately in the only fair way that it could be changed. But *the form*, the style of our behaviour as a metropolitan coloniser, continues to depend on an analogous mental structure” (my translation).

continuum. In the poem “Devaneios da democracia hipotecada,” the Afro-Portuguese poet Raquel Lima sharply critiques the seemingly ‘seamless’ transition from past to present, portraying the ‘Salazarist and colonialist house’ as merely transformed into the new democratic abode of Portugal through superficial layers of paint:

[...]

Porque a casa da repressão era ao pé da casa do fascismo
E ambas serviam a grande mansão já montada do capitalismo
Hipotecar a democracia foi só pintar com quatro de mão,
Mudar portas, fechaduras e encafuar gavetas no sótão.

[...]

Enquanto isso as casas cresciam tão democraticamente
Que poucos sentiram o cheiro a podre no ambiente
Cheirava a genocídio judaico, indígena, negro e cigano
Mas lá na casa dançavam com fado, flamenco e tango (Lima 2020, online).⁵³

Lima’s verses echo what also Eduardo Lourenço (2014, 205) once stated: “a *forma* é tanto ou mais importante que o *conteúdo* na criação efectiva da Democracia.”⁵⁴ Perpetuating the representation of Portuguese colonial history exclusively as an ‘unthought’ dimension essentially contributes to the cultivation of a narrative that denies acknowledgment not only to the collective national self but also to all individuals who have endured the most violent repercussions of the colonial legacy.

Building on the historical legacies of Luso-tropicalist discourse, several Portuguese scholars have highlighted the current reconfiguration of Neo-Luso-tropicalist rhetoric in the context of globalization. They emphasize how terms such as diversity, multiculturalism, and inclusion are employed to present Portugal as a pioneer in global transformation, leveraging its historical role in ‘facilitating global connections.’ Miguel Vale de Almeida (2000) first introduced the concept of “generic Luso-tropicalism” to describe this reimagined narrative, which depicts a ‘mixed-race’ and ‘tolerant’ image as central to a democratic, postcolonial, global Portugal. Similarly, Marcos Cardão (2013)

⁵³ “The house of oppression was next door to the house of fascism./ They both sustained the long-built mansion of capitalism./ To mortgage democracy - four coats of fresh paint, / Change the doors and the locks, hide the drawers in the attic. / [...] / Meanwhile the houses grew so democratically / That few smelled the smell of rot in the air, / That smelled of genocide: Jewish, Indigenous, Black and Romany, / But back in the house they danced to Fado, Flamenco and Tango” (Lima 2020, online).

⁵⁴ “*Form* is as important, if not more important, than *content* in the effective creation of democracy” (my translation).

developed the term “banal Luso-tropicalism,”⁵⁵ to refer to the subtle, everyday practices and ideological constructs that perpetuate the acritical myth of benevolent Portuguese colonialism. This influence permeates various spheres, including political and cultural domains, public and private spaces, and is evident in enduring expressions like ‘Portuguese Discoveries’ (a phrase that completely erase land and Native occupation, expropriation, and exploitation), the organization of public spaces and topographies (museums, theme parks, monuments, and streets glorifying colonialism and its ‘heroes’), political campaigns (such as the 2014 ‘*Portugal é mar*’ campaign that provided Portuguese schools with maps depicting Portugal as a large maritime nation), and even entertainment products like board games, tourist campaigns, and commercials. In essence, banal Luso-tropicalism perpetuates at all levels an uncritical glorification of the colonial past while erasing its most violent aspects from collective memory and consciousness. Caught in a “postcolonial loop” (Silvia Rodríguez Maeso 2016) of ‘innocent’ celebrations and violent erasures, Portugal is thus trapped, paraphrasing Miguel Cardina (2023, 52), in repetitive patterns of meaning, which reaffirm the idea of Europe and Portugal’s (violent) role in the realization of modernity.

The accumulation of ‘unthoughts’ about the past creates vulnerabilities for several social groups, particularly for African and Afrodescendant populations in Portugal. This group continues to see the colonial histories that inflicted deep and lasting wounds on their community as ‘glorified’ in every aspects of daily life. This ongoing pain is exacerbated by the denial of the violent colonial past and its transformation into systemic racism within Portuguese society. Recent violent events tragically highlight the persistent, systemic nature of racial discrimination, marginalization, harm, and death in Portuguese society. Aggressions like the racial assault on Cláudia Simões and the murder of Odair Muniz in Cova da Moura are glaring examples of the deep-seated racism that prevails despite any façade of benevolence. These events represent violent ‘zones of contact,’ where Portugal’s latent, often unacknowledged colonial past—the ‘unthought’—surfaces and collides with the nation’s collective unconscious racism.

⁵⁵ Cardão’s theoretical framework examines the evolution of Luso-tropicalist theses, tracing their transition from political discourse to the domain of the culture industry. In expounding on his proposition, Cardão draws upon Michael Billig’s conceptualization of “banal nationalism.” This notion encapsulates the unconscious solidification of commonplace and recurring language, along with linguistic structures and strategies that inherently anticipate the concept of nationhood as an inherent and unquestioned aspect tied to one’s ‘homeland’ and its corresponding abstract ‘national identity’ (Billig in Cardão 2013, 322).

In the preface to the Brazilian edition of *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism*,⁵⁶ Afrodescendant interdisciplinary artist Grada Kilomba (2019, 11, emphasis added) evokes the feeling of relief after having left Lisbon for Berlin: “não havia nada de mais urgente para mim do que sair, para poder aprender uma *nova linguagem*.”⁵⁷ On German soil, Kilomba acknowledges the ‘denial–guilt–shame–recognition–reparation’ sequence posited by Paul Gilroy as a public and collective trajectory for heightening awareness and assuming accountability concerning the colonial history and its attendant racist and racial repercussions. However, in the estimation of the artist, Portuguese society remains “uma sociedade que vive na *negação*, ou até mesmo na *glorificação* da história colonial,” a society that “não permite que novas linguagens sejam criadas. Nem permite que seja a responsabilização, e não a moral, a criar novas configurações de poder e conhecimento” (Kilomba 2019, 12-13).⁵⁸ Confirming this ‘absence of shame’ for the colonial past is, among the many examples that could be cited here, the statement by Portuguese historian João Pedro Marques (2018, online), who openly condemns those who look back on the Portuguese past “com vergonha e vocação penitente.”⁵⁹ Kilomba argues that learning a new language offers a means to articulate what is often an unspoken European reality that we collectively recognize and bear responsibility for: slavery, colonialism, and racism.

Kilomba links the repression of slavery, colonialism, and racism in the Western unconscious to Freud’s concept of “*Unterdrückung*.” Freud (1923, 17) explains that repression involves pushing something away and keeping it distant from conscious thought to avoid the intense fear, guilt, or shame associated with unpleasant truths. Although these truths are hidden in the unconscious as disturbing secrets, they remain latent and can resurface at any time. Through repression, in other words, there is an

⁵⁶ I make reference to the Brazilian edition of Kilomba’s text, as it encompasses a foreword specifically written and disseminated in the diverse international editions, a component absent in the original text initially published in English in 2008. In other parts of the chapter, I will refer to the second English edition (2010) of the book.

⁵⁷ “There was nothing more urgent for me than to leave so that I could learn a *new language*” (my translation).

⁵⁸ “A society that lives in *denial*, or even *glorification* of colonial history, [it] doesn’t allow new languages to be created. Nor does it allow accountability, and not morality, to create new configurations of power and knowledge” (my translation).

⁵⁹ “With shame and penitent vocation” (my translation). This quotation necessitates contextualization within the broader discourse ignited in 2017 by the proposal put forth by then-mayor of Lisbon, Fernando Medina, to establish the Museu das Descobertas within the city. Almost immediately, anti-racist and Afrodescendant movements strongly opposed the initiative, articulating the resounding refrain “não a um museu contra nós!” (Público 2018, online). Marques’ advocacy for the museum, which appears to catalyze explicit neo-Luso-tropicalist, nationalist, and racist dynamics, aligns with the stances adopted by several other journalists, including Vítor Rainho, Miguel Sousa Tavares, and João Miguel Tavares.

attempt to “make the known unknown” (Kilomba 2010, 21), transforming it into a defence mechanism by which the ego censors what is considered unpleasant. Kilomba’s work on unconscious racism embedded in white and Western subjectivity seeks to give voice to the psychological pain of what she calls “everyday racism” (Kilomba 2010, 13), which constantly recalls “living memories buried in our psyche, ready to be told. [...] I want to speak about that brutal *mask of speechlessness*” (Kilomba 2010, 16).

This ‘brutal mask of speechlessness’ originates from the objectification that the racialized subject has undergone through the colonial violence. Through objectification, Blackness becomes the primary form of ‘otherness’ by which whiteness constructed itself. In other words, the Black subject is forced to recognise themselves always as an alienation when referred to the ‘white’ other (Hall 1996; Kilomba 2010). Colonial history has been portrayed through various images, but when viewed as a history of stolen and purloined subjectivities, the recurring imagery often involves the figure of the amputation. Through amputation, Frantz Fanon reflects on the transformation of the Black subject into the ‘other,’ into the one that is never as the self: “On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an *amputation*, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?” (Fanon 1986, 112, my emphasis).

In her analysis of Fanon’s language, Kilomba emphasizes the interconnectedness of the image of the wound with the concept of ‘trauma.’ Indeed, the term ‘trauma’ derives from the Greek word for ‘wound,’ and it is in this context that both Fanon and Kilomba employ it: wound ‘as’ trauma. Thus, racism indicates a “painful bodily impact and loss characteristic of a traumatic collapse, for within racism one is surgically removed, violently separated, from whatever identity one might really have. Such separation is defined as classic trauma, since it deprives one of one’s own link with a society unconsciously thought of as *white*” (Kilomba 2010, 20). In so doing, the traumatic experience that racism provokes is not only embedded within individual or family-based events and memories, but also it is originated by the unreason of racism that “places us always as ‘Other,’ as different, as incompatible, as conflicting, as strange and uncommon” (Kilomba 2010, 20). That’s why the ‘unthought’ and the ‘unconscious’ all converge in the traumatic nature of both colonialism and racism in Portugal.

To understand the psychological impact of the colonial unthought and the racist unconscious on racialized Portuguese groups, a third component, in my view, must be

considered. This element connects the repressed content in the unconscious to the difficulty of expressing it linguistically—a phenomenon described as aphasia.

In medical and psychological contexts, aphasia refers to the partial or total loss of the ability to communicate verbally or in writing. Individuals with aphasia often exhibit ‘agrammatic’ behaviour, struggling with structural relationships, indicating broader cognitive and epistemic disorganization. For instance, Henri Bergson (1991) links aphasia to a disconnection between materiality, memory, and worldliness, suggesting that these disorders are not just internal issues of organizing embodied memories (that is, memories which do not find an active foundation in the body) but signify a weakening or severing of the bond between inner and outer life. Ann Laura Stoler (2016) extends this concept to various contexts, including the Portuguese Colonial War. She argues that aphasia is a more accurate term than ‘forgetting’ or ‘amnesia’ when discussing a Western colonial past that seems to have vanished from collective memory. These stories are not vanished; on the contrary, they are displaced or rendered inappropriate because “it may be difficult to retrieve in a language that speaks to the disparate violence it engendered” (Stoler 2016, 128). Thus, colonial aphasia becomes a blockage of knowledge, making it difficult to articulate thoughts and develop a language that effectively links the right words and concepts.

In the Portuguese context, Miguel Cardina (2021, 2; 2023, 58) argues that even though, on a public level, the memory of colonial violence is marked by the attempt of ‘organising the oblivion,’ the effort results in that ‘colonial aphasia’ described by Stoler, turning the colonial memories in contemporary battlegrounds. If it is true that collective, public, and individual memories of the Portuguese past are marked by forms of aphasia, it is equally true that contemporary younger generations—especially those who didn’t directly undergo the colonial trauma but have somehow ‘inherited’ its consequences in various ways—are actively working to combat this cognitive impairment and mnemonic distortion. This effort involves developing ‘new grammars’ to challenge the contradictory relationships embedded in the aftermath of colonial oppression and to articulate alternative narratives about the past. This is particularly evident in the artistic expressions created by the Afrodescendant generations.

At a time when the restitution of artistic and cultural artifacts held in public museums, state collections, and private archives from former colonial empires is at the

forefront of international debate,⁶⁰ Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida—a prominent voice in contemporary Afrodescendant literature—highlights a different form of restitution. In her speech, titled “A restituição da interioridade,” delivered at a recent conference at New York University and later published in the essay collection *O que é ser uma escritora negra hoje, de acordo comigo* (2023), she brings this issue to the forefront. “Estados e museus podem chegar a um acordo em relação às condições para a restituição de bens culturais e obras de arte saqueados. Mas aonde ir e a quem solicitar se aquilo que queremos recuperar é a interioridade negra?” (Almeida 2023, 61).⁶¹ Almeida conceptualizes the restitution of Black inwardness as the recovery of an intangible asset that eludes straightforward recuperation through legal actions against states or nations. This inwardness has been systematically erased through a historical process that constructs Blackness as total otherness, reinforced by racism, hierarchies, prejudices, stereotypes, and power asymmetries imposed by a system of white supremacy. This erasure is further perpetuated by representational mechanisms that strip racialized communities of their inner beauty, confining Black individuals to violent modern

⁶⁰ Within the genealogy of debates pertaining to coloniality within museum institutions, the contribution by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy titled *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics* (2018), stands out as emblematic, illustrating the intricate nature of the discourse. The thought-provoking speech delivered by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie at the inaugural session of the Forum Humboldt in Berlin further scrutinizes the contradictions inherent in Europe—a geopolitical entity celebrated for its values, democracy, and adherence to the rule of law—when confronted with the issue of restitution. Adichie’s assertion (2021, online) —“a nation that believes in the rule of law cannot possibly be debating whether to return stolen goods. It just returns them” —encapsulates the tension at the heart of the debate. Recent contributions, such as Ariella Aïsha Azoulay’s work in *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (2019), subsequently echoed by Françoise Vergès in *Programme de désordre absolu: décoloniser le musée* (2023), underscore the profound interconnection between the decolonization of museum institutions and the broader project of decolonizing the world system in which we are embedded. In Portugal, the discourse surrounding the decolonization of museums has become a focal point of discussion, notwithstanding a prevalent reluctance among the country’s institutions to engage in meaningful dialogue. The debate has been amplified by criticism directed at persistently colonialist terminology that characterises the nomenclature of various museums and theme parks, such as the Museu dos Descobrimentos in Belmonte, the Parque dos Pequenitos in Coimbra, and the World of Discoveries in Porto. Tensions escalated notably in 2017 when the Lisbon City Hall proposed the establishment of the previously mentioned Museu das Descobertas. The enduring conceptualization of the museum exists exclusively as an abstract project, notwithstanding the Lisbon municipality’s continued reference to it as a tangible prospect for the future. The spectral presence of the Museu das Descobertas sustains a vigorous discourse. Still in 2017, the Afrodescendant association Djass achieved success in securing the Lisbon municipality’s participatory budget for the establishment of a *Memorial de Homenagem às Pessoas Escravizadas*. The selected proposal, submitted by the Angolan artist Kiluanji Kia Henda, titled *Plantação – Prosperidade – Pesadelo*, was intended for installation in proximity to Campo das Cebolas. However, to date, the monument remains unrealized, and Djass, under the new right-wing executive administration, alleges that the City Hall keeps obstructing the realization of the project (Esquera Net 2023, online). For an in-depth exploration of restitution-related issues in Portugal, readers are directed to the writings of António Pinto Ribeiro (2022; 2021; 2019a), and also in conjunction with a contribution from Margarida Calafate Ribeiro (2018).

⁶¹ “States and museums can agree on the conditions for the restitution of looted cultural goods and works of art. But where to go and who to ask if what we want to recover is black inwardness?” (my translation).

paradigms of representation where Black people can only exist as stereotypical aberrations. The theft of Black inwardness means “que eles foram privados de uma representação da sua vida interior, a qual lhes faria sentir, diante de formas específicas de beleza, alegria e complexidade, como se estivessem em casa. Fizeram-nos ver a si mesmos em paródias rasas: simplificações superficiais e com frequências cruéis” (Almeida 2023, 62).⁶²

Confronted with a long history of artistic, literary, ethnographic, scientific, and political representations that systematically portrayed racialized individuals as exploitable objects or empty stereotypes subject to ridicule or fear, Almeida identifies what could be defined as a new ‘aesthetic grammar’ in the contemporary work of Black artists within the Luso-Brazilian-African diaspora. These artists are not merely attempting to retroactively grant their communities a historical past—an impossible task, as also noted by Saidiya Hartman (2007; 2008)—but are instead dedicated to restoring what colonial history has persistently denied them: “Estamos, sim, dando uma *mente* a nós mesmos, ou estamos dando a nós mesmo uma mente que sempre esteve aqui” (Almeida 2023, 67).⁶³

Beginning with this historical, conceptual and theoretical reconnaissance concerning the (im)possibility of ‘thinking’ Portuguese colonialism and ‘elaborating’ racism as repressed aspects in Portuguese society, Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida’s reflection regarding the different forms of restitution of a stolen inwardness will be the paths that the next paragraphs will attempt to follow in order to complexify the issues arsed by Afrodescendant Portuguese literature. Starting with recent critical contributions advanced by Afrodescendant researchers and critics, I will try to trace ‘Afrodescendant restitutions’ in the historical and literary spheres in an attempt to understand the formation of specific tropes in Afrodescendant literature and their links to the theme of vulnerability.

2.3 Restitution I – History

As previously noted, Portugal’s memories of its colonial past are transformed into disciplinary mechanisms that both celebrate and ‘forget’ that past. Consequently, violent colonial memories can be systematically hidden by official narratives and ‘formal’

⁶² “That they have been deprived of a representation of their inner life, which would make them feel, in the face of specific forms of beauty, joy and complexity, as if they were at home. They were forced to see themselves in shallow parodies: superficial and often cruel simplifications” (my translation).

⁶³ “Yes, we’re giving ourselves a *mind*, or we’re giving ourselves a mind that’s always been here” (my translation).

discourses. These memories may be rendered inaccessible, removed from the archive, or suppressed. They can be ‘dis-abled’ to cover uncomfortable truths, which remain ‘unthought’ and ‘unconscious.’ They challenge the boundaries between what is known and what (and how) can be expressed. In this process, selective emphasis is placed on historical narratives of Portuguese colonial triumphs and conquests, setting precedents for later ‘memorializations.’ Communities that have historically resisted colonial oppression respond to this falsified memorialization by practicing counter-histories, counter-narratives, and counter-memories. These counter-cultures aim to dismantle the colonial archive and challenge its inherent violent grammar. Thus, forgetting, undoing, and unlearning become crucial anti-colonial strategies and practices, focusing more on spectral remnants, lost genealogies, ruinations, and erasures than on tangible historical ‘evidence’ and ‘formal’ legacies of the imperial archive.

Recalling her childhood in Portugal as an Afrodescendant student, Grada Kilomba seems to remember the Portuguese history otherwise:

We were asked to read about the ‘Portuguese Discovery Epoch,’ even though we do not remember being discovered. We were asked to write about the great legacy of colonization, even though we could only remember robbery and humiliation. And we were asked not to inquire about our African heroes, for they were terrorists and rebels. What a better way to colonize than to teach the colonized to speak and write from the perspective of the colonizer (Kilomba 2010, 35).

To counter the enduring legacy of subjugation, humiliation, looting, and violence remarked by Kilomba, recent critical efforts within ‘Black Portuguese Studies’ have emerged to provide African and Afrodescendant communities with first-person narratives of their own history. These efforts seek to rewrite Portuguese history by confronting imperial narratives through two key approaches: first, by actively ‘writing back’ against the epistemological violence inflicted by the colonial archive on their own histories, practices, and knowledge; and second, by engaging in a process of ‘writing Black.’ This latter approach involves giving active spaces and amplifying voices that have long been marginalized and silenced, thus giving them the visibility, as well as scientific recognition in the critical and cultural debate.

In the following sections, I will offer a historical overview of African and Afrodescendant rooted presence in Portugal, as this context is crucial for understanding the background of the novels analysed in the second part of my study. Special attention

will be given to examining the so-called ‘colonial archive’ and its tendency to highlight the empire while systematically sidelining Black subjects and perspectives in historical and cultural research. Building on this historical foundation, I will then explore a key theme in Afrodescendant Portuguese literature: the issue of citizenship, its colonial and nationalist legacies, and the radical sense of exclusion and vulnerability that it engenders for the young Afrodescendant generations.

2.3.1 Black Portugal

Rather than providing a comprehensive historiographical review of the African presence in Portugal, this section focuses on key moments that constitute the historical narrative of African and Afrodescendant Portugal. The goal is not an exhaustive survey but a selective exploration, prioritizing recent research that promotes alternative methodological approaches concerning Portuguese Black historiography and self-representation. Central to this analysis is a critical focus on the agency and active role of the Black community in modern and contemporary Portuguese history.

The 15th century marks the beginning of Portugal’s exploitation of foreign lands, people, and resources for capital accumulation through its colonial occupations in Africa. Chronicler Gomes Eanes Zurara narrated the atrocities of the Atlantic slave trade during the reign of Infante Dom Afonso Henrique, by reporting the sale of 235 enslaved people in Lagos on 8 August 1444. Between the 15th and 16th centuries, a significant concentration of enslaved was dispersed across Portugal, particularly in urban centres like Sintra, Évora, and Lisbon, and regions such as the Algarve, Alentejo, the Sado area, and the Tagus valley, where they were exploited in various productive activities (Cardina 2023, 22; Tinhorão 2019, 119). By the 16th century, Portugal became the leading country in the transatlantic slave trade between Europe and the Americas. Of the 12,5 million Africans deported to the Americas, an estimated 5,848,266 were transported by Portuguese ships (Cardina 2023, 23). This estimate, however, excludes those unrecorded during or after the perilous Atlantic crossing. As demand for enslaved labour increased in the Antilles and later in Brazil, the trafficking of enslaved people within the Iberian Peninsula gradually declined.

Academic scholarship⁶⁴ has examined the historical impact of imperial violence on the social life of the ‘African presence’ in Portugal. These studies primarily provide an overview of this presence from the 15th to the 19th century, with particular emphasis on the era of enslavement. A seminal work in this field is *Os negros em Portugal: uma presença silenciosa* (1988) by Brazilian scholar José Ramos Tinhorão.⁶⁵ The title references the ‘silence’ noted by researchers since the 1980s, critiquing the omission of a history obscured by the ideological remnants of a still-influential colonial past. While many of these perspectives critique the omission of African historiography in national historical accounts, a specific issue requires attention: most studies frame the African presence in Portugal in terms of silence, invisibility, or ‘absent’ narratives, portraying these as inherent aspects of African history in Portugal. To challenge the ‘passive’ connotations attached to silence, invisibility, and absence, I propose interpreting Afro-Portuguese history as a ‘silenced’ history, suppressed by hegemonic narratives and oppressive practices. I argue that a critical, respectful examination of African and Afrodescendant history in Portugal must recognize not a normalized colonial condition of voicelessness, but rather a rich history of ‘Black vocalities’ forcibly silenced by imposing the colonial “brutal mask of speechlessness” (Kilomba 2010, 16).

To recognize a history that goes beyond merely emphasizing the total violence of colonial subjugation—which often reproduces the violence of the archive—and to challenge racialized accounts of injury inflicted on Afro-Portuguese populations, some research highlights strategies of resistance, community-building, and cultural preservation. These studies focus on critical assimilation and the syncretism of African and Portuguese cultures, particularly through religion. For example, Isabel Castro Henriques (2019a, 9) reconstructs the history of Lisbon’s *Mocambo* (now the Madragoa neighbourhood). From the late 16th century, this geographical enclave served as a refuge

⁶⁴ Among these, I highlight the following studies: *História Social dos Escravos e dos Libertos Negros em Portugal (1441-1555)* by A. C. Saunders (1994), *Os Negros em Portugal (Séculos XV a XIX)* by Ana Maria Rodrigues (1999), *O Negro no Coração do Império: Uma memória a resgatar* (1999) by Didier Lahon, *Escravos no Sul de Portugal: Séculos XVI e XVII* by Jorge Fonseca (2002) and *A Herança Africana em Portugal – Séculos XV-XX* (2009) by Isabel Castro Henriques.

⁶⁵ Interestingly, one of the pioneering studies on Black history in Portugal emerges from a Brazilian perspective. Published in 1988, José Ramos Tinhorão’s work begins with an introduction that explicitly outlines its genesis: a compelling need to understand the historical and cultural foundations of Afro-Brazilian social classes, shaped by over three centuries of Portuguese colonization. Initial research within the Brazilian context led Tinhorão to shift his focus to Portugal, recognizing the necessity of genealogical investigation to explore the history of the African presence in Portugal, identified as the primary nexus of the transatlantic slave trade. As Tinhorão asserted, “the history of popular culture in Brazil could only be properly understood with prior knowledge of the Portuguese reality since the end of the Middle Ages” (Tinhorão 2019, 11, my translation). Consequently, *Os negros em Portugal* functions as a quasi-prehistory within the framework of Afro-Brazilian historiography.

for both liberated and enslaved Africans, fostering support networks and nurturing African cultural practices. Uniquely positioned within the European context of the time, the Mocambo seems to have disappeared by the end of the 19th century. Other research (Castro Henriques 2009; Roldão, Pereira, Varela 2023) emphasizes the foundational role of formal and informal Black organizations, such as Black *confrarias* and *irmandades*, particularly in southern Portugal, as syncretic means of preserving African cultures. These studies also challenge the stereotypical view of Black people as solely enslaved, impoverished, or marginalized, revealing a more complex and stratified social reality. Black communities were far from homogenous; they were internally differentiated not only along ethnic lines but also by their degree of assimilation into society, ranging from enslaved individuals and slaves with relative autonomy (*escravos de ganho*)⁶⁶ to freed persons (*alforriados*)⁶⁷ and African aristocrats.

To understand the precarious conditions many formerly enslaved faced at the end of the 19th century—paralleling the exploitation and neglect experienced by many African diasporic people who moved to Portugal after the colonial oppression and the Wars of Independence—it is crucial to analyse the abolition period and its aftermath. In 1761, the Marquis of Pombal banned the import and trade of enslaved people in Portugal. However, this decree did not change the status of those already enslaved, and enforcement was weak in regions like Madeira and the Azores, where trafficking continued until 1832 (Caldeira 2017). In 1773, Pombal introduced the Lei do Ventre Livre, which was supposed to grant freedom to the offspring of enslaved mothers born after that date or those who could trace their lineage to enslaved great-grandmothers. However, the law was deeply flawed because proving such lineage was challenging due to the disruption of family structures and the lack of documentation caused by the Atlantic slave trade. This breakdown in genealogical records prevented many enslaved individuals from obtaining their freedom.⁶⁸ In addition, this law was primarily aimed at increasing the labour force

⁶⁶ In the context of the Portuguese empire, particularly in Brazil, *escravos de ganho* were enslaved individuals forced by their masters to work in various street occupations. At the end of each day, they were required to hand over a set amount of money to their owners, a system distinct from other forms of forced labour. Notably, many of these slaves were able to save a portion of their earnings, which they often used to purchase their freedom by paying their masters

⁶⁷ The term *alforriados* refers to enslaved individuals who had been granted *alforria*, or *manumissão*, meaning their emancipation and release from slavery. In some cases, this status was achieved through the accumulation of savings over years of labour. The nature of *alforria* varied—sometimes it came with conditions or limitations, while in other cases, it was absolute and unrestricted if granted without any constraints.

⁶⁸ It is also important to highlight that those enslaved individuals brought to Portugal by the *emigrados do Brasil* remained ensnared in servitude. The inclusion of illegally imported enslaved persons into the country

in Brazil to meet growing demands in plantations and mines, rather than acknowledging slavery as a crime against the Africans. The abolition of slavery in the African colonies and Brazil was slow, shaped by the social, cultural, political, and economic tensions of the 19th-century Lusophone world. Although slavery was formally abolished in Portuguese territories in 1869, former slaves were forced to continue serving their owners until 1878 as compensation for their ‘losses.’ In Brazil, which had gained independence in 1822, slavery was abolished in 1888 with the *Lei Áurea*. This situation reveals a stark paradox: while state reparations were quickly enacted for former slave owners, there were no institutional measures to support or compensate the formerly enslaved, who had endured centuries of dehumanization and exploitation. Consequently, in post-abolition Portugal, the formerly enslaved were left without material support or the means to integrate into society, facing institutional neglect and abandonment. Many individuals sought quick separation from their former enslavers, relocating to distant areas such as the rice fields of Sado. Given the complete lack of statal support, a considerable number found themselves compelled to persist in their previous states of work exploitation or were relegated to begging and precarious lives on the streets of the country.

Following the loss of Brazil, Portugal sought to establish a ‘third empire’ by gradually occupying and exploiting its African colonies. The 19th-century rise in nationalism and interest in African resources led the liberal monarchy to pursue new imperial projects, which were later solidified by the Berlin Conference (1884-1885)⁶⁹ but also limited after the British Ultimatum (1890).⁷⁰ The First Republic (1910-1926), the military dictatorship (1926-1928), the national dictatorship (1928-1933), and the *Estado Novo* (1933-1974) under António de Oliveira Salazar saw increased settlement of African colonies by white settlers, driven by economic expansions in São Tomé and Príncipe and the establishment of *colonatos* in Angola and Mozambique. This period also marked a

must also be taken into account in comprehending the complex dynamics of the enslaved population in Portugal.

⁶⁹ During the Berlin Conference, European colonial powers discussed the partition of the African continent, a process conducted without the inclusion of any African representatives. The resultant agreement supplanted the historical right of ‘discovery,’ a principle particularly cherished by Portugal, with the ‘principle of effective occupation.’ This new principle stipulated that a colonial power could only assert control and ownership over a specific region through a demonstrable and effective presence in the territory (Cardina 2023, 24).

⁷⁰ Subsequent to the Berlin Conference, Portugal signalled its intent to assert control over an ‘imagined’ corridor linking the Angolan and Mozambican coasts, commonly referred to as the *Mapa cor-de-rosa*. This geopolitical strategy prompted the issuance of the British ultimatum in 1890, compelling Portugal to withdraw from the contested geographical region. The Portuguese monarchy incurred significant damage as a result, bolstering support for the republican cause. This setback was perceived as indicative of the monarchy’s incapacity to safeguard the nation’s interests, thereby intensifying the populace’s attachment to the African colonies (Alexandre 2000, 153).

significant influx of African people into Portugal, leading to a reconfigured yet enduring presence of Black communities as the 20th century progressed.

The ‘third empire’ developed a specific violent, stereotyped, and inferiorizing representation of Africans, exemplified by colonial exhibitions where Africans were put on display. Major events like the Grande Exposição Industrial Portuguesa (1932), Exposição Colonial (1934), and Exposição do Mundo Português (1940) showcased Black subjects in recreated African ‘habitats,’ degradingly presented to the Portuguese public as part of a broader European aesthetic project: showing Portugal (and Western) superiority (Vargaftig 2014). Despite such dehumanizing displays, both the First Republic and the Estado Novo lacked comprehensive social portraits of the African population in Portugal. While numerous studies focus on Black political mobilization, particularly through resistance movements like Casa dos Estudantes do Império⁷¹ (Mata 2015; Castelo, Jerónimo 2017) and the Clube Marítimo Africano⁷² (Rocha 1998; Zau 2005), these works often emphasize the Portuguese empire and the anti-colonial struggle from Africa rather than exploring the internal dynamics of Black communities in Portugal—especially in Lisbon—during the early 20th century.

In their recent historiographical research *Tribuna Negra* (2023) Cristina Roldão, Pedro Varela e José Augusto Pereira directed their inquiries towards the first organized Black movement in Lisbon, which, spanning the years 1911 to 1933, engaged in

⁷¹ As Inocência Mata (2015, 7) asserts, the Casa dos Estudantes do Império (CEI), founded in 1944 with the approval of Minister of Colonies Vieira Machado, was influenced by earlier initiatives like the Casas de Estudantes do ‘Ultramar’ and the Casa de África. The CEI had two key goals: facilitating higher education for students from the colonies and covertly preparing officials to sustain the colonial regime across Lusophone Africa. In the post-World War II era, amid decolonization and the UN Charter’s endorsement, the CEI evolved into a space where students bound by ideological and cultural affinities could explore their national identities and produce cultural content that foregrounded Black and Afrodescendant experiences. Although some former students saw the CEI as a “stage for the metaphorical reconstruction of colonial societies of origin and a backdrop for the cultural mimicry resulting from a more or less extended stay in Lisbon” (Lima in Mata 2015, 8, my translation), it played a crucial role in anti-colonial struggle. Despite being shut down by PIDE in 1965, the CEI influenced the rise of nationalist movements such as PAIGC, UPA, MPLA, and FRELIMO. Key figures like Agostinho Neto, Amílcar Cabral, Joaquim Chissano, Pascoal Mocumbi, Pedro Pires, Francisco José Tenreiro, Alda do Espírito Santo, Vasco Cabral, Pepetela, Mário Pinto de Andrade, Noémia de Sousa, Alda Lara and numerous others intersected their trajectories with those of the CEI. Mata emphasizes the central role of literature and cultural expression in raising political consciousness and resistance to colonialism.

⁷² Established in 1943 by African workers from the Portuguese Marinha Mercante and African students residing in Lisbon, the Clube Marítimo Africano (CMA) initially presented itself as a recreational, sporting, and cultural association. However, it also served as a cover for clandestine anti-colonial political activities, concealed behind events and social gatherings, and worked in collaboration with members of the CEI. Politicized students gradually fostered political awareness among seafarers linked to the CMA, who worked in fleets maintaining connections between the metropolis, the colonies, and other global destinations (Rodrigues 2020, 61). The exchange of materials, propaganda, information, and correspondence within these networks was crucial. The CMA was officially shut down by PIDE in 1959, leading to the confiscation of all club documents (Zau 2005).

combating racism, advocating for the rights of the Black population in colonized and Afrodescendant territories in Portugal, and, despite several ambiguities and contradictions as also underscored by Mário Pinto de Andrade⁷³ (1997, 135-137), consistently criticized colonialism.⁷⁴ Based primarily on period press sources, the researchers not only highlight the lack of attention to this pioneering generation of anti-racism in Portugal but also emphasize an important methodological and epistemological distinction. The archive they analysed does not consist of ‘external’ narratives about this generation; rather, it consists of a wide platform of enunciation ‘by’ and ‘for’ members of the Black diaspora within imperial Portugal. This epistemological approach focused on the ‘voices’ of this first Afro-Portuguese movement is significant, as it seeks to foreground the subjectivities and agency of the Black community in Portugal.

With the onset of the Wars of Independence (1961–1974) in the five former colonies, the turbulent decolonization processes, and the violent civil wars in Angola (1975–2002), Mozambique (1977–1992), and Guinea-Bissau (1998–1999), the relationship between these African countries and Portugal was marked by significant displacement of people. In addition to the ‘*retorno*’—the return of not only former white Portuguese settlers but also children of interracial relationships and ‘assimilated’ Africans in the former colonial societies—there was a large diaspora and exilic condition of Africans fleeing conflict and precarious situations, seeking refuge in Portugal. Despite their deep-rooted historical and material connections to Portugal, these diasporic and exiled individuals were not recognized as such in post-revolution Portugal. Instead, they were reductively labelled ‘immigrants’—a violent categorization that erases the complex and enduring ties these communities have with the country, offering yet another violent, simplified and distorted representation of their presence in Portugal.

⁷³ Mário Pinto de Andrade (1928-1990) is one of the leading figures of the Angolan anti-colonialist struggle, and more generally against the Portuguese empire. A Marxist militant and literary intellectual, he organised several poetry anthologies and played a pivotal role as one of the founders and the first president of the MPLA (*Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*). Residing in various European cities, including Lisbon, he became associated with the African nationalist movement linked to the CEI. According to Roldão, Pereira and Varela (2023, 17) Andrade began to do research on this generation between the 1980s and 1990s, the outcomes of which were disseminated through several conferences and interviews.

⁷⁴ The genealogy of this generation is rooted in post-abolitionist contexts and inspired by Black associations and press from colonized territories. The movement began with the 1911 radical newspaper *O Negro: Órgão dos Estudantes Negros*, founded by São Tomé and Príncipe middle-class students in Portugal, and was followed by eleven other publications during the First Republic and Estado Novo periods, each contributing to an unexplored facet of Afro-Portuguese internationalism. Initially driven by pan-African ideals, the movement peaked in the 1930s but eventually dissolved under Estado Novo censorship, though it laid the foundation for future anti-colonial efforts, including organizations like the Casa dos Estudantes do Império and the Clube Marítimo Africano.

Building on the histories, questions, and challenges explored thus far in the effort to establish a ‘Black historiography’ and, more broadly, an epistemological and methodological approach to Afro-Portuguese archives, I believe that, in concluding this reflection on the restitution of Black histories, three key issues must be addressed—issues that are equally relevant, in my view, to the literary field: the asymmetry inherent in sources related to Portuguese Black history; the importance of genealogical and generational intersectionality; and the need to prioritize Afrodescendant agency in both the research and reconstruction of a shared ‘Black library.’

In fact, Black Studies are still regarded as a non-subject in the Portuguese academia and, when addressed, are frequently not recognized as ‘scientifically’ pertinent. As elucidated earlier, various studies endeavour to disrupt the prevailing ‘silence’ and to ‘disclose’—where silence and invisibility are recurrent keywords—a history shrouded by violence and Luso-tropicalist narratives. However, the focal point remains not on Blackness in Portugal but rather on the multifaceted aspects of the Portuguese empire, which, despite its significance, still fails to place the Black reality in Portugal at the core of the narrative. Far from asserting any form of biological or cultural essentialism, yet current Afro-Portuguese researchers and scholars assert the necessary recognition of Blackness as the primary space of enunciation for critiquing Eurocentrism, nationalism, structural and institutional racism, and the perpetration of exclusionary knowledge. This recognition is warranted because Blackness occupied a distinct space in the construction of the slave and colonial modernity and continues to hold a central position in its capitalist and global continuities. It is therefore evident that the development of the Eurocentric Portuguese archive is rooted in power relations that intersect the organization and hierarchization of knowledge production both historically and retrospectively, as outlined in the processes of memorialization discussed earlier. The records of the Black community in Portugal, in fact, have consistently been the object of colonial domination and concealment. This asymmetry is not incidental; “é antes produto de um projeto político e económico que precisava de ser legitimado, pela justificação das suas violências [...]”. Essa assimetria nas ‘fontes’ é aia hoje um dos degraus do ‘racismo estrutural’ no silenciamento da História Negra” (Roldão, Pereira, Varela 2023, 260).⁷⁵

⁷⁵ “Rather, it is the product of a political and economic project that needed to be legitimised by justifying its violence [...]. This asymmetry in the ‘sources’ is still today one of the steps of ‘structural racism’ in the silencing of Black History” (my translation).

Second, the current anti-racist struggles in Portugal continuously evoke earlier resistance and liberation movements, underscoring a genealogical intersectionality between past and present aimed at affirming Afrodescendant communities' rightful belonging in the country. This challenges the violent notion that their presence is 'exceptional' or 'sporadic,' instead emphasizing a continuity rooted in the history of the country. In a historiographical context where the Black presence is often portrayed through the lens of post-April 25 African immigration—either confined to the era of slavery or erased by Luso-tropicalist narratives—asserting the existence of a Black history in Portugal means reclaiming the opportunity to tell the true, 'Black' story of this community.

Third, by shifting the focus from the Empire to the internal dynamics of Black life and engaging new generations of Portuguese Afrodescendants as interlocutors, current Afro-Portuguese historiography seeks to demonstrate that, beyond the shadows cast by the colonial archive, alternative representations and counter-narratives of the Black community have existed and are still possible. Through the exploration of historical, contemporary, public, and private 'Black archives'—ranging, for example, from the photographic archive of the Black movement between 1911 and 1933, as studied by Roldão, Pereira, and Varela, to the recent exhibition *Álbuns de Família: Fotografias da diáspora africana na Grande Lisboa (1975-hoje)* organized by Inocência Mata and Filipa Lowndes Vicente on photographic self-representations of Afro-diasporic Portuguese subjects—scholars, researchers, activists, and artists seek to challenge the enduring colonial aesthetics that have shaped representations of Africans and Afrodescendants. These projects highlight the importance of showcasing (self)representations that go beyond colonial narratives and reflect how Black people wish(ed) to be seen and remembered. These counter-representations, grounded in Afro-diasporic relationality, are not intended to appease, critique, or instruct the majority white society. Rather, as noted by Roldão, Pereira, and Varela (2023, 258), these representations are “indispensáveis para a reparação do imaginário sobre quem fomos e somos.”⁷⁶ This process seeks to liberate new generations from being confined to viewing themselves solely through the lens of slavery, forced labour, migration, marginalization, and the persistently stereotyped colonial imagery that endures in our present. In conclusion, this counter-archive enables the retrieval of a historically denied inwardness, offering an alternative perspective to reexamine Black history.

⁷⁶ “Essential for repairing the imaginary of who we were and are” (my translation).

2.3.2 Beyond Imperial Citizenship: On Afrodescendency

In *Plantation Memories*, Grada Kilomba writes:

Racism instead includes the dimension of power and is revealed through global differences in the share of and access to valued resources such as political representation, policies, media, employment, education, housing, health, etc. Who can see their political interests represented in the national agendas? Who can see their realities portrayed in the media? Who can see their history included in educational programs? Who owns what? Who lives where? Who is protected and who is not? (Kilomba 2010, 42-43).

When confronted with structural issues such as marginalization and neglect in peripheral neighbourhoods, instances of police violence, discriminatory barriers to acquiring nationality and participating in politics, denial of adequate housing rights, precarious health conditions, labour without protections, educational disparities, and widespread systemic and institutional inequalities in everyday life in Portugal, examining the link between colonial past, race, citizenship and belonging becomes central. These issues demand an investigation into the legacies of colonialism as they affect these social dimensions—dimensions that will emerge as a focal concern in the literary representations I will analyse in the second part of this study. For the Portuguese Afrodescendant community, the inquiry into rightful belonging in Portugal, along with the associated recognition of individual rights, human dignity, and the pursuit of a ‘good life’ and ‘peaceful existence,’ arise primarily from a troubling intersection between the historical notion of ‘imperial citizenship’ and the contemporary discourse on citizenship.

As recounted by Inocência Mata (in Khan 2015, 63), Portuguese colonialism was characterized by an assimilationist approach. Although explicit racial segregation did not find legal validation within the frameworks of the Estado Novo, the publication of the *Estatuto dos Indígenas Portugueses das Províncias da Guiné, Angola e Moçambique* of 1957⁷⁷ established a markedly separatist and discriminatory regulatory paradigm. According to this statute, Africans in the colonies were not accorded the status of citizens but were instead categorized as *indígenas*, subject to regulation under the auspices of the

⁷⁷ As noted by Inocência Mata and Iolanda Évora (2022b, 64), the statute in question is a revision of the *Estatuto Político, Civil e Criminal dos Indígenas de Angola e Moçambique* of 1926. Although initially revised in 1954, it is commonly referred to as the 1957 statute due to a later edition that incorporated additional legislation signed by José Carlos Ney Ferreira and Vasco Soares da Veiga. This legal framework was officially annulled in 1961, coinciding with the outbreak of conflict in Angola.

‘civilising mission.’ This mission, purportedly aimed at ‘upliftment,’ entailed corrective measures and forced labour intended for the increase of production and capital accumulation within the colonies. As asserted by Cardina (2023, 30), a staggering 98% of the populace in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea were systematically excluded from the realm of citizenship.⁷⁸ Simultaneously, the concept of the *assimilado* emerged—a designation for an ‘African individual’ who relinquished their indigenous cultural identity in an effort to ‘assimilate’ into Portuguese culture. This process involved various trials, including the demonstration of economic stability, religious conversion, cultural and linguistic ‘elevation,’ adherence to tax payment regulations, enrolment for military service, and proficiency in correct Portuguese writing. It is thus clear the perversion inherent in assimilationism, which reveals its inherently racist nature, even if not explicitly codified in law, as it served to obstruct Black individuals from asserting their identity as such. Alfredo Margarido (2000, 41) describes the violent assimilation process as a total humiliation of Black people, in which every component of African cultures was disqualified and denigrated in order to enhance what could be traced back to European, and more specifically Portuguese, values and attitudes. In addition to attitudinal, moral, and cultural aspects, Margarido (2000, 42) emphasizes the ‘material’ dimension of life within the assimilation framework. The colonial administration asserted the right to scrutinize their private dimension by entering homes of individuals undergoing the assimilation process to inspect their furniture, utensils, clothing, food, and other artifacts. Demonstrating a clear distinction from the precarious living conditions of the majority of *indígenas* thus became a fundamental requirement of assimilation.

Margarida Rendeiro (2022a, 153) explains that after decolonization, from 1975 to 1981, only those born in Macau, Goa, Damão, and Diu retained Portuguese nationality. Africans who had not lived in Portugal for at least five years before 1974 or did not have Portuguese family members were excluded from citizenship. In 1981, a change to the nationality law replaced *jus soli* with *jus sanguinis*, preventing many individuals of

⁷⁸ The case of the Cape Verdean population stands out as particularly specific. In *Managing African Portugal*, Keisha Fikes (2009, ix) argues that, unlike the other four colonies where non-assimilated individuals were classified as *indígena* and forced into contract labour, Cape Verdean inhabitants were nominally recognized as Portuguese citizens under the law. However, in practice, not all Cape Verdeans could fully exercise the rights of citizenship, as well as not all were allowed to pursue autonomous employment. Évora and Mata (2022b, 55) also acknowledge the comparatively privileged social status of many Cape Verdeans associated with the colonial administration. According to Fikes (2009, x), starting in the 1950s, Cape Verdean men were actively recruited to work on civil public construction projects in Portugal due to their citizenship status. Paradoxically, the same administrative structures that provided certain privileges also regulated the migration of economically disadvantaged Cape Verdeans and their descendants to Portugal, a migration driven by recurring periods of drought and famine in the islands.

African descent born in Portugal from obtaining Portuguese nationality. This policy was only reversed in 2006 with the reinstatement of *jus soli*. However, the change was not made retroactive, meaning many African descendants, despite being born and raised in Portugal, are still considered foreigners for administrative purposes. As a result, debates about the need for more inclusive, equitable, and democratic legal reforms persist.

In examining contemporary pathways to citizenship, several scholars (Khan 2015, 63; Vale de Almeida 2022, 33; Évora and Mata 2022b, 54) remark that a similar demonstration of assimilation remains a requirement for those seeking Portuguese citizenship today. This process involves adherence to a rigidly defined ‘typically Portuguese’ cultural framework, which is still shaped by identity norms rooted in a Western-centric notion of whiteness as the standard for national belonging. Sub-Saharan African cultures, in particular, are viewed as fundamentally incompatible with Portuguese cultural norms. As a result, despite clear historical recurrent mechanisms, the Portuguese state continues to deny the racial diversity and cultural multiplicity that characterize the nation. Within a panorama not limited to Portugal but inclusive of the broader European context, concepts such as ‘inclusion’ and ‘integration’ are frequently confused with assimilation, thereby perpetuating what Miguel Vale de Almeida (2022, 36) termed ‘Colonial Constitution,’ that is, “a forma como se organizavam diferencialmente e desigualmente as populações coloniais.”⁷⁹

In questioning the contemporary definition of Portuguese identity, Vale de Almeida (2022, 34) contends that there exists significant confusion in Portugal between citizenship—denoting the exercise of rights and duties within a political community—and ethnic-national belonging, which is instead rooted in genealogical affiliations. In a nation where historical events have witnessed various instances of ethnic cleansings and processes of whitening, as underscored by Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ works, Portugal grapples with an historical and, more significantly, cultural predicament. Vale de Almeida observes that the enduring issue in present-day Portugal lies in how “categorias de pessoas são vistas como pertencendo *ainda menos*, por causa da História de expansão e colonialismo. A questão racial coloca-se como um marcador imediato de não-pertença” (Vale de Almeida 2022, 35).⁸⁰ What is currently discernible is the conflation, within the nation-state, of political unity with ethnic homogeneity, wherein the predominant model

⁷⁹ The way in which colonial populations were differently and unequally organised” (my translation).

⁸⁰ “Certain categories of individuals are perceived as even less belonging, primarily due to the historical backdrop of expansion and colonialism, with racial considerations emerging as an immediate marker of non-belonging” (my translation).

remains rooted in whiteness. Marta Araújo and Silvia Rodríguez Maeso (2016, 311) contend that in Portugal, a dichotomy has solidified, positing a national and white—thus inherently Portuguese—‘us,’ juxtaposed with an African, Black, and consequently irredeemably foreign, migrant ‘them.’ This normalization of the linkage between Afrodescendants and immigrants systematically marginalizes the former from belonging to the so-called ‘nation’ or ‘imagined community.’

In the aftermath of the April 25, as the nation endeavours to address two primary focal points—namely, the comprehensive reconstruction of the political system and the equitable redistribution of opportunities in a social-democratic framework—it becomes apparent, as elucidated in prior analyses, that the matters of race and the colonial legacy have yet to receive substantial attentions. While the Carnation Revolution was undoubtedly anti-fascist, the failed discourse on citizenship and raciality reveals that it was not an anti-racist movement. Additionally, the prevailing notion of citizenship persists in revolving around the concepts of ‘nation’ and ‘blood,’ rather than evolving into a political community that restructures itself based on a renewed interpretation of citizenship.⁸¹ This scenario underscores two voids: the inadequacies within the citizenship law and the complete absence of an official ‘Truth and Reconciliation’ process, drawing parallels with the model implemented in post-Apartheid South Africa. Once again, Vale de Almeida (2022, 37) characterizes Portuguese discourse on citizenship, race, migration, and diaspora as adopting a humanist, positivist, and paternalistic stance. From the scholar’s perspective, Portugal presents itself as a purportedly post-racial nation⁸²—an assertion reminiscent of the Luso-tropicalist colonial regime’s feigned posture—in which issues of this nature are ostensibly non-existent. This self-perception aligns with Eduardo Lourenço’s assertion (2014, 276) that Portugal

⁸¹ Despite being born in Portugal and having no ties to Africa, some individuals are still excluded from Portuguese citizenship, instead retaining their parents’ nationality due to legal restrictions. This issue is further compounded by the lack of official statistical surveys on the ethnic-racial composition of the Portuguese population. This absence makes it difficult to accurately quantify the Black and Afrodescendant population in the country, impeding the development of effective measures to improve their living conditions and implement policies related to reparations and affirmative action, particularly in areas such as education. Encouragingly, as noted by Miguel Vale de Almeida (2022, 39), recent years have seen emerging discussions at the political and legislative levels about introducing ethnic-racial categories in censuses and statistics, laying the groundwork for the aforementioned necessary policies.

⁸² Évora and Mata (2022b, 50) trace this issue back to a fictitious assertion of ‘racial democracy,’ a concept rooted in the Brazilian context of the 1930s, notably in studies on race relations by scholars such as Arthur Ramos and Roger Bastide. Gilberto Freyre later popularized this term from the 1960s onwards. The term has been invoked in Portugal, where it has been hymned, especially since the 2019-2023 legislative period which saw the election of three Black women to Parliament—Beatriz Gomes Dias, Joacine Katar Moreira, and Romualda Fernandes. Viewing the entry of these women as an ‘inclusive novelty’ within the political system, however, reflects a systemic oversight of the Afrodescendant presence in the country, a presence that dates back at least, as we have seen, to the 15th century.

upholds its identity ‘without problems.’ Here, the ‘symptom’ of denial, previously discussed through Kilomba’s arguments, resurfaces.

In conclusion, these perspectives advocate for the persistence of colonial legacies regarding citizenship, which significantly contribute to the exclusion, marginalization, and social isolation experienced by the Afrodescendant population in Portugal. Scholars, activists, writers, and artists strive to articulate what Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2021, 42) aptly describes as the possibility of narrating a citizenship story beyond the limited and violent confines of ‘imperial citizenship.’ As will be demonstrated through the analysis of novels such as *Luanda*, *Lisboa*, *Paraíso* and *Maremoto* by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida and *O Canto da Moreia* by Luísa Semedo, the narrative of this promised, envisioned, thwarted, and denied citizenship reveals a profound vulnerability for their characters. This vulnerability is both collective and genealogical, as well as personal and individual, in their quest for a sense of belonging within the African diaspora. Angolan writer Kalaf Epalanga (2023, 21) further underscores this vulnerability by illustrating the colour line as a metaphor for the challenges of acceptance in Portugal: “a África umbilical, da saudade, do sonho e do orgulho de pertença, e Portugal, da adoção, da esperança, do desconhecido e da necessidade.”⁸³

How, then, can an alternative narrative of citizenship be articulated? If the discourse on citizenship continues to be framed through the lens of whiteness—a perspective that appears ‘neutral’ in racial terms, even as it ‘racializes’ the citizenship of others while remaining exempt from such categorization itself—then using an alternative category, such as Afrodescendency, within one’s own historical context provides an opportunity to analyse citizenship from outside the dominant perspectives. The focus here is on examining the issue through the perspective of Portuguese people with African descent, that is, “pessoas que não são mais os que transitam, como se fossem ‘estranhos em permanência,’ cuja existência não mais permite duvidar-se de que há negros portugueses que não são brancos, nomeadamente, portugueses negros” (Évora, Mata 2022b, 49).⁸⁴ Despite their undeniable presence, Évora and Mata (2022b, 50) argue that Black Portuguese individuals are absent from the national narrative across all discursive modalities—be it artistic, political, or referential—in the story Portugal has told about

⁸³ “The umbilical Africa of longing, dreams and pride in belonging, and Portugal of adoption, hope, the unknown and necessity” (my translation).

⁸⁴ “People who are no longer those who pass through, as if they were ‘permanent strangers,’ whose existence no longer allows us to doubt that there are Portuguese who are not white, namely black Portuguese” (my translation).

itself for generations. This narrative has constructed a ‘white memory.’ To deconstruct this ‘whitened’ memory, the relationship between Afrodescendency, citizenship, and belonging becomes central to a more inclusive discourse. In this context, concepts such as *mestiçagem* and *enraizamento* define both the historical and contemporary dimensions of the diaspora connecting Africa and Portugal.

It is therefore important to begin by examining the category of ‘Afrodescendency.’ This term has received growing critical attention and discussion in Europe in recent years,⁸⁵ particularly following the United Nations’ proclamation of the International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024).⁸⁶ The use of this term reflects the social and cultural transformations occurring within European societies, driven by distinct dynamics related to decolonization, migration, and diaspora in each country. Iolanda Évora (2020, 119) writes that “em Portugal, o *afro* como categoria é uma questão muito recente e identificada, sobretudo, na forma como descendentes de africanos ou portugueses negros descrevem a sua experiência social e apresentam-se no espaço público, a partir do activismo, por meio da arte, da cultura, da educação, entre outras dimensões.”⁸⁷ This category challenges the traditional, stereotypical view of this population as mere (second, third, and even fourth) generations of migrants. It allows for the redefinition of their identity within a more complex social, historical, political, and cultural context.

Despite the challenging sociopolitical context, the Afrodescendant Portuguese population has embarked on a significant process of self-recognition concerning the

⁸⁵ The concept first emerged in 2000 within the context of Afro-diasporic social movements in the Americas and the Caribbean, notably during the preparatory conference of the Americas in Santiago and subsequently at the Durban conference in 2001. According to Évora and Mata (2022b, 43, my translation), these two junctures represent an epistemological rupture as there is a shift from the “traditional concept of ‘black’ to that of ‘Afrodescendant,’ within a complex model that goes beyond ‘race’ to recognise itself as an ethnic community.”

⁸⁶ The UN’s proposal for the decade stems from the acknowledgment that individuals of African descent still encounter substantial barriers in accessing quality education, healthcare, housing, and social security, coupled with restricted entry to justice and heightened exposure to police violence due to racial profiling. The United Nations recognizes the invisibility experienced by this demographic and the lack of policies addressing their current challenges. Nevertheless, the policies implemented and the outcomes achieved over these years have been notably limited. Kwame Nimako (2022, 28) critiques the decade, arguing that it was not designed as an emancipation project for Afrodescendant people but rather as a social cohesion initiative that reinforced control through policies of ‘managing changes.’ These policies, particularly in fund administration, did not involve the Afrodescendant population in meaningful ways or promote power-sharing. As a result, “there is no structural space for state fiscal policy arrangements for Black emancipation projects” (Nimako 2022, 28). Despite these internal contradictions and ambiguities, the decade has highlighted a crucial political issue: the Afrodescendant population is a foundational, shaping, and integral part of the European space, rather than a fleeting or recent presence.

⁸⁷ “In Portugal, *Afro* as a category is a very recent issue and is identified above all in the way descendants of Africans or black Portuguese describe their social experience and present themselves in the public space, through activism, art, culture, education, among other dimensions” (my translation).

concept of Afrodescendancy. In their research,⁸⁸ Évora and Mata (2022b, 53-56) underscore two recurring aspects. The first pertains to recognizing the non-homogeneity of the Black and Afrodescendant community in Portugal, acknowledging its diverse countries of origin in sub-Saharan Africa. These countries bring forth distinct identities, characteristics, histories, and trajectories, which are transposed to the Portuguese context and undergo successive reconfigurations across generations. Just as sub-Saharan Africa is not a monolithic entity, the Black and Afrodescendant community in Portugal exhibits diversity. The second aspect centres on the collective endeavour to assert citizenship rights as a counter-response to the (misleading) imperial citizenship imposed through the assimilation of one's familial lineage. In contemplating the category 'Afrodescendancy,' the scholars argue, first of all, that it is not a universally accepted identity designation, emphasizing the importance of understanding whether the population acknowledges and embraces this categorization 'of themselves' and 'for themselves.'

In general, the initial findings reveal the enduring perception that the category 'Portuguese' is commonly equated with 'white.' Amidst the intricate process of self-identification and the assertion of Afrodescendancy, three distinct categories emerge prominently. Firstly, there are individuals who define themselves as 'African' or Afrodescendant,' prioritizing their connections to the African continent. Secondly, there are those who underscore the specificity of their identity between Africa and Europe, adopting the term *negro europeu*. Lastly, there are those who emphasize their simultaneous belonging to two worlds and two continents, rejecting the reduction of their identity to a singular national affiliation and thereby challenging the fundamental premises of the nation-state and highlighting the importance of the fluid transits between continents.

The scholars' investigations (Évora 2020, 123; Évora and Mata 2022b, 55-60) also highlight that in processes of self-determination, skin colour serves as a highly impactful

⁸⁸ I make reference to the project *AFRO-PORT. African descent in Portugal: Sociabilities, Representations and Sociopolitical and Cultural Dynamics. A Study in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area* (2018-2022), with Iolanda Évora and Inocência Mata as main coordinators. This project holds pioneering significance in Portugal as it serves as a platform for critical reflection on the emergence of Afrodescendancy as category from the practices and discourses of a specific collective regarding its identity and participation in the public space of the Lisbon metropolitan area. As articulated on the project's website, this geographical region, densely inhabited by the Afrodescendant population, is considered "a field of dramatic changes, serious social contrasts and power struggles, new identity dynamics, diverse forms of individual subjectivity and social determinations" (my translation). Given its pioneering role in Portuguese critical studies, I make frequent reference to the studies generated within the project throughout this paragraph. For a detailed examination of *Afro-Port's* research methodologies, I direct readers to the project's website: <https://cesa.rc.iseg.ulisboa.pt/afroport/#projeto>.

factor for both those who lack citizenship (introducing added challenges to its acquisition) and for those who possess it but still face social non-recognition as Portuguese. This implies that “a cor negra é a prova permanente e mais forte do que qualquer document”⁸⁹ (Évora 2020, 123), meaning that possessing or acquiring citizenship does not mitigate the sense of exclusion from the national fabric in any significant manner. As Kilomba (2010, 65) articulates, this discrimination continues to expose “this forced incompatibility of Blackness and Portugueseness.”

Afrodescendente, afroeuropéu, afropeu, afroportuguês, português negro, negro europeu: these are the prevailing categories frequently employed by younger generations to articulate their self-identification both within and outside the national sphere. Through these designations, they assert an identity that is distinct from the national rhetoric, contending for recognition within the imagined community of Portugal. These categories serve as instruments in the struggle for acknowledgment within the Portuguese societal framework, employing identity policies that counter historical norms. These efforts include advocacy for emancipatory policies such as a revised citizenship law, the criminalization of everyday, structural, and institutional racism, revisions to educational, historical, and cultural programs, the implementation of statistical surveys on the ethnic origins of the Portuguese population, as well as affirmative action and racial quota policies. With these categories, “pretende-se, enfim, encontrar estratégias, discursivas e de acção, que possibilitem que essas veias abertas possam ser ‘cosidas’ para que não sangrem até a uma crónica invisibilidade” (Évora and Mata 2022a, 2).⁹⁰

As demonstrated, the advocacy for a renewed conception of citizenship through the critical lens of Afrodescendency facilitates a re-evaluation, beyond the imperial legacy, of the institutional and legal connections between individuals, communities, nation-states, and transnational movements. In this process of self-affirmation, literature plays a central role. Traditionally, literature has been used both in nationalist contexts and counter-cultural movements to shape public debates about national identity. While colonial-era literature often reinforced exclusionary and violent discourses on ‘nation narration,’ contemporary literature explores the origins and legacies of the enduring sense of non-belonging felt by newer generations in Portugal. Considering the previously examined asymmetries—namely, those pertaining to the Black historiographical archive and

⁸⁹ “The colour black is the permanent and stronger proof than any document” (my translation).

⁹⁰ “The aim is to find strategies, both discursive and action-based, to enable these open veins to be ‘sewn up’ so that they don’t bleed into chronic invisibility” (my translation).

racialized citizenship—the focus now shifts to a subsequent phase concerning the restitution of Black Portuguese inwardness: Afrodescendant literature as a form of self-representation. This restitution is also reflected in critical discussions about its emergence and the terminology used to position it in relation to the national literary system and its canon.

2.4. Restitution II – Literature

Within the realm of literary studies, the term ‘literary canon’ has been delineated by Silvia Albertazzi and Roberto Vecchi (2004, 53) as “l’insieme delle opere che in una data società, in un certo periodo o area geografica, sono ritenute fondamentali e autorevoli per i loro meriti letterari.”⁹¹ Consequently, the process involved in the establishment of a given national canon is invariably influenced by the cultural, social, economic, and political hegemony of its creators. Scholars, including Harold Bloom and Italo Calvino, have endeavoured to canonize Western literature, but with the emergence of the independence movements in regions once subjugated by European colonialism and the configuration of nations within the framework identified by critics as ‘postcolonial,’ the notion of canon undergoes an intricate transformation. The profound entanglement of national literatures with the imperialist history that underpins them prompts postcolonial intellectual groups to scrutinize their own literary canons. Edward Said (1993), a pivotal figure in postcolonial criticism, employs a deliberate ‘contrapuntal’ and ‘eccentric’ approach to Western literature. His purpose is to re-vision the Western canon, highlighting ‘other’ texts and literatures that had been silenced by the prevailing colonial ideology, which predominantly narrated history from the perspective of the colonizers. Said’s postcolonial ideology plays a pivotal role in shaping a new critical paradigm that garners extensive attention, particularly in the context of national literatures and their contentious reception by marginalized subjects overlooked in colonial historiography. This intellectual framework gives rise to probing inquiries, such as the interconnection between nation and narrative, who is included in the national narrative, and who is not. The minorities marginalized by the colonial system in their ‘*lugar de fala*’⁹² are thus

⁹¹ “The set of works that in a given society, in a certain period or geographical area, are considered fundamental and authoritative for their literary merits” (my translation).

⁹² ‘*Lugar de fala*’ is a concept recently theorised by Brazilian philosopher Djamila Ribeiro. Starting from the Black feminist standpoint, ‘*lugar de fala*’ represents that social locus in which “speaking is not restricted to the act of uttering words, but to being able to exist. We think of a *lugar de fala* as refuting traditional historiography and the hierarchization of knowledge resulting from social hierarchy” (Ribeiro 2019b, 30, my translation).

conceptualized as a ‘minor canon.’ According to Albertazzi (2004, 58), this minor canon “non potrà che essere, primariamente, politico, essendo intrinsecamente politica ogni letteratura minore.”⁹³

In contemporary Portugal, the discourse surrounding the literary canon has become a contentious and extensively debated subject marked by diverse perspectives, challenges, and reinterpretations. A recent significant contribution to this ongoing dialogue is *O Cânone* (2020), edited by António Feijó, João R. Figueiredo, and Miguel Tamen. In organizing the content for this compilation, the editors have chosen exclusively deceased authors, with a solitary exception. However, an examination of the index immediately reveals a pronounced prevalence of male authors, predominantly of Caucasian descent. Although it is explicitly stated that this compilation is not exhaustive and, therefore, acknowledges the significance of the omissions of certain names, the editors point out that “não há, de facto, critério algum para o que tem de estar a não ser as ideias de quem escolhe; mas tais ideias reflectem, muitas vezes, as ideias daqueles que anteriormente fizeram escolhas parecidas. A essas ideias pede-se só que sejam justificadas, e cada capítulo deste livro é a justificação da importância de um autor ou de um problema” (Feijó et. al. 2020, 9).⁹⁴ In my view, this statement raises potential ambiguities. The editors suggest that the literary canon remains heavily shaped by past ‘gatekeepers,’ who, on the other hand, intentionally excluded certain authors traditionally seen as non-Portuguese from the literary landscape.

The emergence of Afrodescendant Portuguese literature has reignited discussions about the literary canon. Although Marco Bucaioni (2024, 236) notes a positive and engaged reception of this literature in both public and academic discourse, there has been little change in its wider social and cultural consumption:

Para vastas camadas do público genérico português, a literatura continua a ser esse lugar maravilhoso e ‘neutro’ onde o prazer estético ou o prazer do entretenimento está desligado de qualquer forma de constrição social imediata e contemporânea, determinantes históricas e, o que é mais interessante, desligado da competição pela hegemonia (política e estética), matéria central de boa parte da teoria literária das últimas décadas, desde os Estudos Pós-Coloniais até à Literatura-Mundo. Resumindo, a imagem fundamentalmente oitocentista de

⁹³ “Can only be, first and foremost, political, since all minor literature is inherently political” (my translation).

⁹⁴ “There are, in fact, no criteria for what needs to be there other than the ideas of those who choose; but these ideas often reflect the ideas of those who have previously made similar choices. All that is asked of these ideas is that they have to be justified, and each chapter of this book is a justification of the importance of an author or a problem” (my translation).

um cânone literário (e do seu papel numa sociedade) como museu fixado, ou uma lista de grandes e inquestionáveis mestres a serem lidos para iluminar o leitor, ou para enaltecer a própria vida, parece ter ficado bastante sólida na cabeça do público (Bucaioni 2024, 236-237).⁹⁵

Bucaioni's statement provides a crucial foundation for analysing the emergence and ongoing discourse around Afrodescendant Portuguese literature. The enduring weight of colonial history manifests as ideological legacies affecting and shaping also literary criticism and representation. Though colonization has ended, coloniality, as Vergès (2021, 15) notes, remains an ongoing process, with entrenched structures of power and privilege. This highlights the urgency of decolonization across knowledge domains, including literature. Philosopher Djamila Ribeiro (2019b, 22) argues that naming is essential for recognition—failure to 'name' renders marginalized realities invisible and prevents their improvement. Therefore, critically examining this literary production requires acknowledging its presumed marginality and the need for its demystification.

2.4.1 Afrodescendant Portuguese Literature: A Critical Debate

Before 1975, African literary works in the Portuguese language were significantly marginalized. From that time until the early 21st century, works by Black and Afrodescendant authors from former colonies were consistently framed only in relation to their countries of origin (Angolan, Mozambican, Cape Verdean literature, etc.), often positioned in contrast to Portuguese literature. Despite the undeniable historical trauma connecting Portugal to its former colonies, Black and Afrodescendant writers continued to be perceived as 'foreign' to the national identity, seen as 'permanent outsiders' contributing to what literary critics in the 1990s, referencing Todorov (1991), termed '*literatura dos outros*' (Mata 2006, 295), placing their works 'outside' the Portuguese literary canon. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, authors like Pepetela, Paulina Chiziane, Conceição Lima, Ana Paula Tavares, Germano Almeida, João Paulo Borges Coelho, Mia Couto, José Eduardo Agualusa, and Ondjaki gained recognition as significant voices in

⁹⁵ "For vast parts of the Portuguese general public, literature continues to be that marvellous, 'neutral' place where aesthetic pleasure or entertainment is disconnected from any form of immediate and contemporary social constriction, historical determinants and, most interestingly, disconnected from the competition for hegemony (political and aesthetic), which has been at the centre of much of the literary theory of recent decades, from Post-Colonial Studies to World Literature. In short, the fundamentally nineteenth-century image of a literary canon (and its role in a society) as a fixed museum, or a list of great and unquestionable mentors to be read to enlighten the reader, or to praise one's own life, seems to have remained fairly solid in the public's mind" (my translation).

African literatures written in Portuguese. As a result, they became grouped under the label ‘*africano de língua portuguesa*’ (Bucaioni 2024, 238) within the broader literary landscape.

In her 2015 book *Portugal a Lápis de Cor: A Sul de uma Pós-Colonialidade*, Sheila Khan (2015, 76) underscores the significant absence of literary representations in Portuguese that give visibility to the transits between Portugal and Africa, as well as to the experiences of those who inhabit the ‘abyssal cartography’ of post-imperial Portugal. While novels such as Lúcia Jorge’s *O Vento Assobiando nas Gruas* (2002), Margarida Paredes’s *O Tibete de África* (2006), and António Lobo Antunes’ *O Meu Nome é Legião* (2007) explore the ‘invisible spaces’ and ‘social silence’ surrounding African subjects relegated to the margins of urban centres in post-imperial Portugal, it is only with Joaquim Arena’s *A Verdade de Chindo Luz* (2006) that an Afrodescendant voice directly engages in representing the African diasporic community in Portugal and its embodied experience in the aftermath of oppression. Indeed, it is within this novel that Margarida Calafate Ribeiro (2020b, 293) discerns a departure from African literature in Portuguese and the emergence, albeit in its nascent form, of a distinct literary trajectory that diverges significantly, as much in generational as in content and aesthetic terms, from other literary works.

Beginning in 2006, a new wave of authors emerged, including Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida—whose novel *Esse Cabelo* (2015) stands as a significant contribution to this literary current—along with Yara Nakahanda Monteiro, Gisela Casimiro, Raquel Lima, Kalaf Epalanga, Luísa Semedo, Patrícia Moreira, and Ricardo Adolfo, among others. Their works explore Afrodescendant themes such as transnational movements between Portugal and Africa, migration and diaspora, racism, colonial legacies, memory, identity construction, belonging, and historical re-visions. Each of these writers, in varying ways, seeks new aesthetic forms of expression, aiming to develop a ‘grammar’ that articulates their inner world beyond the shadow projected by the long history of colonial oppression. Reflecting on these recent literary contributions, Bianca Mafra Gonçalves (2019, 120) poses the following question: Does a ‘Black literature’ exist in Portugal? Engaging with Gonçalves’ inquiry requires, in my view, revisiting recent critical perspectives to understand and situate this literary movement within the context of Portuguese literature and the canon, especially in light of the growing theorization and consolidation of Afrodescendency as a critical framework.

Let's delve into recent studies conducted by Emerson Inácio. Inácio (2022, 310) has scrutinized a range of works—from Mário Domingues' *O Preto do Charleston* (1930)⁹⁶ to António Cruz's *Açafate de Floremas* (1971) to Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida's *Esse cabelo* (2015)—where a distinct space of 'black aesthetic enunciation' in Portugal appears to emerge. This descriptive mapping of Black authorship in Portugal seems to solidify specific discursive and aesthetic nuances within a field that Inácio terms 'literatura afroportuguesa.' The expression 'literatura afroportuguesa' thus indicates a literary production by Afrodescendant authors born in Portuguese territory or in culturally and ideologically connected territories addressing issues related to this (trans)national experience. The works within this literature belong to a literary genealogy where Afrodescendant experiences are thematized from a Portuguese perspective, attempting to establish an aesthetic-ethical-political character that sets them apart from literature conventionally understood as 'national.' The concept of 'literatura afroportuguesa' arises from the hypothesis that, in addition to advocating for specific identity policies for Portuguese Afrodescendants, there should also be literary expressions that 'aesthetically' represent over 500 years of Black presence in Portugal. According to Inácio, this literature plays an emancipatory role by situating Black individuals—whether born in Portugal or elsewhere—within a cultural framework that acknowledges their historical and political significance, as well as their contributions to shaping a new Portuguese identity policy.

For the author, it is thus conceivable to regard the contemporary Black literary production in Portugal as a realm of contention capable of aesthetically deconstructing—by way of a previous genealogy of Black Portuguese writers who, through literature, gave expression to a “dicção negra metropolitana”⁹⁷ (Inácio 2022, 312)—many of the naturalized conceptions of Portuguese culture, particularly its monolithic sense of identity. In this light, Afro-Portuguese aesthetic production presents an alternative framework to the current Portuguese literary system precisely because it appears to rearticulate and reconfigure the role of the work of literature, its dissemination, its thematic and representational axes, and its artistic and aesthetic resources. To achieve this objective, Inácio (2020, 52) asserts that this cultural movement employs readership-forming strategies, such as organizing alternative literary fairs, hosting cultural events

⁹⁶ It is noteworthy that Mário Domingues, a prominent figure of the 'pro-nationalist' generation spanning from 1911 to 1933, had already raised questions regarding the terminology employed to characterize both international and national Black literary output, particularly in relation to the poetic works of authors such as Agostinho Neto, Alda Espírito Santo, Francisco Tenreiro, and Noémia de Sousa. Domingues (in Roldão, Pereira, Varela 2023, 198) indeed utilized the term “poetas negros-africanos da língua portuguesa.”

⁹⁷ “Metropolitan black diction” (my translation).

focused on African national origins, facilitating congregational moments, utilizing digital platforms, engaging in political associations, and participating in militant events, as well as promoting moments of reflections on creative writing and literature beyond mere political engagement. Consequently, the ‘literatura afroportuguesa’ serves as a site of rupture and denaturalization in relation to the canonical conception of Portuguese literature—a rupture and denaturalization stemming not only from ‘inner’ dynamics within the nation but also from ‘external’ influences, acting as an advocate for other Afrodescendant, and particularly Afro-European, experiences (Inácio 2020, 48).

Positioning Afro-Portuguese literature within the wider framework of European Afrodescendant literatures is in fact an important stride towards comprehending other categorizations within the Portuguese context. This alignment within the Afro-European and cosmopolitan sphere is equally significant for delineating the literary reconfiguration efforts advanced by Afro-diasporic movements, aimed at reimagining both post-imperial Portugal and Europe. In this direction, terms like “Afropolitan,”⁹⁸ “Afro-European,”

⁹⁸ Coined by Taiye Selasi in 2005 the term ‘afropolitan’ seeks applicability to individuals originating from the African continent and its diaspora who navigate cosmopolitan environments—frequently characterized by certain economic and social privileges—within major cities across the global south and north. Achille Mbembe (2017a, 106) redefines Afropolitanism as “an aesthetic and a particular poetics of the world,” reflecting a new way of being in the world as Africans. By emphasizing itinerancy, mobility, and displacement, Mbembe challenges the pessimistic view that links Africa and its people to structural precarity and passive victimhood. Instead, he reinterprets African history and diasporic movements to foster new identities and understand Afrodescendency within global contexts. For Mbembe, Afropolitanism represents a shift away from nationalism towards a post-racial conception of citizenship. Other perspectives, like those of Chielonza Eze (2014) and Simon Gikandi (2011), view Afropolitanism as a framework for understanding African knowledge beyond the trope of crisis. This perspective reframes diasporic histories not merely as losses but as opportunities for re-signification across various contexts, offering new ways for Africans to engage with the world. Although, the concept of Afropolitanism faces criticism. Scholar criticize the ‘Afropolitan elites’ for their potential complicity with Western hegemony and neoliberalism, and for not adequately addressing social injustices against less privileged social classes (Eze 2014; Wainaina in Bosch Santana 2013; Tveit 2013). Regarding the intersection of this concept with the literary realm, scholars like Grace Musila (2015) and Brian Bwesigye (2013) argue that Afropolitan literature, while affirming the ‘Africaness’ of Western Black elites, often maintains a distance from African cultural diversities to appeal to Western readers. One of the latest publications in this field is *Afropolitan Literature as World Literature* (2020), edited by James Hodapp. Even though the book attempts to broaden the scope of ‘Afropolitan literature,’ it still predominantly focuses on African literary traditions in English and French, omitting other African literatures, both in African languages and in other European languages (as it is the case of Portuguese), thus reinforcing perceptions of these latter literatures as semi-peripheral within the ‘Afropolitan literature’ system (Mata 2023a, 46).

“Afropean,”⁹⁹ and “African European”¹⁰⁰ thus emerge as pivotal categories to rethink identity and belonging in Europe. The arbitrary interpretation and use of these recent identity categories highlight the often irreconcilable disparities in Afro-European experiences across different national contexts. A key theme uniting these experiences is the oscillation between asserting belonging and facing systemic rejection. In *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (2011), Fatima El-Tayeb argues that promoting a ‘European identity’ rooted in Western whiteness perpetuates recurrent exclusion for non-white and racialized communities. In response, these communities increasingly embrace cross-border connections, fostering “new conceptualizations of minority identity” and exploring a “postnational European identity” (El-Tayeb 2011). This contrasts with populations whose European status remains unquestioned. When European identity is defined in negative terms and in opposition to dislocation paradigms such as diaspora and migration, categories like ‘Afropolitan,’ ‘Afro-European,’ ‘Afropean,’ and ‘African European’ become part of a transnational, transgenerational, and transcultural movement to re-signify minority identities. These categories are essential for examining the impacts, dynamics, and imaginaries of a post-imperial Europe, especially from the perspective of those most affected by the colonial past. They allow

⁹⁹ The term ‘Afropea’ was first coined in 1991 by David Byrne and Marie Daulne in the music industry to describe the Zap Mama vocal quintet. The term ‘Afropean’ later appeared in Léonora Miano’s 2008 short story collection *Afropean Soul et autres nouvelles*, and she continued using it in both her fiction and critical texts, including her recent work *Afropea: Utopie post-occidentale et post-raciste* (2020). Initially, ‘Afropean’ was used to self-identify a specific experience in Europe, relating to Africanness, Blackness, and diaspora. Over time, the term gained recognition in academic and literary circles. Sabrina Brancato, in one of the first studies on ‘Afro-European Literature(s),’ argues that this category helps trace the African presence in Europe and affirms its rightful place, despite the long history of invisibility, negation, and oppression faced by Africans from the modern era to today. She emphasizes the concept of “reciprocal embeddedness” (Brancato 2009, 22) between African and European histories. Building on this idea, Nicki Hitchcott and Dominic Thomas (2014, 4) explore the removal of the hyphen in ‘Afro-European’ by those identifying as ‘Afropeans.’ These individuals do not see themselves as either African or European but rather as part of a transnational, diasporic space known as ‘Black Europe.’ A more recent interpretation comes from Johny Pitts in *Afropeans: Notes from Black Europe* (2019), where he maps Black culture and identity, challenging media stereotypes that depict Black and Afrodescendant communities as either hyper-stylized or dangerous. Pitts seeks the “beauty in black banality” (Pitts 2019, 6) and presents ‘Afropean’ as a progressive self-identifier, distinct from ‘European,’ due to Europe’s violent tendency to assimilate. He argues that Afropean identity should not only highlight success stories but also recognize the diversity of lives, identities, and histories, particularly focusing on marginalized groups.

¹⁰⁰ The term stems from Olivette Otele’s significant work, *African Europeans: An Untold History* (2020). Through a historical examination of the African presence on the European continent from its inception to the present, Otele proposes the term ‘African Europeans’ as a challenge to the reluctance of European countries to acknowledge the diverse identities of their Afrodescendant citizens. Using the term ‘African Europeans’ shifts away from traditional narratives and highlights the complex identities and histories of individuals of African descent living in Europe “to rethink the way we use and read European and African histories and define terms, such as citizenship, social cohesion and fraternity, that have been the basis of contemporary European societal values. In addition, it challenges the use of such terms against various groups as exclusionary tools” (Otele 2020, ebook).

Europe to reflect not only on its often violent relationship with other continents but also on the inner dynamics shaped by this legacy.

Critics in Portugal have also engaged with the broader Afro-European debate to explore and reflect on emerging Afro-Portuguese literary expressions. Margarida Calafate Ribeiro begins by employing the categories ‘Afropolitan’ and ‘Afropean’ to delineate the literature created by Afrodescendant Portuguese authors which “inauguram em Portugal uma linha literária de abrangência europeia—*afropean*, numa versão mais anglo-saxónica desta herança—ou *afropolitana*—numa versão mais francesa—de identidades herdeiras dos processos coloniais, que procuram as suas continuidades na Europa de hoje, ao mesmo tempo que se inscrevem numa genealogia literária portuguesa de imaginação e de demanda de Portugal e da Europa” (Ribeiro 2020b, 292).¹⁰¹

In delineating the enduring connection between Portugal and Africa within the postcolonial context, this literature underscores the necessity of situating itself within a literary lineage that is both Portuguese and European. Such positioning is crucial for reassessing the role these voices play in reshaping Portugal’s national history and challenging the exclusionary nature of the literary canon, which often overlooks Afrodescendant literary productions. Sandra Sousa (2022, 52) similarly employs the Afropolitanism/Afropean paradigm to analyse this body of texts, which emerge as representatives of an identity that is no longer hyphenated and boldly claims its rightful space “which is at the same time *in* and *of* Lisbon, *in* and *of* Portugal, *in* and *of* Europe, and *in* and *of* the world.”

Finally, there are perspectives that underscore the urgency of embedding this literature within the genealogy of Portuguese literature itself, aiming to decolonize the literary canon and reassess the role of these voices in relation to the long history of forced silence into the literary realm. Rosangela Sarteschi seeks to analyse Afro-Portuguese literary production using insights derived from the critical debate on Afro-Brazilian literature spanning from the 1940s to the present day. According to Sarteschi, the Portuguese context grapples significantly with its recent colonial past, lingering unresolved historical issues, and a delay in engaging with critical analyses on pivotal themes such as Afrodescendancy. Consequently, the author proposes the categorization of “literatura de autoria negra em Portugal” (Sarteschi 2019, 293) as a framework for

¹⁰¹ “Inaugurate in Portugal a literary line of European breadth—*Afropean*, in a more Anglo-Saxon version of this heritage—or *Afropolitan*—in a more French version—of identities inherited from colonial processes, which seek their continuities in today’s Europe, while at the same time inscribing themselves in a Portuguese literary genealogy of imagination and demand for Portugal and Europe” (my translation).

examining how literary texts construct a Black authorial voice that delves into themes such as racism, resistance, and the confrontation with processes of erasure and invisibilization of the Afrodescendant population. Furthermore, Sarteschi (2019, 293) writes, “essa nomeação, no caso português, possibilita traçar um arco bastante amplo de modo a englobar e contemplar a produção daqueles sujeitos negros já nascidos em solo português, mas também daqueles que, nascidos na África, assumem essa identidade multifacetada e afro-diaspórica.”¹⁰² Similarly, and intersecting this reflection with the category of Afrodescendancy, Inocência Mata (2022) suggests interpreting this production as “literatura portuguesa de autoria afrodescendente,” a category that would recognize this literary strand as an integral part of national literature—simultaneously anchored to its diasporic and Afrodescendant roots—and not merely as minor or marginal literature or as a mere adjunct to the national and canonical one.

It is important to recognize that this debate on identity categories addresses a relatively recent and still limited body of works and authors, as well as the fluidity and arbitrariness of interpretations surrounding these self-categorizations. This results in widespread difficulty in reaching a consensus on how to define this literature (Bucaioni 2024, 243). Nevertheless, as previously noted, naming carries the power of recognition. In my view, discussing identity categories in literature starts with the understanding that no category is inherently more valid than another. These categories are open, non-essentialist, and constantly evolving, reflecting the need to grasp complex socio-cultural and political movements rooted in the traumatic history of colonial oppression. The political and theoretical debates surrounding these categories are essential for framing key questions (problems) and responses (proposed solutions). They remind us that literature—through its expression of thoughts, ideas, stories, outrage, nightmares, and dreams—is deeply connected to the visibility of spaces of expression and knowledge that must be freed from the colonial past’s violence (Di Eugenio, Biasio 2021, 50). By naming these categories, we acknowledge discursive marginalization that must be dismantled within Portuguese literary criticism.

One contributing factor to this marginalization is the lingering spectre of Lusophony. This spectre stands as a symbolic, ideological, and political obstacle in debates surrounding these categories. In *A Lusofonia e os Lusófonos: novos mitos*

¹⁰² “This designation, in the Portuguese case, makes it possible to trace a very broad arc in order to encompass and contemplate the production of those black subjects already born on Portuguese soil, but also those who, born in Africa, assume this multifaceted and Afro-diasporic identity” (my translation).

portugueses, Alfredo Margarido (2000, 6) contends that the construction of Lusophony, conceived as both an imagined community and a linguistic, cultural, and economic policy within a geopolitical sphere, stems from the aspiration to reclaim a lost domain, notably the empire.¹⁰³ While the concept of Lusophony aims to foster the notion of the great ‘House of the Portuguese Language’ among specific linguistic communities, these communities are found to be hierarchized, compelled to orbit around the central axis of Portugal, its European norms, and its peninsular culture. Despite purporting to construct an idealized sense of ‘linguistic brotherhood,’ Lusophony is instead rooted in a common historical inheritance that is Portuguese colonialism. Consequently, beneath the fraternal façade of the linguistic paradigm, hostile political dynamics persist, reminding ‘others’ that they do not belong to the centre, but to its peripheries which that centrality, through colonial history, created. Lusophones, in fact, are never the Portuguese, but always the others.¹⁰⁴ According to Jessica Falconi (2011, 28), Lusophony represents then “una nozione storica che rischia di occultare rapporti di disuguaglianza e che continua a presupporre l’esistenza di un centro e di diversi margini, perpetuando un discorso identitario fortemente eurocentrico in opposizione alle alterità non-europee.”¹⁰⁵ With Lusophony, we are therefore once again faced with operations of negation of others. The same extends to the relationship between ‘Portuguese’ literature and what is termed ‘Lusophone’ literatures, essentially those of others, which aren’t acknowledged in Portugal “em nome da autonomia dos criadores e dos países, mas sim em função da ‘língua portuguesa’” (Margarido 2000, 53).¹⁰⁶ In her article “A lusofonia é uma bolha,” Marta Lança (2010, online) illustrates how Portugal instrumentalizes the concept of Lusophony to perpetuate its self-image as the cultural centre around which other literary productions in the Portuguese language are expected to gravitate. It is within this

¹⁰³ Eduardo Lourenço (1996, 178), for instance, highlights how the ongoing exclusion of Galicia from this imagined community makes it clear that the space of Lusophony and that of the linguistic community of reference do not, in fact, coincide. In essence, Lusophony endeavours to retrace the former maps of the Portuguese empire.

¹⁰⁴ While all Portuguese-speaking countries are classified as ‘Lusophone,’ the term typically brings to mind Portuguese-speaking African countries (PALOP) and East Timor. Conversely, Portugal and Brazil assume an ‘external’ stance, serving as two pivotal points that contribute to the construction and portrayal of Lusophony in the media. This dynamic, as highlighted by Jessica Falconi (2011, 29, my translation), reflects “the varied colonial-like dynamics and relationships that characterized Portugal’s imperial history.”

¹⁰⁵ “An ahistorical notion that risks concealing relations of inequality and that continues to presuppose the existence of a centre and several margins, perpetuating a strongly Eurocentric identity discourse in opposition to non-European alterities” (my translation).

¹⁰⁶ “In the name of creators’ and countries’ autonomy, but rather in the name of the ‘Portuguese language’” (my translation).

framework of ‘other’ literature that the Afrodescendant Portuguese literature is still often perceived in contemporary discourse.

In the ongoing discourse surrounding Afrodescendant literature in Portugal, the question of Lusophony carries significant weight, reflecting Portugal’s hesitance to engage with new decolonial identity configurations. The dichotomy between Portugueseness and Lusophony is deeply ingrained in the traditional definition of Portuguese literature, underscoring the challenge of ‘welcoming’ Afrodescendant literature into the national canon. The case of Afrodescendant Portuguese literature highlights the exclusionary symbolic and rhetorical nature of ‘othering’ perpetrated by the Lusophone rhetoric, despite the fact that it is (and herein lies the contradiction) a literary system that originates within Portuguese territory and Portuguese literature itself. Authors born and raised in Portugal, who have every right to be recognized as Portuguese as their white counterparts, continue to grapple with the alienation and exclusion perpetuated by the discourse of Lusophony. Emerson Inácio (2019, 26) notes that Portuguese literary critics often categorize this literature as either ‘literatura de língua portuguesa’ or ‘literatura lusófona,’ alongside Brazilian literature (both by white and Afro-Brazilian authors). Alternatively, they may relegate such literary production to the national literatures of the African countries from which their ancestry descends, despite the fact that, in many cases, Portugal is effectively their country of origin. This reveals that the ostensibly ‘neutral’ and ‘inclusive’ category of ‘national literature’ is, in reality, structured according to deeply ingrained exclusionary identity geometries.¹⁰⁷

In response to the exclusionary narratives perpetuated by the rhetoric of Lusophony, the categories examined strive to elucidate how this literature offers an alternative way of existing outside the literary hegemonic centre. These texts are hybrid in nature, often blending autobiographical narratives with essays, memoirs with travelogues, and poetry with prose. They also incorporate other forms of expression such as rap, slam poetry and photography. Moreover, they engage with classic texts of national literature, rewriting them through a gaze that aims to decolonize the canon. Margarida Calafate Ribeiro

¹⁰⁷ The emergence of the first texts of this body of literary attracted the interest of various literary and cultural supplements in Portuguese newspapers and periodicals, including *Expresso*, *Público*, and *Diários de Notícias*, among others. I highlight these newspapers because they feature titles that are particularly emblematic for this study: “Telma Tvon trouxe a voz da juventude negra para o romance” (Gorjão Henriques 2018); “Uma rapariga africana em Lisboa” (Lucas 2015); “Angolano Kalaf Epalanga estreia-se no romance com mistura de ficção e realidade” (Diário de Notícias 2017). The titles prominently feature terms and adjectives such as *juventude negra*, *rapariga africana*, and *angolano*, consistently framing the authors as outsiders to the national system, without considering the possibility that these authors might indeed be Afrodescendant Portuguese.

(2020a, 81) describes this literature as ‘disobedient’ to the established canon, where disobedience serves as a mode of translation and rewriting from the marginalized viewpoint, representing not only individual experiences but also those of entire social groups. Emerson Inácio (2020, 47) further posits that this literature is constructed as a ‘space of differences’ and an ‘alternative system’ with respect to Portuguese literature. These texts reconfigure the role of literary works, even rewriting narratives previously dominated by white Portuguese literature. They build upon existing traditions while offering brand new ‘forms’ to represent Portuguese reality.

2.4.2 A Minor Literature? Canon, Language, and Afro-Atlantic Dialogue

The Portuguese language, historically conceptualized in national and ethnic terms as a central authority against ‘other forms’ of Portuguese, has served as a regulatory tool to exclude certain literary expressions from the national canon. To challenge this dynamic, the reclamation, modification, and transformation of the Portuguese language becomes a central focus for the authors of this body of literature. Through their engagement with language in literature, these writers resist historically racialized accounts of colonial injury and reclaim the Black experience, restoring its depth and complexity through a language that is, in effect, ‘their own.’

Historically, Portuguese literature was seen as a ‘testament’ to Portuguese supremacy over ‘other’ cultural traditions, as it was regarded as the only literature to possess its own language. In contrast, the literatures of Brazil and the African continent were compelled to adopt the language imposed by colonization for writing and publication. Even in the post-imperial era, these literary traditions appear ‘bound’ to the colonizer’s language. From this perspective, language becomes the most enduring symbol of a history marked by domination as well as by an imputed sense of enunciative impossibility for the colonized. From Gil Vicente to the discourse of Luso-tropicalism, the subordination of the African population was furthered by highlighting their purported inability to use the Portuguese language of the metropolis. This linguistic ‘deficiency’ evolved from the caricatured portrayal of *‘língua de preto’* to the socially and historically discredited ungrammatical *‘pretuguês’* (a derogatory term referring to African-influenced Portuguese), cast aside as an inferior linguistic system. Margarido (2000, 75) delves into what he terms a “psicologia histórica da língua portuguesa,”¹⁰⁸ revealing how the

¹⁰⁸ “Historical psychology of the Portuguese language” (my translation).

collective memory of its users is deeply etched by its association with colonial violence. Revisiting the deep connection that still exists today between language and Lusophony means therefore “procurar proceder ao inventário das feridas e das cicatrizes, tanto mais que os corpos mantêm, como é sabido, memória das violências que lhes foram infligidos” (Margarido 2000, 7).¹⁰⁹ These wounds continue to fester in contemporary times as Lusophone rhetoric appears to demand that all users of the Portuguese language, despite not being regarded as part of the nation, accentuate its ‘values’ and ‘accomplishments.’ Consequently, this expectation necessitates the relinquishment of any critical examination of its historical misdeeds.

Contemplating this historical-linguistic wound and reclaiming *pretuguês*—a concept introduced by the Brazilian anthropologist and intellectual Lélia Gonzalez¹¹⁰—as a linguistic framework suitable for rewriting, elaborating, and conceptualizing the world through a potential deterritorialization of language, Luso-Angolan writer Kalaf Epalanga (2023, 10) asserts that “o pretuguês é o nosso *kintsugi* linguístico, as linhas douradas que devolvem vida a esse objeto quebrado que é a nossa história.”¹¹¹ Deconstructing the famous (and very often misunderstood) statement by Fernando Pessoa, *minha pátria é a língua portuguesa*, Epalanga rewrites and interprets it as *minha pátria é a língua pretuguesa*, which becomes the title of his recent collection of short essays. In it, the writer underscores the importance of Gonzalez’s proposal in formulating a concept that allows for both critical and creative coexistence and inhabitation with the colonial legacies inherent in the Portuguese language. This is achieved through the linguistic blending and reappropriation of other African languages that have historically intersected with Portuguese, and as a way to counter a long history of enunciative vulnerability due to systemic racial annihilation operating also on a linguistic level.

Symbolically and materially, this stance connects to the history of liberation movements in Portuguese-speaking African countries, whose leaders moulded the Portuguese language to serve an anti-colonial and nationalist agenda. In the words of

¹⁰⁹ “Endeavouring to make an inventory of wounds and scars, especially since bodies, as is well known, retain a memory of the violence inflicted on them” (my translation).

¹¹⁰ Described as “the mark of Africanization of Portuguese spoken in Brazil” (Gonzalez 2020, ebook, my translation), *Pretuguês* is not merely a theoretical concept proposed by the Brazilian intellectual. *Pretuguês* is also put into practice through Gonzalez’s writing, as it is evident in several of her linguistic experiments, such as the extensive epigraph titled “Cumé que a gente fica?” preceding her text “Racismo e sexismo na cultura brasileira” (Gonzalez 1984, 223). Considering projections regarding the future number of *Pretuguês* speakers across Brazil, Portugal, and Africa, Kalaf Epalanga (2023, 189, my translation) asserts that “the future of the Portuguese language will be black.”

¹¹¹ “Pretuguês is our linguistic *kintsugi*, the golden lines that bring life back to this broken object that is our history” (my translation).

Amílcar Cabral (2016, 136), “it’s the only thing we can appreciate from the *tuga*, because he left his language after having stolen so much from our land.” From a political-cultural perspective, Cabral (2016, 137) advocated for a pragmatic principle of ‘critical assimilation’ aimed at transforming the language of the colonizer into a tool for liberation and national unity. On the literary front, however, as Giorgio De Marchis (2022, 249) observes, there has been a gradual process of ‘local nativization’ of the Portuguese language.¹¹² In the literatures of the five African countries, this process reflects an ongoing pursuit of aesthetic autonomy and a persistent anticolonial stance. For a long time, colonial language politics have shaped systemic histories of injury, exposing colonized populations to vulnerabilities enacted through language discrimination. Native languages were systematically deemed inferior and often legally prohibited in the colonial context. In response, anticolonial practices, including the African decolonial re-appropriation of Portuguese alongside native languages, represent long-lasting radical acts of misappropriation against colonial and racial linguistic injury.

If, on the one hand, there is thus in contemporary Afrodescendant Portuguese literature this sense of continuity in the re-appropriation of Portuguese and its multiple possibilities of transformation, occupation and utilization, on the other hand there is also a deeper genealogical reflection. As Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida articulates (2023, 69), acknowledging oneself as a Black women writer today entails recognizing a privileged position compared to previous generations, who lacked the material conditions and social opportunities to pursue such a career—a reality that still eludes many Black individuals in the diaspora today: “aquilo que foi negado aos meus ancestrais, e ainda é negado a tantos dos meus contemporâneos, é a oportunidade de ter uma voz em nosso idioma, sem falseamento” (Almeida 2023, 69).¹¹³ Almeida thus acknowledges the possibility to write in one’s own Portuguese language as the greatest privilege attained by her generation. Through endeavours that are not only individual but also collective, this generation represents the first in history with both the opportunity and the responsibility, within the Lusophone diasporic context, to restore the world of Black inwardness also through the Portuguese language. Almeida (2023, 72) asserts that her role as a writer is dedicated to finding the ‘suitable language’ to reclaim the nuances of individual diasporic interiorities

¹¹² The decision of liberation movements to prioritize the Portuguese language has sparked diverse critical perspectives, with some advocating for the promotion of cultural autonomy within African literatures in the Lusophone sphere. For further insights on this matter and the authors who have made significant contributions to this process, I recommend consulting De Marchis (2022).

¹¹³ “What was denied to my ancestors, and is still denied to so many of my contemporaries, is the opportunity to have a voice in our language, without falsification” (my translation).

within literary texts. However, she acknowledges that her work is just one component of a broader collective project involving all contemporary Portuguese-language diaspora writers and artists.¹¹⁴ As far back as 2014, Inocência Mata characterized these connections as writing processes that reopen the numerous unhealed wounds within the realm of the Lusophone Black Atlantic. Mata (2014, 61) coined the term “encruzilhadas atlânticas”¹¹⁵ to denote this relationship within the Luso-Afro-Brazilian Atlantic space, encompassing Portuguese, Brazilian, and African voices that uncover the omissions in the collective memory of colonial history present at these crossroads. These voices also initiate processes aimed at restoring diverse narratives of oppression.

Concerning the representation of Black people in Portuguese literature, Almeida writes what follows: “Ao me debruçar sobre a literatura na minha língua, deparo com um retrato, de séculos, de pessoas negras como caricaturas, como elementos decorativos: risíveis, planas, muitas vezes sexualizadas, seres exóticos. Relegadas à condição de personagens vazios e estereotipados, pessoas negras são raras no cânone português e são representadas como seres humanos desprovidos de individualidade” (Almeida 2023, 62).¹¹⁶ In the fiction of the ‘esteemed writers’ enshrined within the Portuguese canon, Black individuals are often depicted without their individuality, perpetuating an implicit imperialist mindset that continues to overlook the idiosyncratic manifestations of institutional violence inherent in the canon’s selection criteria. It is precisely for this reason that Almeida argues that the restoration of Black inwardness must commence with its portrayal in the realm of humanities, namely through the arts and fiction:

¹¹⁴ In this manner, Almeida situates the recent literary contributions of her generation in Portugal within a broader context of the Portuguese-speaking diaspora, encompassing Black authors from Brazil and Lusophone Africa. This Afro-Atlantic and diasporic interconnectedness aims at dismantling the colonial legacies that persist in the official narratives and social structures of countries such as Brazil, Portugal, and the five Portuguese-speaking African nations. In this vein, Alessia Di Eugenio and I (2021) have endeavoured to contemplate the significance of fostering an Afro-Atlantic dialogue between Brazil and Portugal. This dialogue aims to transcend experiences and discussions confined solely to national boundaries and to underscore processes of both transnational struggles, reflections and artistic creations. Despite the distinctiveness of their contexts, both countries have been influenced by Luso-tropicalist and sweetened rhetoric—manifested in Brazil through the dynamics engendered by the myth of racial democracy, and in Portugal through those associated with the myth of cultural assimilation—in terms of grappling with the legacies of the colonial past in contemporary societies. In this sense, “thinking about an Afro-Atlantic dialogue means locating the debate on a larger scale, in a global historical context of colonial oppression and from which movements ‘from below’ and from the South attempt to decolonize our present” (Di Eugenio, Biasio 2021, 48, my translation).

¹¹⁵ “Atlantic crossroads” (my translation).

¹¹⁶ “When I look at literature in my language, I come across a centuries-old portrait of black people as caricatures, as decorative elements: laughable, flat, often sexualised, exotic beings. Relegated to the status of empty, stereotyped characters, black people are rare in the Portuguese canon and are represented as human beings devoid of individuality” (my translation).

O projeto dessa restituição é a *principal* missão que a maioria dos artistas negros luso-afro-brasileiros em atividade hoje assumiu, de uma maneira ou de outra. Não podemos exigir a restituição da nossa interioridade—da imaginação negra, do ser interior negro—de qualquer governo ou Estado. Apenas nós poderemos reconstruí-la. Nós, escritores, artistas, acadêmicos, cineastas, jornalistas, ativistas, luso, afro, brasileiros etc.: apenas nós podemos nos responsabilizar por essa restituição (Almeida 2023, 64).¹¹⁷

Beginning with the re-signification of language and its pivotal role in this collective project of restitution, Afrodescendant Portuguese literature appears to be situated within what Deleuze and Guattari delineate as ‘minor literature’ in contrast to a ‘major’ literature (namely, Portuguese literature) already established *a priori* through canonization. According to the authors, minor literature is characterized by three key features: the deterritorialization of language, which involves a minority creating alternative uses of a ‘major language’; its immediate political impact, where the confined space of the literature compels individual stories to connect directly to politics; and the collective chaining of enunciation, which fosters active solidarity despite skepticism. Thus, the term ‘minor’ does not merely define ‘marginalized literatures’; rather, it explores the revolutionary potential inherent in these literatures. As such, language has always been a concern of minorities within a given context of evident cultural hegemony. Throughout literary history, numerous instances exist of languages being extracted and reappropriated to forge a minor literature capable of excavating language itself and reinstating its essence through this re-signified medium. Consequently, when filtered through the pens of these authors, the Portuguese language emerges as a vehicle “to use syntax in order to cry, to give a syntax to the cry” (Deleuze, Guattari 1986, 26) and from that cry to bring out the diasporic Black inwardness. It is precisely this common working through and within the Portuguese languages of the diaspora that imbues it with a new political, ethical, practical, and poetic significance in the effort to restore Black interiority and dismantle all representations deeply ingrained in a language that have historically negated that inner life. This unprecedented commitment, advocated by authors of the Black diaspora in Portuguese, entails a quest within their works to discover a language, semantics, syntax, grammar, and cadence that can effectively reconstruct that inner landscape. Nonetheless,

¹¹⁷ “The project of this restitution is the *main* mission that the majority of black Luso-Afro-Brazilian artists working today have taken on, in one way or another. We cannot demand the restitution of our interiority—of the black imagination, of the black inner being—from any government or state. Only we can rebuild it. We, writers, artists, academics, filmmakers, journalists, activists, Portuguese, Afro-Brazilians, etc.: only we can take responsibility for this restitution” (my translation).

this process necessitates a critical scrutiny at a time when there is extensive discourse surrounding the opening up, revisiting, deconstruction, and decolonization of national literary canons.

As Feijó (2020, 15) observes within the Portuguese literary context, ‘canonical hospitality’ for an author is determined by their recognition and endorsement by peers and later authors. This acknowledgment highlights the author’s unprecedented capacity for expressive articulation and a genuine enhancement of expressive possibilities within the field of literature. This view highlights the challenge of coexisting with established canonical authors, emphasizing that the inclusion of new writers hinges on their ability to broaden the expressive scope of the literary tradition. For this reason, Feijó (2020, 15) introduces the concept of ‘expressive violence,’ which describes the powerful expressiveness that allows new works to introduce innovative tropes, characters, or aesthetic patterns.

In the case of Afrodescendant Portuguese literature, the challenge is exacerbated by the historical exclusion of Black writers from the predominantly white canon. As stated by Almeida (2023, 63), “eu não teria sido aceita à mesa de alguns dos meus ancestrais literários. Eles falharam ao descrever a *minha* ancestralidade, não a entenderam, a subestimaram, zombaram dela.”¹¹⁸ Given the systematic exclusion of Black writers by the canon’s predecessors, Almeida highlights the absence of a comparative benchmark between canonical Portuguese literature and that of Black authors, stemming from the total absence of these writers, representing an historical denial of their rightful place on the pages of literature. Within the Portuguese canon, there are no works that do not flatten and degrade their Black characters, depriving them of the richness of their own inner lives and minds. Thus, the restoration of Black inwardness not only embodies an element of ‘expressive violence’ in comparison to the white canon—enabling the introduction of new tropes, characters, and aesthetic patterns—but also signifies a humanization of a canon still afflicted by an exclusionary colonial mentality in its selection process. Building on the perspectives of critics previously discussed regarding Afrodescendant Portuguese literature, I argue that, in some cases—particularly in the selected novels analysed in the second part of my work—the artistic contributions of this emerging generation reach an unparalleled level of expressiveness, challenging established canonical structures. The political, ethical, practical, and poetic depth of their texts enables this literature to carve

¹¹⁸ “I wouldn’t have been accepted at the table of some of my literary ancestors. They failed to describe my ancestry, they didn’t understand it, they underestimated it, they mocked it” (my translation).

out a distinct aesthetic space in the Portuguese literary debate and in relation the national canon.

2.4.3 A Poethics of Vulnerability: Diaspora, Home, and Belonging

Having examined the historical efforts surrounding the ‘Black Portuguese archive’ and its significance in countering the regimes of historicity that produced material vulnerability for Black and Afrodescendant communities, as well as the debates in Portuguese literary criticism on the need for critical and enunciative practices to affirm the self-identity of this literary tradition, I will now focus on the main literary tropes to be analysed in the second part of my thesis through a close reading approach. In this section, I will focus on the concept of diaspora, its literary declination in Afrodescendant Portuguese literature and its intersection with the issue of vulnerability. I will attempt to identify three tropes foundational to my analysis: the motifs of the ghost and limbo as read threats that connotate the emergence of new literary characters, the working through language as a tangible response to the material effects of vulnerability, and the intersection of the racialized body, its vulnerability, and its spatial embeddedness in the diasporic Portuguese space. Together, these elements form what I term a ‘poethics’ of vulnerability, which thematically and aesthetically informs the texts.

“Talking about place, where we belong,” writes bell hooks (2009, 1), “is a constant subject for many of us.” Home, homecoming and belonging are in fact recurrent issues connected to the global African diaspora. Kwame Nimako and Stephen Small (2009, 228) argue that Afro-diasporic communities have historically passed through two main types of dislocations: ‘forced’ dislocation, linked to the transatlantic slave trade, and ‘voluntary’ dislocation, arising from the consequences of colonialism. In the early 20th century, the term ‘African diaspora’ referred specifically to those of African descent in the Americas, a result of transatlantic exchanges between the Caribbean and the Americas. However, the 20th century saw a rise in African migration to North America and Europe, driven by Western colonial expansion, marking the start of a new phase of the diaspora. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall (2019) defines ‘diaspora’—originally conceptualized in the context of Caribbean migration to the UK—as the dispersal of a group from their homeland due to the legacies of empire, such as poverty, underdevelopment, wars, and lack of opportunity. Hall’s view extends beyond physical displacement, emphasizing that diasporic communities maintain strong ties to their homeland and ancestral culture, even

as they adapt to new geographic locations.¹¹⁹ Key elements of his concept include cultural hybridity, where original and host cultures blend; fluid identity, constantly negotiated through diasporic movement; engagement in cultural and political struggles for representation, power, and belonging; and transnationalism, where diasporic communities form networks across borders while participating in the social, political, and economic life of their host countries. Hall's framework helps explain the complexities of identity, culture, and belonging in a post-imperial world, highlighting the resilience and creativity of diasporic communities in shaping their collective futures.

Within this diasporic context of hybridization, reappropriation, negotiation, relations, encounters and translations, Kobena Mercer (1994, 63) refers to the formation of a "diasporic aesthetic," that is, "a powerful syncretic dynamic which critically appropriates elements from the master-codes of the dominant cultures and creolizes them, disarticulating given signs and re-articulating their symbolic meaning otherwise." This diasporic aesthetic is, according to Mercer, most apparent at a linguistic level, but it also appears on different aspects of cultural formation. This aesthetic is a response to centuries of colonial cultural negation by the white, European, Western, colonizing cultures, which were always positioned as the voiced aspect against the Black, African, enslaved, and colonized cultures, which have always been considered as unvoiced. The efforts made by scholars, artists, and, in general, cultural practitioners within the African diaspora are directed "to piece together these fragmentary, often illegal, 'routes to the present' and to reconstruct their unspoken genealogies," (Hall 2019, 220) in order to make sense of the current interpretive matrix and self-images of the Black diasporic cultures and to make the historical invisible visible.

Concerning the issue of diaspora in Portugal, one of the most perverse colonial politics concerned the process of assimilation for the Black subjects of the colonies. Forced to renounce to their own culture to assume the colonizer's cultural identity, the *assimilados* firmly believed in the 'promised' imperial citizenship. By nullifying the distinction between metropolis and colony and creating the colony as a periphery or

¹¹⁹ In this sense, Paul Gilroy's concept of the 'Black Atlantic' (1993) further expands on the notion of diaspora. His framework challenges conventional geographical and historical boundaries, emphasizing the interconnectedness of Black experiences shaped by slavery, colonialism, and displacement. Central to Gilroy's theory is W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of 'double consciousness,' which reflects the complex identity negotiations of Black individuals navigating multiple cultural, national, and ethnic affiliations. The Black Atlantic highlights cultural hybridity, transnationalism, and resistance, exploring how Black diasporic communities engage with global displacement, trade, and cultural exchange. It also underscores the tradition of anti-colonial resistance, aimed at challenging racial oppression and envisioning alternative futures.

overseas region of Portugal, the process of assimilation, from a diasporic perspective, seems to promise a kind of ‘homecoming’ to those who ‘became Portuguese’ by assimilation. For Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida (2023, 77), assimilation represented and still represents a form of blindness, a vain hope of belonging to Portugal after a history of violent oppression: “A dominação colonial é responsável por esse modo específico de cegueira: na qual homem e mulheres se lançam na diáspora com a ilusão de que estão realmente *voltando para casa*. (Conheci alguns, a maioria homens, a maioria negros.) Mais cedo ou mais tarde eles se conciliam com a percepção de que *não têm lugar*.”¹²⁰ For Almeida, the constant search for a home, for a sense of belonging, is what seems to characterise the literature of the diaspora in Portugal. In addition to ‘perceiving’ this sense of non-belonging from the experience of their descendants as a result of decolonization, this feeling is also increased by the sense of dislocation felt by new generations due to what Almeida (2023, 37) calls, quoting the American philosopher Richard Rorty, ‘idiosyncratic traumatism.’ These traumas stem from growing up in a hostile environment, where belonging to a minority heightens a dual experience of hyper-visibility—marked by racial exposure to daily micro- and macro-violence—and hyper-invisibility, resulting from deep cultural and existential misrecognition. This also intensifies the sense of alienation, as diasporic subjects find themselves caught between two worlds (Europe and Africa), without a true sense of belonging to either.

The figure of ‘limbo’ is often used to describe this feeling within the African diaspora. Sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos interprets African colonies and their populations as a model of radical exclusion that continues in modern Western discourse, much like during the colonial period. He introduces the idea of an ‘abyssal cartography,’ which maps human experience, where the post-imperial Portuguese landscape is defined by abyssal lines that determine who is visible and who is relegated to radical invisibility. Those marginalized during colonization continue to embody this sense of ‘otherness’ within Portugal’s abyssal framework, even after independence and decolonization. The African diaspora, in this context, exists in a ‘spatial limbo,’ a kind of ‘no one’s land’ on the margins of this abyssal divide. In this direction, Almeida (2023, 67-68) writes:

¹²⁰ “Colonial domination is responsible for this specific form of blindness: in which men and women embark on the diaspora with the illusion that they are actually *returning home*. (I’ve met a few, most of them men, most of them black.) Sooner or later they come to terms with the perception that they *have no place*” (my translation).

Por não termos lar, nosso trabalho é em parte arqueologia, em parte performance. Escavamos; imitamos; improvisamos. Mas já não coincidimos com aquilo de que saíamos em busca. É nessa não coincidência, nesse *limbo*, de onde provêm formas específicas de ansiedade e identidade, que começa esse projeto artístico e político de grande escala de restituir a interioridade negra. A mente que estamos dando a nós mesmos é de natureza liminar. Ela pertence tão somente a esse limbo que estrutura tantas vidas.¹²¹

Almeida compares diasporic identities to fragments extracted from one context and reinterpreted in another, recalling the artistic assemblage of the collage technique. She refers to this as a ‘limbo identity’: “Somos feitos de fragmentos, lembrancinhas e pilhagens. Encontramos, perdemos, reunimos, nos apegamos. Estamos em trânsito e espalhados. Somos uma coleção de coisas fora de contexto. Tentamos imaginar um sujeito a quem elas pertencem. Não temos um lar para onde voltar e assumimos nosso nomadismo como condição permanente” (Almeida 2023, 74).¹²² In this way, literature becomes a space for recomposing fragmented narratives and reclaiming subjectivities through new characters and aesthetic forms that convey the experience of living within these limbo identities. It highlights the importance of these identities while exposing how their circumstances reflect the persistent influence of an oppressive worldview. These limbo identities represent in Portugal what Heike Härting (2007, 192) defines as “the impossible citizen”, that is, “the one who lacks official proof of existence yet abounds everywhere.” In the same direction, Sheila Khan (2015, 81) refers to these impossible citizens through a temporal metamorphosis, referring to them as a ‘present past’ walking down the streets of Portugal: “Este passado que é presente anda nas ruas, apanhas os mesmos autocarros que nós, senta-se ao nosso lado à mesa dos cafés, dos restaurantes, e pensa criticamente esta pós-colonialidade portuguesa.”¹²³ This is why the scholar sees literature as a privileged space to represent this post-imperial ‘absence,’ that is, the historically invisible complexity of the inner dimension of the African diaspora in Portugal: “A literatura como lugar do exílio permite-nos tocar nesses espaços doridos,

¹²¹ “As we have no home, our work is partly archaeology, partly performance. We dig; we imitate; we improvise. But we no longer coincide with what we were looking for. It is in this non-coincidence, in this *limbo*, from which specific forms of anxiety and identity originate, that this large-scale artistic and political project to restore black inwardness begins. The mind we are giving ourselves is liminal in nature. It belongs only to that limbo that structures so many lives” (my translation).

¹²² “We are made up of fragments, souvenirs and loot. We find, we lose, we gather, we cling. We are in transit and scattered. We are a collection of things out of context. We try to imagine a subject to whom they belong. We have no home to return to and we assume our nomadism as a permanent condition” (my translation).

¹²³ “This past that is present walks the streets, takes the same buses as us, sits next to us at tables in cafés and restaurants, and thinks critically about this Portuguese postcoloniality” (my translation).

nesses mundos subjectivos ‘em dor’, e repensar esse ‘Sul’ interior, mesmo aqui ao lado, dentro de nós como registo humano territorial e mnemónico” (Khan 2015, 11-12).¹²⁴

I continue to reference Almeida’s reflections because, in my view, they provide one of the most insightful and relevant critical frameworks for understanding contemporary Afro-diasporic literature in Portugal. In her essay “A restituição da interioridade,” Almeida identifies four elements that shape the identity of the diasporic limbo and its literary representation: mourning, the ghost, performativity, and melancholia.

Almeida (2023, 83) employs the term ‘anxiety of the limbo’ to depict the emotional and cognitive framework emerging from the diasporic Black sensibility in relation to what she defines as “luto por um lar impossível.”¹²⁵ Mourning for an impossible home represents the emotional state arising from an eternal search for something unattainable; in other words, it represents the anticipated mourning for the impossibility of homecoming. According to the writer, this dimension of mourning defines the essence of the ‘limbo citizen,’ who, in order to endure it, must learn to live and exist as a ghost. In order to become a ghost “é preciso aprender a dominar a invisibilidade: primeiro, como uma maldição; depois, como uma habilidade; por fim, você vai acabar entendendo que, quando aparece, você assombra” (Almeida 2023, 78).¹²⁶ This process, which I interpret as ‘becoming ghost’ in the diasporic limbo, not only holds implications on a public and social level (in terms of haunting apparitions), but also within the intimate, private, and familial sphere. Almeida (2023, 78) suggests that adopting a ghostly form becomes essential for maintaining familial connections—those rooted in distant places and times—allowing loved ones to recognize and remember each other despite being dispersed across the diaspora. This phantasmagoria thus evolves into theatricality and performance, striving to sustain emotional bonds despite physical separation: “como consequência da separação, sujeitos diaspóricos são inteligíveis uns para os outros na medida em que são amplamente teatrais. Quando juntos, são como atores representando a si mesmos sem parar” (Almeida 2023, 78).¹²⁷ The conclusion reached by Almeida is that diasporic subjectivity is inherently performative and theatrical, with this performativity and theatricality embodying the melancholic condition of diasporic subjects. To illustrate this

¹²⁴ “Literature as a place of exile allows us to touch those painful spaces, those subjective worlds ‘in pain,’ and rethink that inner ‘South,’ right next door, inside us as a territorial and mnemonic human record” (my translation).

¹²⁵ “Mourning for an impossible home” (my translation).

¹²⁶ “You have to learn to master invisibility: first, as a curse; then, as a skill; finally, you’ll realise that when you appear, you haunt people” (my translation).

¹²⁷ “As a consequence of separation, diasporic subjects are intelligible to each other insofar as they are largely theatrical. When together, they are like actors performing themselves non-stop” (my translation).

argument, Almeida traces the performative process of ‘becoming ghost’ for the so-called ‘Afropean’ generations:

Ser afropeu é se dar conta de ser um estrangeiro tanto na África quanto na Europa. Não existe para nós um lugar onde poderíamos nos confundir com os outros. Nossa conspícuidade está sendo apagada porque nossos corpos se tornam símbolos transitórios de um passado traumático. O desejo de ser você mesmo é constantemente adiado pela angústia de encontrar, em algum momento, um lugar onde o ‘eu’ pode ser simplesmente o que é, seja o que for, o qual não pode mais ser separado das responsabilidades associadas a ser um símbolo humano, sobretudo quando se trata de um artista. Por isso, o ‘eu’ diaspórico sempre é performativo e elegíaco (Almeida 2023, 84-85).¹²⁸

Drawing from these four tropes, I propose a diasporic ‘poethics of vulnerability’ to guide the analysis of the novels in my corpus. Here, I interpret the exposure of the characters’ vulnerability—both corporeal and mnemonic—as a ‘poethical approach.’ This approach encompasses political, ethical, practical, and poetic dimensions in its critical representation of the unequal employment and distribution of racialized violence and deprivation within contemporary Portugal and its diasporic space. This poethics of vulnerability serves two purposes. First, it highlights how the regimes of historicity of colonial modernity still acts on and haunts the material realities of diasporic subjects, challenging any dehistoricized or deracialized notions of ‘imperial citizenship.’ Second, it reveals the transformative potential of vulnerability within the diaspora, using artistic forms—and specifically language and literary genres in the realm of literature—to challenge racialized accounts of injury that affect bodily, enunciative and memory vulnerability of the characters. In fact, as Heike Härting (2007, 178) writes, “reading vulnerability as an affect of racial and colonial violence helps decode the historical sedimentation of emotional responses to violent events through the figurative modalities of language.” For this reason, I will examine the figurative modalities of language employed in the selected novels to represent the open *vulnus* that affects the characters, as well as the relationship between their vulnerability and the spaces they interacts with. In this context, space is not merely a metaphor or symbolic reflection of the characters’

¹²⁸ “To be Afropean is to realise that you are a foreigner in both Africa and Europe. For us, there is no place where we can be confused with others. Our conspicuousness is being erased because our bodies become transitory symbols of a traumatic past. The desire to be oneself is constantly postponed by the anguish of finding, at some point, a place where the ‘I’ can simply be what it is, whatever it is, which can no longer be separated from the responsibilities associated with being a human symbol, especially when it comes to an artist. That’s why the diasporic ‘I’ is always performative and elegiac” (my translation).

vulnerability but a material embodiment of a broader history of colonial exploitation through total violence that affects both Black subjects and the spaces they occupy.

Thus, this poethics of vulnerability complexifies the issue of loss in relation to any sense of homecoming. As I will argue, the conclusions of each novel do not offer simple resolutions or paths to reconciliation, restoration, or healing. Instead, they stay with' and 'work from' the wound, using it as a radical provocation to demand urgent social changes.

*

This last argumentation concludes the first part of my thesis, which focuses primarily on the methodological, theoretical, and contextual groundwork that integrates contemporary feminist theories on vulnerability and situates them within the Portuguese Afrodescendant context, particularly in recent emerging literature. The second part of my work is dedicated to analysing a selection of novels where, in my view, vulnerability can be explored through what I define as a poethics and aesthetics of vulnerability. The organization and analysis of these texts follow four main criteria: temporal, thematic, linguistic, and spatial.

In Chapter 3, I analyse three novels: *Luanda*, *Lisboa*, *Paraíso* and *Maremoto* by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, and *O canto da Moreia* by Luísa Semedo. These texts are connected by the temporal setting of their narratives, which span the end of the Portuguese empire, the independence movements, decolonization uprisings, and the diaspora from Africa to Portugal, culminating in the precarious settlement of characters in Lisbon. The protagonists—unlike their authors—embody the last witnesses of colonial oppression. For this reason, the chapter is titled 'Present Past' to highlight how their bodies, marked by extreme vulnerability in Lisbon, evoke a past that re-emerges in the aftermath through complex dynamics of intersection and implication with the former colonial system. These ties influence their diasporic fates. All three novels centre on the racial accounts of injury suffered by the protagonists, highlighting their exposure to precarious lives mainly through the recurrent trope of the vulnerable and affectable body. Similarly, the novels position the characters' vulnerable bodies within a post-25 April Lisbon, itself vulnerable and precarious in the aftermath of colonialism. The analysis of a 'vulnerable Lisbon' will demonstrate how the spatial distribution of the city mirrors the social divide between those who can lead a 'good life' and those condemned to perish within the necropolitical abyss of the current Portuguese urban landscape. From a linguistic standpoint, the novels

share a ‘formal’ and aesthetic exploration of how to narrate these precarious lives. Through metanarrative techniques, they examine the possibility of accounting one’s life in spite of the irreversible dismissal of precarity.

In Chapter 4, I focus on *As Telefones* by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, *Essa dama bate bué* by Yara Nakahanda Monteiro, and *Debaixo da nossa pele: uma viagem* by Joaquim Arena. In contrast to the previous chapter, these novels explore the experiences of the ‘children’ of the witnessing generation, already embedded in the diaspora but often estranged from their parents’ countries, hence the chapter title ‘Past Present.’ The present of these characters is haunted by an unresolved, unprocessed, and unmourned past. Their vulnerability is not only corporeal but primarily tied to memory. The absence of familial genealogies and affections, interrupted by the colonial oppression, determines the characters’ enunciative vulnerability. By foregrounding the ‘absent body’ of family or genealogical affections, a key motif in all three novels is the quest for ancestry. This relationship between memory and vulnerability extends beyond Lisbon to other geographies—the forgotten Portugal ‘*profundo*’ and the African continent—both of which are central to the country’s history but remain unacknowledged. Linguistically, the novels share a common experimentation with language and blended literary genres, offering an aesthetic counter-response in order to ‘give voice’ to genealogical quests, resisting the enunciative vulnerability imposed by the ‘formal’ legacies of colonial modernity which systematically denied the inner life of the ‘children of the diaspora.’

**Part II – Re/de/composing Vulnerability: Characters, Languages, and Spaces within
Afrodescendant Portuguese Fiction**

Chapter 3 – Present Past: Vulnerable Bodies

o mais terrível era o personagem saído das
[esferográficas gigantes
chamando pelas cidades
agarrado ao silêncio mortal
antes do poema parir o mundo
com as formas cálidas dos fonemas.

Hirondina Joshua, *Córtex*

3.1 Present Past

This chapter focuses on analysing the first three novels in the corpus: *Luanda*, *Lisboa*, *Paraíso* and *Maremoto* by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, and *O Canto da Moreia* by Luísa Semedo. The analysis centres on the re/de/composition of the fictional elements that constitute these novels, which I argue contribute to the emergence of an aesthetics of vulnerability. I will examine three key aspects: the introduction of new characters into the Portuguese literary scene, a specific use of language and innovative narrative techniques, and the intricate relationships between characters, language, and space. These elements will be explored through close reading throughout this chapter.

These novels focus on the characters of the *assimilado* and the African soldier within the Portuguese colonial army, exploring their dislocation from Africa—particularly Angola and Cape Verde—to post-25 April Portugal. They depict the shift from the late colonial empire to Portugal's rapid decolonization and democratization, capturing the vulnerabilities, complexities, and contradictions of this transition. I interpret these characters as embodying a 'present past,' with their post-imperial conditions deeply shaped by the colonial past and their implication in that system of oppression. Their shared history as falsely promised 'imperial citizens' leads them to Lisbon, where they experience increasing marginalization, eventually living precarious lives in the city's suburbs and streets. The novels centrally address the issue of the vulnerable, racialized, sick, dis-abled, and addicted body, linking these themes to the formal aspects of the texts in order to depict these embodied conditions.

The use of language, choice of narrators, and narrative forms will be the second central focus of my analysis, as the linguistic reworking of written language is key to how vulnerability is not only expressed but also performed throughout the texts. Special

attention will be given to the characters' self-representation through meta-narrative devices, such as diaries, letters, and phone calls, embedded within the novels. These meta-narrative tools challenge the stereotypical view that impoverished and vulnerable individuals possess a limited inner life and consciousness. By interweaving language, narration, and narrative structure, the novels seek to restore the inner lives of their characters, contrasting the oppression and dispossession that mark their precarious existence in Lisbon.

The third aspect of the re/de/composition process focuses on a close reading of space and the spatial configurations of characters through the use of language. Alongside vulnerable characters, a 'vulnerable Lisbon' also emerges in these novels. The treatment of space reveals the interconnectedness of racial accounts of injury, stemming from the enduring legacy of colonial violence, which not only affects the formerly colonized but also the spaces they inhabit. In other words, the relationship between vulnerable characters and vulnerable spaces exposes a shared wound between racialized people and lands in the context of ongoing coloniality. In the novels, Lisbon is depicted in its most dire and precarious form, becoming a powerful embodied metaphor for the lack of meaningful socio-political transformation in the wake of decolonization and democratization.

The decision to analyse these novels is driven by the authors' approach to vulnerability and precarity, which engages politically, ethically, practically, and poetically with these issues, avoiding any victimizing or paternalistic stance. Through their exploration of painful stories of precarious lives, Almeida's and Semedo's novels prompt a deep reflection on what it means to witness the 'pain of others'—to borrow from Susan Sontag (2003)—particularly when those 'others' are African subjects who continue to be viewed through the representational lens of colonial modernity. As I will argue, the three novels dismantle any paradisiac vision of Portugal (and Europe more broadly) by exposing the most harsh realities faced by individuals who, deceived by the false 'imperial promise' of belonging, seek a new beginning in Portugal. They reveal that hell exists within our former imperial capitals. Furthermore, the novels challenge the tendency to perceive these vulnerable diasporic subjects merely as objects of observation, to be publicly exposed through various forms of racialized representation. Despite their precarious conditions, these characters are not just passive subjects but individuals capable of 'seeing' with their own eyes, 'thinking' with their own minds, and thus representing their inner and outer lives as a form of misappropriation of the enduring

colonial injury. Thus, telling their vulnerability becomes a form of ‘writing Black’/‘writing back’ against that open wound.

3.2 Characters I

Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, a Portuguese author of Angolan descent, stands out as the most studied and recognized literary voice of her generation. Her works have been translated into several languages and have garnered prestigious awards and distinctions. In *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* (2018) she weaves a poignant tale of an Angolan assimilated family navigating the tumultuous transition from colonialism to independence. The narrative revolves around Cartola, a respected male midwife in an hospital in Moçâmedes, who embarks on a journey from Luanda to Lisbon in search of a cure for his son Aquiles’ deformed heel. However, his decision to leave behind his wife Glória, afflicted with progressive palsy, his daughter Justina and nephew Neusa in Luanda sets the stage for a poignant exploration of displacement and longing. Cartola and Aquiles harbour romanticized perceptions of Lisbon, fuelled by idealized postcard imagery reminiscent of the ‘great nostalgic’ imperial Metropolis. As soon as they set foot in postcolonial and ‘democratic’ Lisbon, they understand that the city has no room for two former *assimilados*, which are neglectfully degraded into unknown precarious immigrants. Struggling to find their place in Lisbon, they face economic hardship and social alienation, exacerbated by the absence of support networks. Meanwhile, Justina grapples with the challenges of single motherhood, while Glória languishes in her bed, her only connection to Cartola maintained through letters and phone calls. As they confront their precarious existence in squalid pensions, Cartola and Aquiles are progressively forced into the fringes of society, ultimately settling in the fictional neighbourhood of Paraíso. In Paraíso, amidst the grim backdrop of poverty and decay, they find solace in unexpected mutual support with Pepe, a Galician bar owner, and Iuri, a Portuguese boy left to the care of his grandmother. Together, they carve out moments of fleeting happiness, which are implemented by the summer visit of Justina and Neusa. But happiness never lasts long for the inhabitants of Paraíso. This happiness is shattered by tragedy when their home explodes due to a gas leak, and Iuri succumbs to a grenade accident in Pepe’s store barrack. Haunted by guilt and despair, Pepe takes his own life, leaving Cartola and Aquiles adrift in a sea of loss and estrangement. As Aquiles descends into forgetfulness, severed from his mother’s love, Cartola confronts the river Tagus in the Cais das Colunas, a symbolic space for his journey from Luanda to Lisbon, from a colonial past to a present

marked by exploitation and abandonment. In a final act of surrender, Cartola casts his new hat into the waters, bidding farewell to the city that symbolizes his shattered dreams and dispossessed identity. Alone and bereft, he turns his back on the river, embracing the oblivion that awaits him.

As Almeida stated in an interview (Lusa 2018, online), the novel is inspired by one of the main reasons for the African diaspora: the resolution of health and medical problems. Consequently, the issue of disease and the ill body becomes central to the narrative, as well as blurred boundaries between carer and patient among precarious conditions. Illness and the consumption of bodies due to precarious lives obliterate, in Almeida's words, both the identity of the carer and the patient. These identities become intertwined and oscillate as carers progressively turn into patients and vice versa. Another important aspect of the novel is Almeida's construction of the characters, inspired by her personal collection of 'trinkets without owners and value' found in various flea markets. These characters serve as an investigation into where their subjectivities belong and how much their lives are worth in an inhospitable space where they are regarded as broken, displaced, and useless objects—human waste.

Luísa Semedo is a Portuguese author of Cape Verdean descent, whose debut novel *O Canto da Moreia* was published in 2019. In *O Canto da Moreia*—alternating third-person narration, comprising a heterodiegetic narrator and the protagonist's inner voice revealed through thoughts and excerpts from his diary—recounts the personal and familial history of Eugénio. Born in Cape Verde, Eugénio ventures to Lisbon in the 1970s, guided by Father Chico's hand and fuelled by ambitions of pursuing the "Sabedoria Universal"¹²⁹ (Semedo 2019, 27) at university. However, Eugénio's path diverges from his aspirations. Influenced by Father Chico's guidance and disenchanted by the unfulfilled promises of a better life in Cape Verde, he finds himself compelled to attend an industrial school and later labour in a metal factory alongside a vast group of vulnerable colleagues in the post-25 April period. At the same time, Eugénio builds a troubled family life with a white colleague, Laura, in Rua da Liberdade in the Monsanto neighbourhood, with episodes of domestic violence stemming from Eugénio's internalized patriarchal beliefs and his addiction to alcohol. Thrown out of his home after trying to strangle his wife, Eugénio descends into homelessness on the streets of Lisbon, seeking temporary refuge in a rehabilitation centre before succumbing to cirrhosis of the liver in a hospital bed, alone, at just over 50 years old. The novel's title, *O Canto da Moreia*, imbues the narrative

¹²⁹ "Universal Wisdom"(my translation).

with symbolic weight, evoking Eugénio's fall, or else 'shipwreck,' accompanied by the Moreia, a figuration of alcohol which recalls a creature inhabiting the depths of the sea, reminiscent of the mythological siren song luring souls to their demise. Ultimately, Semedo's novel unfolds as a profound post-imperial odyssey, tracing Eugénio's journey from Cape Verde to Lisbon, culminating in a descent towards the abyss of dissolution.

As a daughter of Cape Verdean migrants to Portugal, Semedo's narrative centres on a space intimately familiar to her—the socially marginalized neighbourhoods predominantly inhabited by African and Afrodescendant communities. Luísa Semedo spent her formative years living in the bairro da Serafina in Lisbon until the age of 24. This neighbourhood, situated near the Aqueduto das Águas Livres, is characterized by precarious living conditions and has become home to many Africans workers, particularly Cape Verdean, who were brought to Portugal during the 20th century for the capital's industrialization. It also served as a destination for *retornados* and migrants from former colonies. While *O Canto da Moreia* is a work of fiction, Semedo reveals in various interviews (Garcia 2019, online; Henriques 2019c, online) that the trajectory of Eugénio mirrors both her father's journey—from Cape Verde to Portugal for educational pursuits—and her own experience of dislocation from Portugal to France for similar reasons. Central to the novel, Semedo emphasizes, is the exploration of post-imperial and diasporic loneliness experienced in a foreign land.

The third novel to be examined in this chapter is *Maremoto* (2021) by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida. This narrative delves into the life of Boa Morte da Silva, an Angolan former soldier who served on the Portuguese side during the Colonial War in Guinea-Bissau. Structured with alternating third-person and first-person narration, the novel unfolds as an extensive letter penned by Boa Morte to his unknown daughter, Aurora, serving as a means of seeking redemption for his crimes against his fellow countrymen and for abandoning his wife and child. Haunted by his harrowing past, Boa Morte resigns himself to a fate of abandonment and marginalization within postcolonial Lisbon. He ekes out a meagre existence as an exploited attendant at a car park on Rua António Maria Cardoso, sharing his destitution with the 'human leftovers' of post-25 April society. Among these companions are Fatinha, a mentally unstable Santomean girl who resides at 28 tram stop on Rua do Loreto, and Jardel, a stray dog who unexpectedly enters Boa Morte's life. Boa Morte's narrative voice emerges as that of yet another survivor, not solely due to his wartime experiences but primarily because of his daily struggle on the streets of Lisbon. In the hustle and bustle of the city, he remains unseen to many,

navigating the precariousness of exploited labour to sustain himself. Each day, he lives hand-to-mouth, his meals dependent on the income from parking cars or restaurants' leftovers. Yet, amidst his precarious existence, he holds onto a profound self-image—that of a guardian of the city. Despite going unnoticed by most, this perception affords him a sense of belonging, as if he is an integral thread woven into the fabric of a city whose citizenship was once pledged in exchange for African blood during the war. Plagued by the threat of a hernia ready to burst, Fatinha's descending into progressive madness, and Jardel's reckless escapades, *Boa Morte* discovers fleeting moments of solace amidst the chaos through the construction and nurturing of a communal vegetable garden. The novel's conclusion unfolds within the subterranean abysses of Lisbon, amidst the exhausting clandestine journeys on the metro and trains. *Boa Morte* slowly sinks into the city, becoming akin to a living entity flowing within it, yet paradoxically disregarded as mere flotsam in its stream. The novel concludes poignantly as *Boa Morte* vanishes into the metro's entrance.

Maremoto includes major issues already present in Almeida's previous novels. Here, the focus is on a character deeply implicated in colonial violence, with an evident grim past. The novel strives to represent a character who is complex and contradictory without passing judgment on his existence. Its intent is to show the world through *Boa Morte*'s eyes. In doing so, Almeida implicitly criticizes the oversimplification of tragic and complex historical events in public and literary debates, revealing a character that defies typification. Thus, *Boa Morte* emerges as an uncomfortable character for both 'sides' of Angolan and Portuguese history.

3.2.1 *Assimilados* in *Luanda*, *Lisboa*, *Paraíso* and *O canto da Moreia*: Mourning for a (Im)possible Homecoming

Luanda, *Lisboa*, *Paraíso* is the first novel that brings into Portuguese literature the *assimilados* as main characters with all their historical and inner complexities. Cartola de Sousa is an assimilated Angolan: He had a respectable position as a male midwife in a hospital in Moçâmedes before Independence, and was a colleague of a white doctor, Barbosa da Cunha, who at one point included him and Glória to his private life as a white wealthy colonizer. The sumptuous dinners served in Moçâmedes by Barbosa da Cunha and his wife become the dream and horizon of fulfilment for Cartola and, principally, Glória, who becomes obsessed with a rich Portuguese lifestyle which will accompany her in her progressive delirium relegated to bed. The main aspiration of Glória is to live again

that wealthy ‘material life’ made of expansive clothes, good European food, creamy Portuguese desserts, deluxe cars and fancy hotels:

De cama desde o início de setenta, Glória conservava algures dentro dela a memória do que haviam sido anos de uma assimilação próspera. [...] Ela não sabia quem era nem onde estava. A sua memória tinha ficado presa ao Império como uma renda esgarçada a um alfinete. Talvez sonhasse que Cartola a levava a passear num *Ford* pela marginal ou que era hora de se encontrar com as amigas saindo de casa aperaltada: a única negra fula de luvas de renda e saltos agulha admitida no Hotel da Ponte Branca (Almeida 2018, 17-18).¹³⁰

As asserted by Daniel F. Silva (2023, 63), the family reaps material advantages from the colonialist system, albeit from a subordinate stance positioned amidst the spectrum of power within subalternity. Cartola’s life and status within Portuguese colonial society accentuate a strategic ambiguity concerning the perpetuation of colonial power, notably through the restricted granting, or mere illusion, of benefits to colonized subjects. Cartola’s family stands as a (subaltern) symbol of privilege amidst an Angolan backdrop of profound vulnerability, a recurring theme in the narrative underscored by the frequent depiction of impoverished individuals on the streets and infrastructures lacking resources. This assimilation is also introjected on a cultural and linguistic level; the family’s imaginaries are filled with glorious postcards of Lisbon, maps of the metropolis, Portuguese books and objects, a language constantly monitored to repeat and master Lisbon’s strict grammar and pronunciation:

Sentado num banco, Cartola enrolava cigarros à janela. Repetia quantos nomes de ruas lisboetas conhecia e afinava a pronúncia como se falasse pela primeira vez. «António Augusto Aguiar, efectivamente, meu caro, seguimos para a António Augusto Aguiar, faz favor», dizia a um imaginário condutor de táxi, e, mesmo que de olhos no prédio em frente, cortava a capital no lugar do morto de um *Mercedes-Benz* (Almeida 2018, 23).¹³¹

¹³⁰ “Bedridden since the early seventies, Glória kept somewhere inside her the memory of what had been years of prosperous assimilation. [...] She didn’t know who she was or where she was. Her memory had become attached to the Empire like a frayed lace to a pin. Perhaps she dreamt that Cartola was taking her for a ride in a Ford along the seafront or that it was time to meet her friends when she left the house dressed up: the only black *fula* in lace gloves and stiletto heels admitted to the Hotel da Ponte Branca” (my translation).

¹³¹ “Sitting on a bench, Cartola rolled cigarettes by the window. He repeated as many Lisbon street names as he knew and honed his pronunciation as if he were speaking for the first time. «António Augusto Aguiar, efectivamente, meu caro, seguimos para a António Augusto Aguiar, faz favor», he’d say to an imaginary taxi driver, and, even though he had his eyes on the building opposite, he’d cut through the capital in the place of the dead man in a *Mercedes-Benz*” (my translation).

The pervasive nature of this assimilation process¹³² is depicted throughout the narrative by barely mentioning the Portuguese empire, as well as the Independence of the country and the subsequent civil war. Nonetheless, these events silently shape the affective and inner dynamics of Cartola's family. In this context, Margarida Calafate Ribeiro (2020b, 299) interprets the quiet pervasiveness of assimilation through the prism of Édouard Glissant's poetics of relationality, while also referencing Roberto Vecchi's concept of "colonialismo de feição relacional."¹³³ Here, violence, when left unchallenged and absorbed through colonial implication, takes on an oddly 'sweet' yet problematic quality inherent in the Luso-Tropical relationships within familial bonds and affects.

Before long, this seemingly serene world starts to unravel: Barbosa da Cunha sets off for Portugal, while Cartola observes anxiously the Portuguese exodus. He celebrates Independence with tempered joy as he loses his social status, yet concurrently, his family's fate takes a downturn: Justina becomes a single mother, and with the birth of Aquiles, named for his flawed heel, Glória is confined to bed due to a sudden palsy and troubled mind. Independence coincides with a sudden onset of illness haunting Cartola's household, an affliction that would shape his family's lives permanently.

Cartola's life becomes inextricably linked with Aquiles' heel, and he begins to sense that his son's illness symbolizes something more profound than just the deformity of his heel. It's as if the heel embodies a haunting presence from the past, manifesting through the afflicted body of his son: "o pai ponderava se o filho seria um fruto doutras vidas chegado para o assombrar" (Almeida 2018, 15).¹³⁴ Upon learning that Aquiles' heel could be healed through surgery before he turned fifteen, Cartola began to plan their journey to Portugal. As 1985 approached, the family toasted Aquiles' coming of age, even if no one foresaw the torment that this might entail. Even before leaving Angola, Cartola perceives

¹³² Cartola's assimilation is also evident through his adherence to colonialist racial ideologies and racist understandings of Angola and its inhabitants. For example, through the lens of internal focalization, the narrator illustrates instances such as Cartola's interiorized colonial perspective on Bantu aesthetics, historically denigrated as inferior to Western standards of beauty. This is exemplified when Cartola comments on Aquiles' bodily features with the remark "para bantu não está mal de todo" [not bad at all for Bantu] (Almeida 2018, 18). Another instance unfolds when Cartola's daughter, Justina, accompanied by her daughter, Neusa, visits Lisbon to reunite with her father and brother. Throughout this gathering, Cartola shares folk tales with his granddaughter, aiming to convey a structured division of the world and its inhabitants delineated by their colour line: "o avô contou à neta a história do macaco a gozar com as listas da zebra e da razão por que nada havia a esperar de gente escura como o carvão" [the grandfather told his granddaughter the story of the monkey making fun of the zebra's stripes and why there was nothing to expect from people as dark as coal] (Almeida 2018, 131).

¹³³ "Colonialism with a relational character" (my translation).

¹³⁴ "The father pondered whether his son was the fruit of other lives that had come to haunt him" (my translation).

the prophetic nature of his journey—one that holds no promise of return, despite it being his lifelong dream to live as a Portuguese in the heart of the ‘metropolis’ of the grand empire that had seemingly granted him a deep sense of belonging.

In reality, nothing and no one awaited them in Lisbon. Soon after their arrival, Cartola’s ties with Barbosa da Cunha quickly disintegrate, his hopes of securing documents affirming his Portuguese identity prove to be a delusion, and Aquiles’ illness persists despite numerous treatments. Meanwhile, memories of Luanda fade into distant requests for luxury items from Gloria, whose voice gradually fades into the background. Years pass, marked by ineffective treatments for Aquiles, exhausting labour on Lisbon’s construction sites, and cheap pensions offering no relief. Cartola’s hopes in Lisbon rest on the false promise of recognition as Portuguese. Instead, the city marks him as merely an immigrant, erasing any historical connection or acknowledgment of Portugal’s colonial past. In Lisbon, the past disappears, and gradually, so do Cartola and Aquiles.

Despite the process of assimilation, the protagonist’s name doesn’t bear the typical individual appellation; Cartola isn’t a João, Miguel, or Tiago. His name is reminiscent of an object, his identity akin to that of a hat, and this reveals much in relation to the condition in which he will find himself in Lisbon. Gradually, Cartola comes to the realization that he cannot shake off this condition, yet he holds onto hope that Aquiles will not suffer the same fate, as he “*era a prova de que havia vida depois da independência*” (Almeida 2018, 76).¹³⁵ In fact, Cartola is irreversibly assimilated, deeply entrenched in the Empire’s phantasmatic internalization, while Aquiles, in contrast, has shed the disillusioned perspective of his father, symbolizing a generational departure from the past. In this respect, Daniel F. Silva (2023, 70) posits that for Aquiles, as a child of Independence, the precariousness and marginalization they both experience are arguably “*menos chocantes, sobretudo porque estas não são, para ele, antitéticas a uma visão histórica favorável acerca da velha metrópole, como aquela que o pai guardava.*”¹³⁶ Nevertheless, neither father nor son evade the fate of ‘becoming ghost’, nor the erosion of their identities in the precarious existence progressively marked by illness and corporeal decline.

Amidst the throngs of people crowding the streets of Lisbon, Cartola gradually acquaints himself with the ‘art of vanishing’ and the skill of moving unnoticed among

¹³⁵ “Was proof that there was life after independence” (my translation).

¹³⁶ “Less shocking, above all because these are not, for him, antithetical to a favourable historical view of the old metropolis, like the one his father held” (my translation).

others like a spectre, taking advantage of the ‘post-imperial’ blindness that shapes Lisbon. Embracing this state of ghostliness becomes one of the few teachings that Cartola believes he can pass on to Aquiles on his eighteenth birthday: “a partir de hoje você é um homem, Papá Aquiles. Aqui nessa terra ninguém sabe quem és, por isso podes ser toda a gente” (Almeida 2018, 75).¹³⁷ When Cartola and Aquiles make their presence known, they do so with their feeble, ailing, and exhausted bodies. They emerge bearing the unmistakable marks of the precariousness experienced by those lacking a support network to dignify the most pressing contingencies of life: hunger, thirst, clothing, the necessity for shelter, and the care of the body. Aquiles thus appears in the novel as the infirm projection of Glória on another continent, that is, the eternally ill, the perpetually convalescent: “Talvez por isso, ainda no hospital, Aquiles tenha deixado de se sentir angolano. Esse olhar de quem vê o mundo da cama, contrariado, a morder-se de raiva porque ninguém o ouve, ninguém acode, foi a sua nacionalidade assim que pisou Lisboa. Não era livre. Era doente. O calcanhar defeituoso era o seu passaporte” (Almeida 2018, 57).¹³⁸ Aquiles ceases to be Angolan, losing his identity, as the only essence available to him in Lisbon is that of a sick individual—a flawed, shattered, broken, disabled body left vulnerable to widespread neglect. His sole conceivable identity appears to be one defined by illness, thrust into obscurity.

Similarly, Cartola transitions from being an assimilated individual to becoming firstly an immigrant and then a ‘no-body,’ utterly exposed to the scrutiny of others, including Aquiles, as a weary, pained and ‘dis-abled’ body through the hard work, anaesthetised by its own misery. Amidst the most dire circumstances in Paraíso, Aquiles observes Cartola: “No sétimo Outono, Aquiles deu-o como causa perdida. Sem o dizer, despachou-o como a um imigrante, condição que negava ser a sua. Sete anos de Lisboa, Cartola babava-se a comer e, se tentava levantar a voz, engasgava-se” (Almeida 2018, 153).¹³⁹

Despite the multitude of losses leading to a rapid dispossession of power and control over their lives and bodies, the narrator never allows the inner dimension, or what remains

¹³⁷ “From now on you’re a man, Papá Aquiles. Here on this land nobody knows who you are, so you can be everybody” (my translation).

¹³⁸ “Perhaps that’s why, while still in hospital, Aquiles stopped feeling Angolan. That look of someone who sees the world from his bed, thwarted, biting himself in anger because no one listens to him, no one helps him, was his nationality as soon as he set foot in Lisbon. He wasn’t free. He was a sick man. His defective heel was his passport” (my translation).

¹³⁹ “On the seventh autumn, Achilles declared him a lost cause. Without saying so, he dismissed him as an immigrant, a condition he denied. Seven years in Lisbon, Cartola drooled when he ate and, if he tried to raise his voice, he choked” (my translation).

of it, to vanish from the characters immersed in utter precariousness. Cartola and Aquiles teeter on the brink of apathy, anaesthesia, almost ceasing to feel anything, yet they never fully succumb. Judith Butler (2016) argues that the relationship between vulnerability and resistance disrupts the passive perception of precarious lives. In the case of Cartola and Aquiles, this can be understood as ‘agency in precarity.’ This agency does not signify a powerful force that transforms their lives; rather, it represents an inner struggle, revealing that life and beauty persist within the body and mind of the precarious subject. Throughout the narrative, the third-person narrator repeatedly highlights moments when the two verge on the ‘zero degree’ of their existence, yet somehow manage to stay just above it, sustained by the last remnants of strength in both body and mind. Beneath the exhaustion, inertia, apathy, and immobility, a conscious, living human being endures, not fully constrained by their precarious condition. Despite precarity, in every characters of the novel “a vida sopra de graça” (Almeida 2018, 99).¹⁴⁰ In the breath of life that remains, “Cartola era tudo menos um escravo”¹⁴¹ (Almeida 2018, 91) while Aquiles “vai invencível na solidão, enche o peito de ar, inspira contra o vento, resiste” because he “é o homem que se encontrou sozinho em Lisboa” (Almeida 2018, 168).¹⁴²

The only ‘paradise’ where Cartola’s vulnerable existence appears to find a semblance of tranquillity is the Cemitério dos Prazeres, where the array of names engraved on the tombstones resonates like verses from a mysterious poem. Suddenly, all the departed souls in the cemetery “eram por umas horas os seus únicos iguais na cidade das sete colinas” (Almeida 2018, 93).¹⁴³ The illusion of having a place of rest, where his memory can be honoured and his name mourned, is all that remains for him. Yet, as the journey from Lisbon to the unsanitary *bairro* of Paraíso unfolds, even this is lost. As Cartola drifts like a ghost among other ghosts, Aquiles comes to realize his own most tragic reality: that of a young boy stripped of both land and home.

Não tem pressa de voltar a casa, para o pijama húmido a cheirar a bafio, para o ressonar do pai, por isso, quando a Lua reflecte no Tejo numa folha de prata, Aquiles crava um cigarro e continua como um sem-terra. De noite, perde o medo: é da cor da cidade, caminha sem o fardo de ser visto, ninguém dá por ele. Tem a cor dos pombos, dos vagabundos, dos gatos, das putas do Cais do Sodré, cuja cara não distingue vendo-as de passagem, os seus cabelos

¹⁴⁰ “Life breathed free” (my translation).

¹⁴¹ “Cartola was anything but a slave” (my translation).

¹⁴² “Walks invincible in solitude, fills his chest with air, breathes against the wind, resists [...] he is the man who found himself alone in Lisbon” (my translation).

¹⁴³ “Were for a few hours his only equals in the city of the seven hills” (my translation).

caju lambidos, os lábios gastos; da cor dos táxis estacionados a ouvirem relatos, da cor dos telhados, das estátuas, da cor do céu. É carne da carne das coisas, feito do mesmo mármore e vidro negro, igualmente incógnito, sem forma, feito da matéria negra das árvores, dos bancos, das torres das igrejas, das montras mortas para revenda, dos cartazes nas paredes, dos tapumes das obras e do poço que eles escondem onde moram segredos. Para quê ter pressa de ir para casa? (Almeida 2018, 169).¹⁴⁴

In Paraíso, where the ‘expendable’ remnants of ‘postcolonial’ and ‘democratic’ Portuguese society are relegated after being used in the public construction, Aquiles transitions into manhood while Cartola ages. The narrative of assimilation unfolds as a tale of continual loss, even in the wake of Angola’s independence and ostensibly swift decolonization, which fails to engender decolonized bodies, minds, and politics. Cartola irreversibly forfeits his social and professional standing and becomes a lost ghost in Lisbon. Glória becomes forever confined to her bed, reigning as the imaginary queen of increasingly fantastical dreams while civil war ravages her homeland. Aquiles is reduced to being recognized solely as a ‘Black cripple.’ Justina and Neusa vanish without a trace following their journey to Portugal,¹⁴⁵ their fates remaining unknown. The only real legacy left by colonial history and its perverse policy of assimilation is the total ‘abandonment’ and deepest ‘precarity’ of those who were part of that history. The

¹⁴⁴ “He’s in no hurry to get home, to his damp pyjamas that smell of stale breath, to his father’s snoring, so when the moon reflects on the Tagus in a sheet of silver, Aquiles stubs out a cigarette and carries on like a landless man. At night, he loses his fear: he’s the colour of the city, he walks without the burden of being seen, nobody notices him. He’s the colour of the pigeons, the tramps, the cats, the whores of Cais do Sodré, whose faces he can’t distinguish when he sees them passing by, their cashew hair licked, their lips worn; the colour of the parked taxis listening to reports, the colour of the roofs, the statues, the colour of the sky. It’s the flesh of the flesh of things, made of the same black marble and glass, equally incognito, shapeless, made of the black matter of trees, benches, church towers, dead shop windows for resale, posters on walls, construction siding and the well they hide where secrets live. Why rush home?” (my translation).

¹⁴⁵ The summer when Justina and Neusa visit Cartola and Aquiles in Paraíso stands out as one of the rare moments of happiness for the two men. The attention, care, and dedication that the women shower upon their father and son’s home, even as they toil away on construction sites, offers a fleeting sense of relief in their lives, as well as in those of Pepe and Iuri. However, distance and the trials of diaspora gradually wear away at their bonds. Cartola, Aquiles, and Justina find themselves feeling strange and estranged from one another. Justina struggles to recognize her father, whose hands, eyes, and voice bear the scars and effect of misery. Meanwhile, Aquiles perceives his sister’s affection as something posthumous and staged, a mere semblance of the affection they once shared, now requiring performative acts to keep it alive, turning it into a spectacle: “Aquiles estava à porta de casa e encolheu-se diante da irmã, muito envergonhado. Ela abraçou-o com alegria saindo do desconforto da viagem com gestos abertos, mas teatrais. Justina achou-o magro e alto, metido consigo, atado. Ele disfarçou que sentia não a conhecer e notou nela um à vontade forçado” [Aquiles was at the door of the house and shrank away from his sister, very embarrassed. She hugged him happily, shaking off the discomfort of the journey with open but theatrical gestures. Justina found him slim and tall, stuck on himself, tied up. He disguised the fact that he felt he didn’t know her and noticed in her a forced ease] (Almeida 2018, 126). This passage shows how spectrality, which in this novel is closely linked to the effects of precariousness on the body and mind of the characters, is connected to the affections in the diaspora and how, through spectacle, an attempt is made to keep those affections alive despite the irreducible distance.

vulnerability of Cartola's assimilated family has always been exploited by the colonial regimes of the past, to the point of complicity with the same regime. The moment the Portuguese Empire fades away, this vulnerability immediately reconfigures itself in the form of structural racism, marginalisation and labour exploitation of specific bodies working in Lisbon's construction sites and cleaning services, bodies who stop at homeless pick-up points and in the most degraded parts of Lisbon, who move on metro lines, bus routes and on eternal ferry crossings; and finally, these bodies land in the degraded, abandoned, and toxic suburbs where they lay down as tired, sad, lonely, and exploited bodies congregate after endless hours of work. Here, the vulnerability inherent in the condition of the *assimilado* unleashes its destructive force, a force latent within the very concept of vulnerability itself, that is, the precariousness and bare existence no longer dictated by the logic of colonialism, but by the dust left behind by the empire, namely coloniality. If Luanda and Angola no longer exist because they have become an impossible memory to reconstruct amidst the total instability of the lives of father and son, the only 'real' dimension that persists is precisely the 'precarity of life' embedded within Paraíso. However, even Paraíso itself as a space is impermanent, for it too is destined for not surviving to itself: Justina and Neusa will return to Angola, the modest house of Cartola and Aquiles will be consumed by fire, Iuri and the dog Tristão perish in a grenade explosion, and Pepe tragically takes his own life. Sooner or later, all characters fade away, leaving behind as their legacy the precarious existence to which they were consigned.

As long as bodies like those of Cartola, Aquiles, Glória, Justina, Iuri, and Pepe¹⁴⁶ persist solely within the realm of extreme precariousness, the Portuguese empire continues, in its afterlife, to remain intact. As long as history continues to marginalize

¹⁴⁶ In this paragraph, while I focus my analysis on the figure of the *assimilado* in relation to the vulnerability produced by this condition in postcolonial Portugal, it's important to underscore the significance of Pepe's character in the novel, particularly in the section dedicated to life in Paraíso. Pepe is a poor Galician whose harsh upbringing "deformara o seu corpo" [had deformed his body] (Almeida 2018, 105), and whose fate of absolute poverty led him and his son Amândio to run a meagre bar in Paraíso. During the five years spent at the Pensão Covilhã in Lisbon, Cartola and Aquiles don't form friendships with anyone because affection seems to be hindered for those leading lives bordering on unhealthiness and death. Fearful of further hurt from people and circumstances, "a amizade não medra nos apeadeiros enquanto se aguarda por uma carruagem e muito menos na doença, que apenas tem tempo para se nutrir a si própria" [friendship does not flourish at the wayside while awaiting a carriage, much less in illness, which only has time to feed itself] (Almeida 2018, 89). In Paraíso, however, recognizing a true intersectionality of the oppressed, Cartola and Pepe become friends because they see in each other a humanity buried beneath layers of vulnerability, pain, filth, and loneliness. This friendship shows how in Paraíso, racial issues are gradually nuanced toward a more vast sense of precarity, comprising all its diverse inhabitants. According to Cláudia Pazos Alonso (2023, 102), the death of Iuri and Pepe at the end of the novel shows that the 'state of injury' transcends mere racial concerns.

these bodies—which have “nem a dignidade dos espoliados nem a honradez redentora dos desgraçados”¹⁴⁷ (Almeida 2018, 173)—the empire remains intact. The fate of Cartola and Aquiles, alongside numerous others who have crossed similar geographies within and beyond Portugal, remains etched in an “existência sem documentos”¹⁴⁸ (Almeida 2018, 173), where “a cidadania dos mortos”¹⁴⁹ (Almeida 2018, 223) may be the only possible permission to stay in Portugal as a legacy of the former ‘imperial citizenship’—the only sense of belonging, the only ‘real’ homecoming.

The main character of Luísa Semedo’s novel *O canto da Moreia* seems to share the same destiny of Cartola and Aquiles. Eugénio is an *assimilado*. He arrives by boat from Cape Verde towards the end of the 1970s, accompanied by Father Chico. From the onset of the novel, Eugénio is depicted as a man with a strong sense of self-esteem, stemming from his family’s social status in Cape Verde. Chapter 9 delves into Eugénio’s ancestral roots in Cape Verde, revealing that he is the son of a clandestine romance between Emília, a member of a prosperous Cape Verdean family, and Edgar, who comes from a less privileged background. Raised in a patriarchal and violent environment, Eugénio’s upbringing is marked by the marriage of his mother to his stepfather Armando—a Cape Verdean of Angolan descent and an aggressive foreman of a property owned by Portuguese colonizers in Praia.

Just like in *Luanda, Lisbon, Paraíso*, here too, the Portuguese Empire is scarcely mentioned, primarily through the work carried out by Armando, who “ganhava muito bem a vida exigindo dos negros cabo-verdianos obediência aos senhores brancos” (Semedo 2019, 190).¹⁵⁰ In this sense, both *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso*, and *O canto da Moreia* craft intricate narratives wherein the Portuguese Empire subtly permeates through brief sentences and sporadic references entwined with the everyday experiences of these *assimilados* in their lands. This portrayal unveils an unseen persistence and pervasiveness that silently profoundly moulds their lives.

In this milieu, Emília, Eugénio’s mother, was raised with a Western education steeped in French and Portuguese literature and culture. Similarly, Eugénio’s upbringing was shaped by the teachings of the Portuguese professor Jerónimo and the works of literary figures such as Camões, Eça de Queirós, and Platon. Influenced by this

¹⁴⁷ “Neither the dignity of the despoiled nor the redeeming honour of the disgraced” (my translation).

¹⁴⁸ “Existence without documents” (my translation).

¹⁴⁹ “The citizenship of the dead” (my translation).

¹⁵⁰ “Made a very good living by demanding that black Cape Verdeans obey their white masters” (my translation).

‘assimilated’ education, culture, and wider imagery Eugénio perceives himself as an exception within Cape Verde’s precarious context. He formulates a mantra, or else a fetish sentence, “Eu sou Eugénio”¹⁵¹ (Semedo 2019, 23), which he repeatedly vocalizes in public as a means of self-affirmation and to express an illusionary sense of individual exceptionality. This mantra symbolizes his privileged social status and access to a ‘good life’ in which material urgencies were not part of his concerns and which in turn has fostered his ‘intellectual’ capacities.

However, Eugénio fails to recognize his own ‘geniality’ within his privileged context, a realization that undergoes a dramatic shift upon his arrival in Lisbon. Orphaned and stripped of his family’s property, Eugénio sets sail for Portugal on Father Chico’s promise that in Lisbon he could pursue university education and delve into what he calls ‘universal wisdom’: “já se via voltar a Cabo Verde, homem feito, para contar, cheio de orgulho, as suas extraordinárias e extravagantes aventuras. *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Eugénio de la Praia*” (Semedo 2019, 27).¹⁵² Trapped within the confines of his own ‘assimilated fantasies’ and his *hubris*, Eugénio finds himself ensnared by high expectations of Portugal and an excessive sense of arrogance. Throughout the novel, he descends into a real spiral of decadence, which is strictly connected to the disillusionment of not being a ‘universal wise man,’ but simply a young diasporic Cape-Verdean Black guy in the 1970s and 1980s in Lisbon with all its consequences in the aftermath.

Eugénio will face progressive losses: firstly, he is deprived of his own privacy, forced to live with Father Chico; then, Father Chico, who “tinha sido um puro passador de um iludido embrulho, inconsciente do seu destino”¹⁵³ (Semedo 2019, 29), compels him, driven by material urgencies and leaving him no choice, to embark on the path of becoming a metalworker. As the narrator tells, “abandono e perdimento foram as palavras que naquele instante lhe ilustraram Lisboa e a sua nova condição” (Semedo 2019, 30).¹⁵⁴ ‘Abandonment’ and ‘loss’ emerge as pivotal issues in comprehending Eugénio’s descent into the Moreira’s abysm. Eugénio gradually loses control over his destiny, yielding to the relentless erosion of agency and the dominating influences of external factors, notably

¹⁵¹ “I am Eugénio” (my translation). Beyond paying homage to Eugénio Tavares, a significant figure in Cape Verdean history, Luísa Semedo selects the name ‘Eugénio’ deliberately. It is a word composed of the Portuguese *Eu* (I) and *Génio* (genius), allowing the character to highlight his ‘supposed’ knowledge and wisdom through the composition of his name.

¹⁵² “He could already see himself returning to Cape Verde, a grown man, to proudly recount his extraordinary and extravagant adventures. *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Eugénio de la Praia*” (my translation).

¹⁵³ “Had been a pure passer-by of a deluded parcel, unaware of Eugénio’s destiny” (my translation).

¹⁵⁴ “Abandonment and loss were the words that at that moment illustrated Lisbon to him and his new condition” (my translation).

the ‘material urgencies’ that were foreign to him in Cape Verde. Additionally, he struggles with his ethnic identity, which becomes an obstacle in Portuguese society, acting as a dehumanizing barrier shaped by the remnants of Luso-tropicalist ideologies and the challenges of a racialized capitalist and neoliberal system embedded in the factory where he works.

Like for Cartola, Eugénio’s sense of abandonment and loss is intensified by the lack of recognition of his ‘imperial citizenship.’ His status as an *assimilado*—an almost-Portuguese—serves as a constant reminder of his otherness, despite historical efforts to create a sense of belonging that was ultimately false and unfulfilled. On the street “lembravam-lhe, por vezes, de maneira menos fraterna ‘Vai prá tua terra,’ porém tinha a sorte de ter africanês clar, bonita e exótica”¹⁵⁵ (Semedo 2019, 48), where lighter skin colour is considered a mark of privilege in the process of racialization of population, which is differently discriminated, as it is the case of Alcino. In fact, Alcino, Eugénio’s fellow, had had the “*má sorte, graças aos acasos das nascenças, de carregar consigo superior concentração melanínica, de obstar superior achatamento nasal e superior pulposura labial, minudências herdadas que faziam toda a diferença na escala das intolerâncias*” (Semedo 2019, 48).¹⁵⁶ Despite enduring persistent neglect, Eugénio steadfastly assumed himself to be a ‘coherent’ and assimilated Portuguese man, continually affirming his perceived legitimacy of belonging to Portugal, while others, such as the chief of the Factory where he works, won’t see anything else but a “naturalizado” (Semedo 2019, 79).¹⁵⁷

His status as a married man to a Portuguese woman and father gives him the illusion of belonging and integration into the social fabric, lending him an appearance of respectability and the agency of a ‘real’ Portuguese. This status also reinforces his absorption of the patriarchal structure deeply embedded in Portuguese society and its colonial past. Additionally, his tumultuous upbringing in a violent family, where he seemingly adopted his stepfather’s aggressive behaviour toward his mother, shapes his assertion of ‘agency’ as a ‘master’ in different domains of daily life. He exercises violent control over family dynamics and as well as leads a spontaneous strike at the factory following an incident involving his coworker, Canhão. “A construção desta personagem,”

¹⁵⁵ “Sometimes reminded him in a less fraternal way, ‘Go back to where you came from,’ but he was fortunate enough to have clear, beautiful and exotic African skin” (my translation).

¹⁵⁶ “*Bad luck*, thanks to the chance of birth, to carry a higher melanin concentration, to have a flatter nose and a longer lip, inherited minutiae that made all the difference on the scale of intolerances” (my translation).

¹⁵⁷ “Naturalised” (my translation).

writes Margarida Rendeiro (2022b, 38) “constrói-se a partir do modelo patriarcal estruturante para o sistema capitalista.”¹⁵⁸ Within the domestic realm, violence is normalized as an intrinsic element of everyday life, perpetuating distinct gender roles and fostering asymmetric power dynamics where a violent masculinity subjugates a ‘vulnerable’ femininity: “na rua, era prestimoso palhaço alegre, em casa, usufruía das usuais imunidades domésticas, prerrogativas do rei macho. A paridade era conceito pertencente a língua estrangeira intraduzível, a exótico dialeto futurista” (Semedo 2019, 51).¹⁵⁹ This very ‘exercise of masculinity’ paradoxically becomes a tool for his syndicalist activism within the factory, serving as a means to highlight social and racial inequalities entrenched within the precarious and harmful working conditions. Indeed, following Canhão’s accident with a factory machine, Eugénio engages in a confrontation with the supervisor, who once again asserts that Eugénio ‘does not belong’ in Portugal: “Eu sou português! Quantas vezes tenho de lhe dizer? Ainda por cima é burro. Português, ouviu! Português!—Eugénio, enfurecido, tirou a carteira do bolso de trás das calças, retirou o bilhete de identidade e atirou-o à cara do patrão” (Semedo 2019, 96).¹⁶⁰ The motif of identity documentation—be it the identity card, passport, or visa—haunts Eugénio persistently, much like it does for Cartola and Aquiles. For Eugénio, the identity card symbolizes material, tangible, concrete proof of his real sense of belonging in Portugal; it is seen as the ultimate manifestation of the assimilation process, despite its affective costs. However, neither the possession of such documents nor any social status can shield Eugénio from plummeting down the social ladder. After losing his job and being ousted from his home following a near-fatal altercation with Laura, Eugénio “de senhor passara a estrangeiro” (Semedo 2019, 13).¹⁶¹ The streets of Lisbon become his final destination.

The exceptionalism of his ‘Eu-génio’ fetish sentence is utterly diminished while enduring life on the streets, with the Tagus River serving as a silent *memento* of his downward spiral from Cape Verde to the heart of the former Empire. A profoundly symbolic moment occurs during the commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the Carnation Revolution, where Eugénio, now living as a homeless individual under the

¹⁵⁸ “The construction of this character is based on the patriarchal model that structures the capitalist system” (my translation).

¹⁵⁹ “On the street, he was a helpful, cheerful clown; at home, he enjoyed the usual domestic immunities, the prerogatives of the macho king. Parity was a concept belonging to an untranslatable foreign language, an exotic futuristic dialect” (my translation).

¹⁶⁰ “Portuguese! How many times do I have to tell you? On top of that, you’re dumb. Portuguese, you hear! Portuguese!—Eugénio, enraged, took his wallet out of his trouser pocket, pulled out his identity card and threw it in his boss’s face” (my translation).

¹⁶¹ “From a master he had turned into a foreigner” (my translation).

arcades of Praça do Comércio, finds himself among the ‘leftovers’ of the Empire and the emerging neoliberal democracy. It’s only at that juncture that Eugénio comprehends the harsh truth: the promised ‘imperial citizenship’ was nothing but a cruel invention born out of violent colonial fiction. As he himself declares while living on the street, “Eu sou o Eugénio. Sou português, mas também estou em terra estrangeira, não tenho casa em lado algum. Nasci em Cabo Verde” (Semedo 2019, 125).¹⁶² In his most dire state, following a night spent sleeping on the pathways of Praça do Comércio, the process of ‘becoming ghost’ begins to take hold: “*Levantou-se o dia, mas não é para mim. Já não faço parte do cotidiano. Fui expulso do tempo*” (Semedo 2019, 126).¹⁶³ Precarity pushes the boundaries of the human body and mind, ushering in a spectral existence that hovers between life and death. In this state, one confronts life in its ‘bare’ dimension against the backdrop of a hostile society. The Moreira, symbolizing alcohol addiction, teaches Eugénio his destituted condition as a bare man in the ‘world that the Portuguese created.’ As a ‘bare’ individual, the protagonist comes to the conclusion that his identity risks aligning with his precarious existence, given the complete loss that robs him of any other means of recognition: “Sou bêbado e sou pobre. Ou sou pobre e sou bêbado. Já não sei o que sou primeiro. Padeço de alcoolismo crónico e de pobreza crónica” (Semedo 2019, 148).¹⁶⁴ Seemingly to Cartola, precarity also encompasses the profound fear of lacking the opportunity for a dignified resting place where one can be properly mourned.

Saber onde morreria tranquilizava-o, conhecer o fim do caminho, ali com os cotovelos em cima da mesa, frente a um prato de cachupa com ovo estrelado em piripiri no amarelo, eis a reconfortante morte idealizada, *que fosse o mais tarde possível, claro*, mas também definitiva, sem ensaios nem avisos. Desconhecia, agora, onde ocorreria a extinção da sua existência, e esta espacial incógnita provocava em Eugénio a inquietude intimidante de quem não detém as rédeas do seu desaparecimento (Semedo 2019, 138).¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² “I’m Eugénio. I’m Portuguese, but I’m also in a foreign land, I don’t have a home anywhere. I was born in Cape Verde” (my translation).

¹⁶³ “*The day is up, but it’s not for me. I’m no longer part of everyday life. I’ve been expelled from time*” (my translation).

¹⁶⁴ “I’m a drunk and I’m poor. Or I’m poor and I’m a drunk. I don’t know which I am first. I suffer from chronic alcoholism and chronic poverty” (my translation).

¹⁶⁵ “Knowing where he would die reassured him, knowing the end of the journey, there with his elbows on the table, in front of a plate of cachupa with a fried egg in yellow piripiri, this was the comforting idealised death, *which would be as late as possible, of course*, but also definitive, without rehearsals or warnings. He now didn’t know where the end of his existence would occur, and this spatial unknown gave Eugénio the intimidating restlessness of someone who doesn’t hold the reins of his disappearance” (my translation).

Upon realizing his fate of fading into oblivion,¹⁶⁶ Eugénio also grasps that he has joined the ranks of those consigned to limbo, condemned to perpetually search for a lost home, an illusory grave, drifting in a spectral existence. Despite his condition as an *assimilado*, Eugénio comprehends, upon being hospitalized, that he had never truly had a home, acknowledging his diasporic condition: “*Em Cabo Verde vivíamos na casa da minha tia, depois vivi na paróquia, vivi na casa alugada pela minha mulher, vivi na casa do Alcino, vivi na pensã na calçada da estrela, morri na rua. Vivi no refúgio e agora estou aqui*” (Semedo 2019, 138).¹⁶⁷ While Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida introduces the concept of ‘anxiety of the limbo’ in relation to the diasporic characters in her works, Margarida Rendeiro (2022b, 39) argues that Eugénio’s fictional construction is rooted in a sense of orphanhood. This orphanhood, more than a mere fictional trait, reflects a condition shaped by multiple forms of exploitation—colonial, capitalist, racial, and neoliberal—as well as diasporic rootlessness, despite his decades in the country. Eugénio’s orphanhood arises from his separation from family and is most evident in his emotional ties to his Creole language, which gradually erodes and fades due to colonial assimilation. He scarcely converses in Creole with other Cape Verdean homeless individuals on the street, aside from uttering the mournful phrase “*mamai ta pila mundu*”¹⁶⁸ (Semedo 2019, 124) in remembrance of his mother. This sentiment is compounded by memories of Cape Verde, evoked only by the occasional taste of *cachupa* and the absence of updates from scattered family members worldwide. Significantly, Eugénio’s inability to share ties and memories of his past life with his wife Laura exacerbates his feelings of isolation. Laura’s persistent inquiries about his inaccessible past only serve to widen the emotional chasm between them. Consequently, Eugénio retreats into self-imposed silence, fostering inner loneliness exacerbated by the progressive deterioration of his body—a thin silhouette, stained hands, and prematurely aged face due to his addiction.

Alone with nurse Judite in the hospital, Eugénio finally reveals the trauma that has haunted him throughout his childhood and adult life: he confesses to having been the catalyst for his mother’s death. He admits that he wrote a letter to his stepfather, exposing

¹⁶⁶ In an analysis of the novel through the lens of a racialized and exploitative neoliberal capitalist system, all the characters, particularly those working in the factory, undergo a process of ‘pulverization,’ as described by Margarida Rendeiro (2022b, 35), where they either disappear or are left isolated. Within this capitalist framework, which perpetuates unequal social opportunities and often ignores disparities and vulnerabilities, the fates of Eugénio and his colleagues are shaped by their systemic induced weaknesses—poverty, precarity, and premature death.

¹⁶⁷ “*In Cape Verde we lived in my aunt’s house, then I lived in the parish, I lived in the house my wife rented, I lived in Alcino’s house, I lived in the pensione on Calçada da Estrela, I died on the street. I lived in the refuge and now I’m here*” (my translation).

¹⁶⁸ The expression means ‘my mother wanders throughout the world.’

his mother's affair with Edgar, and shortly after this revelation, Emília passed away. In his final confession, Eugénio asserts his agency to narrate his true story, transcending the intertwining of his identity with his precarious circumstances, as he finally wants to converse with Judite “como homem, não como um doente” (Semedo 2019, 227).¹⁶⁹ The protagonist confesses that his greatest fear is to continue existing, even after death, as a ghostly presence: “Tenho medo, Judite tenho medo da morte, da solidão eterna, vejo-me errar no frio e no escuro para sempre, numa solidão infinita. E pior com a consciência dessa mesma infinidade. Numa espécie de imortalidade da morte. Compreendes?” (Semedo 2019, 228).¹⁷⁰ For the man, even death doesn't offer solace to his weary bones. This restlessness-in-death stems from the absence of the feeling of homecoming: “Até ao fim, não terei tido casa minha, até a minha sepultura será um aluguer, onde outro corpo virá habitar por cima do meu. E qual é a moral da história? Que tenho eu a ensinar-te no fim da vida, minha querida Judite? Nada. Peço-te perdão. Não fui nem sábio nem santo, terei sido Homem?” (Semedo 2019, 230).¹⁷¹

In an interview (Henriques 2019c, online), Luísa Semedo asserts that the novel delves into a profound exploration of loneliness, specifically examining what remains at the conclusion of one's life—memories, affections, family connections, expectations, dreams, and illusions—aiming to discern what truly matters when confronted with finitude. From this perspective, *O canto da Moreia* serves as a contemplative journey through Eugénio's lens, contemplating both the reality of his existence and the potential it held. In constructing Eugénio as a character, Semedo keeps in mind that “existe a noção de que o corpo negro é um corpo que pode sofrer mais, porque temos presentes aquelas imagens da escravatura. Para mim é importante mostrar um personagem negro, que é um personagem que chora, que tem problemas quando sai do seu país e que nos merece todo o respeito” (Semedo in Garcia 2019, online).¹⁷² In this regard, Eugénio, as well as Almeida's characters, rises above any stereotypes associated with superficial ‘postcolonial’ and ‘migration’ issues—contrary to the prevailing societal perception of

¹⁶⁹ “As a man, not a sick person” (my translation).

¹⁷⁰ “I'm afraid, Judite, I'm afraid of death, of eternal loneliness, I see myself wandering in the cold and the dark forever, in infinite solitude. And worse, with the awareness of that very infinity. In a kind of immortality of death. Do you understand?” (my translation).

¹⁷¹ “Until the end, I will have had no home of my own, even my grave will be a rental, where another body will come to live above mine. And what's the moral of the story? What do I have to teach you at the end of my life, my dear Judith? Nothing. I beg your forgiveness. I was neither wise nor holy, was I at least a man?” (my translation).

¹⁷² “There is a notion that the black body is a body that can suffer more, because we have those images of slavery. For me it's important to show a black character who cries, who has problems when he leaves his country and who deserves our respect” (my translation).

him. On the contrary, Semedo presents the reader with a highly nuanced and complex character far removed from mere colonial attributes: Eugénio is a man of both virtues and flaws, grappling with inner conflicts that extend beyond specific colonial traumas. Instead, his struggles reflect the profound challenges of navigating the aftermath of colonialism within a neoliberal, capitalist, patriarchal, and racialized society. Multiple layers of societal constructs contribute to his vulnerability across social, relational, political, cultural, economic, and health dimensions. *O canto da Moreia* thus becomes the confession and testimony of a man endeavouring to attain a ‘peaceful life,’ as posited by Vergès (2021, 98), or a ‘good life,’ as per Butler (2012), despite the numerous mistakes and transgressions he has committed. In the narrative, his death underscores the urgent need for a discussion about the post-imperial social fabric of Portugal, particularly regarding collective memory and identity. Alongside *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso*, Semedo’s novel offers a stark literary critique of contemporary Portugal, highlighting the ‘humans as waste’ neglected in the unseen corners of the capital and revealing the complexity and vibrancy of their inner lives.

In her critical reflection on the significance of the *assimilados* in literature, Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida (2023, 77) highlights their role as enduring symbols of colonial oppression, despite their deep entanglement with the regime. She notes their frequent neglect in both literary works and broader research, nonetheless expressing a profound sense of horror when contemplating these characters, because “esse horror está intimamente relacionado a um contexto epistemológico ao qual somo todos vulneráveis: o de alguém poder estar irremediavelmente errado.”¹⁷³ It is only after enduring complete loss and dispossession that Cartola and Eugénio come to the realization—and reluctantly accept—that their lack of a genuine sense of belonging is a result of the perverse story of assimilation to which they are profoundly bound.

The stories and transits of characters like Cartola and Eugénio—unsettling figures for Portugal, embodying non-conforming racialized bodies, and grappling with induced weakness or illness—highlight the falsity of the plural and multicultural society invented by the nation during the phase of re-democratization. What becomes evident from their narratives, however, is that while the intersection of gender and race has often been explored predominantly from a female and feminist perspective, the male experience within the context of Portuguese diaspora—particularly when intersecting with vectors of

¹⁷³ “This horror is closely related to an epistemological context to which we are all vulnerable: that someone could be irremediably wrong” (my translation).

race and illness—paints a picture of heightened vulnerability, whether it be physical, mental, or both, as also highlighted by Cláudia Pazos Alonso (2023, 94). When examining the impact of assimilation on her characters, specifically the deceptive illusion of an homecoming, Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida (2023, 77) herself acknowledges that this phenomenon is predominantly experienced by the men she encountered: “Conheci alguns, a maioria homens, a maioria negros.”¹⁷⁴

Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso and *O canto da Moreia* show how vulnerability and precarity are embedded within the construction of the diegesis while also embodied within the condition of the *assimilados* in post-imperial Lisbon. Illness, disability, and addiction are fundamental issues at stake when taking into consideration the frame of vulnerability of these men in the aftermath. These issues are strictly relate to everyday processes of racialization and the economic structures of what Cedric J. Robinson (1983) calls “racial capitalism” within the diegesis of the novels. Both of them explore how Lisbon still embodies a colonial soul who normalizes these processes of abandonment and exclusion, while also leading specific bodies into a tragic confrontation with their subaltern status in Portugal. In this direction, with parallel logics and ends, both assimilation in Angola or Cape Verde and marginalization in Portugal aim to “situar racialmente o sujeito dentro de um paradigma socioeconómico como local de exploração e/ou agente de reprodução desta ordem social. [...] O processo de assimilação opera dentro da ordem colonial como assegurado da divisão de trabalho vigente, com a ideia de mobilidade social dentro da mesma imaginada em termos raciais” (Silva 2023, 64).¹⁷⁵ In fact, the most shocking reality for Cartola and Eugénio is the complete lack of institutional protection that the ephemeral status of *assimilado* had previously falsely proportionated. The rapid change leads the men into complete vulnerable abandonment to a ‘bare’ life caused by the perpetration of exploitation through racial capitalism. That same racial capitalism—intended as a system which “pursued essentially racial directions” and in which “racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism” (Robinson 2000, 37)—has been instrumentalized by the expansion of this Europe in formation, which used processes of racialization as a way of defining itself through bodies that, in turn, served as an epistemic boundary between human beings and

¹⁷⁴ “I’ve met a few, most of them men, most of them black” (my translation).

¹⁷⁵ “Racially situating the subject within a socio-economic paradigm as a place of exploitation and/or an agent of reproduction of this social order. [...] The process of assimilation operates within the colonial order as a guarantor of the prevailing division of labour, with the idea of social mobility within it imagined in racial terms” (my translation).

exploitable sub-humans (Silva 2023, 66). If the assimilation led to social and material mobility to Cartola and Eugénio with a false perception of being conceived as ‘more humane’ than their compatriots, it also showed that that process was pure phantasmagory, revealing the ‘less-than-human’ status to which they are now socially relegated.

Taking into consideration Keisha Fikes’s (2009, 63) social and historical distinction between citizen and migrants within the African migration to Portugal as a way to categorize and racialize the lives of Afrodescendant, Cartola and Eugénio are faced with the issue of losing their ‘imperial citizenship.’ This represents a real trauma in relation to the way they understood their social position and identity within the colonial world. Since in the aftermath the rules have suddenly changed, their social title is completely emptied of meaning, or rather it is forgotten by Portugal, causing them a material, corporeal loss of value as (human) beings. They become part of what Byung-Chul Han (2018, 18) calls a “society of the undead, capable neither of living nor of dying.” This part of the society faces every day the reduction of life to mere vital biological processes exploitable for the racial capitalism, which ultimately “strips life itself bare” (Han 2018, 18). Deprived of everything, the three men of these novels become ‘buried alive’ since their lives are already considered not lives, or only partially living, almost dead and gone, although without being affected by any explicit, visible or official violence. In *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging*, Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2007, 15) define this ‘society of the undead’ as “spectral humans, deprived of ontological weight” because they are produced as stateless while simultaneously being excluded from any juridical form of belonging. This explains how one can be “stateless within the state,” as is the case for the incarcerated, enslaved, or those residing and labouring illegally. In other words, “they are, significantly, contained within the polis as its interiorized outside” (Butler and Spivak 2007, 16). This interiorized exclusion generates a deadly sensation for anyone who already understands themselves as a dispensable sort of being, one who registers at an affective and corporeal level that their life is not worth safeguarding, protecting, or valuing. For the passive inhabitants of Lisbon, the lives of Cartola, Aquiles and Eugénio are not worth any support.

Since their lives ‘do not matter’ for Portugal, both the novels focus on the aspect of what happens to a body when it doesn’t have the minimal material support to endure life. The legacy of assimilation is complete spoliation. This is why Daniel F. Silva and Cláudia Pazos Alonso’s analysis of *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* focus on vulnerability, precarity, and disability in order to read the construction of the characters. These essays represent

important input also to think about addiction as part of the precarization of bodies in the aftermath. Racial capitalism needs diseased, weak, broken, disable and ‘dis-abled’ bodies in order to subjugate them to exploitation. Similarly to Small’s (2018) paradigm of hyper-visibility/hyper-invisibility in Black Europe, important Black feminists like Nirmala Erevelles (2014), Moya Bailey and Izetta Autum Mobley (2019) highlight the connection of disability with race, class and gender as mechanism to undo and nullify, on a large scale, the freedom and citizenship of people of African descent. Specifically, Bailey and Mobley (2019, 24) state that “disabled and able-bodied function as two oppositional poles that belie the slippages and realities in between. Black people are afforded the curious task of being simultaneously hyper-able-bodied and disabled, while at the same time being locked into ideologies that figure us as both superhumanly strong and pathologically inept.”

This is why Eugénio, Cartola and, above all, Aquiles (because of his aching heel) are seen as hyper-able bodies during the strenuous hours of work and hyper-disable(d) when their bodies leave the construction site or factory, pervaded by pain or anaesthetised by alcohol. Through Aquiles’ heel, disability isn’t merely linked to corporeal or infrastructural concerns, but to an entire discursive and material framework emblematic of coloniality and racial capitalism, which systematically disables bodies like those of the characters. As the narrative voices imply, this system actively contributes to the deliberate weakening of exploitable bodies, rendering them disabled. In this direction, Daniel F. Silva’s (2023, 72) comments on Aquiles’ heel that “o enfoque não é apenas no pé em si e como o conteúdo discursivo e material do capacitismo constroem o pé de Aquiles como algo ‘deficiente,’ mas o pé e tudo em torno dele funcionam a um nível como metáfora/alegoria dos modos de racialização anti-negra em Portugal que articulam corpos negros em termos de deficiência ou falta vis à vis a normatividade do cidadão português branco.”¹⁷⁶ This reflection illuminates, in my view, also Cartola and Eugénio’s conditions. Their bodies are not like those of Aquiles, but they are progressively disempowered, weakened and dis-abled as bodies incapable of living any form of ‘good life’ within the racial capitalist system of coloniality. For this reason, they are bodies always collocated in opposition to white Portuguese normativity.

¹⁷⁶ “The focus is not only on the foot itself and how the discursive and material content of ableism constructs Achilles’ foot as something ‘disabled,’ but the foot and everything around it function on one level as a metaphor/allegory for the modes of anti-black racialisation in Portugal that articulate black bodies in terms of disability or lack vis à vis the normativity of the white Portuguese citizen” (my translation).

In alignment with Claudia Pazos Alonso's (2023, 95) perspective, and incorporating my insights regarding *O canto da Moreia*, the key words 'state of injury,' 'disposable,' and 'dead-alive' encapsulate the tragic and complex essence of the *assimilados*' experience in the aftermath. Beyond any utopian illusions, these novels underscore the impossibility of finding paradise in Portugal when it is built on a history marred by the hell of colonization. They also conclude that no happy ending can arise from a false sense of homecoming.

3.2.2 Living with the Dead: The Unseen Consequences of War Assimilation in Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida's *Maremoto*

In an essay discussing the Black combatants recruited into the colonial Forças Armadas Portuguesas (FAP) in Mozambique, writer João Paulo Borges Coelho (2012, 303) asserts that "é quase um truísmo dizer-se que a colonização do continente africano não teria sido possível sem colaboração local."¹⁷⁷ Coelho contends that their recruitment—the so called 'Africanization' of the Portuguese troops—was a political tactic employed to confront the conflict. The participation of Black troops in the conflict is not a homogeneous phenomenon. Instead, it reflects uneven and discontinuous moments throughout the thirteen years of the military campaign. Beginning in the 1950s, the Estado Novo mandated that one-third of the Portuguese army be composed of soldiers 'indigenous' to the colonies. This policy aimed to demonstrate to the world that the army fighting for control of the 'ultramarine provinces' embodied the 'mixture of races' celebrated by Luso-tropicalist ideology. According to Coelho (2012, 303), this insidious strategy gained increasing importance over time, eventually comprising nearly 50 percent of the soldiers involved in the war effort by the eve of April 25. An astonishing half. Adhering to the principle that 'conquering the populations equated to victory in war,' the Portuguese empire pursued two concurrent endeavours. Firstly, there was an historical rationale rooted in the integrative ideologies of the empire, characterized by concepts like *miscigenação* and later Luso-tropicalist theories embraced by the Estado Novo. Secondly, there was a 'psycho-social' rationale which emphasized the need to foster a sense of identification among local populations, particularly their representatives, with colonial values. This involved actively engaging in the defence of Portugal, often with the hope of

¹⁷⁷ "It is almost a truism to say that the colonisation of the African continent would not have been possible without local collaboration" (my translation).

social advancement and attaining Portuguese citizenship. The ‘advantages’ for Portugal in having an army “da mesma raça que eles”¹⁷⁸ (Coelho 2012, 310) were unmistakable: “A utilização de tropas de recrutamento local garantia, por si só, um conhecimento muito maior do terreno e das populações, uma resistência muito maior às doenças tropicais (sobretudo à malária) e às duras condições de operação no mato. Além disso, o soldado local era ‘mais barato’ em termos de transporte e manutenção, e a sua morte tinha ‘menos repercussões’ que a do soldado europeu” (Coelho 2012, 310).¹⁷⁹ In other words, the life of an assimilated soldier held lesser value compared to that of a Portuguese soldier. However, in the aftermath of the war, the destinies of these ‘compromised’ soldiers diverged significantly in the former colonies.¹⁸⁰ But what awaited them upon their eventual ‘return’ to the country they fought for?

In one of the earliest detailed studies on the subject, *Antigos Combatentes Africanos das Forças Armadas Portuguesas: A Guerra Colonial como Território de (Re)conciliação* (2017), Fátima da Cruz Rodrigues explores the memory and identity conflicts, as well as the ideological, political, cultural, and symbolic issues faced by former African soldiers through their biographical testimonies in the aftermath of the conflict. Their most tragic outcomes are represented by a complex bifurcation: for some, these men betrayed the independence projects of African countries; for others, these men fulfilled their duty to defend what they thought it was their homeland. Questions that presuppose answers based on a dichotomous logic—such as whether they were colonized men forced to fight in the army, or why they couldn’t escape and join the African liberation armies like so many others—are not suitable, according to Rodrigues, for understanding the extreme complexity surrounding the lives of these men. Following alternative interpretative logics requires paying particular attention to the different temporalities that shape the life journeys of the former combatants. These men’s journeys did not begin with the war; they are part of the much longer timeline of Portuguese colonization in Africa and the subsequent periods that ‘replaced’ it. Following such

¹⁷⁸ “Of the same race as them” (my translation).

¹⁷⁹ “The use of locally recruited troops in itself guaranteed a much greater knowledge of the territory and populations, a much greater resistance to tropical diseases (especially malaria) and the harsh conditions of operating in the bush. In addition, the local soldier was ‘cheaper’ in terms of transport and maintenance, and his death had ‘fewer repercussions’ than that of the European soldier” (my translation).

¹⁸⁰ Coelho (2012, 313, my translation) succinctly sums up the destiny of these individuals: “Curiously, the fate of these thousands of men was unequal in the three colonies that became independent. Guinea saw the most radical rejection, and a large number of black ex-colonial combatants were shot there. Invaded by South Africa as early as 1975, the Angolans integrated a large number of these experienced combatants into the new national army and even today a significant part of the officer corps has this colonial military origin. Mozambique represents an intermediate case between these two situations.”

intertwined temporalities, the most tragic and perverse outcome of this specific historical process of assimilation is that it was not limited to Portuguese linguistic and cultural introjection or to labour division within the former colonial society; it also involved the brutal internalization of colonial warfare ideologies. In other words, the assimilation process for these soldiers required an inner acceptance of the ‘justification’ for colonial war against African countries, upheld by Portugal’s false promises of belonging. However, for Portugal, African soldiers were merely expendable men placed on the battlefield in place of the colonizers themselves. With the independence of the African territories, they become men free from colonization but who remain former FAP fighters. Rodrigues highlights the necessity of deconstructing the monolithic identity that situates these subjects within the dichotomy of colonizer/colonized.¹⁸¹ She invites us to rethink their identity within the fluid interstitial spaces of alterity, starting from their life stories in contemporary post-imperial Portugal and considering what they expected to find and become. Since the former FAP combatants lost their Portuguese citizenship with the independence of the African territories (Rodrigues 2017, 192), this rethinking is crucial.

Boa Morte da Silva, the central figure in Almeida’s novel *Maremoto*,¹⁸² embodies the profound and conflicted struggle to come to terms with this internalized assimilation

¹⁸¹ Rodrigues reinterprets the figure of the African combatant in the FAP through various perspectives and categories. She employs postcolonial theories to explore identity formation in the ‘zones of contact’ between the colonizer and the colonized, examines the military institution as a disciplinary power that shapes the combatant, considers the experience of war as an ‘extreme experience’ closely linked to trauma and psychic disruption, and, finally, addresses the profound consequences of these factors in post-imperial times.

¹⁸² *Maremoto*, initially published in 2021, found its place in the triptych *Três Histórias de Esquecimento* (2021). This collection also includes *A visão das plantas*, previously released as a standalone work in 2019, and the unpublished novella *Bruma*. Within this composite book, Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida grants voice to figures that have hitherto lacked profound consideration within Portuguese historical and literary narratives. In *A visão das plantas*, Captain Celestino—a character that comes from Raul Brandão’s *Os Pescadores*—is a shadowy slave trader, serving as a counterbalance to the national glorification of Portuguese discoveries of ‘peoples and lands,’ instead spotlighting slavery as a pivotal aspect of Portuguese modernity’s foundation. Meanwhile, in *Maremoto*, Boa Morte da Silva embodies the antithesis of the heroic image often associated with Portuguese colonial war veterans, depicting instead a man stranded without a homeland to return to, caught in the throes of his own tragic circumstances. Finally, in *Bruma*, the eponymous protagonist—reminiscent of a character quoted from Eça de Queiroz’s childhood—sheds light on the prevalent presence of Black servants in 19th-century Portuguese society. This aspect represents another overlooked facet of Portuguese societal structure, with profound implications that remained largely invisible within historical and literary discourse. Across Celestino, Boa Morte, and Bruma, the multifaceted inner worlds of these both historical and fictional figures come to the fore. The decision to compile these three narratives emphasizes a historical spacetime continuum that is not linear, but circular. It spans from the era of slavery, through decolonization, to the precarious street life of post-25 April Lisbon, and then loops back to the 19th century to explore the inner and social life of a Black squire. *Três Histórias de Esquecimento* thus serves as a poignant invitation to contemplate the normalization of relegating the depth, complexity, the horror and even beauty of these silenced figures within both historical records and Portuguese literature. While it’s worth noting that literary exploration of Portuguese involvement in the slave trade is not unprecedented, with works like Ana Margarida de Carvalho’s *Não Se Pode Morar nos Olhos de um Gato* (2016) and Alexandra Lucas Coelho’s *Deus-Dará* (2016) offering significant critical

through war in post-25 April Portugal. Thus, the novel explores the disconnection between what Boa Morte expected to find and become in Portugal through war-driven assimilation, and what he actually became: a precarious, ghostly inhabitant of a ‘democratic’ Lisbon, surrounded by many other forgotten ghosts.

In Portuguese tradition, the archetypes of ‘seamen’ and ‘fighters’ are recurring, romanticized symbols that reflect the intertwined narratives of the country’s colonial ‘discoveries’ and ‘conquests,’ shaping both historical and contemporary memory of Portugal. This celebration is evident to anyone walking through Lisbon, where streets, squares, and monuments frequently commemorate these figures. In contrast, there is little to no space in topographical or historical memory, nor in historiography or literature, for figures such as Black soldiers within Portuguese troops—an absence that has been systematically normalized across various forms of misrepresentation. The lack of memory surrounding these characters has constituted—and continues to constitute—a deeply disquieting element in the ongoing construction of Portuguese democracy.

In this context, it is impossible to overlook Marcelino da Mata, a Guinean military officer who gained recognition for his role in the colonial war, fighting on the Portuguese side. However, da Mata’s legacy is marred by well-documented atrocities, including his involvement in the 1973 ‘Ametista Real’ operation, which sought to occupy Senegalese territory, and the 1970 ‘Mar Verde’ operation, where Guinea-Conakry was invaded in an attempt to attack the PAIGC base and assassinate Amílcar Cabral (Cardina 2023, 88). Despite his controversial actions, da Mata was celebrated for his ‘commitment’ and ‘dedication’ to Portugal during his 2021 funeral, with no acknowledgment of the brutalities he perpetrated during the war. This stark contrast is underscored by Margarida Rendeiro (2023, 131), who highlights that most Black African soldiers who fought for the Portuguese troops received no support from the Portuguese state after the conflict, as revealed in the investigative article “Por Ti Portugal Eu Juro!” published by *Divergente* magazine in 2021.

If post-April 25 literature concerning the colonial war engaged in a reassessment of the cartography of historical memory, shifting its focus towards post-conflict and post-dictatorship Portugal, then, the character of the former African fighter implicated in the Portuguese army is still a largely unexplored figure in literature. Authors like António

reflections on this historical archive, the significance of Almeida’s contributions, alongside those of other authors under examination, lies in the fact that they represent the inaugural endeavours on this topic by Afrodescendant Portuguese authorship.

Lobo Antunes and Lília Jorge have skilfully depicted the drama of white Portuguese participation in the war through literature, as well as the subsequent reconfiguration of Portugal in the post-war era, deconstructing any 'glorified' vision of the country as a once-magnificent colonial power. However, their portrayals fall short in addressing the gap left by the absence of the Black combatants, their complex inner life conspicuously absent from the nation's historical memory.

The character construction of Boa Morte da Silva is truly fascinating. Boa Morte's origins trace back to Cunene, a region in the southern part of Angola, specifically in the town of Evale. Initially, he pursued a career as a customs agent in Silva Porto (known today as Cuíto). Later on, he joined the Portuguese army in Guinea, where, during the narration, he affirms that he left behind a wife and daughter named Aurora. The very name, Boa Morte da Silva, carries a hint of Santomense influence, akin to the typical expressions from São Tomé that Boa Morte employs, such as "problem se resolve leve, leve" (Almeida 2021, 35). Boa Morte's geographical 'confusion' presents an intriguing contrast—an Angolan figure with Santomean characteristic engaged in the conflict in Guinea-Bissau, offering a narrative that defies conventional expectations. What Almeida presents in the novel isn't merely the meticulous accuracy and coherent reconstruction of a historical figure, nor is Boa Morte an archetypal or symbolic representation of African combatants in the FAP. Instead, Almeida delves into the complex inner world of this mysterious man, much like her other characters. What interests Almeida is the restitution of the inner complexities, dramas and conflicts of this person who, through his writings and thoughts, communicates the deep suffering he experiences in relation to his past and his present.

Amidst his bewildering shifts of bio-geographical transitions, Boa Morte emerges as a profoundly unsettling figure, both for the Portuguese and Africans alike. He embodies the twisted legacy of perverse assimilationist policies and wartime strategies that coerced Africans into fighting against their own brethren, only to abandon them entirely at the conflict's conclusion, devoid of any reparative measures or acknowledgment. However, this discomfort extends beyond the mere colonial perspective. Boa Morte also disturbs Africans, viewed as a compromised and morally ambiguous individual, doomed to perpetual exclusion due to his bloodstained hands. Thus, Boa Morte epitomizes a convergence of complexities, nuances, and shadowy realms rarely encountered in characters representing a 'typical' portrayal of the African experience. He defies easy and static categorization, serving as a stark reminder of the intricate webs of power, betrayal,

and enduring marginalization woven into the complex fabric of the relations between Portugal and African continent.

Thinking about the dramatic complexity that violence produces, Byung-Chul Han (2018, 189) writes that “the history of violence culminates in this merging of victim and perpetrator, of master and slave, of freedom and violence.” In this direction, it is interesting to consider the concept of the implicated subject in the formulation of historian Michael Rothberg. Rothberg defines the ‘implicated subject’ as a subject who oscillates between the figure of the oppressor and the victim but does not identify with either polarization. Rather, the implicated subject participates in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator, but without occupying a clear and defined role between the two binary oppositions: “In other words, implicated subjects help propagate the legacies of historical violence and prop up the structures of inequality that mark the present” (Rothberg 2019, 1). In this sense, complicity presupposes implication, but implication does not always imply complicity. For the same reason, Boa Morte is also placed in an ambiguous identity space, inherent in the assimilationist process, constantly oscillating between being an accomplice and a victim of the regime, between the oppressor and the colonial oppressed. The awareness of this scabrous implication leads Boa Morte to feel rejected in any place, to be the eternal condemned to the absence of a home not only intended as a country, but as a place for affection. Reminiscent of Eugénio’s character, Boa Morte acts violently against his wife in Guinea the moment she reminds him that he will never be truly Portuguese, and that his ‘imperial citizenship’ is a cowardly promise to instrumentalise the clash between compatriots on the Portuguese side. From that moment, Boa Morte loses all contact and affective ties with his wife and daughter.

The inclusion of *Maremoto* within the triptych *Três Histórias de Esquecimento* provides deeper insights into the novel’s meaning. *A Visão das Plantas*, *Maremoto*, and *Bruma* are interconnected through an opening epigraph by British philosopher Peter Geach: “Mas talvez um homem possa perder a sua última chance quando é novo, e depois viver até ser velho: viver contente e sentir-se em casa no mundo, mas aos olhos de Deus estar morto” (Almeida 2021, 1).¹⁸³ *Maremoto* explores the fate of a man who has squandered his chance at salvation and happiness—marked by the moment he exerts violence against his wife—yet must continue living. The remainder of his life, following

¹⁸³ “Perhaps a man may lose his last chance when he is young, and then live to be old: live contented and at home within the world but in God’s eyes be dead” (my translation).

this lost opportunity for redemption, is defined by a relentless struggle for dignity in the face of abandonment, as he finds himself unseen by both God and anyone else.

In retrospect, in one of his letters to his daughter Aurora, Boa Morte reflects on the total loss of any sense of homecoming:

Minha terra me guardou lugar de farrapo, mas aceitei meu posto como filho de Deus aceita seu quinhão da colheita. Filho não escolhe seu pai, eu não escolhi meu país. Matei como um louco. A cada cadáver me entreguei a Portugal. Cheguei a Lisboa, em 1979, soldado de regresso à casa do sei pai, cara de meu pai são essas ruas por onde hoje caminho. Meu velho pai pobre não tinha mesa posta no dia do meu regresso nem foi avisado de que eu cheguei. Mas, mesmo assim, me estendeu porção da sua terra—Rua António Maria Cardoso—para eu lavrar com as minhas mãos e colher a minha colheita. Descendo a rua, dia inteiro, sinto que a minha paga não foram migalhas, mas a cidade grande. Caminho cidadão pleno, mesmo que me tomem por vagabundo. Sigo acordado. [...] À minha chegada, meu pai me abriu a porta, mas não me reconheceu (Almeida 2021, 67).¹⁸⁴

The only possible homeland for Boa Morte is obviously his innermost illusion of belonging, the same illusion that condemns him to be yet another inhabitant of the limbo, abandoned to the only possible dimension that is the precarious life of the ‘dead-alive’: “Boa Morte está cego, filha. Morto. A noite traz um sentimento, me pergunto para quê contar minha história. Boa Morte é leproso que não vê a sua lepra. Acabei a minha vida e não entendi” (Almeida 2021, 72).¹⁸⁵

‘State of injury,’ ‘disposability,’ and ‘death in life’ are thus key concepts in order to analyse also Boa Morte’s existence. Throughout the novel, the figure of the *assimilado* becomes even more intricate, like a puzzle to which a new piece is always being added. Boa Morte—a ‘speaking name’ indicative of his ghostly, phantasmagorical, ‘death-in-life’ dimension—lives in a Lisbon that for him is more than a limbo, but a true purgatory in which he must atone for the atrocities committed during the war against his blood brothers. Unlike Cartola, Aquiles and Eugénio, whom, as we have seen, the reader follows

¹⁸⁴ “My land saved me a place as a rag, but I accepted my position as a child of God accepts his share of the harvest. A son doesn’t choose his father, I didn’t choose my country. I killed like a madman. With every corpse I gave myself to Portugal. I arrived in Lisbon in 1979, a soldier returning to my father’s house, my father’s face are these streets where I walk today. My poor old father didn’t have a table set on the day of my return, nor was he told that I had arrived. But even so, he gave me a portion of his land—Rua António Maria Cardoso—for me to plough with my hands and harvest my crops. Walking down the street all day, I feel that my payment was not crumbs, but the big city. I walk as a full citizen, even if I’m labelled a vagabond. I stay awake. [...] When I arrived, my father opened the door, but he didn’t recognise me” (my translation).

¹⁸⁵ “Boa Morte is blind, my child. Dead. The night brings a feeling, I ask myself why tell my story. Boa Morte is a leper who can’t see his leprosy. I’ve finished my life and I didn’t get it” (my translation).

in their process of ‘becoming ghosts,’ Boa Morte is already a spectre from the very beginning of the story: “Sou Boa Morte da Silva, fantasma. Ando, mato a sede, escrevo, falo, penso, mas já vi a minha hora, já fui julgado há muito” (Almeida 2021, 40).¹⁸⁶ He is a ghost aware of everything and everyone, yet entirely invisible to the eyes of others. He considers himself the unseen guardian of Lisbon, leading a kind of spectral army that roams its streets. What’s most astonishing, and perhaps chilling, is the novel’s ability to evoke a collective sense of loss, abandonment, invisibility, and a pervasive feeling of ‘death-in-life,’ far surpassing what was achieved in *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* and *O canto da Moreia*. From the very beginning of *Maremoto*, the unsettling words of Boa Morte unveil a haunting portrayal of being ‘buried alive’ alongside the impoverished inhabitants of Largo do Chiado, casting a spectral veil over post-25 April Lisbon. To truly comprehend the pervasive presence of these precarious figures, it’s crucial to delve into the following passage:

[...] sou um homem sem bagagem, filha, um marinheiro sem navio. Minha terra são esses malucos aqui do Chiado, ninguém nos vê pela rua, podemos andar esfarrapados, ninguém nos olha, mas vemo-nos uns aos outros, vivemos aí, na transparência, a trocar conversa, trocar pão, trocar vinho, espíritos do além, que andam por Lisboa, mais abaixo tem o Ti Zeca, natural de Santiago, mas esse dá problemas, anda sempre bêbado, tem também muitos portugueses. Alguns encontro hora do almoço quando vou almoçar—o Bruno, moço que dá pena, deixou a escola, andou na droga, agora também anda no estacionamento, a Cinha e o Pedro, Fatinha já disse, tem um moço do Senegal nunca me disse o seu nome, esse aí só conversa com o pacote de vinho, tem muitos: Joca, um moço de Santarém, a Cátia, rapariguinha ainda bem bonita, mas toda magreza, somos quase um exército, mas ninguém nos vê por aqui, o Chiado também é nosso, minha filha, somos os guardiões das ruas, [...], patrões do estacionamento dão-me moeda todo o santo dia sem me perguntar sequer meu nome, nem vêem a minha mão, pagam na mão do espírito para lhes poupar à morte, pagam para eu não dar chatice. Ia escrever agora, minha filha, enterrados em vida, eu e os meus amigos aqui do Chiado. [...] Tem também muito bandido e agarrado, enterraram-nos e faltámos ao nosso funeral. Enterraram um caixão vazio e deitaram-no à terra debaixo de uma pedra com o nosso nome. Agora, somos espíritos que habitam as ruas, a andar com os pés e as pernas, a falar e a respirar, mas as pessoas passam, circulam e não nos vêem (Almeida 2021, 15).¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ “I am Boa Morte da Silva, ghost. I walk, I quench my thirst, I write, I talk, I think, but I’ve already seen my time, I was judged long ago” (my translation).

¹⁸⁷ “[...] I’m a man without luggage, daughter, a sailor without a ship. My land is these crazy people here in Chiado, nobody sees us on the street, we can walk around ragged, nobody looks at us, but we see each other, we live there, in transparency, exchanging conversation, exchanging bread, exchanging wine, spirits from beyond, who walk around Lisbon, further down there is Ti Zeca, from Santiago, but he’s trouble, he’s

This portrayal of flooding spectres, as expressed through Boa Morte's words, mirrors a similar scene in the novel. The third-person narrator vividly describes a procession of the dead advancing toward Largo do Chiado and eventually reaching Rua António Maria Cardoso, all under Boa Morte's gaze (Almeida 2021, 59-60). These passages reveal that *Maremoto* is a profound meditation on what it means to live alongside the dead in post-imperial Portugal. The coexistence of the dead, the nearly dead, and ghosts is depicted through the shared and material wound they all inhabit in the aftermath. In this scenario, a collective palpable sense of abandonment and vulnerability permeates through the narrative.

What's interesting to observe is how, amidst the struggles of characters also in *Luanda*, *Lisboa*, *Paraíso* and *O canto da Moreia*, distinctions of race, class, and gender appear to blur slightly when faced with precarious circumstances. Across the three novels, Black Portuguese *assimilados* find themselves sharing their existence with immigrants from other African countries, impoverished Portuguese people, and other marginalized 'European citizens'—such as the relationship between Angolan Cartola and Galician Pepe. This cohabitation extends to vulnerable men and women alike, as in the case of Boa Morte and her 'mentally unstable' Santomean friend Fatinha. Reminiscent of Glória in some respects, Fatinha is the troubled girl lost in her delusional fantasies of misery, envisioning a Lisbon submerged beneath the waters of the Tagus and populated by these marginalized groups. Thus, individuals marginalized by both neoliberal policies and neocolonial legacies find themselves converging in a collective, albeit often unconscious, experience of precarity in the aftermath. As such, their shared precarity highlights a common struggle for survival. In the novel, this interconnection extends also to non-human animals. Boa Morte's isolation in Lisbon is eased by an unexpected encounter with Jardel, a stray dog who chooses to live with him, forming a companionship marked by shared experiences of abandonment and precarity. Notably, Boa Morte and Jardel

always drunk, there are also lots of Portuguese. I meet some of them at lunchtime when I go for lunch—Bruno, a boy who's a pity, he left school, did drugs, now he's also in the car park, Cinha and Pedro, Fatinha already told me, there's a boy from Senegal who never told me his name, he only talks to the wine carton, there are lots of them: Joca, a boy from Santarém, Cátia, a pretty girl, but all skinny, we're almost an army, but nobody sees us around here, Chiado is ours too, my daughter, we're the guardians of the streets, [...], car park bosses give me coins every day without even asking me my name, they don't even see my hand, they pay in the hand of the spirit to spare them death, they pay so I don't give them a hard time. I was going to write now, my daughter, buried alive, me and my friends here in Chiado. [...] There are also a lot of bandits and clingers, and we were buried and missed our funeral. They buried an empty coffin and threw it in the ground under a stone with our name on it. Now we're spirits who inhabit the streets, walking with our feet and legs, talking and breathing, but people pass by, move around and don't see us" (my translation).

embody what Nicole Shukin (2018, 123) describes as “precarious encounters”—bonds forged beyond speciesist divisions amidst shared precarious conditions. Their relationship illustrates how different living beings can co-create life-sustaining connections when united by shared wounds and precarious lives. This expands the reflection on what it means to be living beings who have collectively reached the zero degree of existence.¹⁸⁸

What’s particularly striking in *Maremoto* is how the heart of Lisbon itself—rather than the distant periphery like the *bairro* of Paraíso, hidden from public view—becomes the stage where these precarious lives are simultaneously most exposed and yet most unseen. The extensive portrayal of diverse marginalized communities sharing a common space resonates with Silviano Santiago’s concept of the ‘cosmopolitanism of the poor,’ particularly within the Brazilian context. Reflecting on the redefinition of Afro-Brazilian culture as ‘cosmopolitan and poor’ during the 1980s and 1990s, Santiago (2004, 61) argues that this cultural movement, part of a broader network in the Global South, challenges the longstanding inefficiencies and injustices perpetuated by governmental and intellectual elites regarding national citizenship. The critique of the National State no longer solely targets the shortcomings of official politics but instead engages in a dialogue with similarly oppressed cultures amidst the contemporary global flows from south to north. In the context of these three novels, various marginalized groups converge in a shared space, confronting together the myriad challenges stemming from their exclusion from any sense of belonging.

These collective scenes of precarity quoted from the novel resonates also with the analysis presented by Françoise Vergès. The introduction to her book *A Decolonial Feminism* (2021) sets the tone with its emblematic title: “Invisible, They ‘Open the City’.” Vergès highlights the often unseen and strenuous labour carried out by marginalized

¹⁸⁸ Though a detailed analysis of this issue is beyond the scope here, I want to emphasize that Almeida’s novels depict precarity also through the relationships between vulnerable human and non-human animals. In *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso*, Cartola, Aquiles, Pepe, Amândio and Iuri form a community in Paraíso with the stray dog Tristão, whose presence fosters their interdependence amidst shared precarity. In *Maremoto*, Boa Morte and Jardel are described sleeping and dreaming together, merging into a single entity that confronts daily struggles in Lisbon. Their existence is nearly devoid of material value in the eyes of Portuguese society. Yet, despite their differences, vulnerability binds them as they co-exist, struggle, and resist together. This bond between Boa Morte and Jardel illustrates how living beings forge connections in a city haunted by the dead of modern Portuguese society. Before Boa Morte disappears into the depths of the metro, he stumbles upon a circus tent, where dirty donkeys, skinny lions, sleeping tigresses, faded peacocks, and ragged dromedaries are caged. A white mare with blue eyes, reminiscent of Fatinha, looks at Boa Morte as an equal, and he realizes his fate mirrors that of these disempowered animals. The abandonment of animals and the many ‘Boa Mortes’—society’s waste—on the streets of Lisbon symbolizes a fall from the false state of grace generated by colonial oppression and its perverse assimilation policies. In this sense, precarity is not limited to humans; the interconnected vulnerability of animals and humans in the novel reveals much about shared histories of marginalization, oppression, and their intertwined fates. For a more in-depth discussion on this topic, see Biasio (2023).

populations, especially racialized women, in the major cities of the Global North. When offices, hospitals, universities, museums, shopping malls, airports, hotels, parking lots, streets and train stations lie empty, it is these very groups who step forward to clean, care for, construct, and tidy these spaces. Yet, after performing these essential tasks, they are expected to disappear, allowing others to ‘take advantage of’ the cleaned, cared for, constructed, and tidied spaces that we occupy in our daily lives:

Billions of women take care of cleaning the world every day, tirelessly. Without their work, millions of employees and agents of capital, the state, the army, and cultural, artistic, and scientific institutions could not use their offices, eat in their cafeterias, hold their meetings, or make their decisions in clean spaces where wastebaskets, tables, chairs, armchairs, floors, toilets, and restaurants have been cleaned and made available to them (Vergès 2021, 1-2).

Similarly, Boa Morte and his ‘friends’ in Chiado assume the role of invisible ‘guardians of the streets’ in Lisbon. Their labour, essential for the city’s material functioning, remains unseen by those who benefit from their contributions in ‘unskilled industries.’ Thus, the inquiries posed by decolonial feminist perspectives—‘who cleans the world?’—can be expanded within the context of these three novels to ask, ‘who cleans, builds, constructs, manages, gathers, and tidies Lisbon?’ It’s thus evident that the disposable lives of the marginalized ‘others’ within the Portuguese empire transition into the new disposable lives of Democratic Portugal.

Within the neoliberal paradigm of invisible exploitability of vulnerable lives, Sheila Khan (2021) interprets the novel through the concept of a ‘sociology of absences,’ shedding light on the dimension of loneliness and absence inherent in Portuguese coloniality. Since the novel opens to a collective sense of precarity in the aftermath, I argue that *Maremoto* undertakes a critical ‘anatomy of loneliness’ in a post-imperial time. Once again, Boa Morte embodies the most sinister consequence of assimilation politics, having taken the lives of his compatriots to ‘become’ Portuguese. Boa Morte not only relinquished his convictions to Portugal but also sacrificed his familial bonds. Caught in a narrative of death, violence, and ‘inhumanity’ perpetuated by Portugal’s glorified imagery, he finds no respite from the suffering and cruelty inflicted upon human bodies. The only semblance of homeland is one of illusions and bloody dreams, amidst life on the streets and its perpetual precarity as an enduring atonement.

In this context, *Maremoto* reveals that despite the Carnation Revolution, a significant portion of the population has yet to experience any meaningful social change,

exposing 25 April as a revolution that failed to seriously address the racial wounds inflicted by the long history of colonial oppression. Boa Morte emerges as a living example of this chronic, structural exclusion, one that denies him any true sense of belonging in Angola, Guinea or Portugal. Mourning again takes centre stage, as Boa Morte grapples with the complete loss of all familial ties, condemned to wander ghost-like through Lisbon, searching for an unknown daughter and a blind fatherland to which he cannot ‘return’ because it never existed. The question, “mas quem me ia chorar?”¹⁸⁹ (Almeida 2021, 93), repeatedly voiced by Boa Morte, resonates throughout the novel, stirring a disquiet sense of unfinished history. This unresolved mourning, if not addressed by both sides of the former conflicts, will perpetuate the open wounds of these countries, keeping alive the haunting absence of critical examination of the necropolitical abyss that coloniality continues to reproduce over and over again.

3.2.3 Bodies in Community: ‘Staying with the Wound’

If thus far I have centred the focus of the analysis on the several accounts of injury proportionated by Portuguese colonial and modern violence—namely, the connection between these particular characters and the precarity engendered by specific historical regimes—in this section my focus shift to the tiny acts of misappropriation of the injury as a form of resistance to its deadly effects.

In this section, I argue that the three novels under examination grapple with vulnerability and precarity without being ‘consumed’ by them. Indeed, the fate of the characters appears bleak, with many of them vanishing into oblivion. Yet, amidst the solitude and invisibility, there always remains a glimmer of permanence of beauty. Drawing a parallel with Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida’s works, Roberta Guimarães Franco (2023, 39) contends that beyond the apparent shock realism depicted through racism, war, illness, hunger, familial disruption, and violence, there persists an “apesar de tudo”¹⁹⁰ ethos rooted in the cultivation of relationships amid the seemingly insurmountable challenges of precarity. As Franco (2023, 40) elaborates, “em todas as obras há uma espécie de respiro, episódios em que o afeto é construído/alimentado apesar de tudo.”¹⁹¹ In this sense, *O Canto da Moreia*, *Luanda*, *Lisboa*, *Paraíso*, and *Maremoto* are unified by

¹⁸⁹ “But who would mourn for me?” (my translation).

¹⁹⁰ “Despite everything” (my translation).

¹⁹¹ “In all the works there is a kind of respite, episodes in which affection is built/fuelled despite everything” (my translation).

the authors' clear attempt to explore community-building and kinship as small acts of resistance and affective permanence against the precarious conditions shaped by social and historical neglect.

'Despite' Eugénio's rapid descent into alcoholism in *O Canto da Moreia*, he finds fleeting moments of solace with various characters who share precarious spaces within the city and accompany him toward the end of his life. Óscar, his companion on the streets; Pedro, a homosexual man hospitalized in the Community referred to as "refúgio," where Eugénio admits in his diary that he was "por vezes feliz"¹⁹² (Semedo 2019, 138); and Judite, the nurse who cares for him in his final days, to whom he reveals the inner secrets of his life. While Eugénio feels the impossibility of any true homecoming, due to both the country's and his personal violent history, these sporadic encounters with others who share his suffering offer brief glimpses of a sense of return.

'Despite' their gradual decline, impoverishment, and corporeal deterioration in *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso*, Cartola, Aquiles, and Pepe find brief moments of peace when Justina and Neusa visit them during the summer, offering attentive care and a sense of reconstructed family unity. Other acts of resistance against loneliness and marginalization include the friendship between Cartola and Pepe, their nurturing role in Iuri's education, akin to that of adoptive parents, and the patient rebuilding of Cartola and Aquiles' home after a devastating fire. These moments, small yet significant, serve as motivations to persevere, grounding them in the vulnerable but still meaningful aspects of life. In a deeply symbolic scene, Pepe and Cartola dance together, performing a 'choreography of vulnerability,' witnessed by the disillusioned Aquiles. In this moment, bodies bound by shared precarity converge as a radical act of 'staying with' their living wounds:

Já não eram dois homens, mas demasiada gente. Não era a barriga de um que empurrava o estômago do outro, mas dois amigos a conduzirem a sua ruína sem ousarem querer resolvê-la. [...] Cartola olhou para Pepe, olhinhos húmidos, suado e andrajoso. O outro viu o preto como o velho que era, encabulado e sem palavras, como se tivesse metido o pé na poça ou revelado alguma inconfidência. Haviam cruzado uma fronteira. Estavam, sem o terem querido, para lá do fosso da linguagem. Não tinham ido e vindo do passado. Isso seria fácil. Mas perdoado por momentos o presente (Almeida 2018, 160).¹⁹³

¹⁹² "Sometimes happy" (my translation).

¹⁹³ "It was no longer two men, but generic people. It wasn't one's belly pushing the other's stomach, but two friends driving their ruin without daring to resolve it. [...] Cartola looked at Pepe, his eyes moist, sweaty, and ragged. The other saw the black man as the old man he was, embarrassed and speechless, as if he had stepped into a puddle or revealed some confidential information. They had crossed a border. They were,

Paraíso thus emerges as a crossroads, a convergence point, or even a destination for individuals entangled in distinct narratives yet thrust into a shared present. Their pasts have shaped their current circumstances, making the present the only temporal dimension that—though fleeting—can be forgiven in order to rescue what remains of a ‘liveable’ life.

Despite his traumatic past and bleak existence in Lisbon, Boa Morte emerges as a resilient character. The various figures who cross his path—Aurora, Jardel, and Fatinha—play crucial roles in sustaining his will to live. Though Fatinha seems mentally absent, she remains a vital conversational partner, providing moments of relief from life’s bitterness. The letters Boa Morte writes to his unknown daughter, Aurora, represent his effort to reconcile with his past. The relationship with Jardel exemplifies another way of forming kinship in the midst of precarity and fostering interspecies affection. Lastly, his final act of resilience amidst adversity is a vegetable garden—a reflection of the many Cape Verdean vegetable gardens adorning the margins of Lisbon’s peripheral streets as a form of urban resistance and example of collective agency amidst the diaspora¹⁹⁴—that he tends alongside other marginalized characters. With the vegetable garden “*criou-se agora em mim um outro tempo, minha filha, que vem comendo o tempo ruim que às vezes me come por dentro*” (Almeida 2021, 25).¹⁹⁵

It is interesting to note that Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida’s works consistently highlight strong connections between humans, animals, and plants, usually arising from themes such as banishment, marginalization, and vulnerability on the outskirts of Lisbon. Ana Paula Coutinho (2022, 13) suggests that these connections do not compensate for the lack of human communion; rather, they serve as both a critical and poetic reflection on new, hybrid, deterritorialized forms of co-existence amidst vulnerable spaces. These ‘multispecies communities’ challenge the boundaries between different categories of

without intending to, beyond the ditch of language. They hadn’t come and gone from the past. That would be easy. But momentarily forgiven the present” (my translation).

¹⁹⁴ In her essay “A restituição da interioridade,” Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida (2023, 85) describes these Cape Verdean vegetable gardens as spaces of belonging and attempts to recreate a lost homeland within the city. From a social urbanistic perspective, Eduardo Ascensão (2013, 461), in his essay “A barraca pós-colonial: materialidade, memória e afeto na arquitetura informal,” argues that the local population demonstrates their agency and resistance despite the progressive displacement and demolition of the outskirt bairros and their homes along the Estrada Militar. Ascensão highlights how residents re-occupy their dispossessed land by creating collective vegetable gardens on the ‘free spaces’ left after the demolition of their homes. I will analyse this aspect in detail in the final section of this chapter.

¹⁹⁵ “Another time has now been created in me, my daughter, which has been eating away at the bad time that sometimes eats me up inside” (my translation).

living beings in precarious states. In Almeida's narratives, instinctive alliances, vital contaminations, and osmotic interactions persist despite the violence of the city. The focus is not on humanizing plants and animals or animalizing humans, but rather on exploring the 'poethic' precarious encounters between vulnerable beings and the relational forms that emerge from them. In this sense, *Maremoto* is particularly illustrative through the 'porous' relationships between Boa Morte, Jardel, and the vegetable garden.

Thus, it becomes evident that community-building among vulnerable beings is a central 'poethics' in these three novels for resisting modern accounts of racial and social injury. Each novel portrays precarity as a catalyst for forming new kinships—both human and non-human—that transcend traditional familial genealogies or blood ties. The protagonists, distanced from their previous affections due to diaspora, create new kinship bonds and engage in practices of 'promiscuous care'¹⁹⁶ with other subjectivities to endure their shared precariousness. This is exemplified by the 'promiscuous family' in *Paraíso* composed by Cartola, Aquiles, Pepe, Iuri, Amândio, and the dog Tristão; the kinship among Boa Morte, Fatinha, his canine companion Jardel, and his vegetable garden on the outskirts of Lisbon; and the alliances between Eugénio, the homeless, and the residents of the rehabilitation centre. These precarious encounters, 'promiscuous' families, and alternative forms of care represent, in my view, the most significant acts of resistance in the face of injury. Thus, community-building through 'precarious encounters' becomes the most radical 'despite everything.'

In the introduction to the thematic volume of *The Black Scholar* dedicated to "Black Masculinities and the Matter of Vulnerability," Darius Bost, La Marr Jurelle Bruce, and Brandon J. Manning (2019, 2) assert: "we hasten to note that vulnerability is not merely a relation to violence and hurt; it may also entail susceptibility to a range of favorable forces, like love and care." In this vein, the characters of Semedo and Almeida's novels illustrate that there is no independent, self-sufficient, or autonomous individual in the face of precarious circumstances. In this sense, vulnerability and precarity challenge any neoliberal or neocolonial conception of the individual by showcasing the unavoidable material and social interdependence that binds the characters together. Specifically, these

¹⁹⁶ I draw upon the concept elaborated by the Care Collective in their *The Care Manifesto* (2021). The Collective harks back to the notion of promiscuous care, rooted in the ethics espoused by AIDS activist theory of the 1980s and 1990s. Promiscuous care acknowledges that care can be carried out by individuals with diverse kinship connections to us, and advocates for the equal valuation, recognition, and allocation of resources to all forms of care, irrespective of the identities of human and non-human subjectivities, based on their respective needs and ongoing sustainability. In essence, promiscuous care embodies an ethic that extends outward, reshaping caring relationships from the most intimate to the most distant.

novels not only reimagine the discourse surrounding Blackness within the specific diasporic Portuguese context but also redefine the notion of ‘being human’ through the lens of vulnerability and ‘precarious life.’ This perspective portrays ‘humanity’ as a contingent and exposed existence in the world, where vulnerability, exacerbated by specific exploitative processes, can lead to a sentence of death. Embracing a decolonial and feminist reimagining of vulnerability and precarity involves advocating for alternative epistemological and corporeal interventions, as well as new embodied forms of alliances and community-buildings that stand in opposition to the dominant exploitative Western episteme. It seeks to redefine the essence of ‘being human’ by acknowledging historical and situated vulnerability for specific social groups while striving for resistance within a community.

I would like to conclude this first part of the analysis by emphasizing a central concern: these narratives, as evidenced by their endings, do not offer easy or happy resolutions regarding reconciliation, restitution, or healing. *Cartola* and *Aquiles* remain trapped in their limbo in *Paraíso*; *Boa Morte* disappears among the crowd at the metro entrance; *Eugénio* dies alone in the hospital, haunted by the screams of the *Moreia*. The various ‘despites’ explored in this section are somewhat insufficient to ‘save’ their lives from the trauma of long-lasting oppression. These narratives do not offer conventional answers to colonial wounds, enduring racial injuries, or anticipated redress as post-imperial policies. In my view, these novels represent the profound aim of what Fred Moten (2017, ix) terms as ‘Black art’: “Black art neither sutures nor is sutured to trauma. There’s no remembering, no healing. There is, rather, a perpetual cutting, a constancy of expansive and enfolding rupture and wound, a rewind that tends to exhaust the metaphysics upon which the idea of redress is grounded.” Instead of healing these wounds, the characters remain with them. They ‘stay with the wound’ in order to work within their confines and observe what might germinate from their sustained, patient, and radical presence. What endures from this narratives is the love shared among beings within that necropolitical wound of colonization—a small gesture of permanence, occupation, and connection amid the violence that constantly seeks to dispossess them.

3.3 Language I

After having examined the main characters and themes of vulnerability and precarity in Lisbon’s post-imperial diasporic environment, this section shifts to an aesthetic analysis of the three novels. I aim to explore how vulnerability is conveyed and ‘performed’

through specific linguistic features, such as narrative structures, metanarratives, and the recurrent use of language linked to the corporeal realm. By analysing the ‘formal’ aspects of these texts, I seek to reveal how they challenge the colonial aesthetic that flattens and stereotypes Black characters as they confront their own vulnerable conditions.

In particular, I argue that the use of metanarrative—employing modes of self-writing and self-narration as a means of reflecting on the interconnection between vulnerable lives and the possibility of ‘telling’ them despite total dispossession—is foundational to the structure of these novels. I interpret them through the concept of the ‘Black *residuum*,’ a counter-aesthetic that challenges ‘perfect’ and coherent narratives, which are often tied to modern grammar that reinforces the racial regime of representation. In contrast, these novels aesthetically reflect the material fragmentation, ruination, and dispersal experienced by these diasporic subjects. Furthermore, these forms of self-writing and self-narration demonstrate how language can ‘politicize’ the representation of vulnerable lives, resisting pietistic, paternalistic, objectified, or voyeuristic modern portrayals of Black diasporic suffering. As such, the language and counter-representations of vulnerability in these texts dismantle the false mainstream belief that impoverished, precarious, and rootless characters possess an equally impoverished, limited, or absent inner life and mind.

The final focus of this section examines how corporeal vulnerability is represented, embedded, and performed throughout the text. As noted earlier, the body serves as the primary site where characters ‘feel’ the deadly effects of precarity. To this end, I analyse the “unwieldy materiality,” as Rizvana Bradley (2023, 165) terms it, of corporeal representations in Almeida’s and Semedo’s novels, exploring how this materiality is conveyed through specific linguistic tropes.

Roberta Guimarães Franco expands on João Barrento’s analysis of Portuguese ‘realist’ literature from 1974 to 2000, as explored in his book *A Chama e as Cinzas* (2016). She revisits and refines his work to establish links with the literary contributions of Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida. Barrento highlights April 25 as a key historical and cultural turning point, but rather than identifying a single literary trajectory, he argues for the recognition of three distinct poetics and aesthetic movements within Portuguese literature: ‘olhar para trás,’ ‘olhar para a distância,’ and ‘olhar para dentro.’ The result is a body of literature focused on remembering the recent past, particularly the Salazar period. At the same time, a significant portion of this literature turns its attention to the African continent, exploring in specific the traumas of the colonial war. There is also a

trend toward introspection, where authors engage not only with autobiographical narratives, but also with a reflect on the act of writing itself. Franco (2023, 36) identifies three distinct ‘perspectives’ in Almeida’s work: a ‘olhar para a distância,’ which addresses contemporary dislocations between Angola and Portugal and the diasporic condition of familial separation; a ‘olhar para trás,’ recalling not only post-independence and civil wars in Angola but also the deeper and long-lasting colonial spacetime continuum; and a ‘olhar para dentro,’ where writing becomes a reflective act, evident through meta-narrative elements such as letters, phone calls, diaries, and essayistic writing, which are prominent across her work.

Expanding beyond this exploration of the ‘realistic turn,’ Franco (2023, 37) characterizes Almeida’s writing by drawing a parallel with Karl Erick Schøllhammer’s concept of ‘realismo afetivo’ within the context of contemporary Brazilian literature. Viewing politics as a means to shed light on what remains officially unrecognized and ethics as a pathway to understand our connections with others, affective realism transcends the dichotomy of descriptive realism versus affective realism. Instead, it entails grasping the symbiotic interplay between the two within literature: “Entre o índice, que traz para dentro da escrita a marca da realidade como evidência e testemunho, e a performance, que converte a recepção em intervenção poética sobre o mundo, a procura da literatura é dos efeitos e afetos que marcam as intersecções de nossos corpos na realidade da qual todos somos parte” (Schøllhammer in Franco 2023, 39).¹⁹⁷ Affective realism thus evolves into a multifaceted endeavour that intertwines politics, ethics, and aesthetics within the literary text. In relation to Almeida’s work, Franco (2023, 38) writes that “por isso, importa pensar não só os temas abordados por Djaimilia, mas as formas encontradas pela escritora para trazer à cena, em primeira ou terceira pessoa, corpos que (sobre)vivem no limiar entre pertença e exclusão. A intervenção política da literatura manifesta-se, assim, ao dar o tratamento narrativo aos sofrimentos e injustiças que atingem partes específicas de uma sociedade.”¹⁹⁸

This critical analysis is highly relevant to the objectives of this study. I argue that the some of these insights regarding Almeida’s literary works could also be applied to

¹⁹⁷ “Between the index, which brings the mark of reality into writing as evidence and testimony, and the performance, which converts reception into poetic intervention in the world, literature’s search is for the effects and affections that mark the intersections of our bodies in the reality of which we are all a part” (my translation).

¹⁹⁸ “It is therefore important to consider not only the themes addressed by Djaimilia, but also the ways in which the writer brings to the stage, in the first or third person, bodies that survive on the threshold between belonging and exclusion. The political intervention of literature is thus manifested by giving narrative treatment to the sufferings and injustices that affect specific parts of a society” (my translation).

other Afrodescendant writers, who exhibit notable similarities in both the thematic and linguistic construction of their texts. Specifically, I draw attention to the parallels between Almeida's *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* and *Maremoto*, and Luísa Semedo's *O Canto da Moreia*, in their portrayal of vulnerability. These novels reflect a shared connection between affective realism and what I term an 'aesthetics of vulnerability.' Rather than focusing on the historical root causes of the characters' precarious conditions, these works emphasize the consequences of those processes, expressing them through storytelling, (self)writing, and narration—a form of affective realism articulated through the verbal exposure of one's own vulnerability. Building on this, the following paragraphs explore the narrative strategies used to 'convey' vulnerability and analyse how language embeds this precariousness into the fabric of the text.

3.3.1 The *Black Residuum*: Telling Vulnerability

To begin, I take into consideration Caterina Botti's (2022, 49) concept of the 'grammar of pleasure and pain,' which highlights the limits of intelligibility in understanding others' needs, experiences and inner lives. In these three novels, the narrative form grapples with this constraint, resulting in a fragmented structure. The first-person narrators—Cartola, Boa Morte, and Eugénio—struggle to fully articulate their stories, often falling short in expressing their desires, fears, and needs. In contrast, an omniscient third-person narrator steps in, offering insights where the first-person voice cannot. However, the reverse also occurs: where the heterodiegetic narrator cannot reach, the first-person voice fills in. This continuous shift creates a layered portrayal of the characters, revealing both the inner and outer dimensions of lives in precarious circumstances.

The narrative structure of *O Canto da Moreia* hinges on the interplay of multiple voices. Each chapter begins with an excerpt from Eugénio's diary, written during his hospitalization as a way to confront his life and the limited time he has left. These entries, shaped by his condition as a terminally ill man battling alcohol withdrawal, act as memoirs. The narration alternates between Eugénio's first-person reflections—effectively becoming confessions¹⁹⁹ as he 're-imagines' the course of his life—and the

¹⁹⁹ Throughout the novel, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau is frequently referenced. According to Luísa Semedo (in Garcia 2019, online), Rousseau's work served as a significant influence in the crafting of her novel. It presents an intimate, unfinished confession by Rousseau as he reflects on the balance of his life while approaching the end of his existence. The notion of 'confession' is subsequently adopted by the author and reconfigured through her poetics in order to shape the sections of Eugénio's diary.

omniscient narrator's perspective, which offers an account of how events in Eugénio's life actually unfolded. In contrast to Eugénio's retrospective gaze,—“sei que nasci, vivi e estou prestes a morrer, entretanto não sei bem o que se passou”²⁰⁰ (Semedo 2019, 26)—, the omniscient narrator delves into the intricate layers of history, contradictions, violence, and suffering that envelop Eugénio's life. What follows is an example of how the alternation of the narrators works as a way to construct and deconstruct perspectives concerning Eugénio's life:

Éugenio e Óscar dormiam nas arcadas do Terreiro do Paço, ali no canto esquerdo, de quem está a olhar para o rio. Dormiam em cima de umas caixas de papelão e tinham uns cobertores fornecidos pela Cruz Vermelha. Estar na rua é o fim do mundo, o fim do caminho. Relativizar é pura negação. *Pelo menos tenho saúde!* Na rua, ela depressa se desvirtua ficando-se a conhecer um número incalculável de maleitas, para as quais nem sequer se sabia haver nome. *Pelo menos tenho amigos!* Na rua, as amizades são raras quando o que está em causa é sobreviver. Lutar pela existência faz de nós um bicho amedrontado que prefere esconder-se para não ser atacado ou então morder antes de ser mordido. *Pelo menos tenho a minha cabeça toda!* Na rua perde-se a cabeça, vai-se até muitas vezes lá parar porque ela já não era muita, e a que resta, a pouco e pouco, desagrega-se. Evaporam-se todas as referências. A solidão desnatura o corpo e a alma. Regressar a uma “vida normal,” com paredes de tempo e de cimento, é árdua tarefa. Até quando conseguimos manter-nos Homens tendo a rua como único espaço de existência? Podemos ser Homens, sem ter um teto? (Semedo 2019, 132).²⁰¹

By shifting between two contrasting perspectives, the third-person narrator cautions against romanticizing the precarity experienced by Eugénio and other characters, particularly as they are driven into destitution and forced to endure the indignities of life on the streets. The narrator invites reflection on existence stripped of everything—what remains when one is deprived of or has lost it all? In deconstructing any idealized view

²⁰⁰ “I know I was born, I’ve lived and I’m about to die, but I’m not sure what happened in between” (my translation).

²⁰¹ “Éugenio and Óscar were sleeping in the arcades of the Terreiro do Paço, in the left-hand corner, looking out over the river. They slept on cardboard boxes and had blankets provided by the Red Cross. Being on the street is the end of the world, the end of the road. Relativising is pure denial. *At least I’m healthy!* On the street, it quickly becomes distorted and you get to know an incalculable number of ailments for which you didn’t even know there was a name. *At least I have friends!* On the street, friendships are rare when it comes to survival. Fighting for existence makes you a frightened animal that prefers to hide so as not to be attacked or to bite before being bitten. *At least I have my head!* On the street you lose your head, you often end up there because it wasn’t there anymore, and what’s left, little by little, falls apart. All references evaporate. Loneliness denatures body and soul. Returning to a ‘normal life,’ with walls of time and cement, is an arduous task. How long can we remain humans with the street as our only space of existence? Can we be humans without a roof over our heads?” (my translation).

of a ‘bare’ or ‘precarious’ life, the narrative emphasizes the unrelenting exposure of both body and mind to profound degradation.

Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso employs an additional narrative strategy by alternating between a predominant omniscient third-person narrator and meta-narrative techniques involving characters who ‘take the words’ beyond conventional dialogue forms. This communication unfolds primarily through other mediums such as telephone calls and letters, notably between Cartola and Glória, as they strive to maintain their familial connection despite the geographical separation. Conversely, Justina and Aquiles do not participate in this exchange, underscoring the significant disruptions in familial bonds across generations within the diaspora. What’s intriguing is that beyond letters and phone calls, the narration is enriched by ‘visual writings’ such as the list of objects titled “desejos da mamã – ano 1980” (Almeida 2019, 71) that Glória, reminiscing about her assimilated past, repeatedly requests from impoverished Cartola in Lisbon. Another example is the letter devoid of words, bearing only the traces of Glória’s lipstick on the paper, signalling “o ressentimento dela pela distância de Cartola” (Almeida 2019, 155).²⁰² In this regard, the relationship between Cartola and Glória is further examined by alternating these narrative levels, illustrating what Almeida (2023, 78) describes as the ‘spectacle’ enacted to sustain the diasporic emotional connection within lives marked by separation and the impossibility of a return. Despite their descent into the precarious contexts of Paraíso for Cartola and the Angolan civil war for Glória, they continue to nurture fantasies of a better life and a future reunion, as shown in this telephone call in which we read/hear the voice of Glória with the civil conflict in background:

Sim, vou ser forte. Sim, vou ser bonita. Sim. Eu sei que tu vais-me vir buscar, meu Pai. Nosso varão vem sempre para nós. Hum, sim, vou ser corajosa. As miúdas também. Estamos bem. Sim, vou escrever e vou-me alimentar. [...] Acredito, sim, Papá. Sim, vou ter força. Às vezes, uma pessoa fica só triste. Mas quando é que estão a pensar? Mais seis meses. Sim, vou, Vai. Vai dar. Vai corer tudo bem. Tá bem. Beijo, vai cair a chamada. Beijo, Pai. Sim, vou ser bonita (Almeida 2018, 183).²⁰³

²⁰² “Her resentment at Cartola’s distance” (my translation).

²⁰³ [Yes, I’m gonna be strong. Yes, I’m gonna be pretty. Yes. I know you’ll come for me, my Papa. Our man always comes for us. Uhm, yes, I’m going to be brave. The girls too. We’ll be fine. Yes, I’m gonna write and I’m gonna feed myself. [...] I believe, yes, Papá. Yes, I’m gonna be strong. Sometimes a person is just sad. But when are you planning? Six more months. Yes, I will. It’ll work out. Everything will be fine. It’ll be fine. Kiss, the call’s going down. Kiss, Papa. Yes, I’m gonna be pretty.]

This ‘spectacle’ is most evident in Glória’s letters, which she keeps signing with the recurring expression “felizes para sempre” (Almeida 2019, 189).²⁰⁴

Similar to *O canto da Moreia*, the novel *Maremoto* also employs a dual narrative perspective, initially presented through a third-person omniscient narrator and then interspersed with first-person letters penned by Boa Morte and addressed to Aurora. In this instance, the ‘grammar of pleasure and pain’ becomes particularly salient, as the ongoing shift between these perspectives deepens the connections between Boa Morte’s inner life and those of other characters, such as Fatinha and Jardel. This continuous oscillation underscores a key aspect present in the reflections of these novels, and especially evident in *Maremoto*: the use of writing as a means of asserting dignity amidst a precarious existence.

In *O canto da Moreia*, Eugénio’s compulsion to write is intertwined with his proximity to death: “Comecei este diário, não sei quanto tempo me resta, mas senti falta de escrever” (Semedo 2019, 42).²⁰⁵ Despite being constrained by his frail health and faltering memory, the narrative consistently unfolds with Eugénio’s endeavour to recollect and organize his tumultuous past. This serves as a ‘final testament’ to an unknown reader, whether it be for his grandchildren or for himself, offering a means to evade oblivion, or else ‘death-in-life’: “nem sei bem porque escrevo, sei que tenho dois netos, mas nunca os vi e nem sei se os verei um dia. Talvez seja para eles este caderninho, ou talvez seja para não me esquecer de quem sou” (Semedo 2019, 108).²⁰⁶ Until the very end of his life, Eugénio maintains that writing serves as a means of reconciling with the violence of his past, intertwined with the death of his mother and the harm inflicted upon his wife. It also addresses the solitude and abandonment he experiences in the history of diaspora between Portugal and Cape Verde. Ultimately, writing becomes a means of embracing what remains of his life.

In *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso*, writing takes on a nuanced role as a means of confronting solitude. For instance, Cartola provides Aquiles with a notebook and pen to alleviate his loneliness while in the hospital (Almeida 2019, 51). However, the significance of other forms of ‘writing’ is further highlighted through Carola and Glória’s phone conversations and letters. These exchanges, though directed towards an ‘absent’

²⁰⁴ “Forever happy” (my translation).

²⁰⁵ “I started this diary, I don’t know how much time I have left, but I missed writing” (my translation).

²⁰⁶ “I’m not even sure why I’m writing this, I know I have two grandchildren, but I’ve never seen them and I don’t know if I ever will. Maybe this notebook is for them, or maybe it’s so I don’t forget who I am” (my translation).

interlocutor—since we only hear or read one side of the conversation—serve as a means of storytelling and resistance in the face of dispossession. Cláudia Pazos Alonso (2023, 105) observes that Glória’s first letter to her husband holds emblematic significance, particularly in its exploration of writing as a tool for contemplating a life marked by vulnerability. Glória explains that “o Dr. Kilombo mandou eu começar a escrever”²⁰⁷ (Almeida 2019, 65) as a means of recuperating from the palsy. Alonso (2023, 105-106) states that “não será decerto mera coincidência que o nome de quem dela trata, na ausência do marido parteiro, remeta para um termo da língua Kimbundu, que convoca o local onde os escravos fugidos encontravam refúgio. Por um lado, o próprio nome do médico alude a um espaço alternativo de liberdade e resistência, e por outro, a prescrição dele encoraja justamente o direito à verbalização de experiências traumáticas.”²⁰⁸ This underscores the imperative of exploring, within the meta-narrative reflection on writing, the in-between spaces and the realms of imagination for those who resist becoming ‘enslaved’ by precarious circumstances. Through writing, these characters discover a sense of purpose in navigating life amid its inherent dispossessed conditions.

This reflection gains particular significance when examining *Maremoto*. The novel is based on Boa Morte da Silva’s compelling urge to communicate his pain, sorrow, trauma, and solitude to an unidentified daughter-interlocutor. Hence, Boa Morte’s voice is solely ‘heard’ through the letters he diligently writes: “Deixo registo para se alguém encontrar a papelada saber ao menos quem eu sou, nunca se sabe, minha filha” (Almeida 2021, 21).²⁰⁹ The letters are Boa Morte’s only means of transcending his invisibility, spectral existence, and the ‘death-in-life’ imposed by his precarious circumstances on the streets. The act of writing to Aurora represents a crucial ‘despite everything’ that allows him to endure his harsh reality. His fear of losing these letters surpasses even his fear of losing his own life, as writing sustains the emotional connection between him and his daughter: “Preciso de me saber a escrever, saber-me a escrever dá-me noção da minha existência. [...] Só então entendo que, enquanto te procuro, Aurora, estou acompanhado. Não importa se me lerás ou não. Importa este raio que liga meu coração à ideia do teu

²⁰⁷ “Dr Kilombo told me to start writing” (my translation).

²⁰⁸ “It is surely no coincidence that the name of the person who treats her, in the absence of her midwife husband, refers to a term from the Kimbundu language, which refers to the place where fugitive slaves found refuge. On the one hand, the doctor’s name itself alludes to an alternative space of freedom and resistance, and on the other, his prescription encourages the right to verbalise traumatic experiences” (my translation).

²⁰⁹ “I’m leaving a record so that if anyone finds the paperwork they’ll at least know who I am, you never know, my child” (my translation).

coração. Se eu continuar a escrever, estou vivo, filha. Se eu continuar a escrever, tu vives” (Almeida 2021, 85).²¹⁰

Finally, *Maremoto* stands as a testament across generations. In the novel’s final moments, Boa Morte expresses his hope that everything he has written—every trace of pain, crime, blood, solitude, and violence—will never touch Aurora. He wishes for his traumatic past to remain separate from the future of his daughter: “Dor de pai procura coração da filha até ao fim do mundo. Vou seconder-te da minha dor, Aurora. Vou cegar minha dor para a minha dor não encontrar teu coração. Que a minha dor nunca encontre o teu caminho, Aurora. Que a minha dor nunca te encontre” (Almeida 2021, 102).²¹¹ The letter thus becomes an unattainable future memory for Aurora, as Boa Morte fervently hopes it will never reach her. This raises the question: for whom does this memory exist? What is the purpose of recounting this story if Boa Morte ultimately chooses not to burden his daughter with his pain, avoiding passing down a legacy marked by ghosts? In this light, *Maremoto* underscores writing as a “duty of memory” (Rendeiro 2023, 140) in contemporary Portugal. The novel can be seen as an exploration of ‘postmemory,’ delving into the intergenerational transmission of trauma, loss, and grief. It also calls for the public acknowledgment of marginalized lives and overlooked memories in both Portuguese and Angolan history.

In various ways, characters such as Cartola, Aquiles, Glória, Boa Morte da Silva, and Eugénio expose their vulnerable stories and precarious existences through diaries, phone conversations, letters, and notes within the narratives, driven primarily by their fear of disappearing. Faced with lives on the brink of being forgotten by history and society, Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida and Luísa Semedo direct their focus toward the lives of those around them, striving to bestow dignity upon these subjects. Despite the apparent absence of a future and the bleak survival prospects at the end of each novel, the intimate narratives of these characters reveal both their suffering and moments of beauty, both violent dispossession and tiny exercises of resistance. By telling their stories, they ‘give a syntax to the cry’ in order to reveal that, even in vulnerability, they can critically and consciously think and engage with their own life. Thus, listening to and reading about

²¹⁰ “I need to know that I’m writing, knowing that I’m writing gives me a sense of my existence. [...] Only then do I realise that while I’m looking for you, Aurora, I’m accompanied. It doesn’t matter if you read me or not. What matters is this ray that connects my heart to the idea of your heart. If I keep writing, I’m alive, child. If I keep writing, you’re alive” (my translation).

²¹¹ “A father’s pain searches his daughter’s heart to the end of the world. I’m going to hide you from my pain, Aurora. I’m going to blind my pain so that it doesn’t find your heart. May my pain never find its way to you, Aurora. May my pain never find you” (my translation).

someone else's experiences still implies the potential for those characters to 'lead a life' worthy of being heard, read, and remembered. As Judith Butler argues,

In other words, under conditions of extreme peril and heightened precarity, the moral dilemma does not pass away; it persists precisely in the tension between wanting to live and wanting to live in a certain way with others. One is still in small and vital ways 'leading a life' as one recites or hears the story, as one affirms whatever occasion there might be to acknowledge the life and suffering of another. Even the utterance of the name can come as the most extraordinary form of recognition, especially when one has become nameless or when one's name has been replaced by a number, or when one is not addressed at all (Butler 2012, 11).

In opposition to any notion of a 'vulnerability culture' that seeks to depict vulnerable individuals solely as weak and traumatized, devoid of agency and incapable of expressing their own experiences, the utilization of meta-narrative serves as a critique of this passive portrayal of people in precarious situations. It exposes the fallacy that suggests, in the words of Ankhi Mukherjee (2022, 2015), that "the poor may not have cognitive resources to sustain a deep analytic work." In other words, this focus on language and meta-narration in the novels aims to deconstruct the widespread stereotype that the precariously poor and disempowered subjects also have an impoverished, limited, empty inner life. Cartola, Aquiles, Boa Morte, and Eugénio critically and consciously engage with their lives by reflecting on the material, psychic, and affective impacts of their troubled histories of oppression, involvement with the colonial regime, and diasporic dislocations. Through the act of writing and telling their stories, they reflect on how these experiences have impacted both their corporeal and inner selves. Engaging with pain and trauma through writing serves as a powerful analytical, cognitive, and even epistemological tool, enabling these characters to articulate and shape their corporeal and inner lives while facing precarity. These novels unveils the tiniest, minimal attempts at telling the story of unseen characters, as a means of leaving a trace which reveals that 'I was there.' It is the case of the note left by Pepe in *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* before his suicide— "Perdoame, Cartola, meu irmão preto"²¹² (Almeida 2019, 221)—or Aquiles' obsessive quest to perfect his signature for an unattainable check that could improbably transform his future: "Enchia as páginas de um caderno com a sua assinatura, que não se cansava de ensaiar. Procurava pela assinatura perfeita para assinar cheques. Ele nunca lhe parecia

²¹² "Forgive me, Cartola, my black brother" (my translation).

suficientemente próxima do homem que ele queria vir a ser” (Almeida 2019, 78).²¹³ By inscribing his name, Aquiles leaves a trace of himself—a testament to a life that seeks to counter the enduring wounds of modern colonial and racial indignity.

To conclude, I interpret these tiny, fragmented acts of self-writing and self-narration as embodying a form of ‘Black residuum’ within the novels, borrowing the concept from Rizvana Bradley (2023, 240). Bradley defines the Black residuum as the materiality of Black corporeality, systematically negated by modernity, yet never fully extinguished, as it lays at the foundation of modernity itself. Thus, the obdurate persistence of this materiality constitutes the ‘Black residuum.’ In my view, on a linguistic and narrative level in these novels, reading acts of self-writing and self-narration as a ‘Black residuum’ highlights the irreducible materiality embedded also in these enunciative acts, which serve as the characters’ sole means of self-signifying their corporeal and inner lives against any annihilating modern gaze. Eugénio’s diary, Cartola and Glória’s letters and phone calls, Aquiles’ signatures, and Boa Morte’s letters are fragmented, partial, incomplete, and infinitely open forms of self-writing and self-narration. As such, their inherent opacity resists the linear and clear forms of modern and colonial representations historically used to render their inner lives and bodies at the same time destroyable and unimaginable to themselves. Understanding these self-writings and self-narratives as a ‘Black residuum’ does not suggest that ‘what remains’ constitutes a scarcity. Instead, this narrative ‘residuum’ represents an obdurate counter-aesthetic to colonial and modern forms of representation that historically imposed brutal, anti-Black portrayals. Through their fragmentarity and opacity, these narrative ‘Black residuums’ create material, enunciative spaces that resist modern traditional formalization, challenging racial representational constraints. By interpreting the construction of these novels through the concept of the Black residuum, we can reconsider Afrodescendant aesthetics in a way that challenges linear and simplistic approaches to representing vulnerability. Fragmentation, opacity, openness, and the re/de/contextualization of self-writing and self-narration become essential elements for conveying the vulnerable diasporic experience within the literary text, outside the confines of the racial regime of representation.

²¹³ “He filled the pages of a notebook with his signature, which he never tired of rehearsing. He was looking for the perfect signature to sign checks. He never seemed close enough to the man he wanted to become” (my translation).

3.3.2 The Flesh of the Text: Representing Vulnerability

The concept of Black residuum is also a useful framework for introducing the second part of this aesthetic analysis of the three novels. As previously discussed, despite modern aesthetic grammars that are fundamentally anti-Black, the Black residuum reveals its obdurate materiality because “the unwieldy materiality of flesh cannot be reduced, cannot be rendered transparent” (Bradley 2023, 165). In this section, I aim to analyse the ‘unwieldy materiality’ of the corporeal representations in Almeida’s and Semedo’s novels and examine how this materiality is conveyed through specific uses of language.

The corporeal vulnerability of the characters is one of the most striking aspects of these works, prompting a profound reflection on vulnerability and its representability. By focusing on the diasporic and exilic conditions of the protagonists in these three novels, where gradual loss and rupture are central to their experiences, the body emerges as the only form of territoriality they can claim. However, the narratives denounce how life in precarious Lisbon exacerbates corporeal dispossession, as precariousness consumes, corrodes, and dis-ables their possibility to inhabit and feel ‘at home’ within their own bodies.

As Carla Sofia Araújo (2023, 192) states, “o léxico é a janela através da qual vemos o mundo e é também a porta de entrada para a leitura de textos.”²¹⁴ In these three novels, vulnerability is indeed ‘a matter of skin.’ The corporeal dimension plays a pivotal role in shaping the semantic structure of the texts. These works explore the consequences of having a body—specifically a racialized body—left unsupported and exposed to illness, addiction, and the degradation inflicted by violence and abandonment. According to Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015, 10), racial violence is “a visceral experience” which “dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth.” Even when violence is displaced to a discursive level, it ultimately lands on the body, the first ‘material’ entity exposed to the public gaze. The representation of the body, the violence it endures, and the language used to convey its effects become crucial and sensitive aspects of literary portrayal.

O canto da Moreia employs a language that mirrors Eugénio’s downward spiral, shaped by the exhausting labour in the factory, his precarious existence on the streets, and his struggle with alcohol addiction. The figurative construction of corporeal vulnerability and affect recurs in the novel’s metaphors of stairs, falling, shipwreck and abyss. In this

²¹⁴ “The lexicon is the window through which we see the world and is also the gateway to reading texts” (my translation).

regard, the symbolic opening of the novel with the first chapter entitled “As escadas” reflects the movement of Eugénio’s fall toward a precarious existence. The stairs becomes the “encarnação física da distância entre a partida e a chegada, símbolo dos altos e baixos da existência, da progressão e da queda” (Semedo 2019, 15).²¹⁵ Indeed, the novel performs linguistically the ‘corporeal embodiment’ of Eugénio’s vulnerability in his transit from Cape Verde to Lisbon.

The body becomes a central issue in Eugénio’s writing, as he copes with the corporeal consequences of alcohol addiction and acknowledges a progressive estrangement to his deteriorated body parts: “não reconheço as minhas mãos. Elas estão mais magras, com manchas e veias salientes. [...] Agora são estas coisas amolecidas e quase ausentes. Esqueço-me muitas vezes que as tenho” (Semedo 2019, 78).²¹⁶ In the last page of the diary, Eugénio recognizes that his body is slowly disappearing:

O meu corpo parece escapar-me, sinto-o tão leve que nem marcas deixo no colchão, a Judite consegue agora lavar-me sem problemas e sem se queixar do meu peso. Ontem pedi um espelho e vi a que ponto os meus cabelos estão ralos e sem brilho, os meus dentes perderam a sua invejada brancura, tenho os olhos encovados e turvos. Lembra-me o gato que me morreu nos braços e a minha sogra que ajudei a vestir depois de falecida. Já tenho o aspeto de um morto e, portanto, ainda aqui estou, estou quase pronto, mas ainda não, quase... (Semedo 2019, 210).²¹⁷

In addition to the body and its deterioration, the theme of fragmentation plays a crucial role in the novel. The narrative is structured around chapters that abandon a linear timeline, forming a circular mosaic of events. This circularity disrupts the modern conventions of linearity, sequentiality, and determinacy. Each chapter bears a title which recalls different settings where actions unfold across time. As such, each chapter serves as a temporal gateway, through which the past, present, and future of Eugénio’s vulnerable story continually intersect, re/de/composing his narrative. These chapters act as fragments of singular events, initially recalled through Eugénio’s diary and later

²¹⁵ “Physical embodiment of the distance between departure and arrival, symbol of the ups and downs of existence, of progression and fall” (my translation).

²¹⁶ “I don’t recognise my hands. They’re thinner, with spots and veins sticking out. [...] Now they’re these softened, almost absent things. I often forget that I have them” (my translation).

²¹⁷ “My body seems to escape me, I feel so light that I don’t even leave marks on the mattress, Judite can now wash me without any problems and without complaining about my weight. Yesterday I asked for a mirror and saw how thin and dull my hair is, my teeth have lost their enviable whiteness, my eyes are sunken in and cloudy. It reminds me of the cat that died in my arms and my mother-in-law who I helped dress after she passed away. I already look like a dead person, so I’m still here, I’m almost ready, but not quite, almost...” (my translation).

intertwined with the voice of the heterodiegetic narrator. This fragmentation reflects both the disintegration of Eugénio's character and his memories. Through Semedo's structural choices, the novel vividly portrays the amnesias, temporal voids, and chronological disorder that shape Eugénio's narrative. This style emphasizes the haunting echoes of violence from his past in Cape Verde, as well as the brutality he inflicted on his wife. The ellipsis becomes a powerful rhetorical device, highlighting the extremes of violence and placing them at the edges of representation. In doing so, it offers a subtle exploration of the human psyche, its capacity for suffering, and its potential for inflicting harm. According to Jaime Ginzburg (2017, 44), "elipses aparecem frequentemente em cenas após um ato de violência, sugerindo que foi invadido um terreno aquém do verbal, em que o que está sendo vivido não pode ser expresso adequadamente em palavras."²¹⁸ Consider the chapter wherein Eugénio nearly strangles his wife, Laura. It begins in the aftermath of the violent altercation, with his daughter Emília's screaming at him. Following a narrative pause, symbolized by a stark blank space, the narrative unfolds through the lens of Eugénio's drunken consciousness. He perceives the scene in slow motion, every detail stretched out as if viewed through a lens of distorted time:

– Cobarde! És um cobarde, a bater numa mulher! – gritou Emília, enquanto lhe desferia um estalo. Prostrado, sentado na cadeira da sala de jantar, Eugénio não reagiu à transgressão da filha de catorze anos. Momentos antes, no quarto, tina cometido o Imperdoável, o pecado com nome. Tinha disso consciência, mas... estava tão embriagado! Eugénio, o Bêbado. *Estou tão bêbado, vejo tudo ao ralenti* (Semedo 2019, 113).²¹⁹

Fragmentation is also present in *Maremoto*, as the novel follows the precarious reconstruction of Boa Morte's testimony. Here again, there is no linearity in his story, as past and present are constantly intertwined, giving an 'aesthetic' feeling of haunting as a permanent condition of the character within the city. The connection between Boa Morte and his corporeal exposure to a precarious life is symbolized by an aching umbilical hernia that is continuously referred to within the text as capable of exploding at any time. It becomes a sort of 'objective correlative' and 'synecdoche' of Boa Morte's existence in

²¹⁸ "Ellipses often appear in scenes after an act of violence, suggesting that a terrain beyond the verbal has been invaded, where what is being experienced cannot be adequately expressed in words" (my translation).

²¹⁹ "– Coward! You're a coward, hitting a woman! – shouted Emília, as she slapped him. Prostrate, sitting on the dining room chair, Eugénio didn't react to his fourteen-year-old daughter's transgression. Moments before, in her bedroom, she had committed the Unpardonable, the sin with a name. He was aware of it, but... he was so drunk! Eugenio the Drunk. *I'm so drunk, I can see everything in slow motion*" (my translation).

Lisbon as a bleeding wound exposed to chronicle haemorrhage and in search for any form of support and relief to endure life. Boa Morte identifies himself with his hernia—“minha hérnia é minha vida inteira” (Almeida 2021, 23)²²⁰—, becoming a means through which past and present merge through corporeal exposure within an indifferent society. The aching body of Boa Morte, turned ‘linguistically’ visible through hyperboles such as “tenho barriga de três meses [...] A hernia cresce, parece que tenho uma cidade na barriga”²²¹ (Almeida 2021, 23), is completely invisible to others.

Sheila Khan (2023, 81) connects the novel to important social and anthropological studies, as well as public reflections, on mental disorders and bodily disabilities that resulted from the colonial war. In particular, she asserts that *Maremoto* conveys “uma abordagem sobre solidão, invisibilidade e saúde mental para que foram injustamente empurrados os sujeitos testemunhas da guerra colonial portuguesa.”²²² While this novel is a work of fiction, it is interesting to draw parallels with the lived experiences of numerous ex-combatants. Many of them never received formal recognition from institutional organizations (such as the Military Hospital’s records or the Association for the Disabled of the Armed Forces). They were deprived of public compassion, lacking any form of solace that could engage with processes of reorganizing, and reconstructing their traumatic memories. This is worthy of attention when re-examining these personal archives as authentic testimonies to their actual participation on the tumultuous and violent battlefield of the colonial war.

Almeida meticulously constructs a fragmented archive of traumatic memories, which resonate not solely due to their association with the colonial war, but also due to the intricate layers of assimilation, racial discrimination, and diasporic challenges involving transit and affective disruptions. Linguistically, Boa Morte’s psychic vulnerability is expressed through an unrestrained flow of language, conveyed via his stream of consciousness. Concise, blunt sentences are juxtaposed with long, scarcely punctuated ones, characterized by accumulation, climax, hyperbole, and repetition. This linguistic style reveals that his precarious state is not solely due to inadequate healthcare or societal marginalization, but also stems from the deep emotional distress within his psyche, fractured by his entanglement in colonial violence and the rupture of familial

²²⁰ “My hernia is my entire life” (my translation).

²²¹ “I have a three-month belly [...] The hernia is growing, it feels like I have a city in my belly” (my translation).

²²² “A approach to the loneliness, invisibility and mental health into which the witnesses of the Portuguese colonial war were unjustly pushed” (my translation).

bonds. The style reflects his inner anguish, seemingly insurmountable, paralleling his restless search for solace, much like his letters that never reach their intended recipient. Consider this example, illustrating Boa Morte's perpetual sense of an unattainable encounter with Aurora, alongside his acknowledgment of the implausible improvement of his 'death-in-life' existence connected to his vulnerable body:

Me tira pedra, me tira osso, carne, me tira nervo, braço, cabelo, pêlo, me tira língua, dente, cabeça, tira de mim ferro, cal areia, meu corpo é obra no fundo da rua, me tira terra, muro, estaca, perna músculo, grito, me enche de fé, minha filha, me tira voz, sangue, água, me tira razão, alma buraco na areia, sigo meu ouvido, me tira som, rua, sino, moinho, pássato, põe buraco nas minhas costas, me tira ventura, creio que meus passos me levam ao Rossio, me tira mapa, Rossio é onde?, coordenada, me tira asa, hélice, rota, ondeia comigo, apaguei minha pegada, se eu morresse hoje, queria ver escrito na minha pedra Aqui Jaz Senhor Que Não Foi, aqui jaz este jumento, palhaço, arlequim trapalhão, me tira coração, riso, lagrima, botão, pedra, sapato, pelotão, camelo, deserto, palmeira, riacho, cinzeiro, beata, moinho, baleia, andarilho, levante, tinido, me tira moinho, poço, me tira amigo, avô, avó, piano, me tira nota, casa, caminho, folha, andor, carril, semana, estendal [...] (Almeida 2021, 96-97).²²³

The novel's aesthetic cohesion linguistically embodies both dispossession and loss, resembling a probing into the very flesh of its textual form, which mirrors Boa Morte's inner abyss. This interplay between self-writing as a meta-narrative device, with its ethical implications, and the specific use of language that evokes corporeal and psychological wounds, creates a nuanced and intricate portrayal of what it means to lead a precarious existence.

This interplay is also perceptible in *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso*, a novel that, in my view, offers a poignant portrayal of corporeal vulnerability within the framework of African diaspora in Portugal. In the novel, the racialized body, in its evident and 'unwieldy materiality,' is present from the very beginning, as stated by the narrator: "Se

²²³ "Take away my stone, take away my bone, my flesh, take away my nerve, my arm, my hair, my tongue, my tooth, my head, take away my iron, my lime, my sand, my body is a piece of work at the bottom of the street, take away my ground, my wall, my stake, my leg, my muscle, my scream, fill me with faith, my daughter, take away my voice, my blood, my water, take away my reason, my soul, a hole in the sand, follow my ear, take away my sound, my street, my bell, my windmill, my bird, put a hole in my back, take away my adventure, I think my steps are taking me to Rossio, take away my map, Rossio is where?, coordinated, it takes away my wing, propeller, route, it goes with me, I've erased my footprint, if I were to die today, I'd want to see it written on my stone Here Lies the Lord Whom I Wasn't, here lies this donkey, clown, clumsy harlequin, it takes away my heart, laughter, tears, button, stone, shoe, platoon, camel, desert, palm, stream, ashtray, butte, mill, whale, wanderer, east, jingle, take away my mill, well, take away my friend, grandfather, grandmother, piano, take away my note, house, path, leaf, walker, rail, week, clothesline [...]" (my translation).

uma história se parece com o corpo de um animal, então pode começar por um calcanhar” (Almeida 2018, 13).²²⁴ In the lexicometric analysis of the novel, Carla Sofia Araújo (2023) points out the connection between thematic and lexical fields as a form to construct semantic coherence within the literary discourse. She identifies eight thematic fields: family, body, hope, diaspora/immigration,²²⁵ home, friendship, loneliness, inequality. Thus, the corporeal dimension, in particular the issue of health, occupies a central attention in the semantic construction of the text.

Recalling Frantz Fanon’s analysis, Grada Kilomba (2010, 96) states that Black people are constantly reduced to a body as they represent a mirror image of the ‘white’ subject which is reduced to pure physicality: “We are perceived as images of bodies—the dancers, singers, performers, and athletes of white arenas” (Kilomba 2010, 96). In a racist society, Fanon (1986, 112) states that the “corporeal schema” is transformed into a “racial epidermal schema” which defines the construction of the Black body and its vulnerability. This ‘schema’ exposes the vulnerability of the body to public display, abjection, and violation, translating the Black body into metaphors and associations embedded in racist discourses and practices.

In certain passages of the novel, the narrator assumes the external viewpoint of onlookers who observe Cartola’s family members, reducing them to racial ‘plantation’ imageries dictated by the Western gaze. As a consequence, as argued by Kilomba, this evokes ‘plantation memories’ for the family. While Cartola wanders through the Cemiterio dos Prazeres, “quem o visse talvez se lembrasse de um velho escravo de casa que tivesse encontrado a misericórdia arbitrária dos seus senhores, decididos enfim, quando o descobriam cego e à beira da morte, a deixá-lo arrastar-se pela fazenda como se ainda tivesse força para serrar madeira”²²⁶ (Almeida 2018, 93); seemingly, during the summer visit of Justina and Neusa in Lisbon, “não se saberia dizer quem observava, pois os outros, ao passarem de raspão, também os viam e eram aos olhos deles três pobres diabos sem destino, uma família de chimpanzés vestidos de gente” (Almeida 2018,

²²⁴ “If a story resembles the body of an animal, then it can start with a heel” (my translation).

²²⁵ I agree with Inocência Mata (2023b, 13) in asserting that ‘diaspora’ and ‘immigration’ should be delineated as distinct semantic fields and categories, often conflated in everyday language usage. As elucidated in Chapter 2, diaspora is intricately intertwined with genealogical, geopolitical, cultural and affective ties among nations bound within specific (colonial) historical frameworks. Should we equate diaspora with immigration, the Portuguese Afrodescendant populace risks losing its rightful sense of belonging to Portugal, relegated instead to the discursive confines of ‘second, third, and fourth generation’ immigrants.

²²⁶ “Anyone who saw him might remember an old house slave who had found the arbitrary mercy of his masters, who finally decided, when they found him blind and on the verge of death, to let him drag himself around the fazenda as if he still had the strength to saw wood” (my translation).

143).²²⁷ As a means of contrasting the ‘racial epidermal schema’ imposed by the Western and white gaze, the novel endeavours to restore agency to its characters’ bodies, even when they are subjected to their most precarious circumstances.

All the characters in the story are connected to the corporeal realm in one way or another. As the narrator states, “todos os Cartola de Sousa se viram adiados pela doença” (Almeida 2018, 123).²²⁸ What’s notable is that the plot doesn’t focus on detailed descriptions of the various ailments afflicting the family members. Instead, it examines the transformation of bodies subjected to precarious health and the absence of support to endure such physical degradation. The narrative is filled with recurring references to different body parts, resulting in a continual accumulation of bodily imagery throughout the text.

Cartola’s profession is intricately linked to the human body. Initially, he serves as a male midwife, but later, due to familial obligations, he transitions to working from home as a “calista científico” who “conhecia as vizinhas pelas unhas dos pés e os homens pela espessura dos prepúcios em circuncições caseiras” (Almeida 2018, 21).²²⁹ In Lisbon, alongside his exhausting work on the construction site, Cartola finds himself thrust into the role of an impromptu nurse, tending to injured bodies and assisting with operations “como suturar golpes, tirar gesso, arrancar dentes, desencravar unhas ou fazer massagens ortopédicas” (Almeida 2018, 75).²³⁰

While the two men are away from home, Glória is stuck in bed due to her palsy. From the outside, Glória is seen by others as “uma peça de carne sem enigma”²³¹ (Almeida 2018, 27), even though the narrator admits that she is a “corpo que queria sobreviver” (Almeida 2018, 26).²³²

Upon the arrival in Lisbon, Aquiles’ body undergoes multiple surgical operations, leaving it torn apart:

Estava capaz de contar os ossos de cabeça. Tinha as costas dormentes, doía-lhe o pé, nada no corpo lhe era indiferente. No calcanhar, os tendões conquistavam espaço aos corpos

²²⁷ “You couldn’t tell who was watching, because the others, glancing past, also saw them, and in their eyes they were three poor devils with no destination, a family of chimpanzees dressed as people” (my translation).

²²⁸ “All of Cartola de Sousa were postponed by the disease” (my translation).

²²⁹ “Scientific chiropodist [...] knew his neighbours by their toenails and the men by the thickness of their foreskins in homemade circumcisions” (my translation).

²³⁰ “Such as suturing cuts, removing plaster, removing teeth, dislodging nails or performing orthopaedic massages” (my translation).

²³¹ “A piece of flesh without an enigma” (my translation).

²³² “Body that wanted to survive” (my translation).

estranhos. O metal dos parafusos misturava-se com a carne e fazia pressão contra os nervos, adaptando-se, como uma armada rendida. Engolindo os pinos, os tecidos inflamavam e reagiam, acabando por aceitar a intrusão enquanto o parteiro saía de dentro do pai, amarfanhado na cadeira ao lado da cama onde o rapaz convalescia. Cartola já não sabia pitada de anatomia (Almeida 2018, 51).²³³

Initially confined to hospital beds, Aquiles' body becomes further deformed by the gruelling work, exacerbated by his disability: "Tem uma ferida aberta no pé direito por pôr o peso todo do lado bom do corpo. A perna direita é musculada. A canela da perna esquerda é raquítica. Nu, parece ser metade homem, metade rapaz. Partido ao meio, de um lado é filho, do outro falha" (Almeida 2018, 167).²³⁴

Mirroring his son's experience, Cartola tends to his own bodily decline due to the exhausting work on the construction site, beginning with his hands, which he barely recognizes anymore. Gradually, father and son merge into one body, despite their structural disparities, undergoing transformation, consumption, and degradation together. The precarious state of their bodies becomes the sole bond between the two men in Lisbon: "Pai e filho habituaram-se a não fazer caso de avisos do azar e passaram a fingir que não lhes tinha nascido uma verruga no olho, que não lhes doíam os dentes ou que não tinham fome, hábito que nunca tendo precisado de dominar se entranhou em Cartola e Aquiles como uma peste. O corpo deles tornara-se uma atenção de que não se distinguiam" (Almeida 2018, 73).²³⁵

As evidenced by the passages explored thus far, the body stands as a semantic cornerstone shaping the text through its metaphors and descriptive accumulations. The novel skilfully uses language to portray the impact of historical and racially induced and produced precarious circumstances on the body, without resorting to paternalism or victimization. Instead, the precariousness of the body serves as a graphemic sign, highlighting the enduring influence of the empire's legacy. *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso*

²³³ "He could count the bones in his head. His back was numb, his feet hurt, nothing in his body was indifferent. In his heel, the tendons were giving way to foreign bodies. The metal of the screws mixed with his flesh and pressed against his nerves, adapting like a surrendered armada. Swallowing the pins, the tissues inflamed and reacted, eventually accepting the intrusion as the midwife left his father, crumpled in the chair next to the bed where the boy was convalescing. Cartola no longer knew a thing about anatomy" (my translation).

²³⁴ "He has an open wound on his right foot from putting all his weight on his good side. His right leg is muscular. The shin of his left leg is rickety. Naked, he appears to be half man, half boy. Broken in half, on one side he's a son, on the other he's a failure" (my translation).

²³⁵ "Father and son became accustomed to ignoring warnings of bad luck and began to pretend that they hadn't had a wart in their eye, that their teeth didn't hurt or that they weren't hungry, a habit that they never needed to master and which took root in Cartola and Aquiles like a plague. Their bodies had become an attention span from which they could not be distinguished" (my translation).

provides a language and a voice for bodies that are rendered sad, weak, exploited, emptied, destroyed, and dis-abled by a colonial regime, compelled to endure the ongoing social structures of contemporary coloniality and neoliberal governmentality of precarization. Examining the body as a ‘material’ entity carrying the imprint of colonial and modern spacetime continuum, the novel underscores how racialized precarity permeates the very ‘matter’ of existence of the protagonists: “A noção exacerbada do corpo enviava Aquiles ao pai, homem que não imaginava ser capaz de se safar sozinho em Lisboa, um ‘portuguêsão’ dispensado pelo império a que jurara obediência, protegido de um tal Barbosa da Cunha que apenas se dera a ver uma vez desde que tinham chegado a Lisboa” (Almeida 2018, 42).²³⁶ Decolonial feminist Françoise Vergès (2021, 75) defines this process as “the economy of wearing out and tiring out racialized bodies.” She defines it as an economy that exploits the strength of certain individuals deemed expendable by capital and the state, as bodies to be used and consumed. These individuals become victims of illnesses, debilitations, and disabilities. Thus, wear and tear on the body is inseparable from an economy that divides people and bodies into those who are entitled to good health and to a ‘good’ and ‘peaceful’ life, and those whose health is disregarded and who are denied the right to rest.

Through the corporeal use of language, the narrative voice compels us to contemplate that the main concern of these texts is not the construction and performance of the protagonists’ identities, but primarily the ‘materiality’ of their bodies and the daily realities in which they are embedded. As articulated by Daniel F. Silva (2023, 49), it is within this material realm that racist and anti-Black structures manifest, perpetuating racial, corporeal and identity hierarchies as a continuum of colonial legacies. The novel aims to reflect on this materiality and corporeality, highlighting how they can be fatally compromised by exposure to precarious living conditions. Similarly, Liz Maria Teles de Sá Almeida (2021, 79) argues that the characters in the novel form an ‘exile community,’ quoting Alexis Nouss, due to their impossibility to organize themselves within society. The only common identity they could invoke is that of being ill, an identity tied to the materiality of their bodies affected by the governmentality of precarization. As a result, for Teles de Sá Almeida exile becomes the only possible form of identitarian identification when a lack of belonging and material/corporeal urgencies converge.

²³⁶ “The exacerbated notion of the body sent Achilles to his father, a man who couldn’t imagine being able to manage on his own in Lisbon, a ‘big Portuguese’ dismissed by the empire to which he had sworn obedience, protected by a certain Barbosa da Cunha whom he had only met once since they had arrived in Lisbon” (my translation).

Echoing Judith Butler (2012, 14), “we cannot struggle for a good life, a liveable life, without meeting the requirements that allow a body to persist.” Thus, the body, laid bare in its total exposure, is configured within both language and diegesis by the narrative voice as an epistemological standpoint through which to critically apprehend the processes of precarization intertwined with racial, ableist, and gender discrimination within the psychic, corporeal, and material dimensions. *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* asserts the ‘discursive’ and ‘material’ humanity of its characters, dismantling the Western episteme and its restricted notions of the ‘human’—typically depicted as white, able-bodied, autonomous, and wealthy—to pave the way, through representation, for an alternate conception of humanity: one historically rendered more vulnerable.

In these three novels, emphasizing the body both thematically and semantically involves providing space, visibility, and materiality to bodies that patriarchal, capitalist, and neoliberal systems have historically and systematically rendered weak and vulnerable for the sake of exploitation. Colonial history has been built upon the exclusion of these bodies from the category of ‘human.’ Thus, prioritizing the representation of corporeal vulnerability in critical and aesthetic discourse allows for the inclusion of bodies systematically removed as ‘less-than-human.’ By foregrounding the vulnerability and precariousness of bodies, these three novels challenge the Western episteme’s conception of ‘human’ and prompt consideration of other kinds of bodies wherein wounds—both physical and historical—are intrinsic to that same bodies. In this sense, the notion of vulnerability does not refer to the construction of an ‘undifferentiated’ new humanism that overlooks the evident unequal geopolitical distribution of vulnerability. Rather, the concept of vulnerability, as I employ it, enables a discourse of the human seemingly to Frantz Fanon’s view of ‘new humanism’ in *Toward the African Revolution* (1967, 125) which seeks the unmaking of racialized bodies and their redress to properly decolonized human modes of being in the world. It is through the linguistic exposition of such vulnerability that these novels extend an invitation to decolonize our limited understanding of humanity, thereby opening pathways of visibility for different bodies that, despite enduring radical ontological denial, steadfastly assert their right and dignity to existence.

3.4 Space I

As the final part of my analysis tracing a potential ‘aesthetic of vulnerability’ in *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso, Maremoto*, and *O canto da Moreia*, I now turn to a close reading of the

trope of space and spatial configurations. This element, along with the introduction of 'vulnerable' characters and the specific aesthetic use of language and meta-narrative forms, recurs consistently across the three works. Racial accounts of injury impact not only the characters on a bodily and enunciative level, but also their embeddedness in the diasporic and exilic geographies of Lisbon. In this regard, Grada Kilomba asserts that Fanon's concept of the 'racial epidermal schema' is intricately bound within the racial power dynamics and systemic discriminations, where the issue of spatiality is inseparable from these structures. Inscribed on the skin, the 'racial epidermal schema' "guides us through space. Memories, legends, jokes, comments, stories, myths, experiences, insults, all of them symbolically inscribed on the surface of our skin, telling us where to sit and where not to sit, where to go and where not to go, whom to talk with and whom not to talk with. We move in space, in alert, through this racial epidermal schema" (Kilomba 2010, 109).

Building on this spatial 'racial epidermal schema' embedded in the geography of Lisbon, I aim to analyse the intersection of body and space through the 'poethic' use of language within the novels. *Cartola*, *Aquiles*, *Eugénio*, and *Boa Morte* each represent distinct vulnerable bodies inhabiting distinct spaces in the dislocation from Angola and Cape Verde to Lisbon, with an osmotic connection emerging between them. In this dynamic, the vulnerability of their bodies is interconnected with their specific spatial conditions, which are deprived of the necessary elements to support and sustain life. In fact, in the three novels, the protagonists' corporeality doesn't merely 'occupy' space; it 'becomes' the space they inhabit. As embodied subjects, they constitute the vivid 'face' of the contemporary geopolitical realities of the African diaspora in Portugal and their complex intersection with a space that is often hostile, repulsive and that continues to reproduce a colonial spatiality. If, therefore, territoriality is the place where identity manifests its corporeality, then the territoriality of these characters is closely linked to their diasporic condition, the consequences of false assimilation policies, the precarious health of their bodies and the lack of support networks in a radically exclusionary territory. As a consequence, Lisbon mirrors within its conformation these 'other' vulnerable territorialities. This corporeal territoriality reflects a post-imperial vulnerability, with bodies functioning not just 'in' space but 'as' space where power relations are constantly inscribed and reconfigured.

In addition to the corporeality-territoriality relationship, I aim to demonstrate how the urban spaces inhabited by the protagonists in Lisbon reflects specific colonial and

neoliberal policies of environmental degradation. These policies are rooted in a long history of extractivism, land occupation, and pollution, relegating racialized and precarious subjects to deadly and unhealthy peripheral areas. After enduring long hours of exploited labour in the city centre, they are confined to insalubrious suburban spaces, alongside the capital's heaps of non-functional objects, garbage, and toxic waste. These environmental hazards severely impact the health of bodies already made vulnerable by intersecting racial, ableist, and gender oppressions. In distinct ways, and with specific characteristics, the Monsanto neighbourhood and street life depicted in *O Canto da Moreia*, the Quinta de Paraíso in *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso*, and the 'unseen' Lisbon of misfits in *Maremoto* illustrate a spacetime continuum where both bodies and spaces exist solely as 'waste.'

As a result, my close reading will argue that vulnerability, in the post-imperial context, has become an inherent characteristic of Lisbon. Drawing on Estelle Ferrarese's (2016, 20) conceptualization of vulnerability as a "zone for cartography," I aim to move beyond simply 'mapping' vulnerable communities or spaces within Lisbon through fiction. Instead, I seek to analyse how vulnerability is interwoven into public and unseen spaces, shaped by neglect and neo-Luso-tropicalist policies that violently regulate territories inhabited by Afrodescendant diasporic populations. Additionally, I intend to link this cartography to notions of 'affective' or 'inner' mapping in Almeida's and Semedo's fiction, offering a counterpoint to spaces continually stereotyped and paternalized in mainstream discourse. Thus, representing 'vulnerable spaces' in literature, and a broader vision of a 'vulnerable Lisbon,' serves as a reimagining of space from a specific Afrodescendant perspective. This re-mapping stems from situated standpoints and personal, as well as community, experiences.

Before proceeding to the close reading of the spatial elements in the novels, a brief digression on Lisbon's 'vulnerable' geography in the aftermath of colonialism is, in my view, necessary. This will explore the spaces within the city that remain most vulnerable to coloniality and neoliberal politics, perpetuating a reconfigured colonial spatial division. Introducing these spaces is essential for understanding how territorialities are reimagined and reconstructed through fiction in the works of Almeida and Semedo.

3.4.1 Vulnerable Lisbon: When Life Goes Under

When analysing the relational dynamics between Portuguese and Africans in the ‘post-conflict’ period, Italian translator and scholar Roberto Francavilla characterizes Lisbon as a city deeply marked by stark precarity:

I vivi, però, i sopravvissuti, adesso passeggiano gli uni accanto agli altri all’ombra dei monumenti equestri, di fronte al Teatro Dona Maria II o alla Pastelaria suíça, con i camerieri indaffarati stretti dai loro farfallini senza tempo. Quale frontiera invisibile separa le loro vite? [...] Mi trovo nel cuore di una capitale europea [...] che mi restituisce un’immagine di sé derelitta e decadente, con le vie del centro abitate da mendicanti e reduci resi storpi dagli effetti di quelle guerre, vie cariate da marciapiedi sconnessi e muri saccheggiati dei loro *azulejos*, le maioliche pombaline che troverò qualche anno dopo in vendita a prezzi esorbitanti nei negozi antiquari di Praça Príncipe Real” (Francavilla 2019, 34-35).²³⁷

The ‘battleground memories’ from the aftermath of the conflict intersect with and are embedded in the geography of Lisbon, where the streets become shared spaces for afflicted and mutilated former soldiers, impoverished and neglected *retornados*, migrants, and Afro-diasporic subjects fleeing civil conflicts, alongside Portuguese citizens facing structural poverty. While this sense of ‘vulnerability’ was particularly stark in the 1980s, attributed to the recent conclusion of those traumatic events, it has become even more complex today due to the contemporary forces of capitalist, neoliberal, and neocolonial developments that impact both the city and its inhabitants.

Following the backdrop of postcolonial, capitalist, and neoliberal dynamics, Lisbon is undergoing rapid transformation. Specific areas such as Martim Moniz, Praça de São Domingos, Restauradores, sections of Alfama, Santa Apolónia, Gare do Oriente, and Avenida Almirante Reis have witnessed a dramatic increase in the population of impoverished, marginalized, and, in extreme cases, homeless individuals over the years. These areas are beginning to be defined by the proliferation of precarious encampments, emblematic of the challenges faced by certain segments of the city’s population. Manuela Ribeiro Sanches (2010, online) contends that such groups not only find themselves

²³⁷ “The living, however, the survivors, now stroll past each other in the shadow of the equestrian monuments, in front of the Dona Maria II Theatre or the Pastelaria suíça, with busy waiters clutching their timeless bow ties. What invisible border separates their lives? [...] I find myself in the heart of a European capital [...] that presents me with a derelict and decadent image of itself, with the streets of the centre inhabited by beggars and veterans crippled by the effects of those wars, streets scarred by uneven pavements and walls looted of their *azulejos*, the pombaline tiles that I would find a few years later for sale at exorbitant prices in the antique shops of Praça Príncipe Real” (my translation).

confined to these spaces but are also socially and locally ‘immobilized’ within them. This immobility raises a critical question: did the end of the empire result in a truly ‘decolonized’ urban existence, particularly for diasporic subjects?

The issue of space invites reflection on both the suburbs and the city centre. In the outskirts, areas identified as ‘*bairros sociais*’—where ‘second or third-generation’ diasporic subjects, often Portuguese of African descent, coexist with impoverished white populations—are marked by boundaries historically delineated by the old Estrada Militar.²³⁸ By the 1950s and in the aftermath of 1974-75, these areas were occupied by displaced, marginalized, and impoverished communities, including those dismissed from the former colonies and abandoned by the Portuguese capital. These groups established numerous informal settlements, such as Bairro da Liberdade, Pedreira dos Húngaros, Curraleira, Bairro 6 de Maio, Bairro de Santa Filomena, and Mira Loures. Under current neoliberal and neocolonial policies, these informal ‘*bairros*’ have become targets of municipal efforts to ‘requalify’ the areas, driven by the so-called Plano Especial de Realojamento (PER).²³⁹ This plan has perpetuated the racialization and criminalization of these spaces, not only by displacing families, social networks, and friendships but also by leaving many residents homeless as a result of progressive demolitions. Overnight, individuals lost their homes and everything they had built over their lifetimes. It is evident that communities in these outskirts remain excluded from full recognition of their belonging within the city, despite being integral to the labour force that sustains Lisbon’s economy. Many of these residents work in semi-skilled or unskilled jobs such as construction, public works, garbage collection, domestic services, cleaning, catering, and hospitality.

Luca Fazzini (2020, 161) highlights how, while the outskirts of Lisbon face institutional violence with repressive intent, the city centre, particularly in historically

²³⁸ The Estrada Militar was initially constructed as a defence against French invaders during the Napoleonic Wars and later served as the third line of defence for the city of Lisbon. This line formed part of the Lisbon Entrenched Camp, completed in 1902 but dissolved in 1926. The Estrada Militar thus symbolizes the defence of Portuguese sovereignty in response to numerous invasions and external military interventions aimed at asserting dominance over Lisbon, the nation’s primary political, economic, demographic, and administrative hub, thus inevitably intertwining with the memory of a history and a struggle centred on preserving Portuguese identity. As historical events unfolded, this territory gradually fell into neglect and was progressively occupied by subaltern communities which established several multifaceted and multiracial *bairros*.

²³⁹ In 1993, the Instituto Nacional de Habitação (INH-IGAPHE) launched a comprehensive initiative aimed at eradicating precarious barracks across the country. This program was called Plano Especial de Realojamento (PER). Upon conducting a partial mapping of these areas, it became evident that they were completely overlooked in the official cartography of Portugal’s major cities, as highlighted by Ascensão (2013, 427).

marginalized areas like Martim Moniz, Avenida Almirante Reis, and Mouraria, experiences gentrification under the guise of promoting ‘cultural diversity.’ The Lisbon City Council²⁴⁰ regularly proposes projects aimed at relocating and ‘sanitizing’ so-called ‘bad neighbourhoods,’ such as the recent 2024 redevelopment plan for Martim Moniz square. An article in *Público* underscores this, stating, “Martim Moniz vai ter acções urgentes de higiene e segurança antes da requalificação” (Alemão 2024, online).²⁴¹

Since the 1990s, public and political interventions, both in the periphery and city centre, have aimed to transform areas deemed ‘problematic’ or ‘threatening’ into spaces aligned with the ruling class’s values. Central gentrification displaces economically disadvantaged communities from their traditional spaces, replacing them with a middle class—both local and foreign—supporting the city’s neoliberal framework. While these ‘requalification’ projects dismantle entire communities and erase their dwellings, the neo-Luso-tropicalist rhetoric persists, portraying Lisbon as a cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic city adept at ‘inclusive management’ of urban diversity. This creates a stark contrast between the romanticized Lisbon depicted in tourist postcards, uncritically glorifying colonial history, and a more vulnerable, precarious Lisbon with its unseen inhabitants.

In this more ‘realistic version’ of Lisbon, its inhabitants carry the weight of a recently dismantled and swiftly forgotten empire. This vulnerable Lisbon, a city within the city, becomes a repository for everything the former empire deemed undesirable. Thus, the ‘postcard’ narrative is challenged by those seeking to expose the deeper historical, social, and cultural roots of these spaces, moving beyond mere academic formalism or the ethnographic ‘museumification’ of these neighbourhoods. Key works in this regard include Sónia Vaz Borges’s *Na Po Di Spéra: percursos nos Bairros da Estrada Militar, de Santa Filomena e da Encosta Nascente* (2014) and Ana Rita Alves’ *Quando ninguém podia ficar: racismo, habitação e território* (2021). Both address the historical and cultural fabric of specific ‘bairros’ along the Estrada Militar, as well as the institutional violence linked to demolitions. Borges and Alves, in different ways, reveal the rich social and historical layers of these communities, examining their knowledge systems in ‘constructing’ their self-fabricated *bairros*, identity strategies, and the broader metropolitan policies that have become paradigmatic in the Portuguese state’s approach to managing Black, racialized, Sinti, and migrant communities in urban spaces. Public

²⁴⁰ Fazzini (2020, 161) highlights how this paradigm of ‘salubrity’ influenced also an initial phase of ‘hygienic’ intervention during the Estado Novo, forming part of a ‘civilising urbanism’ initiative and serving as a method of ‘domesticating’ space in alignment with the regime’s exclusionary policies.

²⁴¹ “Martim Moniz will have urgent hygiene and safety measures before requalification” (my translation).

support of redevelopment, sanitation and demolition plans reveals, in Alves' words (2021, 67), “uma narrativa pública (leia-se académica, mediática e político-legal) que tem contribuído para a racialização e criminalização dos bairros autoproduzidos.”²⁴² It is evident that these urban spaces are not ‘natural’ or merely the outcome of the ‘living customs’ of certain groups (who are often excluded from full citizenship). Instead, they are the result of specific policies of ‘making’ the city. As a consequence, Cape Verdean-born Portuguese historian Sónia Vaz Borges (2024, online) argues that these *bairros* are “lugares politicamente marcados para um dia serem silenciados e apagados. Este processo é fruto da evidente política colonial em curso do governo português, anteriormente praticada nos territórios colonizados.”²⁴³

Regarding the structural and systemic invisibility imposed on Black communities in Portugal, and linking past, present, and future through a critique of urban policies, Cristina Roldão, José Augusto Pereira, and Pedro Varela (2023, 240) argue that “a invisibilidade do passado das comunidades e da mobilização política negras em Lisboa é uma lacuna não só historiográfica, mas também do imaginário sobre a cidade, branqueando a nossa percepção, quer em retrospectiva, sobre o de ‘onde vimos,’ quer na forma como nos projetamos no futuro, no ‘para onde vamos’.”²⁴⁴ From this perspective, various Afrodescendant research and artistic projects have recently emerged to bring visibility to this ‘vulnerable’ Lisbon, highlighting its historical roots. These projects also explore the spaces Afrodescendant communities have occupied, reappropriated, and continue to redefine, despite ongoing struggles.²⁴⁵

²⁴² “This consensus is born out of a public (read academic, media and political-legal) narrative that has contributed to the racialisation and criminalisation of self-produced neighbourhoods and, later, rehousing” (my translation).

²⁴³ “Politically marked places to one day be silenced and erased. This process is the result of the Portuguese government’s obvious colonial policy, which had previously been practised in the colonised territories” (my translation).

²⁴⁴ “The invisibility of the past of black communities and political mobilisation in Lisbon is a gap not only in historiography, but also in the imaginary of the city, whitening our perception, both in retrospect, of ‘where we come from’ and in the way we project ourselves into the future, ‘where we are heading’” (my translation).

²⁴⁵ Without claiming to be exhaustive, I highlight some projects and exhibitions that interrogate this ‘vulnerable Lisbon’. *Re-mapping Memories*, coordinated by Marta Lança, seeks to challenge and deconstruct the colonial legacies embedded in the architecture and collective mental map of the city. The project proposes alternative maps that highlight anticolonial resistance and Afrodescendant contributions. Findings are presented on an interactive website featuring essays, reports, and interviews, along with new city maps and photographs that counter traditional tourist and racially biased perspectives. The project aims to decolonize the city through innovative uses of urban maps, such as Francisco Vidal’s ‘subjective’ city maps and Rui Sérgio Afonso’s personal photographs of ‘places of memories.’ Contributions from Afrodescendant historians like Sónia Vaz Borges and writers such as Joaquim Arena and Yara Nakahanda Monteiro enrich this re-mapping with alternative histories and embodied experiences. In the realm of photography, recent projects have explored the vulnerable and often unseen facets of Lisbon. Guillermo Vidal’s *Under the Bridges: Reflections When Life Goes Under* (2020) portrays the lives of homeless

In this endeavour, I argue that contemporary Afrodescendant Portuguese literature plays a crucial role in re-envisioning, through fiction, the relationship between embodied subjectivities, neglected memories, unseen communities, and spatiality embedded within Lisbon's maps. Specifically, in the three novels analysed in this chapter, my aim is to highlight the interconnection between the vulnerable bodies of the characters and the vulnerable territories they traverse. 'Vulnerable Lisbon' serves as the common setting linking Almeida's and Semedo's novels, as these are stories of diasporic journeys where the characters gradually lose their sense of home. In *O Canto da Moreia*, *Luanda*, *Lisboa*, *Paraíso*, and *Maremoto*, the characters' post-imperial journeys reflect the pursuit of a promised territoriality in Portugal. These novels also 'chart' the maps that the characters must navigate in response to their precarity and 'dis-abled' corporeality. As a result, Lisbon, with its overlooked spatial configurations, almost becomes another character, directly linked to the protagonists' diasporic fates. In her literary essay "Dying for the First Time" (2023), Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida (in Botelho, Guéniot 2023, 10) asks: "What is a city and the word that names it if not merely the grammatical correspondent between a point on the map and a point on an internal map, one which nobody can access? [...] What is a city inside a text, a book, a poem, a photograph, a testimony, a novel?" The following close reading seeks to answer this question by exploring the relationship between the embodied diasporic vulnerability of the characters and the spaces they inhabit, achieved through the 'poethic' use of language.

3.4.2 Of Shipwrecks: Sinking into Lisbon

O Canto da Moreia underscores the deep connection between narrative and space. The novel is structured into ten chapters, each named after a different setting: the stairs, the church, the table, the tavern, the factory, the bed, the street, the refuge, Cape Verde, and finally the hospital. While these locations don't map directly onto Lisbon's geography,

individuals under the Santa Apolónia bridge, revealing a reality that keeps proliferating in different parts of the city and the country. In this direction, the book *Lisboa Mesma Outra Cidade* (2023), curated by Catarina Botelho and David-Alexandre Guéniot, presents 'visual essays' that update representations of Lisbon's overlooked areas, emphasizing the interplay between individual memory and collective history. Among the different section, Hugo Barro's *Li ki nu ta vivi* captures the rhythms and affections of Lisbon's extramural Afrodescendant neighbourhoods. Another exhibition that warrants further contemplation is Mónica de Miranda's *Contos de Lisboa* (2020), which features a decade of photographic and audiovisual documentation of informal neighbourhoods along the Estrada Militar, many of which have been demolished. This exhibition is complemented by short stories from Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, Kalaf Epalanga, Yara Nakahanda Monteiro, Ondjaki, and Telma Tvon, adding a fictional dimension to the exploration of urban dispossession and vulnerability.

they form a symbolic topography reflecting Eugénio's journey through the city. In an interview, Semedo (Garcia 2019) explains that the book's structure, which distinguishes between these spaces, mirrors the aim of presenting them as a 'walk' through the various events that unfold there. Thus, the spaces themselves shape the narrative.

The space in *O Canto da Moreia* becomes a 'silent' witness to the key events shaping Eugénio's life—his descent into alcoholism, family breakdown, abandonment, marginalization, and ultimately death. It is a space that absorbs and reflects both affection and violence, aggression, and trauma. Through this constellation of emotions, the novel seeks to reconstruct a fragmented diasporic map of Eugénio's journey, tracing his transits from Cape Verde and his familial past to his life in Portugal.

In the symbolic topography followed by Eugénio, there is a progressive downgrade to precarious spaces which follows the transformation of Lisbon. According to Margarida Rendeiro (2022b, 32), Portuguese modernity is revealed in the novel through constant space transformation, based on the progressive gentrification of Lisbon. The metal factory, where Eugénio worked until he was fired, closed after decades of activity, giving way to a luxury hotel. The bairro do Monsanto where Eugénio lives with his family is a microcosm where precariousness emerges in various nuances, which also suffers from the transformations imposed by urban modernity. It is the case of Alziro's 'family tavern,' a central place of informal fraternisation in this neighbourhood, where from sombre cubicle it is progressively "nobilitada na hierarquia dos comércios de proximidade" (Semedo 2019, 68).²⁴⁶ Against the neoliberal 'upgrade' of these spaces, the housing in the neighbourhood deteriorate over the years, and the description of Eugénio's family home is paradigmatic in this respect. Eugénio lives with his wife in the Avenida da Liberdade—an antiphrastic toponym since it is placed within the poor and precarious bairro do Monsanto. Eugénio and Laura's house become an objective correlative of their gradual descent to dispossession and familial rupture due to Eugénio's violent behaviour and neoliberal urban drifts that materially desegregate the Lisbon peripheries:

No entanto, sem demora, a casa perdeu a maquilhagem, descolaram-se os tacos, desenrolaram-se de forma irrevogável os estores, os bichos comeram a madeira da janela, a espuma amarela escapou dos rasgos dos estofos do sofá, as canalizações hesitaram, buracos insinuaram-se no telhado, chovia dentro de casa e a humidade nas paredes esbodegou o já inestético verde-garrfa das paredes e o laranja berrante das portas, escolhidas num catálogo a dedo pela crianças, em idade de não saber ler. [...] Em pouco anos, a *casa jeitosa*

²⁴⁶ "Nobilitated in the hierarchy of neighbourhood businesses" (my translation).

transfigurou-se numa espécie de embarcação naufragada que se teria ido desentranhar aos abismos do mar (Semedo 2019, 45).²⁴⁷

Although the spatial degradation, the narration keeps representing the *bairro* as a space connotated by structural difficulties but also by good neighbourliness and solidarity. These feelings are aggregating characteristics that lay at the heart of community life in the *bairro*, and which take the form of communal sharing of care and freedom of movement within the community. This contrapuntal description is based on Semedo's lived experience as a young Afrodescendant who, according to interview declaration (Henriques 2019c, online) grew up in the bairro da Serafina. Semedo states that “vejo um problema quando vejo bairros como o meu descritos de forma totalmente estereotipada. Por exemplo, a miséria é vista de forma muito miserabilista, onde tudo é mal quando na verdade, mesmo nos piores momentos, há humor, há poesia.”²⁴⁸ This complexified notion of the *bairro* is present in the narrative construction of Eugénio's surroundings.

The house as a ‘shipwrecked vessel’ serves as an objective correlative through which the reader grasps Eugénio's fate. His destiny seems inscribed in the city's ‘affective grammar,’ which, like a fatal siren song, lures him into a deeper descent into alcoholism and the harsh realities of inhospitable Lisbon. Despite the ‘privilege’ of assimilation, nothing protects him from his fall down the social hierarchy, as he is consistently viewed as a non-national—primarily a poor Black man—relegated to the margins of both the system and the city.

Expelled from his home, Eugénio's topography shifts from the vulnerable bairro to the overlooked and marginalized centre of the city. On the 30th anniversary of the Carnation Revolution, Eugénio, now homeless, walks from Calçada da Estrela to Terreiro do Paço. In Praça do Comércio, where April 25 is celebrated, those on the fringes of neoliberal democracy—primarily foreigners and the impoverished—also wander. Among them are Amílcar, a Cape Verdean from Fogo who frequents the social canteen; Juan, a Venezuelan abandoned by his Portuguese wife; and Óscar, a former alcoholic and

²⁴⁷ “However, without delay, the house lost its appearance, the tiles peeled off, the shutters unrolled irrevocably, the bugs ate the wood of the window, the yellow foam escaped from the tears in the sofa upholstery, the plumbing hesitated, holes crept into the roof, it rained inside the house and the damp on the walls faded the already unsightly garnet green of the walls and the garish orange of the doors, hand-picked from a catalogue by children of an age when they couldn't read. [...] In just a few years, the handsome house became a kind of shipwrecked vessel that would have drifted into the depths of the sea” (my translation).

²⁴⁸ “I see a problem when I see neighbourhoods like mine described in a totally stereotyped way. For example, misery is seen in a very miserabilist way, where everything is bad, when in fact, even in the worst moments, there is humour, there is poetry” (my translation).

fado singer. These figures embody a failed ‘multiculturalism’ rendered invisible in the modern capital. The street, as a living space, thus becomes another metaphor for shipwreck, symbolizing lives consumed by the lack of support to endure life’s contingencies and materiality: “A rua é o naufrágio do ser, o derradeiro nível de existência, onde o prazer ilusório da solidão se transforma em dissolução do Eu” (Semedo 2019, 140).²⁴⁹ Thus, the precariousness of life, confined to a specific space, continuously transforms these exiled, lost, unwanted, and neglected individuals into “caos de peças de puzzle que com o tempo perderiam a forma, impossibilitando encaixamentos” (Semedo 2019, 145).²⁵⁰ The street as a point on the map within the vulnerable geography of Eugénio emerges as the epitome of exposure to a precarious life.

In *La colpa di non avere un tetto* (2021), Daniela Leonardi carefully analyses the critical aspects of the public debate on homelessness. She argues that homelessness is not an individual deficit due to personal misfortunes or failures, but rather a social, structural phenomenon. Depoliticizing homelessness removes from political discussion the crucial issues of housing policies, eviction prevention, housing accessibility, and the urban precariousness faced by the most vulnerable social groups. Leonardi particularly emphasizes how architecture is often used as a tool of exclusion against homeless people, who are considered undesirable as soon as they use public spaces for purposes other than those normally accepted. This results in the criminalization of severely marginalized individuals simply for existing and occupying public space with their bodies: “guardare alla questione abitativa, alla segregazione spaziale, agli sfratti, ai processi di espulsione di determinate fasce della popolazione da porzioni delle città dev’essere la priorità. La casa e la povertà sono strettamente correlate” (Leonardi 2021, 51).²⁵¹ Addressing homelessness, in other words, means intervening politically to reduce structural inequalities.

In his walking, Eugénio “caminhou, de novo, para a Praça do Comércio, aproximou-se do rio e pensou que a sua vida poderia ali acabar. Ninguém daria por ela, ninguém o procuraria, ninguém sentiria a sua falta, iria, enfim, para perto da mãe. O

²⁴⁹ “The street is the shipwreck of being, the ultimate level of existence, where the illusory pleasure of solitude is transformed into the dissolution of the Self” (my translation).

²⁵⁰ “Chaos of puzzle pieces that would lose their shape over time, making it impossible to fit them together” (my translation).

²⁵¹ “Addressing the housing issue, spatial segregation, evictions, and the processes of expulsion of certain segments of the population from portions of cities must be the priority. Housing and poverty are closely related” (my translation).

soturno rio chamava por ele como fúnebres sereias negras” (Semedo 2019, 124).²⁵² The Tagus River, the very first entrance to Lisbon for Eugénio, now seems to close in on him and others like him, as they find themselves abandoned and marginalized in a city that offers no genuine refuge or acceptance.

Eugénio’s vulnerable topography concerns also a spatial flash back to Cape Verde, as the external narrator delves into the family memory and history of the protagonist. Chapter 9 interrelates spatial vulnerability with memory vulnerability. Along the novel, the reader senses the inaccessible past of Eugénio due to its reluctance to recall it. Only travelling back to those memory allows the reader to get closer to Eugénio’s genealogy, silently embedded within the late colonial empire on the islands. It is highly symbolic to place this chapter before the conclusion of the novel, which takes place in the hospital, “o lugar do eterno retorno. O local onde, cada vez que saía vertical e soberano pela porta de vidro, confirmava as várias vidas que havia vivido. O marco icónico das setes vidas já tinha sido largamente ultrapassado” (Semedo 2019, 211).²⁵³ The last two geographies on Eugénio’s map are then reconducted both to the origin of traumatic family story—the death of her mother due to Eugénio’s mistrust—and to the diasporic separations that progressively leads Eugénio to forget his past, his origins, and his culture in order to sink in the false dream of assimilation in Lisbon. Connecting past and present, and sewing up all the points on his map, Eugénio locates on this same map the affect that accompanied him toward his long navigation from Cape Verde to Lisbon, as he admits before dying: “Eu acho que no fundo a raiva vem-me da solidão. Eu gostei da solidão, procurei-a, defendi-a e hoje entendo que ela só me serviu de esconderijo. Pensei que fosse um refúgio, mas foi uma caverna de sombras. Uma ilusão de vida” (Semedo 2019, 229).²⁵⁴ Eugénio’s vulnerable topography once more unveils itself as an impasse, a dead-end not solely fashioned by the empire’s impact on him and his family, but also by the choices he made and the toll his addiction took on his affective relationships. Home doesn’t exist anymore.

²⁵² “He walked back to Praça do Comércio, approached the river and thought that his life could end there. No-one would notice him, no-one would look for him, no-one would miss him, he would finally go home to his mum. The gloomy river called out to him like dark, mournful sirens” (my translation).

²⁵³ “The place of eternal return. The place where, every time he walked out of the glass door, he confirmed the many lives he had lived. The iconic milestone of seven lives had already been far surpassed” (my translation).

²⁵⁴ “I think that deep down my anger comes from loneliness. I liked solitude, I cared for it, I defended it and today I realise that it only served as a hiding place. I thought it was a refuge, but it was a cave of shadows. An illusion of life” (my translation).

3.4.3 Luanda, Lisbon, Trash Room

From its very title, Almeida's *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* underscores the profound connection the novel maintains with spatial, geographical, and topological dimensions. Indeed, the narrative traces the journey of Cartola de Sousa and his son. The toponyms embedded in the title encapsulate a broader diasporic trajectory depicted in the novel, emphasizing transitions both in Angola and Portugal. Initially rooted in the quaint Angolan village of Quinzau, Cartola relocates to Luanda, where he marries Glória. Subsequently, the family moves to Moçâmedes, where Cartola assumes the role of a male midwife under the tutelage of the Portuguese doctor, Barbosa da Cunha. Meanwhile, as Glória, Justina, and Neusa endure the gradual deterioration of Luanda amid civil conflict, Cartola and Aquiles traverse precarious paths that lead them through sombre spaces etched into Lisbon's cartography. Their journey takes them from the heart of the city, where they reside in the precarious Pensão Covilhã, to a ramshackle hovel provided by Somitex, the company where Cartola works. Eventually, they find themselves in the impoverished outskirts of Quinta do Paraíso, inhabiting a dwelling that falls victim to fire, prompting them to construct a second home with the assistance of Pepe, Amândio, and Iuri.

As noted by Margarida Calafate Ribeiro (2020b, 299), the novel clearly facilitates an intersectional approach that intertwines race and class with geography, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding the subjective legacies of empire on the characters. In her essay "*Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso: a cartografia da violência dos sujeitos da diáspora*," Liz Maria Teles de Sá Almeida (2021, 73) delves into the novel using the concept of the 'cartography of violence' as a literary tool to illuminate the historical violence inherited from the empire, which is deeply ingrained in the characters' affective maps. The scholar argues that many Western authors who contemplated violence in theoretical and philosophical reflections often overlook the genocidal acts perpetrated against racialized populations during slavery and colonial eras, as well as the ongoing violence faced by masses of exiled migrants (and their descendants) attempting to cross European borders daily. Drawing on Norman Ajari's insights, Teles de Sá Almeida asserts that the hyper-violence experienced by Africans and Afrodescendants underscores a contemporary blurring between life and death, resulting in a state of indignity or what Ajari terms the 'black condition.' This condition challenges the value that Europe places on African and Afrodescendant lives, a theme starkly portrayed in Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida's spatial portrayal of the novel. Here, geographies, spaces, and objects intricately

intertwine with the vulnerable topography traced within the trajectories of Cartola and Aquiles. This deepens the intersectionality issue raised by Ribeiro, as the characters' vulnerable bodies become increasingly intertwined with the precarious spaces they inhabit. It reveals not only a cartography of violence or a diasporic and exilic map, but also a cartography of vulnerability, carrying significant ethical implications for navigating these spatial dynamics.

Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso is structured into three non-homogeneous parts that mirror the geographies indicated in the title. The novel commences with the marriage of Severino, Cartola's colleague in Lisbon's construction site. The wedding takes place in a prefab near Chelas, while the party unfolds in a private garage, concluding with the workers trekking back to the construction site. From the first outset, readers are thrust into a distinct, precarious realm within Lisbon. While the following chapters trace back to the family life in Angola, briefly touching upon the economic downturn when Cartola resigns from his job to care for Glória, it's upon the father and son's arrival in Lisbon that space assumes a pivotal role in the narrative. Cartola's initial challenge lies in reconciling his idealized 'mental map' of Lisbon—fashioned from tourist postcards and romanticized colonialist depictions of the city—with the stark reality of the violent and vulnerable terrain in which they find themselves inscribed: “Dentro de um taxi, com o olhar curioso de duas crianças, viram Lisboa pela primeira vez. Pareceu-lhes pequena e oscura” (Almeida 2018, 33).²⁵⁵

The narration emphasizes sensory descriptions of the spaces traversed by the characters. For instance, the initial depiction of the Pensão Covilhã: “A Recepção da Pensão Covilhã cheirava a mofo. Conduzidos por uma senhora de lunetas, pai e filho subiram por uma escada em caracol periclitante e entraram no quarto 111. A janela americana enferrujada abria-se para um muro e um contentor de lixo. A vista não era grande coisa, mas estavam vivos” (Almeida 2018, 34).²⁵⁶

The first walk in Lisbon reveals the susceptibility of the two men which can't afford to show their vulnerability in an unknown, hostile, and almost 'cannibalistic' city ready to devour its most weak inhabitants:

²⁵⁵ “Inside a taxi, with the curious gaze of two children, they saw Lisbon for the first time. It seemed small and dark to them” (my translation).

²⁵⁶ “The reception of Pensão Covilhã smelled of mould. Led by a lady with a spyglass, father and son climbed a ramshackle spiral staircase and entered room 111. The rusty American window opened onto a wall and a rubbish bin. The view wasn't great, but they were alive” (my translation).

Aquiles conseguia pressentir o desnorteamento do pai e começou aos poucos a dar-lhe a mão. Tocava-lhe nas pontas dos dedos, como um rapaz nos primeiros passeios com a namorada. Cartola negou-se, desembaraçando-se dos dedos do filho, desconversando com secura, mas aos poucos rendeu-se e começou a apertar a mão de Aquiles com toda a força. O filho sentia o suor de Cartola, o leve tremor de nervosismo. Sentia que de mãos dadas com o miúdo coxo estavam mais vulneráveis. O rei estava mais fraco por caminhar de mão dada com uma criança e a criança sentia-se exposta por sentir que ao dar a mão ao rei o desapossava (Almeida 2018, 38).²⁵⁷

Lisbon is perceived as a hostile city—“do cimo da Rotunda, Lisboa era perigosa” (Almeida 2018, 39).²⁵⁸ The relationship between Cartola and his envisioned Lisbon mirrors the act of throwing oneself into the embrace of something that, in reality, seeks to harm. Aquiles comes to grasp this truth and anticipates the loneliness that awaits them, observing as his father becomes enveloped in the illusion of a warm reception from Lisbon.

As noted by Luca Fazzini (2020, 169), one of the most evident metamorphoses within the novel occurs with the bodies of the two men and the ‘body’ of the city of Lisbon, which undergoes several transformations throughout the narrative. There is a persistent emphasis on describing the spaces inhabited and traversed by the two men—the Pensão Covilhã, the construction site, the forsaken and unfamiliar corners of Lisbon, and its most famous settings—recalling tastes and smells that evoke decay, the deterioration of objects, and the weariness of foodstuffs, mirroring the gradual erosion of the bodies of these two exiled men. As mentioned by the narrator, “a cada dia o corpo mudava como muda uma casa” (Almeida 2018, 83).²⁵⁹ In their degraded room, which “cheirava a mofo, a suor, a desodorizante, aroma cortado pela acidez de medicamentos fora de prazo”²⁶⁰ (Almeida 2018, 74), Cartola and Aquiles live surrounded by amount of meaningless objects. In their room,

²⁵⁷ “Aquiles could sense his father’s bewilderment and slowly began to hold his hand. He touched his fingertips, like a boy on his first stroll with his girlfriend. Cartola refused, disentangling himself from his son’s fingers and dryly refusing, but gradually gave in and began to squeeze Aquiles’ hand with all his strength. His son could feel Cartola’s sweat, the slight tremor of nervousness. He felt that holding hands with the lame boy made them more vulnerable. The king was weaker for walking hand in hand with a child and the child felt exposed because he felt that holding the king’s hand would dispossess him” (my translation).

²⁵⁸ “From the top of the Rotunda, Lisbon was dangerous” (my translation).

²⁵⁹ “Every day their body changed like a house that is changing” (my translation).

²⁶⁰ “Smelled of mould, sweat and deodorant, the aroma cut by the acidity of expired medicines” (my translation).

as coisas de Luanda se misturavam com coisas de Lisboa, calendários, uma ou outra peça de roupa, uma garrafa de vinho vazia, um cachecol do Belenenses, uma telefonia. Nas rodilhas de roupa do quarto 111 e nos rostos de pai e filho, um império permanecia intacto. A roupa de Verão encardida vestia-se debaixo de casacões de Inverno emborbotados, uma lâmina velha comprada no Mercado de São Paulo em Luanda aparava a barba que a Europa fizera despontar ou encanecera (Almeida 2018, 75).²⁶¹

Within Cartola and Aquiles' room, the precariousness of their existence is manifested through the broken and disjointed objects that surround them, serving as material manifestations of the enduring influence of the Portuguese empire and its ongoing impact on the lives of father and son.

Throughout the novel, Lisbon gradually transforms into a fragmented, distorted reflection of the 'dignified life'—albeit entangled in the oppressive politics of colonial rule—once experienced in Luanda. Lisbon becomes a fractured mirror, reflecting an inverted existence of father and son marked by radical precarity. It is interesting to note that the dignity and recognition of their former lives erode as they descend into occupying precarious spaces, which are constantly filled with dysfunctional, displaced objects. In this sense, their room resembles a 'trash room,' a concept borrowed from Afro-Brazilian writer Carolina Maria de Jesus, who used it to describe her embodied experience of the life in Canindé, one of São Paulo's favelas. The dross, the waste, the leftover become the most tangible legacies of the empire, saturating the protagonists' spaces and serving as both metaphors and metonymies for their constant state of exile and displacement. This spatial metaphor/metonym of waste is central in the articulation of the diasporic and exilic 'limbo identity' of the characters. In fact, Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida reflects on the connection between diasporic subjects and out-of-context objects. In "A restituição da interioridade," she describes Afro-diasporic subjects as "feitos de fragmentos, lembrancinhas e pilhagens. [...] Somos uma coleção de coisas fora de contexto. Tentamos imaginar um sujeito a quem elas pertencem" (Almeida 2023, 74).²⁶² Thus, the relationship between Aquiles and Cartola's vulnerable bodies and their embeddedness in Lisbon is mediated through the metaphorical and metonymic link between characters and the

²⁶¹ "Things from Luanda were mixed with things from Lisbon, calendars, a piece of clothing, an empty bottle of wine, a Belenenses scarf, a telephone. On the clothes racks in room 111 and on the faces of father and son, an empire remained intact. Grimy summer clothes were worn under faded winter coats, an old razor bought at the São Paulo Market in Luanda trimmed the beard that Europe had brought out or made duller" (my translation).

²⁶² "Made of fragments, trinkets, and loot. [...] a collection of things out of context. We try to imagine a subject to whom they belong" (my translation).

degraded objects surrounding them. These objects serve as a ‘poethical’ medium, where corporeality and spatiality intersect.

In *Gli oggetti desueti nelle immagini della letteratura* (1994), Italian literary critic Francesco Orlando focuses on the non-functional corporeality of objects in literature from the 18th century, particularly in relation to the industrial revolution and the rise of the bourgeoisie. Drawing on Freudian analysis, Orlando views the literary realm as a space where the anti-functional repressed surfaces through embodied objects. Considering the relationship between time, nature, and culture, Orlando sees literature as a domain where even useless and harmful objects find a place through the ‘formation of compromise’—a Freudian concept—that ‘redeems’ them within the text. He explores the presence of anti-commodities within the capitalist system as depicted in literature. However, Orlando’s analysis focuses exclusively on classic texts and does not address the colonial context. What interests me in Orlando’s critical approach is the idea of the return of the repressed as a psychoanalytic response to a specific socio-historical, cultural, and economic period. I believe the prominent presence of objects in *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* is strongly connected to this dimension and invites a critical psychoanalytic reading of both the kinds of objects at hand and the subjectivities related to these objects. This is strictly intertwined with what I defined in the first chapter as the colonial unthought and the racial unconscious in the Portuguese context. This reflection also aligns with what Margarida Calafate Ribeiro (2021b, 205) highlights as the critical importance of evaluating the materiality of (post)memories from the colonial period. She emphasizes the significance of anchoring these memories to concrete objects or to a more elusive, diffuse heritage. This heritage includes genealogy heirlooms and their projections in contemporary societies, revealing the ways in which colonial legacies persist, consciously or unconsciously, within modern cultural and social frameworks through these objects. Objects, particularly waste, within the diaspora become crucial sources of information and investigation for lives at risk of being erased. In Cartola and Aquiles’ room, the casual blend of objects from different eras and places, alongside remnants and bodily traces, transforms these items into mediums that evoke the timeless dimension of a post-imperial condition without true decolonization. Objects from the past reappear in the present but are rendered dysfunctional, as they were never meant to be there under the colonial order. Similarly, Cartola—a former *assimilado*—was never expected, under to colonial rule, to find a ‘Paradise’ in Portugal, nor any sense of belonging to the mainland.

By situating the novel's geography across both Europe and Africa, *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* revisits and reinterprets the intertwined histories of colonialism, exploring their lasting impact on those historically denied both a sense of territoriality and inwardness. The novel's discarded, consumed, abandoned, out-of-context, and desensitized objects serve as remnants of an enduring past that shadows the protagonists. Through these objects, the characters are forced to confront the colonial logic that equates disposable objects with disposable subjectivities.

The precarious conditions of Lisbon are depicted through the lens of the two protagonists: They traverse the city, passing by its most iconic sites such as the Cemitério dos Prazeres, Chiado, Rossio, Cais do Sodré, and Praça do Comércio. However, these locations are described from the perspective of individuals living on the edge, who can discern the hidden and unseen aspects typically overlooked by the privileged passersby. They observe abandoned animals, impoverished individuals, decaying remnants, and neglected corners of the city that often escape notice. Almeida skilfully dismantles any lingering romanticized notions or mythical imagery about the metropolitan area by juxtaposing vulnerable characters with vulnerable spaces. Rather than presenting a glossy tourist postcard, the writer offers readers a raw portrayal of one of the many 'trash rooms' systematically overlooked within Lisbon. Aquiles' nocturnal stroll through Lisbon serves as a poignant illustration of this process:

Meu bom Aquiles, quão longe estás tu de casa? Já não há outra casa para além dos toldos da Rua Augusta, do cheiro a mijó das casas de banho do Terminal do Rossio, das Escadinhas do Duque, que sobe aos tombos, escadinhas de Sísifo. Não há pressa nem de ter casa nem de ter pai nem de ter mãe. A noite salva-o de estar sujo por dentro. Aquiles tem a cor da noite e não carrega aos ombros o fardo de ser quem é (Almeida 2018, 170).²⁶³

The tragic fire that engulfs the top floor of the Pensão Covilhã, killing a mother and her son, coupled with their dire financial situation, ultimately forces Cartola and Aquiles to move toward their final destination: Quinta do Paraíso. The Quinta do Paraíso, a fictional neighbourhood characterized by its antiphrastic name (akin to the rua da Liberdade in Luísa Semedo's *O Canto da Moreia*), yet evocative of the several *bairros* in

²⁶³ "My good Aquiles, how far are you from home? There's no other home apart from the awnings on Rua Augusta, the smell of piss from the toilets in the Rossio Terminal, the Escadinhas do Duque, the stairs of Sisyphus. He's in no hurry to have a home, a father or a mother. The night saves him from being dirty inside. Achilles is the colour of night and doesn't carry the burden of being who he is on his shoulders" (my translation).

Lisbon, functions as a literary canvas for contemplating the urban evolution of the city and its outskirts over the past five decades.

As argued, there exists a lingering colonial/postcolonial ghost in the genesis of these spaces, particularly prominent during the years 1970-1990. As a consequence, Paraíso emerges as an *Ab-Ort*, a space where Lisbon's castoffs and remnants accumulate. The themes of waste and the discarded are direct consequences of racial capitalism in Portugal, which targets precarious lives like those of Cartola and Aquiles. In the novel, racial capitalism functions as an economy of waste, where discarded lives are hidden from the view of privileged Portuguese citizens—such as Doctor Barbosa da Cunha—who continue to enjoy a 'good life' after their role in colonial oppression. This waste is displaced into the unseen 'trash rooms' surrounding Lisbon, like Quinta da Paraíso. In her feminist analysis of the repercussions of slavery and its residual materiality, Saidiya Hartman (2007, 90) asserts that "waste is the interface of life and death. It incarnates all that has been rendered invisible, peripheral, or expendable to history writ large, that is, history as the tale of great men, empire, and nation. It 'evokes the dull ordinary horror of what is vile, worthless and contemptible—a pile of shit.' Waste is the remnant of all the lives that are outside of history and 'dissolved in utter amnesia.'"²⁶⁴ Thus, it becomes clear that this capitalistic 'economy of waste' and 'wear and tear' of bodies is inextricably linked to the production of human (as well as non-human) beings as 'dirt' and 'waste.' An entire segment of humanity—which is not recognized as such—is condemned to perform invisible and overexploited labour. This labour supports a world of hyper-consumption and sustains institutions for the privileged parts of contemporary society. Paraíso evolves into an extension of the trash room where Cartola and Aquiles once resided in the heart of Lisbon and which now is progressively dislocated outwards. Thus, the issue of waste becomes intricately linked to issues of spatial abandonment in the aftermath of the colonial period. In regard to the numerous neighborhoods comprising the outskirts of the capital, Eduardo Ascensão (2013, 438) contends that "os habitantes de bairros de barracas em Lisboa não são sequer proletariado ou operariado, mas 'pessoas deixadas à sua sorte,' descendentes de muitas outras populações pobres que o colonialismo e o capitalismo criaram ao longo do séculos XIX e XX, isto é, momentaneamente necessárias como mão-de-obra mas posteriormente descartadas através de regimes ignorância e sobranceria

²⁶⁴ The quotations within Hartman's statement refer to Marcel Hénaff's reflection on the issue of waste in the book *Sade, the invention of the libertine body*.

administrativa.”²⁶⁵ Paraíso emerges as the corporeal incarnation of the colonial spectre that shapes the outskirts of contemporary Portugal. It embodies not only the “humans as waste” axiom proposed by Françoise Vergès (2021, 16), but also the metaphorical/metonymical transformation of ‘waste as humans.’ This spectre spatially organizes these areas to enforce distance and invisibility upon marginalized groups, including the impoverished, immigrant, diasporic, Black, and racialized populations. In this sense, the act of creating distance replicates, in a violent manner, the tactics of colonialism, which aimed to establish and perpetuate distance for the sake of domination and exploitation.

In the essay “A barraca pós-colonial: materialidade, memória e afeto na arquitetura informal,” Eduardo Ascensão proposes the concept of ‘biography of the house’²⁶⁶ to unravel the post-imperial condition characterized by a lack of access to housing and urban spaces, perpetuated by public policies that gradually reintroduce colonial dynamics into the contemporary framework of Portuguese urban peripheries. In examining the specific context of Quinta da Serra along the Estrada Militar near Prior Velho, Ascensão embarks on an exploration rooted in the personal narratives of its residents and their intimate and affective connection to home and livelihood. He delves into how memory, life experiences, and emotional bonds intricately shape the informal architecture of the *bairro*. Far from reifying any vision that romanticizes a vague notion of the ‘creativity of the poor,’ Ascensão reveals a profound convergence of memory, affection, and architectural form, culminating in a real ‘philosophy of dwelling’ related by the inhabitants of the *bairro*. According to Ascensão (2013, 421), “trata-se do pensar a partir da habitação, isto é, pensar a barraca a partir da noção do edifício que se constrói e onde se vive mas também enquanto objeto e elemento estruturante da vivência. Ou seja, pensar a barraca como simultaneamente estruturada e estruturante.”²⁶⁷ The author describes a ‘cyborg’

²⁶⁵ “The inhabitants of Lisbon’s shantytowns are not even proletariat or workers, but ‘people left to their own fate’, descendants of many other poor populations that colonialism and capitalism created throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, that is, momentarily needed as labour but later discarded through regimes of ignorance and administrative arrogance” (my translation).

²⁶⁶ Ascensão’s discussion of the issues surrounding the barracks in the *bairros*, and their intersection with affective projection and the narration of the diasporic history of the house, is particularly relevant to my argument: “In short, the shack is a precarious accommodation even when it seems relatively comfortable; it is an architectural artefact that evolves as an extension of the family household but also causes recurring types of illness; it is, for those who don’t live in it, a symbol of danger and unwanted encounters; and it is, for those who do, both a source of mnemonic solace and a mark they carry with them when they interact socially” (Ascensão 2013, 458, my translation).

²⁶⁷ “It’s about thinking from the point of view of housing, in other words, thinking of the barracks from the point of view of the building that is constructed and where people live, but also as an object and structuring element of living. In other words, thinking of the barracks as both structured and structuring” (my translation).

connection between home, biography, and body, portraying the home and its affective associations as a prosthesis for a body estranged not only from its land of origin but also from the heart of Lisbon, left forsaken on the fringes of society. The materiality of the house, frequently constructed from discarded materials and harmful substances like asbestos fibre sheets for roofing, frequently exerts a brutal impact on the body, “como se os materiais ou a sua montagem tivessem agência sobre este” (Ascensão 2013, 422).²⁶⁸

Although the narrator of the novel doesn’t directly depict Quinta do Paraíso, the reader discerns the squalor of the neighbourhood through the deplorable conditions under which its inhabitants live: Pepe’s grimy and cramped tavern, his hideaway in the woods surrounded by garbage, the precarious streets upon which the neighbourhood is built, and Cartola and Aquiles’ ramshackle dwelling, tended to by Justina and Neusa during their Portuguese summer with the male members of the family. In the novel, Cartola and Aquiles develop ‘cyborg’ connections with two distinct houses within Paraíso. In fact, Ascensão’s notion of the house as an agent for changing, affecting, and transforming the body and its health is visible during Cartola and Aquiles’ permanence in the first barrack:

Aos primeiros dias de um Setembro particularmente frio, já os dois homens dormiam de novo na cama de casal que havia no quarto do fundo porque o frio no quartinho de Aquiles não o deixava adormecer. «Cala a boca, seu macaco», berrava o pai se o filho ressonava a meio da noite. O vento assobiava na Janela da sala durante a noite, o que despertava Aquiles do sono, e ele sentava-se nos degras à entrada do casebre, coberto com uma manta a pensar na irmã, como se recordasse a visita inesperada de um forasteiro (Almeida 2018, 147).²⁶⁹

Amidst those precarious circumstances, Cartola and Aquiles’ makeshift dwelling is ravaged by a fire, resulting in the total loss of what the narrator refers to as the “reino das bugigangas de Cartola”²⁷⁰ (Almeida 2018, 172), which once filled their room in the Pensão Covilhã. The pinnacle of devastation is reached as the narrative describes the objects consumed by flames, including their birth certificates and documents, underscoring once more the utter dispossession and total loss experienced by the two men.

²⁶⁸ “As if the materials or their assembly had agency over it” (my translation).

²⁶⁹ “In the early days of a particularly cold September, the two men were already sleeping on the double bed in the back bedroom because the cold in Aquiles’ room wouldn’t let him fall asleep. «Shut up, you monkey», the father would shout if his son snored in the middle of the night. The wind whistled in the living room window during the night, which woke Aquiles from his sleep, and he would sit on the steps at the entrance to the hut, covered in a blanket thinking about his sister, as if remembering the unexpected visit of a stranger” (my translation).

²⁷⁰ “Kingdom of Cartola’s trinkets” (my translation).

Surprisingly, the rebuilding of Cartola and Aquiles' new home fosters a deeper bond with Pepe, Iuri, and Amândio. As they collaborate on constructing the dwelling, these men envision a pathway to a brighter future, united by hope and determination, as "Cartola iniciou uns optimistas 'Apontamentos para a nossa futura casa' nos quais narrava em retrospectiva o que contava vir a construir" (Almeida 2018, 193).²⁷¹ While the first 'barrack' symbolized the impact of precarious housing on the physical and mental well-being of shantytown dwellers, the construction of the second house is clearly intertwined with the emotional projection of a previous family and home life with Glória, as articulated in Cartola's letter: "Viva, Mamã! Erguemos a nossa casa! Aleluia, mãe! É pequena mas dá para nós três. Tem chão de mosaico como tu querias. Ainda não temos louceiro, mas é como dizes, minha rainha, Deus sempre providencia" (Almeida 2018, 205).²⁷² Almeida includes the sketches drawn by Cartola (figure 3) in the novel as a form of material witness of the life project and dream proportioned by the house. I was struck by the strong resemblance between the drawing of Cartola, a fictional character, and another illustration featured in Eduardo Ascensão's essay. Among the various interviews he conducted, Ascensão shares the story of Utelinda, a resident of Quinta da Serra from Guinea. He particularly delves into her process of constructing her home in the Portuguese neighbourhood, aiming to resemble her old residence in the outskirts of Bissau, as she depicted in a sketch (figure 4). Ascensão underscores that Utelinda's endeavour to replicate her former home in Quinta da Serra transcends mere architectural mimicry. Rather, it reflects her desire to recreate a sense of living in her old house by projecting memories of her life in Bissau onto the new house.

²⁷¹ "Cartola began an optimistic 'Notes for our future home' in which he recounted in retrospect what he hoped to build" (my translation).

²⁷² "Hurray, Mamã! We've built our house! Hallelujah, Mama! It's small but it's enough for the three of us. It has mosaic floors just like you wanted. We still don't have a cupboard, but as you say, my queen, God always provides" (my translation).



Figure 3 – Djaimilia Pereida de Almeida, *Apontamentos para a nossa futura casa* (2018)

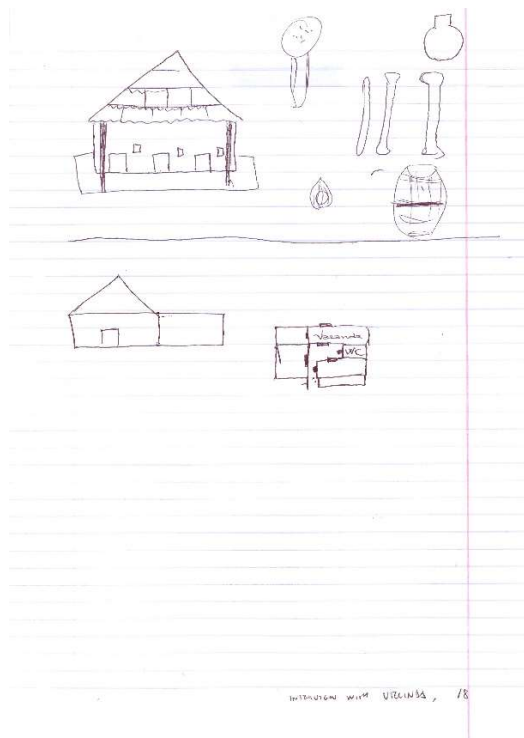


Figure 4 – Eduardo Ascensão, *A casa de família de Utelinda na periferia de Bissau* (2013)

The common thread between these two houses, one imaginary and the other real, is the notion of a tangible, physical structure that serves as an emotional conduit, fostering the revisiting of emotions and memories. Drawing on Christopher Morton’s insights, Ascensão suggests that the house serves as a catalyst for the ‘memory work’ of diasporic communities: “falar dela suscita memórias e emoções, como se duma ajuda narrativa se tratasse” (Ascensão 2013, 451).²⁷³

Exposed to an almost bare life, the four men find themselves bound together by a form of “promiscuous care” (The care collective 2020) while building the new house. Beyond any blood ties, they provide mutual support and care, facing their shared vulnerability head-on and exchanging stories of their past lives as a means of addressing the various hardships and beauties they have experienced: “«A nossa casinha», assim lhe chamavam. E cada um deles se entregou a ela como se lhe tivesse sido dada a oportunidade de matarem quem haviam sido. A forma final da vida de Pepe era cada vez mais clara no seu espírito. A casa era o túmulo da primeira vida de todos eles, um jazigo para uma

²⁷³ “Talking about it stirs up memories and emotions, as if it were a narrative aid” (my translation).

família de quatro inadaptados” (Almeida 2018, 199).²⁷⁴ In my view, the construction of the house symbolizes what Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfau’ and Marie Moïse (2023, vi) describe as a decolonial space, countering the objectification of one’s existence: “la casa come spazio decoloniale, nella vita quotidiana delle persone razzializzate, non corrisponde necessariamente a un appartamento. Può essere un cortile, un garage trasformato in luogo di culto, un bar al crocevia di un quartiere segregato. [...] è uno spazio decoloniale perché vive della pratica di resistenza quotidiana al potere di ridurre la vita, in tutte le sue articolazioni umane e non umane, a oggetto di possesso.”²⁷⁵ Their home transcends being merely an artefact; instead, it embodies a form of resistance and serves as a repository for tangible shared memories in response to their precarious existence. In fleeting moments, the four men find solace and a sense of belonging with each other through their affective projection onto the house.

As argued, happiness doesn’t last long in Paraíso. After the death of Iuri, Tristão and Pepe, any dreams of reconstruction are lost forever. Vulnerability once again permeates the spaces, extending its reach to Luanda, ravaged by civil war. Meanwhile, Glória, confined to her bed, blurs the lines between her own delirium and the city’s degradation, epitomized by the broken elevator in her building strewn with garbage and animal carcasses. With Pepe’s death, “Portugal terminava para o seu amigo angolano sem que o pai de Aquiles tivesse chegado a esse paraíso” (Almeida 2018, 228).²⁷⁶ The novel’s now iconic conclusion portrays Cartola walking from Rossio down Rua Augusta to the Cais das Colunas, where he gazes at the Tejo, casts his hat into its waters, and turn his back on it forever. However, just before the climax, Cartola mourns the loss of the idealized Lisbon from postcards—a city that never truly existed. He comes to terms with the fact that Lisbon has always been something else entirely: a Leviathan, the enduring symbol of vulnerability in Western philosophy: “Sob o Arco da Rua Augusta, vieram-lhe à memória aqueles velhos postais da metropole e então reparou que este se parecia com uma boca para duas goelas e que a gente se movimentava ao longo das arcadas como a

²⁷⁴ “«Our little house», they called it. And each of them committed themselves to it as if they had been given the opportunity to kill who they had been. The final shape of Pepe’s life was increasingly clear in his mind. The house was the tomb of their first life, a grave for a family of four misfits” (my translation).

²⁷⁵ “The house as a decolonial space, in the everyday life of racialised people, does not necessarily correspond to a flat. It can be a courtyard, a garage turned into a place of worship, a bar at the crossroads of a segregated neighbourhood. [...] it is a decolonial space because it lives from the practice of everyday resistance to the power of reducing life, in all its human and non-human articulations, to an object of possession” (my translation).

²⁷⁶ “Portugal ended for his Angolan friend without Aquiles’ father having reached that paradise” (my translation).

refeição alegre de um leviatã” (Almeida 2019, 229).²⁷⁷ Contemplating *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* within its spatial dimension prompts us to ponder the intricate relationship between Lisbon’s centre and its peripheries, revealing the shortcomings of purportedly ‘democratic’ policies in a state that, despite defining itself as ‘postcolonial’ in its temporal dimension, has yet to fully decolonize its essence. The colonial leviathan morphs into a postcolonial leviathan, perpetually exploiting the vulnerabilities of those who remain shackled by the subaltern, racialized, and dehumanizing legacies of the past.

3.4.4 The Miserable Sleep under the Tagus: Psychogeographies of Lisbon

While in *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* the narrative trajectory traces the toponymy of the title, gradually depicting a (still colonial) detachment from the centre of Lisbon, in *Maremoto*, Almeida no longer diverts her gaze to the periphery. Instead, she delves into the unseen crevices of the city’s heart and its equally unseen inhabitants. It is within the tumultuous core of Lisbon that Boa Morte da Silva works and interacts with all the other characters abandoned to their fate.

Lisbon’s blend of ongoing neoliberal gentrification and its celebration of colonial history reveals a layered urban and human landscape marked by political and historical contradictions. *Maremoto* opens by situating Boa Morte and Fatinha in two emblematic city spaces: Boa Morte works as an unlicensed car-park attendant on Rua António Maria Cardoso, a street marked by historical significance, while Fatinha leads a precarious life along the route of the famous tourist tram 28. As Margarida Rendeiro (2023, 142) notes, Rua António Maria Cardoso—formerly Rua do Tesouro Velho—was renamed in 1890 after the Berlin Conference to honour an explorer who solidified Portugal’s colonial claims. Later, it became the headquarters of the PIDE, the repressive police of the Estado Novo regime. The street’s toponymy, like much of Lisbon, continues to reflect Portugal’s celebration of capitalist modernity, built on the foundations of its colonial violence. Taking into consideration the story that permeates Rua António Maria Cardoso, it’s profoundly impactful to consider that Boa Morte da Silva works as an exploited car valet in a space with such a dreadful past etched into its very stones.²⁷⁸ The unskilled, poorly

²⁷⁷ “Under the Rua Augusta Arch, those old postcards of the metropole came to mind and he noticed that it resembled a mouth for two throats and that people moved along the arcades like the happy meal of a leviathan” (my translation).

²⁷⁸ In an interview, Almeida (in Navarro de Andrade 2021, online) explains that placing Boa Morte on Rua António Maria Cardoso was not a deliberate poetic decision, but rather a coincidence. The novel is inspired by a man Almeida knew who, like Boa Morte, worked on that street and had a life story similar to the character’s. Thus, there was no political or historical intent behind the writer’s creative choice.

compensated nature of his work and the invisibility of Boa Morte as an individual highlight how both the spirit of the Portuguese conqueror and the ethos of Salazarist exclusion continue to shape Boa Morte's life. Equally poignant is Fatinha's existence within the public space, making her home at 28 tram stop, a well-known tourist destination in the city, amidst the garbage of Rua do Loreto.

From the very beginning of the novel, the characters' vulnerability intersects with iconic and renowned urban spaces, which, beneath the surface glamour of tourism or the transient gazes of passersby, unveil a profound essence of precariousness: "Talvez alguém tenha reparado na rapariga que viveu na Rua do Loreto, na paragem do 28. Não dizia coisa com coisa. Ele, o combatente, estacionava carros abaixo, na António Maria Cardoso. [...] Quem sabe se notavam que mudávamos de passeio para os evitar, mudar de passeio no qual ia a nossa morte e não a sua" (Almeida 2021, 9).²⁷⁹

From these initial insights, it becomes clear that the Lisbon experienced by Boa Morte and Fatinha is not 'invisible,' but rather 'unseen.' This Lisbon is a real city, though often overlooked by its privileged residents. I draw the concept of the 'unseen city' from Ankhi Mukherjee's *Unseen City: The Psychic Lives of the Urban Poor*. Mukherjee (2022, 20) recalls Salman Rushdie's distinction between invisible cities—that is, imagined cities, as per Italo Calvino—and unseen cities, which are cities 'not looked at,' systematically 'ignored.' Thus, depicting vulnerable Lisbon as an 'unseen city' in the novel involves acknowledging the Afrodescendant perspective of a city that is materially present through Boa Morte's eyes but generally 'unseen' because it is either dismissed or made abject in traditional literary Portuguese representations. Mukherjee's concept also connects with experiences of vulnerable neighbourhoods, environmental crises, displacement, diaspora, migration, racism, and urban poverty, examining these through the lens of both literary representations and decolonial psychoanalysis. Thus, she introduces the concept of 'psychogeography,' which involves reading urban space through the psychic lives of individuals, blending the city's often inhospitable geography with the subject's 'inner and affective map.' Psychogeography seeks to explore this 'inner map,' shaped by intersectional oppression, through literary and cultural expressions. Accordingly, I

Nevertheless, the symbolic weight and antiphrasis of Boa Morte being confined to such an exploited workspace remain significant.

²⁷⁹ "Perhaps someone noticed the girl who lived in Rua do Loreto, at the 28 stop. Her speech made no sense. He, the fighter, used to park cars down António Maria Cardoso. [...] Who knows if they noticed that we were changing direction to avoid them, changing direction where our death was coming and not theirs" (my translation).

propose that the recurrent spatial references in *Maremoto* are crucial for capturing the ‘psychogeographies’ of characters within the ‘vulnerable’ and ‘unseen’ Lisbon.

While the outskirts of Lisbon, such as Prior Velho (where Boa Morte resides), Amadora, Campo Grande, and even Sintra, are occasionally alluded to, it’s the heart of the city that truly takes centre stage in the novel. Here, Lisbon itself almost becomes a character, constantly intertwining with the experiences of the former soldier. Boa Morte vividly narrates his own personal ‘psychogeography’ and inner map of the city, revealing its significance ambivalent connection with Lisbon and its traumatic past connected to the colonial war. Indeed, Lisbon becomes a battleground map through which Boa Morte moves in order to ‘open’ and ‘care for’ the city through his unskilled and exploited work as car valet and unseen ‘gatekeeper’ of the city:

Teu pai é soldado português. Faço ronda do estacionamento na António Maria Cardoso como guardava a nossa messe contra o inimigo. Tenho na cabeça o mapa e as coordenadas da minha missão. Começa no Chiado e desce ao Dona Maria II, no Rossio, vai ao fim da Calçada do Combro e desagua em Santos-o-Velho, debaixo da jacarandás da Avenida Dom Carlos I. [...] Prior Velho é para dormir e comer, só porque não posso dormir no Chiado. [...] Chiado é capital da minha pátria, só esses prédios falam minha língua, desde os tempos dourados dos Armazéns Grandela ao grande incêndio, até à reconstrução. Essas ruas contam minha história. Além da estação do metro de Campo Grande, sou um preto, no Chiado, sou fantasma (Almeida 2021, 73).²⁸⁰

The closer Boa Morte ventures toward the city centre, the more he fades into his spectral essence. Thus, Chiado presents a paradox. While it turns into the epicentre of Boa Morte’s existence, it simultaneously acts as a space that overlooks him entirely: “Se eu não voltasse ao Chiado, Chiado não ia à minha procura” (Almeida 2021, 68).²⁸¹ The man that invisibly ‘opens the city’ is, at the same time, continuously ejected by all the places he navigates, such as Teatro São Luiz, Teatro São Carlos, Cais do Sodré, rua do Alecrim, Calçada do Combro, Igreja de São Roque, the Largo Camões, Terreiro do Paço, Campo

²⁸⁰ “Your father is a Portuguese soldier. I patrol the car park at António Maria Cardoso like I used to guard our mess against the enemy. I have the map and coordinates of my mission in my head. It starts in Chiado and goes down to Dona Maria II, in Rossio, goes to the end of Calçada do Combro and flows into Santos-o-Velho, under the jacaranda trees of Avenida Dom Carlos I. [...] Prior Velho is for sleeping and eating, just because I can’t sleep in Chiado. [...] Chiado is the capital of my homeland, only these buildings speak my language, from the golden days of the Armazéns Grandela to the great fire and the reconstruction. These streets tell my story. Beyond Campo Grande metro station, I’m a black man, in Chiado, I’m a ghost” (my translation).

²⁸¹ “If I didn’t go back to Chiado, Chiado wouldn’t look for me” (my translation).

das Cebolas, Santa Apolónia, rua nova do Almada, Rossio, Príncipe Real, Largo do Carmo, and Café do Teatro.

Lisbon is thus depicted through a dual perspective: that of the narrator's external observation, and the internal viewpoint (which transforms into an affective and traumatic projection) of Boa Morte. While the external perspective reveals the complete indifference of Lisbon toward Boa Morte and his misfit companions, the internal perspective delves into two visions that deepen the connection between vulnerability and urban space: the corporeal embodiment of the city through trauma and the transformation of the real city into an imaginative map of total dispossession.

Boa Morte's life is persistently threatened by a blown hernia which could explode at any time. Boa Morte's condition doesn't allow him to get the possibility to afford any form of health care. His chronic health condition becomes intertwined with his precarious condition within the city in one of Boa Morte's nightmares:

Outro dia sonhei que a minha barriga era o Chiado, da Rua Nova do Almada até à Rua do Loreto. Tinha engolido tudo. [...] acordei aos berros, sem saber onde estava, senti-me grávido, Aurora, grávido da cidade onde teu pai vive, desse bairro do Chiado, eu que não ganho para o jantar engoli o Teatro São Luiz e o Teatro São Carlos e todas as ruas para cima e para baixo, barriga anafada, grávido da morte, me chamo até Boa Morte, sei lá que história esconde esse meu nome. [...] mas o teu pai engoliu a morte, Aurora, pela porrada toda que dei nesta vida, por quantos compatriotas matei na guerra sem misericórdia, preto que mata preto tem de sofrer amargamente, minha filha, por mil séculos, fora o resto, por tudo isso (Almeida 2021, 24).²⁸²

Thus, the trauma of war etches itself into Boa Morte's psychogeographical map through the pain of his body. His violent past and his forsaken present intertwine through the wound that mirrors the city itself. Lisbon becomes an extension of Boa Morte's corporeal injury, a manifestation of the precariousness he endures in the aftermath. This paradoxical embodiment of something seeking to extinguish him becomes strikingly clear in the passage where Boa Morte declares: "O centro da cidade sou eu. Aqui, no meio da minha

²⁸² "The other day I dreamt that my belly was Chiado, from Rua Nova do Almada to Rua do Loreto. I had swallowed everything. [...] I woke up screaming, I didn't know where I was, I felt pregnant, Aurora, pregnant with the city where your father lives, this Chiado neighbourhood, me who doesn't earn enough for dinner, I swallowed the São Luiz Theatre and the São Carlos Theatre and all the streets up and down, fat belly, pregnant with death, I'm even called Boa Morte, I don't know what story my name hides. [...] But your father swallowed death, Aurora, for all the beatings I've given in this life, for how many compatriots I've killed in the war without mercy, blacks who kill blacks must suffer bitterly, my daughter, for a thousand centuries, apart from the rest, for all that" (my translation).

barriga, onde tenho esta ferida, sou o umbigo de Lisboa” (Almeida 2021, 74).²⁸³ Caught between the roles of victim and perpetrator, Boa Morte endures invisibility within the map of Chiado as a form of atonement, confronting a city that has swiftly brushed aside its recent history.

As we have observed, *O Canto da Moreia* portrays the shipwreck of a life. Conversely, *Maremoto* illustrates the fate of those lives that already sunk, stranded, poised to settle on the riverbed of the Tagus. Compared to the other two novels, *Maremoto* takes on a dimension of collective loss and precarity, as the misfits of Chiado are portrayed as a spectral ‘army’ haunting its streets. This collective aspect is further emphasized by their specific spatial arrangement, although it deviates from any realistic mapping. Instead, it is displaced into the realm of (traumatic) imagination. In her delirium, Fatinha reveals to Boa Morte the existence of a drowned city that ‘shelters’ all the misfits of Lisbon. “Há rios em todas as cidades e cidades em todos os rios. Aqui também, lá no fundo, mortos e vivos a viverem as suas vidas, só que lá no fundo não chove. É lá que eu vou encontrar o meu livro de cheques, senhor Boa Morte, se calhar a minha filha também vive no fundo do rio Tejo” (Almeida 2021, 19).²⁸⁴ With lucidity amidst her madness, Fatinha strives to return an imaginary city to the ‘buried and drowned in life,’ to all those souls adrift in contemporary migrations and diasporic transits. Envisioning a submerged Lisbon, Fatinha reconstructs, through the power of imagination, a city or homeland where one can seek refuge from the invisibility and exploitation of the tangible urban landscape. In addition to a real geography of Lisbon, there exists a wholly imagined, dreamlike, surreal, yet profoundly symbolic psychogeography of those ‘buried and drowned in life’ who inhabit the unseen centre of Lisbon. This encompasses both an underwater geography envisioned by Fatinha and an underground geography, characterized by Boa Morte’s ceaseless, ticketless train and metro voyages. These imaginary cities are symbolically intertwined with the real city through the remnants, detritus, lost objects, and people that flow into the depths of the Tagus. These other geographical dimensions show how far can get a sense of displacement, exclusion, and neglect due to an extreme precarization of life.

²⁸³ “I am the centre of the city. Here, in the middle of my belly, where I have this wound, I am Lisbon’s navel” (my translation).

²⁸⁴ “There are rivers in every city and cities in every river. Here too, at the bottom, the dead and the living go about their lives, only it doesn’t rain there. There is where I’ll find my chequebook, Mr. Boa Morte, maybe my daughter lives at the bottom of the river Tagus too” (my translation).

In *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso*, the *Ab-Ort*, or waste space, is relegated outside the city centre. In *Maremoto*, however, these many ‘waste places’ are not only ignored, rendering the city ‘unseen,’ but they are also recreated in the imaginary drowned and underground Lisbon. Françoise Vergès (2021, 77) emphasizes the instrumentalization of the clean/dirty separation as a paradigm for organizing urban space. In this division, the ‘wretched of the earth’ are left with dirt, pollution, non-potable water, uncollected garbage, pervasive plastics, neglected gardens, malfunctioning sewers, polluted air, and destroyed nature. Meanwhile, the privileged enjoy a clean city, well-maintained gardens, functional working spaces, and serene wandering, all made possible by the exploited labour and existence of the other social group. In other words, “the world is segregated through a division of the clean and the dirty, which rests on a racial division of urban space and the environment” (Vergès 2021, 77). Boa Morte recognizes this clean/dirty division and understands that the filth of the real Lisbon is destined to flow down into the submerged unreal Lisbon: “Boa Morte espreitou o esgoto a céu aberto, um arca congeladora finada, pneus, a cabeceira de uma cama de ferro, partes de um gerador eléctrico, ervas daninhas, rãs malhadas, de seixo em seixo. Também a ribeira desaguava no Tejo, pensou o homem. À cidade no fundo do rio confluíam outras cidades e os seus derramamentos, fragmentos da vida noutros lugares” (Almeida 2021, 99).²⁸⁵

Again, Lisbon is portrayed as a Leviathan, highlighting the strict connection between vulnerability and urban space: “O leviatão de betão armado galgava o monte. Boa Morte era um ponto em movimento na berma da estrada, homem deambulando sem lugar onde ir. No tronco do leviatã, centenas de olhos acesos indicavam que era Janeiro e que passava das seis da tarde” (Almeida 2021, 99).²⁸⁶

Examining the novel through its spatial dimensions might offer insights into interpreting the title in connection to the division between a real Lisbon and an envisioned one, representing the sole conceivable destiny for Boa Morte and his companions. Colonial history, with its perverse ideologies and assimilationist strategies, constituted the initial ‘seaquake’ that left its mark on Boa Morte’s life. Conversely, the second ‘seaquake,’ anticipated with the continuation of the liberation wars, the democratic

²⁸⁵ “Boa Morte looked at the open sewer, a dead freezer, tyres, the headboard of a wrought-iron bed, parts of an electric generator, weeds, spotted frogs, pebble after pebble. The stream also flowed into the Tagus, the man thought. The city at the bottom of the river was joined by other cities and their spillages, fragments of life elsewhere” (my translation).

²⁸⁶ “The reinforced concrete leviathan was climbing the hill. Boa Morte was a moving dot on the side of the road, a man wandering around with nowhere to go. On the leviathan’s trunk, hundreds of lit eyes indicated that it was January and past six in the evening” (my translation).

revolution, and the pursuit of justice in ‘postcolonial’ times, never materialized in Lisbon. The democratic revolution, or rather the democratic ‘seaquake’ that was supposed to radically transform Portugal into an egalitarian country, never took place. As Boa Morte asserts,

Lisboa aguarda o maremoto que já me afogou. Do Rossio a Santos-o-Velho, cai água, escorre que nem cascata por onde passam as pessoas, os casacos, as discussões. Leva troncos, galhos, ramos, pernas, braços, carcaças. A onda arrasta tudo e tudo lava, água e tempo sobre as fachadas, lava os teatros por dentro, afoga as fontes, as estátuas, somos esqueletos na corrente, não apenas eu e os meus companheiros, é a cidade debaixo do Tejo de que fala a Fatinha, esta, onde boiamos (Almeida 2021, 89).²⁸⁷

It is in this ‘imagined’ Lisbon that the protagonist meets his end. In the final moments of the novel, Boa Morte disappears into the depths of underground Lisbon as he boards the metro.

Adopting a decolonial feminist reading of geographical imagery, *Maremoto* challenges our taken-for-granted spatial orderings of the world by rendering the ‘unseen’ visible. In their article “Decolonising Feminist Explorations of Urban Futures” (2023, 1844), Elsa Koleth, Linda Peake, Nasya S. Razavi, and Grace Adeniyi-Ogunyan argue that decolonial feminist imaginaries “are characterized by lifeworlds that reveal the precarious nature of everyday existence in the city.” Consequently, a decolonial feminist urban imaginary must engage with the precarious everyday lives of marginalized subjects and their ability to claim the right to a ‘peaceful’ and ‘good’ life, thus realizing their hopes and dreams beyond precarity. Beyond any romanticization or polarization between hope and despair, the task of these imaginaries is to make urban life liveable through everyday pragmatic negotiation, contention, and experimentation with existing urban realities.

To conclude my ‘spatial’ reading of *Maremoto* and reconnect it to the ‘imaginative effort’ proposed by decolonial feminisms, I turn to one final central space in the novel: the collective vegetable garden Boa Morte cultivates with his ‘misfit’ companions on the city’s outskirts. Earlier in this chapter, I analysed the vegetable garden’s role in fostering community, a form of resistance to racial and colonial injury, despite the precarity of their

²⁸⁷ “Lisbon awaits the seaquake that has already drowned me. From Rossio to Santos-o-Velho, water falls, cascading like a waterfall over people, coats and arguments. It takes trunks, branches, legs, arms, carcasses. The wave sweeps everything away and washes everything, water and time over the façades, washes the theatres inside, drowns the fountains, the statues, we are skeletons in the current, not just me and my companions, it’s the city under the Tagus that Fatinha talks about, this one, where we float” (my translation).

lives. The garden not only symbolizes resistance but also opens possibilities for the making of multi-species kinship as a response to precarious living conditions and the diasporic distance from familial bonds and affections. In this way, it acts as a decolonial imaginary, offering an affective projection to help endure life in the face of displacement and vulnerability. From a spatial perspective, Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida explains the inspiration behind the fictional creation of the garden. In her essay “A restituição da interioridade,” Almeida asserts that, faced with inhospitable environments, diasporic subjects dream of and build spaces of belonging—scenarios that resemble a home—which are often “uma alegoria da terra prometida” (Almeida 2023, 85).²⁸⁸ As an example, Almeida points to the numerous illegal vegetable gardens cultivated by Cape Verdean diasporic subjects on small plots along the edges of roads on the outskirts of Lisbon. Similarly, Boa Morte and his friends grow a vegetable garden in Prior Velho to provide food for their survival. With this view, Boa Morte’s psychogeography recognises in the collective garden a ‘tiny’ political act that translates into an attempt to anchor himself to the circumstances in which he lives.

Boa Morte and the ‘misfits of Chiado’ are the perennial landless; if we understand politics as the possibility of coming together in a given space to exercise one’s rights, the landless are those who, not having the opportunity to ‘anchor themselves’ to a territoriality, cannot ‘do politics’ or who, even attempting to do so, are radically excluded from the debate. The relationship that Boa Morte establishes with the space of the vegetable garden represents an attempt at a process of emancipatory political subjectivation that, by passing through the claim of belonging to a specific territoriality, wants to link the struggle for the dignity of a liveable life to the need to be rooted to a territory, to a sense of belonging, to the right to live and lead a good, healthy and peaceful life. Claiming a territoriality starting from the collective garden therefore represents a political and profoundly poethical effort to re-imagine a new sense of belonging untainted by the necropolitics of radical exclusion exercised by imperial citizenship. An imaginative effort in which the body-territory re-appropriates the space that excludes it and, through a misappropriation of the racial injury embedded in the map of Lisbon, forges an (im)possible feeling of homecoming in life: “Na horta, não me sinto de novo em Bissau nem em Evale, na minha infância, a jogar bola com pedra e coco. Vem até mim uma dor que não é saudade e não é tristeza. Sinto que encontrei meu pedaço não aqui em Portugal, mas na vida. Que a vida ainda tinha um toldo para a minha carcaça velha, depois de tudo,

²⁸⁸ “An allegory of the promised land” (my translation).

o que é maior e ainda mais doce do que ter ganhado uma pátria” (Almeida 2021, 70-71).²⁸⁹

²⁸⁹ “In the garden, I don’t feel like I’m back in Bissau or in Evale, in my childhood, playing ball with stones and coconuts. A pain comes over me that isn’t nostalgia and isn’t sadness. I feel like I’ve found my place, not here in Portugal, but in life. That life still had an awning for my old carcass, after all, which is greater and even sweeter than having found a homeland” (my translation).

Chapter 4 – Past Present: Vulnerable Memories

Epute liukuene kaliukuvala, cada ferida dói a quem a tem.

Yara Nakahanda Monteiro, *Essa dama bate bué*

4.1 Past Present

In their work *Des-cobrir a Europa: filhos de impérios e pós-memórias europeias*, Fátima da Cruz Rodrigues and Margarida Calafate Ribeiro (2022, 14) describe the 2019 celebration of 25 April, where a group of young Afrodescendant Portuguese marched down Avenida da Liberdade carrying a banner that declared “o 25 de Abril nasceu em África.”²⁹⁰ This statement affirms their right to claim citizenship in Portugal while also embracing an identity rooted in their ancestral legacy. This legacy encompasses not only their parents and grandparents’ participation in the (armed) struggles for the liberation of African nations, but also a profound, historical connection to the long-standing anti-colonial and anti-slavery resistance. These younger generations question why figures like Amílcar Cabral are absent from their education, while they are instead taught to celebrate the so-called ‘Portuguese discoveries.’ By occupying public spaces as political bodies, they confront both the institutional politics of memory and the silences of their parents and grandparents—a recent past that, though lived, seems to have been erased from family and intimate memory.

This opening scene sets the scope for this chapter, which analyses the second part of the corpus: *As Telefones* (2020) by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, *Essa dama bate bué* (2018) by Yara Nakahanda Monteiro, and *Debaixo da nossa pele: uma viagem* (2017) by Joaquim Arena. As indicated by the chapter’s title, it explores different times, spaces, and characters, focusing on the ‘vulnerable memory’ of the descendants of the ‘witness generations’ who experienced colonial oppression. Although these descendants did not witness the end of colonialism, its profound influence on their lives in Portugal persists, as the colonial past seems to be reinscribed in the present and confined to both public and domestic silence. This silence, however, should not be understood as a void but rather as an absence. In this context, memory becomes ‘vulnerable’ as it conceals specific

²⁹⁰ “April 25 was born in Africa” (my translation).

genealogical connections, affective experiences, and traumatic origins, which lead to feelings of pain, non-belonging, and identity issues for this subsequent generation. In this chapter, I define ‘memory vulnerability’ as the painful, silenced, and erased memories embodied in identity distress, resulting in sorrow and even physical pain for the generations that did not witness these events firsthand and that struggle to become interlocutors with institutional, historical and family silence.

In her analysis of the relationship between memory and place, Aleida Assmann (2011, 322), drawing on Walter Benjamin’s concept of aura, explains that the interplay between distance and proximity to history imbues spaces with an aura, enabling people to seek a direct connection with the past. Among the various ‘places of remembrance,’ the ‘zone of contact’ for traumatic places lies in their unhealed wounds. In the context of Portugal and its five former African colonies, trauma and the notion of the unhealed wound remain persistent themes in public discourse. These nations are marked by numerous traumatic places—whether officially recognized or preserved in collective memory—where history continues to resist resolution or mourning. For instance, I am referring to the massacres of Batapá in São Tomé and Príncipe (1953), Mueda (1960) and Wiriyamu (1972) in Mozambique, Pidjiguiti (1959) at the port of Bissau, and Nambuagongo (1961) in Angola, all perpetrated by the Portuguese colonial army and PIDE. These urban spaces have become spaces of trauma. They hold, in both their geographic memory and the memories of their inhabitants—whether witnesses or not—episodes of violence that continue to seep into collective consciousness. These events remain largely unprocessed and unacknowledged by former Portuguese perpetrators.

Likewise, Portugal, particularly Lisbon, is riddled with what Elsa Peralta (2013, 362) refers to as ‘complexes of memory.’ The Belém area is a prime example: by uncritically celebrating the ‘Portuguese conquests,’ these complexes reawaken the ‘plantation memories,’ as Kilomba describes, of the Afro-Portuguese population. Monuments like the Padrão dos Descobrimentos thus become ‘traumatic complexes,’ spaces that evoke the historical wounds of a significant portion of the Portuguese population. While such areas are regarded as ‘places of memory’ that uncritically promote a narrative of ‘positive’ collective memory, sites connected to African and Afrodescendant histories—such as the cemetery of enslaved people unearthed during the construction of a car park in Lagos’ Parque do Anel Verde—remain largely unacknowledged and unmourned by the nation. These unrecognized and unmourned sites of trauma hinder the formation of affirmative meaning, as they seem marked by an inability to tell their stories.

As a result, both public and private memories associated with these places and histories often remain silenced, giving rise to what is commonly referred to as ‘intergenerational silence.’

Rodrigues and Ribeiro (2022, 16) assert that silence is perhaps the most significant legacy passed down to subsequent generations following the end of Portugal’s empire. This silence was the strongest inheritance for the ‘children of the Colonial War,’ and it remains so for the ‘children of the Empire,’ in their formulation. Today, as family dialogue evolves with the retirement or passing of parents and grandparents and the generational shift in power and public life, we witness a growing scrutiny of these silences. This includes not only family silences but also public ones, especially as it becomes clear that these silences are part of a broader, largely unspoken and silenced history of the country. Specifically for the Afrodescendant generations, it is clear that public rhetoric on the transmission of memories about the end of the empire in Portugal fails to reflect and portray the real and embodied experiences of their preceding generations. These public discourses are rife with aphasia, voids, and distortions of the past, creating a disconnect between ‘official’ memory representation and family and affective memory. This disruption between the omitted public memory and the suffered family memory creates personal and social malaise for the younger Black generations, perpetuating social conflict characteristic of post-imperial Portuguese society. This malaise drives new generations to question the past within the private realm of the family, using these personal inquiries to interpret public policies and critique the official, distorted representations of Black history, ultimately addressing social tensions and the resulting unease. The Afrodescendant generations are striving to decode the ‘encrypted memories’ (Rodrigues 2021) of their parents and grandparents as a means of uncovering the pain and suffering hidden or disguised by those who lived through colonial oppression. They do so because that pain and suffering also shape their feelings and lives. Making these memories visible on a public, shared, and collective level can ensure that generations who did not experience the end of the empire—but whose identities are intertwined with that period—can recognize their identity within a new public narrative from which they feel systematically excluded.

Almeida’s *As Telefones*, Monteiro’s *Essa dama bate bué*, and Arena’s *Debaixo da nossa pele* are novels that once again centre vulnerability as a key motif. However, unlike the works discussed in Chapter 3, where the vulnerability of the body and the precariousness of existence were evident in their material contingencies, the focus here is

on vulnerability arising from the absence of familial, genealogical, and ancestral memories of the colonial past and the consequences of diaspora. This absence profoundly impacts the characters' bodies and lives, particularly in their search for identity. This 'memory vulnerability' is depicted in the narratives through the motif of the 'absent body' of the 'witness generation.' In Almeida and Monteiro's works, this absence 'takes the form' of a distant and missing mother caught between Portugal and Angola; in Arena's novel, it is the lost genealogy of an enslaved community in Portugal's Sado Valley. The 'silence' of previous generations manifests as absence, which in turn creates vulnerability in the present.

These novels, therefore, seek to make visible what is missing and absent in contemporary traumatic transitions—such as the diasporic displacements that follow oppression—as well as in historical legacies that continue to affect the present, such as slavery in Portugal. In essence, these works engage with 'material' histories of disappearance, dealing with gaps that cannot be intrinsically represented. The challenge they confront lies in how to mark these gaps and make absence tangible without turning it into a deceptive presence.

As in the previous chapter, I will analyse the 're/de/composition' of the constitutive elements of the novels through three central tropes: the interconnection of vulnerable family memory and public memory as key factors shaping the characters' quest for identity; the search for a language to 'give form' to the absence of the 'witness generations' and to confront historical racial injuries, both on a bodily and enunciative level; and the tracing of new, hidden maps of 'return' through which the characters explore ancestry and past vulnerabilities and question their origins and identities.

Unlike the protagonists of the previous chapter, who experienced the end of empire, decolonization, and dislocation to Portugal, the characters in this chapter represent the children of the diaspora (Monteiro 2019) and the children of the 'exilic experience' (Mata 2022). These concepts place Black genealogy, ancestry, and self-representation at the centre, allowing for the past to be observed from a Black, embodied, genealogical, and situated perspective. The characters in these novels have not directly experienced the traumas of colonialism's end, wars, or dislocations; rather, they inherit these pains through stories of family diaspora and exile. They grapple with the silences and absences of the witness generation, while searching for genealogical connections—both proximate and ancestral—by exploring the spaces of their origins. In Almeida's novel, the focus is on what happens to a mother and daughter who, due to diasporic distance, know each

other only through the telephone, developing what I call ‘vocal identities’ rather than embodied ones. Monteiro’s work, on the other hand, explores a ‘counter-return’ narrative of a girl searching for her lost guerrilla mother in post-conflict Angola, delving into the long-lasting theme of ‘maternal loss’ from slavery to present times and its impact on younger generations’ identities. Finally, Arena’s novel blends the search for the ‘last witnesses’ of an enslaved community in the Sado Valley in Portugal with his own family memories, connecting the broader Black diaspora to his personal quest for identity.

While the previous chapter focused on the vulnerable bodies of characters caught in their material diasporic dimensions, this chapter shifts to an analysis of vulnerable memories and the characters’ attempts to reclaim memories, stories, spaces, and family ties in their search for self-identity. In the earlier chapter, identity was largely denied to the protagonists, who were confined to precarious and dehumanizing conditions in the suburbs of Lisbon. This marginalization forced them to focus on the material survival of their bodies, leading to a radical questioning of their ‘imperial citizenship.’ They also sought to create new forms of kinship amid precarity as a misappropriation act against the disruption of family and genealogy caused by colonial oppression. In contrast, this chapter examines the characters’ ‘memory vulnerability,’ exploring how the protagonists attempt to reconstruct the genealogies and lines of filiation fractured by colonial violence and decolonization. It highlights how the ability of new generations to reflect on and explore their ‘decolonized’ identities is rooted in the histories of vulnerability and marginalization, as well as the struggles and resistance of those who preceded them.

Secondly, this chapter will explore the aesthetic experimentation present in these novels to convey such ‘memory vulnerability.’ Unlike the first group, which employed specific narrative forms and figures of language to convey and represent corporeal vulnerability, this second group engages more deeply with language itself. As the characters embark on their identity quests, the novels seek new aesthetic forms to provide a different language—or, else, a distinct ‘grammar’—for their inner worlds. Almeida’s novel utilizes the phone call as a specific literary genre of the diaspora which, through language, structures the inner relationships among diasporic subjects; Monteiro’s work focuses on the reappropriation of Angolan languages—previously forbidden due to colonial laws and thus ‘mute’ for many of the younger diasporic generations—as a form of resistance against enunciative vulnerability; Arena’s narrative employs ‘critical fabulation’ as a method that challenges the imperial archive of slavery in Portugal, aiming to reveal the inner lives of the last enslaved communities in the country beyond radical

violence, humiliation and oppression. In this context, I argue that these novels propose ‘decolonial grammars,’ attempting to decolonize their approaches through a specific counter-aesthetic formation that confronts the colonial legacy still present in language and modern aesthetic forms.

Third, these novels broaden the scope of literary analysis to include alternative maps and geographies—some grounded in reality, others more imagined—within diasporic networks, integral to the characters’ quests for identity. In order to interrogate the embeddedness of their vulnerable memory within the geography, they extend beyond the capital cities, such as Lisbon and Luanda, to explore less examined regions, including the Sado Valley in Portugal, areas in Angola outside Luanda, and the imaginative geographies shaped by diasporic dislocation. Investigating these ‘other’ maps reveals how the history of Portugal (and Europe more broadly) remains fundamentally incomprehensible—and alarmingly misleading—without acknowledging the structural significance of African countries, both historically and in contemporary contexts.

To conclude this chapter overview, I recall Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida’s words (2023, 9-10): “o meu maior privilégio imerecido é ter nascido em 1982. Não é ter tido uma educação, ter sido amada e protegida pela minha família. Não é a habitação, ou sequer o acesso à saúde. [...] Houvesse eu nascido setenta, oitenta anos antes, talvez até apenas cinquenta, tivesse eu a mesma inclinação, e o meu destino seria, com sorte, a cozinha, a vassoura, a roça. O meu maior privilégio é este tempo, o meu.”²⁹¹ Thus, this chapter examines the processes of identity reappropriation experienced by the ‘children of the diaspora’ and of the ‘exilic existence’ by adopting a generational, genealogical, and ancestral perspective to address the sense of vulnerability stemming from a partial access to collective memory. This perspective, recalled by Almeida, recognizes the significance of this ‘privileged time,’ where asserting one’s right to exist also involves acknowledging and honouring the struggles of previous generations.

4.2 Characters II

Among Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida’s rich literary output, *As Telefones* provides a profound exploration of intergenerational memory vulnerability, affective female family

²⁹¹ “My greatest undeserved privilege is to have been born in 1982. It’s not having had an education, having been loved and protected by my family. It’s not housing, or even access to health care. [...] If I had been born seventy, eighty years earlier, maybe even just fifty, I would have had the same inclination, and my destiny would hopefully have been the kitchen, the broom, the farm. My greatest privilege is this time, mine own one” (my translation).

life, and identity in the diaspora. It addresses the impossibility of return—not only in a geographical sense but also in terms of the affective familial bonds—following decolonization.

The narrative centres on the long-distance relationship between Filomena and Solange, mother and daughter. In the context of the Angolan civil war, faced with hunger and precarious living conditions, Filomena sacrifices her relationship with her daughter to secure better prospects for Solange by sending her to live with her sister Benedita on the outskirts of Lisbon. Due to the impacts of colonialism, independence, civil wars, diaspora, and economic precarity, mother and daughter meet only a few times in their lives and primarily get to know each other through telephone conversations. These calls form a relationship based on imagination, dreams, performativity, and frequent deceptions, as both women grapple with the strangeness brought on by the passage of time and the changes in their bodies and affects.

The use of the telephone and telephone calls is not a new motif introduced by this novel, as it has been a recurring element in Almeida's previous works. In *Esse Cabelo*, the telephone relationship between Mila, the protagonist, and her mother, who resides in Luanda, is referenced. Similarly, *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* features several telephone calls between Cartola and his wife Glória, serving as a means to sustain their family relationship amidst the precariousness of their lives. With *As Telefones*, Almeida dedicates an entire novel to the telephone call, exploring the psychological, thematic, and linguistic dimensions of what she refers to as the quintessential literary genre of the diaspora.

As I will argue, the absence of the body is the central theme of the novel, reflecting the difficult relationships within Afrodescendant female genealogies due to the disruptions and dislocations historically caused by colonial violence. The lack of corporeal presence—and its associated visible and palpable vulnerabilities—is somehow compensated by the 'vocal' relationship between the two women, serving as the last vestige of corporeality that sustains their affective bond. The voice thus becomes a material medium through which they navigate gaps in memory, historical trauma, assimilation, uprooting, a sense of non-belonging, and, above all, memory vulnerability as perceived by younger generations represented by the character of Solange.

Building on these foundational issues, my analysis will explore the concept of 'vocal ontologies' through specific feminist interpretations to understand the identities of the two women as they confront their 'missing bodies' resulting from displacement. Additionally, I will examine the novel through Paolo Jedlowski's concept of 'memory of

the future,' which reflects on the future expectations shaped in the past and projected into a transformed present. In particular, I will focus on Filomena's 'assimilated' memory of the future and its influence on Solange's present, highlighting this as a form of memory vulnerability linked to her ancestral past.

In contrast, Yara Nakahanda Monteiro's novel, *Essa dama bate bué*, shifts the setting from Portugal to Angola. The protagonist, Vitória, born in Angola but raised by her grandparents in Portugal, is haunted by a trauma she has never overcome: she never knew her mother, Rosa Chitula, an Angolan revolutionary. Just a few months before her wedding, Vitória flees to Angola in search of her mother and, by extension, her own identity.

The novel begins with the exodus of the Querioz da Fonseca family, depicting the story of Vitória's assimilated grandfather António, his wife Elisa, and their conflicted relationship with their rebel daughter Rosa, who disappears to join the anti-colonial forces. Following this initial flashback, the narrative transitions to Vitória's arrival in a chaotic and socially contrasted Luanda at the dawn of the 21st century, just as the city emerges from a prolonged civil war in 2003. Key characters such as Zacarias Vindu, a general with ties to Rosa's past, and Romena Cambissa, a family friend, assist Vitória in exploring Luanda. However, it is during her journey to Huambo that she uncovers new information about her mother, thanks to Juliana Tijamba, a former comrade of Rosa's during the civil war. This encounter brings forth the ghosts of a violent past, culminating in a letter from Rosa to Vitória, in which the mother recounts the traumas she endured and expresses her desire not to meet her daughter.

Although the novel is a work of fiction, it shares some parallels with the author's own life. Yara Nakahanda Monteiro, a writer and artist, was born in Huambo, Angola, in 1979 but has lived in Portugal since the age of two. Like Vitória, Monteiro's family exiled to Lisbon in the 1980s. In an interview, Monteiro describes herself as "trineta da escravatura, bisneta da mestiçagem, neta da independência e filha da diáspora" (Henriques 2019, online).²⁹² Both the author's biography and Vitória's fictional narrative centre around genealogical concerns, exploring a critical reflection on ancestry and the negotiation of identity driven by the diaspora. This exploration extends beyond the Portugal-Angola axis, situating herself within an Afro-Atlantic context. It was during her time in Brazil that Monteiro became acutely aware of her Blackness and Angolan identity,

²⁹² "The great-great-granddaughter of slavery, the great-granddaughter of *mestiçagem*, the granddaughter of independence, and the daughter of the diaspora" (my translation).

highlighting the lack of public consciousness in Portugal regarding the colonial past and how this limits identity exploration for those who do not conform to the conflated image of whiteness and Portuguese identity.²⁹³ Eventually, Monteiro's first 'return' to Angola also failed to provide a sense of identity recognition, as identitarian concerns were not a priority in the aftermath of the prolonged civil conflict.

These biographical insights suggest that the novel offers a situated perspective on Blackness, identity, and the legacies of female postmemory concerning past traumas. The narrative underscores the crucial role of women in the decolonization efforts, highlighting the central involvement of women combatants in the anti-colonial struggle, the civil war, and the peace accords. The novel also delves into the dynamics of female genealogies within the Afrodescendant diaspora, focusing on the relationship between the absent mother's body—which embodies a long history of vulnerability to violence—and the daughter's body, which, in the absence of her mother's corporeal presence, struggles to fully reconstruct her own identity. The lack of a 'historical truth' about her mother becomes a source of vulnerability for Vitória's memory, identity, and body in the present.

In the paragraph dedicated to *Essa dama bate bué*, I will focus on Vitória as an innovative character in Portuguese and Angolan literature, particularly in the context of postcolonial return to Africa. I will explore how traumatic memories in both countries impacts the identity of the younger Afrodescendant generation, emphasizing vulnerability, especially concerning violence against women and the challenges of identity formation within a racist society. Vitória's journey is portrayed as a search for her female affiliation and a reconnection with her homeland to address the gaps in memory that affect her sense of self.

The third novel I will analyse in this chapter is *Debaixo da nossa pele: uma viagem* by Joaquim Arena. The text is challenging to classify within a single literary genre, as it

²⁹³ The novel's significant circulation in Brazil can be attributed to its focus on the protagonist's 'return' to post-civil war Angola, a theme of great importance in the literary Afrodescendant debate. Within the context of Portuguese literature, which is characterized by a wealth of novels about the *retornados*, Monteiro's text stands out. Similar to Helder Macedo's journey in *Partes de África* (1991), it offers a reverse journey—from Portugal to Angola—in search of familial roots and the exploration of post- and decolonial pathways between the two countries. In the realm of Afro-Brazilian literature, Monteiro's novel echoes another type of journey: the return to Africa of formerly enslaved individuals (known as *libertos* and *alforriados*). This theme, recurrent in Afro-Brazilian narratives, continues to explore the legacies, heritages and temporalities of the Black communities. Notable works addressing this theme include Antonio Olinto's *A casa da água* (1969) and, more recently, Ana Maria Gonçalves's *Um defeito de cor* (2006). The latter, a highly successful novel, underscores the attention Afro-Brazilian literature pays to the connections with the African continent, critically examining the concept of ancestry and the inevitable intersections that characterize literary, cultural, philosophical, religious, and spiritual reflections concerning the Afro-Atlantic Lusophone space.

blends elements of memoir, fiction, autofiction, travelogue, and essay. It traces the journey of a narrator—who remains an anonymous protagonist yet is implicitly identified with the author—from Lisbon to Lagos, passing through the Sado Valley. The protagonist embarks on this journey in search of the traces of descendants of enslaved populations, first documented in the late 19th century by philologist and archaeologist José Leite de Vasconcelos in the Alentejo region. The catalyst for this journey is an encounter with Leopoldina, a retired school teacher who, during a conference on the African presence in Lisbon, reveals to the protagonist her ancestry from former enslaved people in the Sado rice field region, specifically in the village of São Romão.

The journey, further prompted by Leopoldina's death, intersects with the diasporic story of the narrator's family, from Cape Verde to Portugal. It also engages with a broader international and global network of Afrodescendant figures who have shaped the history of the African diaspora in the West across fields such as art history, literature, culture, and politics. As noted in the first part of this thesis, Joaquim Arena is one of the pioneering Portuguese Afrodescendant voices in literature. In an interview (Ribeiro 2020b, 300), Arena describes himself as 100% Cabo Verdean and 100% Portuguese. From a narrative grounded in Cape Verde—a country deeply impacted by slave trafficking, economic exploitation, linguistic and cultural hybridization, dislocation, and diaspora—Arena seeks to explore the socio-historical layers that lie beneath the ostensibly 'white skin' of Portugal, and by extension, Europe.

The narrative, which charts a journey inward to Portugal—recalling and re-reading that of Almeida Garrett—as opposed to Monteiro's outward journey, aims to reflect on what Saidiya Hartman describes as the "afterlife of slavery." In the section devoted to the novel and its characters, I will analyse how this exploration of the invisible history of the '*negros do Sado*' community continues to shed light on diasporic identities and their contemporary history in Portugal. By also reflecting on recent developments in Afro-European historiography, considering the works of scholars such as Olivette Otele and Johny Pitts, I will demonstrate how Joaquim Arena's text is a crucial resource for deconstructing the exceptionalism often attributed to Portuguese colonialism. It also provides visibility to the often-overlooked African and Afrodescendant history in Portugal, which is frequently omitted from historiographical discussions on 'Afro-Europe.'

4.2.1 A Mouth Without Memory: Vocal Identities in Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida's *As Telefones*

Family separation is a central concern within the African diaspora. In Portugal, the lack of ethnic-based statistics makes it difficult to determine how many families have been separated due to displacement during the transit between Portugal and the five Portuguese-speaking African countries. The current history of African and Afrodescendant family separations recalls a spacetime continuum of contemporary prolongation of the traumatic separations that originated with the forced transatlantic dislocation and enslavement at the heart of Portuguese and European colonial history. Indeed, family separation is closely linked to the figure of the mother and her deprivation of genealogical connection with her offspring.

In her seminal essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Afro-American scholar Hortense J. Spillers emphasizes the connection between the violence of colonial history and the breakdown of family ties in the Afro-American community. Spillers argues that this dynamic began with the transatlantic trade in enslaved people, where the father is forcibly absent and the mother’s relationships with her children are no longer recognized as parental ties, since the offspring are recurrently separated from the mother as sources of exploitable labour forces. The structures of slavery thus perpetuate across generations, masked by “symbolic substitutions” of historical becoming (Spillers 1987, 67). She contends that this systematic rupture between the Black female body and central aspects of family and femininity—such as motherhood and sexuality and the stereotypes connected to these experiences—persists in the contemporary Afrodescendant community, especially within the African diaspora.

As Telefones explores this separation and disruption from a female (dis)embodied perspective and its impact on the identity of younger generations of Afrodescendant Portuguese. I use the term ‘(dis)embodied’ because the novel delves into the relationship between a mother and a daughter where physical distance, between Lisbon and Luanda, removes the mutual presence of the body in their daily life. This disembodiment is an evident consequence of colonialism and decolonization, making it impossible for Solange’s body to be included in the female genealogy of Filomena and her Angolan ancestry. Not knowing her mother’s body means not knowing her own body as a woman geographically displaced from her birthplace. The telephone becomes at the same time the only possible ‘zone of contact’ and the concrete symbol of this long history of affective

deprivation. Consequently, the novel highlights the Afrodescendant experience of loss by dramatizing the absence of the body within the diaspora in Portuguese literature.

As a consequence of separation from her mother, Solange states that “não conheço o meu corpo porque não conheço o teu. Olho-me ao espelho à procura da tua figura. [...] Sou uma boca sem memória. [...] Não sei com quem me pareço, como se a verdade fosse uma história sem princípio. Se não conheces o meu corpo, também não o conheço” (Almeida 2020, 19).²⁹⁴ The expression ‘I’m a mouth without memory’ is very impactful, as it symbolizes the double dispossession experienced by Solange. She cannot fully understand her body without that of Filomena, and this absence of physical connection is linked to a lack of embodied memories. Solange faces several impasses as her displacement in Lisbon makes it difficult to reconnect with her ancestral roots. This highlights her ‘memory vulnerability’ due to a partial, sometimes distorted or ‘covered,’ transmission of memories. Solange appears as an absent body with a disembodied memory, constantly searching for that memory and negotiating her identity during her long telephone calls with her mother, Filomena.

The narrative unfolds as the two women develop strategies to re-signify a new form of affiliation and existence amid their estrangement, and to envision a possible return to a life together. Consequently, the telephone, phone calls, and voice become material means that enable Solange and Filomena to survive the separation and precariously recreate a form of affiliation: “Para sobrevivermos, quando não estamos em linha, não existimos. O telefonema: uma ressurreição semanal, seguida de nova escuridão. Habitúamo-nos ao que as chamadas fizeram de nós. Emprenhámos pelos ouvidos” (Almeida 2020, 11).²⁹⁵

The connection between vocal expression, epistemology, and ontology from a feminist perspective is explored by Adriana Cavarero in her book *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (2005). In this work, Cavarero introduces the concept of ‘existing only as voice.’ She examines the voice in its material dimension, describing it as a “vibration of a throat of flesh” (Cavarero 2005, 2). So, the voice and its reception is indeed a corporeal matter: “The play between vocal emission and acoustic perception necessarily involves the internal organs. It implicates a

²⁹⁴ “I don’t know my body because I don’t know yours. I look in the mirror in search of your figure. [...] I’m a mouth without a memory. [...] I don’t know who I look like, as if the truth were a story without a beginning. If you don’t know my body, I don’t know it either” (my translation).

²⁹⁵ “To survive, when we’re not on the line, we don’t exist. The phone call: a weekly resurrection, followed by a new darkness. We got used to what the calls made of us. We absorb each other through our ears” (my translation).

correspondence with the fleshy cavity that alludes to the deep body, the most bodily part of the body. The impalpability of sonorous vibrations, which is as colorless as the air, comes out of a wet mouth and arises from the red of the flesh” (Cavarero 2005, 4). Cavarero proposes a significant distinction between ‘voice’ and ‘word.’ Unlike words, the voice emphasizes its vocalic materiality, ignoring the semantic level. Voice is sound before it becomes word. Therefore, according to the Italian philosopher, before the word, there is the voice, the zero degree of individual ontology. Considering this differentiation, it is no longer about intercepting a sound to decode and interpret it (thus making it a ‘word’), but about responding to a unique and unrepeatable voice that signifies nothing but itself. Cavarero (2005, 7) suggests that there is “a vocal phenomenology of uniqueness,” characterized by both the embodied vocal singularity of every existence and the relationality involved in listening to these singular material voices that precede any word, revealing someone’s existence.

While the realm of the *logos* turns mother and daughter into spectral actresses of a performative spectacle, necessary, as Almeida (2023, 78) states,²⁹⁶ for sustaining affective bonds despite physical separation, it is in the corporeal dimension of the voice that Solange and Filomena try to reassemble their affiliation and their bodies, and to imagine their presence in each other’s life. As Ana Gabriela Macedo (2022, 18) argues, through the voice heard and the breath felt on the other end of the line, mother and daughter sense

²⁹⁶ In many passages, the novel reflects on the themes of spectacle and performance in relation to feelings and emotions that are difficult to understand and often deceptive. This deception arises because the mother and daughter are unaccustomed to each other’s presence. The limited time they spend together becomes a spectacle where they attempt to piece together a relationship through the affective illusion of an imagined life together. In so doing, the telephonic language becomes “a língua em que a distância é vencida pelo teatro da voz, em que todos, bilhões, somos actores experientes” [the language in which distance is overcome by the theatre of the voice, in which all of us, billions of us, are experienced actors] (Almeida 2020, 25). In a specific chapter, Solange and Filomena are depicted as actresses performing on the stage: “Se fosse uma peça de teatro, haveria um telephone no palco e elas em cena, faladoras, mas surdas. Falariam um com a outra, sem se ouvirem nem se responderem. Duas targelas surdas. A mãe perguntaria «a sério, filha, então não te lembras que te disse que chegava amanhã?”. A filha responderia “sim, espinafres, queres que congele?”. De quando em quando, interrompendo as suas falas, o telefone tocava. Elas continuariam a conversa, sem o atenderem, sem o ouvirem” [If it were a play, there would be a telephone on stage and they would be talking but deaf. They would talk to each other, without hearing or answering each other. Two deaf tarts. Mum would ask, «Really, daughter, don’t you remember I told you I’d be there tomorrow?». The daughter would reply «yes, spinach, do you want me to freeze it?». From time to time, interrupting their conversations, the phone would ring. They would continue their conversation, without answering it, without hearing it] (Almeida 2020, 27). In the essay “A restituição da interioridade,” (2023, 79) Almeida discusses the issue of the diasporic performance concerning the two women. She explains that by repeatedly portraying themselves over the years through a version of what they imagine they once were to each other, they are tacitly struggling to save their relationship and themselves from becoming unintelligible. As *Telefones* demonstrates that diasporic subjectivity is performative in specific ways, and this mode of approaching others through performance becomes the melancholic condition of diasporic subjects. As Almeida (2023, 79) states, this reasoning could not be demonstrated ‘scientifically,’ which is why she chose fiction as her method.

the corporeality of their respective bodies, transcending the evident spectacle and performativity that words often produce through deceiving. If the distance of the diaspora leads to the affective negation of the maternal body, the telephone appears to reintroduce that corporeality through vocality. That's why expressions like 'giving body to the voice' and 'giving oneself in the voice' aptly emphasize the affective and material depth conveyed through the telephone wires, the only possible means of corporeal, albeit ghostly, contact. Vocality conveys the residual materiality of the body, which, through the telephone wires, transmits and propagates to the ears of the two women. The denied body is thus constantly sought in the unique, embodied voice of a daughter growing up without a mother and a mother growing old without a daughter. As Solange states, "costumo ligar-lhe apenas para a ouvir respirar [...]. Dói-me o corpo todo, ao desligar a chamada. Meto-me na cama. Preciso de acomodar a vibração da sua voz. O telefone através do qual falamos é o nosso elo tangível à história da espécie humana: uma educação simultânea do corpo uma da outra" (Almeida 2020, 31-32).²⁹⁷

Mother and daughter are constantly in search of a body, corporeality—senses, smell, touch—and, ultimately, affection. Thus, the telephone serves as the recurrent medium for daily 'physical' contact in the novel, embodying both the pain of abandonment, separation, and displacement and the precarious 'care' for that pain. In this sense, Maragrida Rendeiro (2022c, 49) interprets the connection with the telephone as a variation on the postcolonial trope of the mutilated body to which the telephone is linked as an extension of the skin, a kind of diasporic 'cyborg body,' as it is clear in the following statement: "E nós, com ele, auscultadores de carne, humanidade telefónica, máquina de coração na boca, bonecos num caderno em breve antigo" (Almeida 2020, 25).²⁹⁸

Compared to the Monteiro's and Arena's novels, *As Telefones* represents a 'mediation' text where the figure of the mother embodies the connection with the spectral colonial past, and the figure of the daughter conveys the identity concerns in the aftermath of independence and in the diaspora. In contrast, *Essa dama bate bué* and *Debaixo da nossa pele* address the absence of the previous generation as a means of transmitting and confronting memory and identity concerns. I will now focus on Solange and Filomena as specific new characters within contemporary Portuguese fiction.

²⁹⁷ "I usually call her just to hear her breathing [...]. My whole body aches when I hang up. I get into bed. I need to accommodate the vibration of her voice. The telephone through which we speak is our tangible link to the history of the human species: a simultaneous education of each other's bodies" (my translation).

²⁹⁸ "And us, with it, handsets of flesh, telephonic humanity, heart-in-mouth machine, dolls in a soon-to-be ancient notebook" (my translation).

Even though Filomena is present in her daughter's life through the telephone wires, a sense of orphanhood haunts Solange. The feeling of loss is examined as a constraint that diasporic movements impose on Solange's ability to physically recognize herself as part of an ancestral maternal family line. Essentially, it limits her ability to see the traits of her mother, with whom she cannot identify. This includes the features of an ancestry she barely knows and the similarities between bodies forced by displacement to mature without reference to each other. This situation continually translates into a sense of longing between mother and daughter. While Filomena bears specific 'grieves' in her body—namely, the colonial and assimilationist past and the civil war that disrupted the possible future with her daughter—Solange, representing the younger generation of people of African descent who grew up during independence away from their birth countries, feels different 'grieves' in her body. Her mother's experiences resonate within her as a vulnerable memory—family memories that remain inaccessible to her, which are further complicated by the displacement she has endured, having been physically relocated to Lisbon by her mother in the hope of a better life. Solange has to deal with the grieving body and memory of her mother, to which she does not have complete access due to their separation. At the same time, she faces a sense of non-belonging and uprooting, making her a 'permanent stranger' (Mata 2006) with a hyphenated identity in which she does not recognize herself as either Angolan or Portuguese.

Having grown up in Lisbon, Solange embodies a blend of European and African traits: she is a complete 'African Portuguese girl' with a 'completely Lisbon' accent, yet also entirely 'Angolan' in her physical presence. As she matures, the reader learns that Solange marries, has children, lives in the suburb, has financial difficulties, and works in a generic office. Indeed, this story mirrors the experiences of many Afrodescendant girls separated from their mothers. The maternal bond and the metaphorical umbilical cord connecting mother and daughter highlight the impossibility of returning to Angola and living together. During their few visits in both Lisbon and Luanda, the two women feel estranged from each other's physical presence. Despite the emotional ties to her mother, Solange does not feel at home in Luanda. Solange's identity is explored throughout the novel as she constantly experiences estrangement, revealing that returning to her place of origin does not provide a sense of homecoming. In this direction, Margarida Rendeiro (2022c, 51) states that "this is what being Portuguese of African descent means: it is the consciousness that the desire to return to the figure of the mother will always be merely the formulation of a desire for a spiritual return to that which is ancestral." This longing

is captured in a verse from a Black spiritual song written in Lingala and Portuguese—*“Bobele Yo, Bobele Yo. Somente tu, somente Tu”*²⁹⁹ (Almeida 2020, 9)—which recurs throughout the narrative and marks its conclusion.

On the other hand, Filomena represents yet another example of the *assimilada*, previously explored in detail through characters like Cartola de Sousa, Glória, and Boa Morte da Silva. Although assimilation is not a central theme of the text, analysing this reference helps us understand Filomena’s affective projections onto Solange. Filomena recalls her assimilated childhood in a white Angolan neighbourhood, where she admired and emulated the tastes and desires of the colonizers. She is proud of having had a mother who was “*negra muito bonita, clarinha, clarinha, de feições bonitas*”³⁰⁰ (Almeida 2020, 85), dreams of a rich and wealthy life in Europe, and strongly disapproves of her daughter marrying any Black man. Additionally, Filomena unconsciously perpetuates the colonialist legacy of managing Black female bodies by teaching her daughter how to alter the shape of a Black baby’s nose, as she herself had done with Solange: “*Esse teu nariz, quando tu eras pequenina, ainda tinha aquela forma que eu lhe dei, não era assim como agora. Agora inchou, sócia, não sei onde é que andaste a meter o nariz [...] são coisas antigas da nossa vida que eu te estou a ensinar para tu aprenderes, assim ficas já a saber*” (Almeida 2020, 86).³⁰¹

Relegated to Luanda, Filomena drifts through memories of her past, which deeply shape her future expectations: “*Filomena é a mulher à espera da chamada que mudará a sua vida*” (Almeida 2020, 49).³⁰² Through her voice, Filomena shares and projects her ‘memories of the future’ onto Solange, a concept elaborated by Italian sociologist Paolo Jedlowski (2017). According to Jedlowski, ‘memories of the future’ represent memories of dreams, projects, forecasts, aspirations, concerns, illusions, and expectations that individuals and groups held in the past, based on what was considered possible at that historical moment. This perspective views the past not just as a concluded archive, a time of ‘never again,’ but as a time of ‘not yet.’ Thinking about memories of the future suggests that the memory of past imaginings serves as a reservoir of possibilities that may or may not come true. Thus, memories of the future help us understand how the past’s

²⁹⁹ “*Bobele Yo, Bobele Yo. Only You, only You*” (my translation).

³⁰⁰ “*Very pretty black woman, light-skinned, with beautiful features*” (my translation).

³⁰¹ “*That nose of yours, when you were little, it still had that shape I gave it, it wasn’t like it is now. Now it’s swollen, mate, I don’t know where you’ve been sticking your nose [...] these are old things in our lives that I’m teaching you so you can learn, so you’ll know now*” (my translation).

³⁰² “*Filomena is the woman waiting for the call that will change her life*” (my translation).

expectations and dreams can influence the present, inviting a critical comparison between the current situation and the ways in which the future was imagined in the past.

As Jedlowski asserts, ‘memories of the future’ are not essentialist or predetermined critical tools; rather, they must be analysed in detail within each specific context of application. In our case, it is important to examine the expectations and dreams of the mother and daughter in relation to the ‘memories of the future’ that arise from the colonial past, as it does in particular for Filomena and the issue of assimilation. Using Jedlowski’s concept, I aim to emphasize the complexity of temporalities at stake in the post-imperial times for the Afrodescendant community. In *As Telefones*, the spacetime continuum is broadened through the inscription of the future seen from a past perspective. Consequently, the memories of the future, linked to the recent colonial past, the perverse politics of assimilation, and the diasporic expectations, influence both the present and future of diasporic subjects.

In Filomena’s case, her ‘memories of the future’ are tied to the expectations of the assimilation process, which seemed to promise a higher quality of life compared to the precariousness faced by the non-assimilated population.³⁰³ Although decolonization, independence, and civil wars altered that status, the introjection of those memories of the future continued to influence post-imperial relations between Portugal and Angola, and even more so, relations with the next generation. For Filomena, living connected only by telephone wires fosters a constant hope for improved living conditions, symbolized by her daughter’s relocation to Europe—a place still imagined as a paradise of opportunities and personal fulfilment. This disillusionment is continually offset by the fantasy she harbours, maintaining an enduring hope for the possibility of reuniting and living together again in the sombre of assimilated fantasies: “Um dia, ainda vamos ter férias de cruzeiros, filha, vais ver. Um dia, ainda vamos num desses barcos com piscina comer bolinhas de melão, beber champanhe, o mambo todo, nós duas pretas finas e uns criados de lacinho a encherem-nos as taças. A Mamã acredita, filha. Deus é fiel. Vai chegar a nossa vez” (Almeida 2020, 26).³⁰⁴ Filomena’s assimilated ‘memories of the future,’ conveyed

³⁰³ This analysis is certainly applicable also to the desires and expectations of the characters introduced in Chapter 3. Assimilation invariably carries with it a history of past expectations. For instance, Cartola de Sousa’s memories of the future are completely undermined by the precarious circumstances he faces. Similarly, Glória’s letters and phone calls continually evoke these assimilated dreams of a different life even after independence. Eugénio’s hope to elevate his family’s assimilated status in Cape Verde is also dismantled by the life he ends up leading on the outskirts of Lisbon. I delve deeper into this issue with *As Telefones*, which places these diasporic desires and expectations at the centre of its narrative reflection.

³⁰⁴ “One day we’re going to have a cruise holiday, child, you’ll see. One day we’ll be on one of those boats with a swimming pool, eating melon balls, drinking champagne, the whole mambo, us two fine black

through their calls, become “um sonho em andamento”³⁰⁵ (Almeida 2020, 72) for both women. Through their conversations, they dream about each other’s lives, imagine how they live. In this way, they engage in a shared illusion, sustaining a simulacrum that shields them from the suffering and the implicit realization of the impossibility of reuniting to a family life together.

Between the emptiness caused by absence and the fantasies allowed by distance, Solange becomes a woman while Filomena grows old. This impossibility of an ‘affective return’ is compensated for by the only tool they have left to cope with abandonment and separation: imagination. The imaginative function of dreams serves as the greatest compensation for their losses and current affective vulnerability, as Solange says: “o teu sono é a nossa recompensa” (Almeida 2020, 37).³⁰⁶ Through the compensatory function of fantasy, the women’s ‘memories of the future’ become lost illusions of a future imagined in the past, but which will never materialize. Filomena’s biggest mistake was believing her daughter’s move to Portugal would lead to a future different from her own. In reality, life in Lisbon is just as vulnerable and precarious for those in the diaspora as it is in Luanda:

Enquanto nada disso acontecia, e não podia jamais acontecer. Filomena e Solange folheavam revistas. Mentiam às amigas sobre o tanto que planeavam fazer juntas. Os seus telefonemas não eram palavras, mas um sonho em andamento, cujo avesso era tudo o que não contavam uma à outra: a filha sonhando com a vivenda onde a mãe vivia, que nunca visitara, a mãe sonhando com o apartamento onde a sua menina haveria de ser dona da casa. Viam-se quando calhava, após anos. Nunca tinham dinheiro para nada. Solange recebia a mãe, pobremente. [...] À entrada, Filomena fazia sempre o mesmo, adaptando-se à vida. Olhava para o tecto, entrando na sala, sfregava os braços, como se se aliviasse de um arrepio. Dizia sempre: «É pobrezinha, pequenina, mas é leve. Sinto-me leve aqui dentro, bem leve, minha filha, não fica triste, um dia a Mamã vai-te dar uma casa bem grande». Às vezes, vendo o soalho escurecido e gasto, as parades a precisar de uma demão, tinha de se conter para não chorar. Por amor à menina dentro de si, consoando-a (Almeida, 2020, p. 72-73).³⁰⁷

women and some servants in bow ties filling our glasses. Mummy believes, child. God is faithful. Our moment will come” (my translation).

³⁰⁵ “A dream in progress” (my translation).

³⁰⁶ “Your sleep is our reward” (my translation).

³⁰⁷ “While none of this was happening, and it could never happen. Filomena and Solange leafed through magazines. They lied to their friends about how much they planned to do together. Their phone calls were not words, but a dream in progress, the reverse of which was everything they didn’t tell each other: the daughter dreaming of the place where her mother lived, which she had never visited, the mother dreaming of the flat where her little girl would be the owner of the house. They saw each other whenever they could, after years. They never had money for anything. Solange received her mother poorly. [...] On entering, Filomena always did the same, adapting to life. She would look up at the ceiling and, entering the room,

Despite their different identity configurations—Filomena as a witness and Solange as an uprooted heiress—their shared vocal identity, created through the telephone, unites them, allowing them to imagine closeness and affection: a compensatory female affiliation.

With the father's figure entirely absent from the novel, *As Telefones* draws attention to the implicit connection between mother and 'motherland.' Despite the physical separation, there is a constant search for proximity, conveyed through the ancestral knowledge passed down from Filomena to Solange: recipes, oral traditions, stories, Black genealogies, family memories, and Black female secrets. Through oral transmission, 'facilitated' by the telephone, Filomena tries to impart her Angolan knowledge to her daughter. In this sense, ancestry, as theorized by Brazilian scholars like Katiúscia Ribeiro (2020d) and Eduardo David de Oliveira (2007), is not merely an exercise in archaeology or the reconstruction of family trees. Rather, it serves as a vital analytical concept for understanding the experiences, identity politics, epistemologies, and even the educational practices of Afrodescendant communities, and their connections with future projections. Ancestry functions as a category of recognition, self-understanding, and self-assertion, enabling a subject to reconstruct the relationship between the bodies, memories, and territories of a community, thereby linking its past to a future horizon. The novel thus presents a complex interweaving of assimilated 'memories of the future' and the effort to break away from them through the challenging process of ancestral reconnection between the bodies of the two women, their stories, their memories, and their diasporic territories and communities.

While this transmission seeks to give Solange a sense of connection to the ancestry she was deprived of, the narrative also delves into the limitations of this reconnection and the possible future projections for the two women. In this way, ancestry functions as a bridge, attempting to sustain an emotional bond between them, rather than offering an oversimplified or unrealistic promise of a 'romantic' return to a future life together.

Solange grows old, Filomena dies. In her final farewell, Solange says goodbye to her mother, emphasising the total impossibility of her return: "a tua filha é uma sombra. O telefone é a minha mãe. [...] Adeus, Filomena, boa viagem. Não te acordo mais à

she would rub her arms, as if relieving herself of a chill. She always said: «It's poor, it's small, but it's light. I feel light in here, very light, my child, don't be sad, one day Mum will give you a very big house». Sometimes, when she saw the dark and worn floorboards, the walls in need of a coat of paint, she had to stop herself from crying. Out of love for the little girl inside her, she consoled her" (my translation).

procura de um fim feliz nem tento começar pelo princípio” (Almeida 2020, 88).³⁰⁸ The inheritance Filomena leaves Solange is a suitcase brimming with shattered hopes, unrealized dreams, and assimilated ‘memories of the future’ that fail to reflect her daughter’s tomorrow: “não tenho outra imagen para nós, só essa mala vazia no porão de um *Boeing*, enquanto, noutro fuso horário, entro no escritório grata e abençoada por a ter na minha vida e por sermos, enfim, parecidas: pretas, gordas e perfeitas” (Almeida 2020, 90).³⁰⁹ By highlighting the spectral continuity between past and present and the enduring legacies of the transatlantic transits in contemporary history, Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida’s novel introduces two complex characters grappling with their ghosts, imaginations, vulnerabilities, and their constant challenge: a struggle for affection between Black women separated by the Afro-Atlantic diaspora.

4.2.2 Lose Your Mother Twice: Genealogy, Gender, and Race in Yara Nakahanda Monteiro’s *Essa dama bate bué*

While colonialism inflicted profound atrocities on African populations, decolonization, as Fanon poignantly theorized, was equally brutal for those who remained in the newly independent nations. In the Lusophone post-colonial context, the Angolan Civil War further devastated the country, as violence tore apart neighbours and communities that had once coexisted. Today, any discussion of peace in Angola seems incomplete without acknowledging the long and destructive period of civil conflict that followed the War of Independence. According to Luso-Angolan writer Yara Nakahanda Monteiro (in Wieser 2024, 79), the conflict is critically embedded within the unprocessed trauma of Angolan society, where silence and unresolved stories persist among military personnel, families, and subjects who have experienced death or witnessed someone dying. Monteiro asserts that these sorrows were also carried into exile in Portugal: “Pensamos que não existem, mas vêm escondidas nas malas. Por muito que se faça a roda do esquecimento, continuam lá e depois têm impacto nas gerações futuras, porque não são resolvidas” (Monteiro in Wieser 2024, 80).³¹⁰ Although freedom and Independence were achieved and a nation

³⁰⁸ “Your daughter is a shadow. The phone is my mum [...] Goodbye, Filomena, have a good trip. I’m no longer waking you up looking for a happy ending or trying to start at the beginning” (my translation).

³⁰⁹ “I have no other image for us, just this empty suitcase in the hold of a Boeing, while, in another time zone, I go into the office grateful and blessed to have her in my life and that we finally look alike: black, fat and perfect” (my translation).

³¹⁰ “We think they don’t exist, but they are hidden in suitcases. No matter how much you turn the wheel of forgetfulness, they’re still there and then they have an impact on future generations, because they’re not resolved” (my translation).

was formed, a pervasive post-traumatic context remains unresolved. Joana Gorjão Henriques (2016, 20) notes that in Angola, over 60% of the population is under 24 years old. Consequently, most of the population did not experience the colonial period or the unofficial racial apartheid imposed by the colonial regime. This makes the issue of memory and remembrance a central concern for the younger generation. At the same time, the need to remember the conflict in order to understand peace seems absent in Portugal. From the historical perspective of the nation, the wars of independence in Africa and their aftermath are often perceived as ‘external’ events rather than integral parts—and consequences—of the country’s own history. As a result, diasporic individuals connected to both nations, whether they experienced the events firsthand or not, continue to feel a deep sense of frustration on both sides of the ocean due to the lack of historical reckoning with this recent traumatic past.

In recent years, post-independent Angolan historical, anthropological, and memory research has been rewritten and reconsidered through a female perspective, particularly highlighting the vital role of women within the liberation groups and in the peace agreements.³¹¹ In the field of human and social sciences, there has also been a movement to revisit the Angolan literary canon from the standpoint of women. In a recent study, Iolanda Vasile (2021) highlights the predominance of male voices, characters, and perspectives within Angolan literature. This feminist research aims to shed light on women’s voices that, although foundational to the Angolan literary landscape, have not been regarded as important references within the canon.³¹² Among these endeavours, Vasile highlights the significance of Yara Nakahanda Monteiro’s *Essa dama bate bué* as

³¹¹ Dya Kassembe and Paulina Chiziane’s work, *O Livro da Paz da mulher angolana, as heroínas sem nome* (2008), is foundational as it responded to the call for public recognition of Angolan women’s importance in the peace processes, despite their diverse positions within the conflict. Another significant text is Margarida Paredes’ *Combater duas vezes: mulheres na luta armada em Angola* (2015), which brought visibility to the struggles of Angolan guerrilla women against both colonial oppression and local patriarchal invisibility and subordination.

³¹² As Vasile (2021, 241) states, Angola boasts a plethora of writers recognized as part of the country’s literary canon, yet there exists a large corpus of oral literature whose identification remains neither nominal nor exhaustive. Authors such as Ruy Duarte de Carvalho, António Jacinto, Pepetela, José Luandino Vieira, and Manuel Rui are undeniably integral to the Angolan literary canon. However, thanks to contemporary feminist research and efforts in literary criticism, authors like Alda Lara and Ana Paula Tavares have been acknowledged as foundational to Angolan literature. More recent feminist research, such as that by Noemi Alfieri (2021), highlights the significance of Deolinda Rodrigues—writer, poet, and guerrilla fighter within the MPLA—within Angolan society and the literary field. The objective of revising the canon from a feminist perspective is to illuminate the history of Angolan women during the violent colonization period and to recognize their central contributions to the War of Independence, the civil conflict, and the peace processes. These authors challenge the traditional Angolan literary canon, where female characters, though present (as in the works of Luandino Vieira or Pepetela), are often overshadowed by the predominant male voice. By placing female figures with agency at the centre of their narratives, these women become the protagonists of their own life stories and the poetics they create.

a novel that further disrupts traditional canonical classifications within Angolan literature. This novel, written and published within in Portugal, challenges conventional boundaries and expands the understanding of Angolan literary production. In my view, the novel further disrupts canonical conventions by challenging also the traditional Portuguese canon. It demonstrates that Angolan history is inseparably intertwined with Portuguese history. This interconnectedness is exemplified through the main character, Vitória, for whom negritude and ancestry are central concerns.³¹³

In this paragraph, I aim to analyse the character of Vitória as an innovative figure within both Portuguese and Angolan literature, particularly within the specific literary trope of the ‘postcolonial return’ to Angola. Specifically, I will discuss the concerns she highlights regarding the ‘covered’ memories of both Portugal and Angola and how this lack of memory affects her identity construction. Vulnerability is a central concern of the text, as it addresses violence against women and their exposure during both colonial and post-imperial periods. This vulnerability extends beyond the corporeal dimension, delving into Vitória’s memories and exposing her to the threat of not understanding her identity in relation to her female genealogy and ancestry within a systematically racist society. She faces the risk of a fragmented identity due to a lack of maternal memory. Her journey backwards represents a search for her lost female lineage, as well as a reconnection with her lost country, aiming to ‘heal’ from the memory vulnerability that impacts her sense of self.

In *Lose Your Mother*, Saidiya Hartman (2007, 17) focuses her research on the “afterlife of slavery” by embarking on a journey from the United States to Ghana in search of lost slaves and their descents. She particularly emphasizes the family disruption caused by the transatlantic slave trade and the repercussions of this violence on subsequent generations. A slave without a past or memory of her ancestry had no life to avenge; in other words, “the absentminded posed no menace” (Hartman 2007, 116) to the Western colonial system. Indeed, the politics of forgetting have a strong tradition within colonial regimes, and the Portuguese case is no exception. Minds and mouths still have a strong

³¹³ Iolanda Vasile (2021, 243) raises several intriguing questions regarding Monteiro’s novel. She explores why this work was written from an ‘external’ perspective and why it first emerged in the diaspora rather than in literature produced within Angola. Vasile also questions why it is necessary to adopt an outsider’s viewpoint to give visibility to Angolan female heroes who have been historically overlooked. These reflections suggest that the displacement of Angolan descendants, who experience genealogical pain and suffering, might be an attempt to uncover hidden aspects of their history. It is also noteworthy that, among various authors of Angolan descent, such as Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida and Kalaf Epalanga, Monteiro’s novel is the only work that has also been published in Angola (by Elivulu Editora). This highlights the specific in-between position the novel occupies in both the traditional and re-visioned literary canons.

connection. If Solange is ‘a mouth without memory,’ Vitória describes herself as a “sombra de uma identidade, uma língua cortada” (Monteiro 2018, 60).³¹⁴ While Solange tries to reconfigure her identity through the voice to connect with her mother, Vitória’s identity quest stems from the complete absence of her maternal figure, who is ‘present’ only in an old photograph that Vitória constantly carries with her. The mother becomes a constant object of intimate desire, lost and absent of any voice or body, embodying a threatening history for both Portugal and Angola. Vitória represents the ‘absentminded’ individual that the afterlife of the empire sought to keep in oblivion. In contrast, Monteiro’s novel intricately questions the politics of forgetfulness, staging a reversed post-imperial return from Portugal to Angola in search of answers to historical, genealogical, and memory absences.

First, Vitória’s concerns about her identity are closely linked to her relationship with her grandparents, particularly her grandfather, António Queiroz da Fonseca. António, an Angolan merchant who had ‘risen socially’ through his marriage to Elisa, a white woman, “considerava-se assimilado e, acima de tudo, português” (Monteiro 2018, 11).³¹⁵ From the novel’s outset, he emerges as a contradictory and implicated character supportive of the colonial regime in Angola. In Silva Porto, he owned a plantation with low-paid indigenous ‘workers’ and, similarly to other characters as Cartola de Sousa, Boa Morte da Silva, and Eugénio, had profoundly internalized Western worldview and culture. His primary concern was racial uplift. He married Elisa because, adhering to colonial biases against local women, he was captivated by her “pele clara e imaculada” (Monteiro 2018, 25).³¹⁶ António’s profound disappointment with the dark skin of her daughter Rosa reveals the perverse whitening politics embedded within assimilation—“ao contrário das expectativas, a primogénita não puxou o bom e branco ventre da progenitora” (Monteiro 2018, 81).³¹⁷ He leveraged his “cor do meio,” which “colocara-o num mundo intermédio” (Monteiro 2018, 13).³¹⁸ After leaving the plantation in Silva Porto due to the advancing colonial war, António worked for both sides of the conflict in Nova Lisboa (modern-day Huambo) to manage his commercial interests. In Silva Porto, he also abandoned Rosa, Vitória’s mother, upon discovering her collaboration with the independence movements. Following an episode of violence, Rosa disappeared forever. In this novel, assimilation

³¹⁴ “The shadow of an identity, a severed tongue” (my translation).

³¹⁵ “Considered himself assimilated and, above all, Portuguese” (my translation).

³¹⁶ “Clear, unblemished skin” (my translation).

³¹⁷ “Contrary to expectations, the firstborn did not pull out her mother’s good, white womb” (my translation).

³¹⁸ “Colour in the middle [...] placed him in an in-between world” (my translation).

takes on a sombre and specific aspect as it directly impacts Vitória and her initial ability to uncover her past.

The violence imposed on Vitória by her assimilated grandfather is depicted through two central episodes. The first episode involves their final visit to *soba* Katimba, António's friend, before leaving Angola. In Katimba's village, António requests his friend to conduct the ceremony of forgetfulness around the *mulemba* tree to erase the Angolan past of the Queiroz da Fonseca family. In her work, Saidiya Hartman recalls various stories told by people in Ghana—and circulating throughout Western Africa—about how slaves either developed strategies or were forced to forget their past before being deported. The outcome, however, was invariably the same: the slave would lose her mother. One particular story involves a specific ritual, explicitly referenced by Monteiro in the passage mentioned, connected to the 'tree of oblivion,' where women had to circle a tree seven times, and men nine times, to forget their origins and accept their slave status. Rituals of oblivion became common practices among both slave traders and enslaved individuals. This enforced forgetting rendered the enslaved defenceless: "No longer anyone's child, the slave had no choice but to bear the visible marks of servitude and accept a new identity in the household of the owner. It was one thing to be a stranger in a strange land, and an entirely worse state to be a stranger to yourself" (Hartman 2007, 117). By recalling this tradition, Monteiro reconnects with an ancient practice and situates it in the post-independence period, thereby projecting the slaves' destiny onto the exiled child forced to forget her country and, once again, to lose her mother.

The second episode concerns the removal of all traces of Vitória's mother from their new life in Portugal, further deepening the process of forgetting and exacerbating Vitória's identity vulnerability. As Hartman (2007, 38) writes, "a lie was the price of kinship." To ensure a future for Vitória, António believes that eluding the past—marked by family ties to slavery and assimilation, oppressors and the oppressed, rebellion and collaboration—becomes a vital prerequisite to belonging in the new country.

The first chapter introduces Vitória's earliest memories, involving a tree and a wave, symbolically linking her recollections of Angola with those of Portugal. These memories persist on her tongue, mingling with the tastes of sour milk and sweat. The tongue—or rather, the severed tongue—serves as a repository for lost memories. Reflecting on her mother's absence, Vitória describes herself as a 'situated present' (Vasile 2021, 246) by stating: "Chamo-me Vitória Queiroz da Fonseca. Sou mulher. Sou negra" (Monteiro

2018, 9).³¹⁹ Vitória identifies genealogy, gender, and race as central concerns. However, it is through her journey, alongside other women, that she will come to understand the profound meaning, interdependence, and intersectionality of these categories as foundational for her ancestral identity and in order to elaborate her troubled past.

As Sandra Sousa (2020, 206) states, Vitória's narrative concerns a story of "double displacement," since she left for Portugal at a very early age but she never felt at home in the country. Quoting Bosnian-American writer Aleksandar Hemon, Sousa observes that displacement leads to a form of self-othering, resulting in a tenuous relationship with the past and the self that once existed and operated in a different context. Displacement and diaspora constitute an ontological crisis, as individuals are forced to negotiate their selfhood under perpetually changing existential circumstances. Consequently, the displaced person strives for narrative stability, even as they grapple with the inevitable reality of a self transformed by diaspora. This creates a split between an 'us-here' and an 'us-there.' Vitória is unfamiliar with her 'us-there,' as that part of her family memory has been erased by her grandfather. Therefore, Vitória's journey is not only a search for her mother but also an effort to create her own narrative stability through this quest.

As I will argue, the issue of female genealogy is central to Vitória's quest for identity, intertwining with Monteiro's own experiences regarding her identity and family history. It is no coincidence that the novel opens with a dedication to the women in Monteiro's family: her great-great-grandmother Nakahanda, her great-grandmother Feliciano, her grandmother Júlia, her mother, and her aunt Wanda.³²⁰

If Vitória's identity is overshadowed by the consequences of António's assimilation, the novel showcases a diverse array of women who, despite significant differences and contradictions, accompany Vitória on her journey. First are the women in her family: her grandmother Elisa and her aunts Isaltina and Francisca. For Vitória's ceremony of oblivion to be successful, she needed to be immersed in the waters of the new country.

³¹⁹ "My name is Vitória Queiroz da Fonseca. I'm a woman. I'm black" (my translation).

³²⁰ Monteiro's exploration of female genealogy continues in her recent poetry collection, *Memórias Aparições Arritmias* (2021). The poems delve into the intimate female memories of her family, beginning with the vital role played by Monteiro's grandmother, whom the poet regards as the guardian of the family's memories. Through her grandmother's stories, Monteiro discovers that many traumatic events had been silenced within the family, particularly those concerning her great-great-grandmother Nakahanda—whose Angolan name was erased from official documents and replaced with the Portuguese name Beatriz—and her great-grandmother Feliciano, a former enslaved Angolan woman forced to marry an unknown white Portuguese man. In an interview, Monteiro (in Wieser 2024, 79) asserts that traumatic stories repeat across generations. She learned that her traditional name is Navitangue. However, her grandfather did not want her to be registered with this traditional name, and since her parents were very young, they did not register the Angolan name. By choosing the pen name 'Nakahanda,' Monteiro honours her Angolan ancestry as a duty of memory.

However, as Monteiro states in an interview (in Wieser 2024, 74), the ritual failed because the women of the family did not want it to succeed. They did not want to forget Angola, nor did they want to forget the daughter/sister left behind. They did not want Vitória to forget either. Consequently, these women ally with Vitória to find clues and traces to reconnect with Rosa during the grandfather's absence from home. Due to the complete erasure of Rosa's signals, Vitória, Elisa, and aunt Francisca visit aunt Isaltina, whom António had committed to a psychiatric hospital. Isaltina's precarious mental health is linked to the trauma of the war, yet despite her paradoxical condition, she is the only one in the family who "tem boa memória" (Monteiro 2018, 84).³²¹ Isaltina's good memory represents a further obstacle for António, as it threatens the oblivion imposed by the assimilated man. To maintain the status quo of the politics of forgetting, this 'good memory' must be marginalized and relegated to a distant space. Thus, Isaltina represents a form of 'imprisoned memory.' With her cooperation, Vitória discovers two names that could help her find her mother in Angola: General Zacarias Vindu and Juliana Tijamba.

Upon arriving in Luanda and being welcomed into Romena's home—a completely female space inhabited by her aunt's friend and her daughters, devoid of any male figure—Vitória begins to confront her identity. Too dark-skinned for Portugal and too light-skinned for Angola, she soon discovers that others define her identity based on her location. Returning to Angola does not align with the imagined, nostalgic portrayal of a lost paradise propagated by the assimilated mythology of the Queiroz da Fonseca family. Worse still, Vitória realizes that her skin, accent, and behaviour do not facilitate an easy homecoming. She is constantly reminded that she does not belong: "Sinto o comentário como se fosse uma mão abruptamente lançada à minha cara. Um lembrete áspero de que não pertenço ali. Não tenho o sotaque da terra" (Monteiro 2018, 71).³²² If Portugal's inability to address Vitória's history and identity due to specific aphasic displacements is evident, similarly, Angola appears incapable of providing such answers. The term 'precarity' aptly describes Angola in 2003, a country still reeling from a 27-year-long conflict following its protracted war for Independence. Given these precarious conditions, identitarian politics are not prioritized upon Vitória's arrival, making her quest a prolonged process of unearthing history and memory.

³²¹ "Has good memory" (my translation).

³²² "I feel the comment like a hand abruptly thrown in my face. A harsh reminder that I don't belong there. I don't have the accent of the land" (my translation).

Vitória's fate contrasts starkly with the privilege enjoyed by her assimilated grandfather during the colonial times. While António could leverage his 'middle colour' to his advantage, his granddaughter bears the full weight and violence of that history, experiencing the perverse consequences of assimilation in reverse. In an extended stream-of-consciousness monologue, she states:

a honra e a vergonha, que falsidades, a sensualidade ou o convencionalismo, uma coisa ou outra, a merda deve ser o pior lugar do mundo. “Ela será chamada mulher porque do homem foi tirada”, livro de Génesis, elas não choram, são duras como as estátuas de pau-preto que a avó tem na sala, o pior lugar da Terra, é ser-se mulher negra, quem delas cuida não sei. Melhor pôr os dedos à boca e vomitar, sai tudo de uma vez, bebi demasiado, aqui sou clara, lá sou escura, o sítio do meio é o segundo pior (Monteiro 2018, 59).³²³

Thus, Vitória places the complex issue of *mestiçagem* at the heart of her identity concerns, contextualizing it within the broader history of specific colonial politics.

Indeed, Monteiro's novel critically highlights, through fiction, the impact of *mestiçagem* within the post-imperial connections between Portugal and Angola. Today, Portugal tends to exalt a Neo-Luso-Tropicalist narrative of *mestiçagem* without confronting the violent historical legacies that gave rise to this condition. As Joana Gorjão Henriques argues in *Racismo em Português* (2016, 12), there is little acknowledgment in Portugal of its responsibility for creating deep racial imbalances between whites and Blacks, as well as among the 'border' identities shaped by colonial contact. Moreover, Portugal's accountability for the specific forms of exclusion and racism affecting various ethnic-racial identities is still starkly overlooked. Neo-Luso-Tropicalist 'soft narratives' do not allow for a deep questioning, nor for Portuguese society to be effectively made aware of several distinct processes of identification that arise from Portuguese colonization in relation to the African diaspora, running the risk that the descendants of the former 'colonized' are rendered even more subaltern and marginalised. Henriques poses a very interesting question concerning the violent processes of *mestiçagem* and assimilation which still echo today not only in Portugal, but also in the former African countries: “Vamos perpetuar a narrative de um colonizador que não discriminava porque

³²³ “Honour and shame, what falsehoods, sensuality or conventionality, one or the other, shit must be the worst place on earth. ‘She shall be called a woman because she was taken out of man,’ book of Genesis, they don’t cry, they’re as hard as the blackwood statues grandma has in her living room, the worst place on earth is to be a black woman, I don’t know who looks after them. Better to put your fingers in your mouth and vomit, it all comes out at once, I’ve had too much to drink, here I’m light-skinned, there I’m dark-skinned, the middle place is the second worst” (my translation).

se miscigenou com as populações locais, quando sabemos que as obrigava a despirem-se da sua identidade Africana, a mudar de nome, a alisar o cabelo ou a obliterar a sua língua?” (Henriques 2016, 15).³²⁴

Vitória embodies the identity questioning of the *mestiço* from both sides of the Ocean, adding complexity to the nuances this identity conveys. Primarily, she expresses the urgency of existing within the dimension of diasporic *mestiçagem* through the reappropriation of her Angolan roots. To achieve this reappropriation, Vitória undergoes a gradual process of ‘Angolanization’ (Sarteschi 2021, 136), reflecting her attempt to reconnect with her origins. This process marks the acceptance and assumption of her racial identity, an aspect that her journey problematizes both in relation to the past colonial and current post-imperial spaces of the metropolis and on the African continent. Her Angolanization is characterized by a progressive movement of remembering—through the clues she uncovers about her mother—and forgetting—by deconstructing the altered and distorted visions of the past shaped by a history of assimilation. This is exemplified by the death of António and Vitória’s refusal to return to Portugal for his funeral.

The initial phase of Vitória’s ‘Angolanization’ occurs during her stay in Luanda at the home of Romena and her daughters. They gradually introduce her to various aspects of the city’s life, including its rhythms, tastes, accents, traditions, and, most importantly, its social contradictions and violent realities. In this process of rediscovery, the women she encounters upon her arrival represent a different genealogical strand compared to those in her own family. This other strand is marked by stark social contradictions and, most notably, by violence. For this reason, a significant portion of the narrative focuses on two other types of women: Domingas, a *zungueira*,³²⁵ and Josefa and Mariela, domestic workers employed by Romena. These women are emblematic figures in Luanda’s social landscape, representing specific female figures that illustrate the complex

³²⁴ “Are we going to perpetuate the narrative of a coloniser who didn’t discriminate because he mixed with the local populations, when we know that he forced them to strip off their African identity, change their names, straighten their hair or obliterate their language?” (my translation).

³²⁵ *Zungueiras* refers to street vendors in Angola’s informal market. The term, commonly used by the residents of Luanda, originates from the Kimbundu word *zunga*, meaning to go round and round. The figure of the *zungueira* is a postcolonial continuation of the *quitandeira* (today often regulated vendor who sell traditional products and natural remedies in local markets). During the colonial era, these figures were systemic victims of dehumanizing practices characterized by race, class, and gender oppression. They were especially opposed by colonial authorities because their activities undermined the regulated trade system and were perceived as disturbing public order and hygiene. In contemporary Angolan society, *zungueiras* represent a social class that has been systematically and historically marginalized, also after decolonization. These women traverse the visible and invisible borders of the city daily, conducting door-to-door sales to support their households. As such, *zungueiras* are subjectivities within the institutionalized process of socio-spatial segregation in Angola. This marginalization is evident in the numerous deaths of street vendors in Luanda, officially justified on the grounds that they cause public disorder (André, Luz 2022, 3).

genealogies of oppression persisting in the aftermath of Angolan historical injustices. Vitória interrogates these characters to understand the complex identity of the country.

Monteiro's portrayal diverges from any romanticized representations that frequently depict *zungueiras* as brave women traversing the city to earn money for their impoverished families. Instead, she highlights the vulnerabilities of these women, emphasizing the public and social violence they face in the aftermath of colonial rule and civil conflict. As Monteiro asserts (in Tavares et al. 2021, 153), the *zungueira* embodies the black woman exploited to the maximum extent, forming the foundation of a structure of state and social violence. Domestic workers also play a central role in Monteiro's depiction of Angolan society. By placing both mother and daughter in the service of Romena, Monteiro illustrates how Mariela's fate mirrors the subaltern social position of her mother. These women are linked through a genealogy of violence rooted in the colonial past, where the mother's destiny is projected onto the daughter.

Thus, the social positions of *zungueiras* and domestic workers perpetuate a colonial legacy in which Black women occupied the lowest, most exploited, and objectified positions. According to Monteiro (in Tavares et al. 2021, 153), this legacy has evolved into a new state 'technology' aimed at controlling and exploiting these women's bodies, minds, and lives, as well as at relegating them to the most precarious margins of the cities. Emerging from conditions of extreme poverty, these women symbolize otherness *par excellence* in decolonized Angola. They challenge culturally hegemonic models of femininity while upholding the prestige of the ruling classes. In Angola, this ruling class includes a small white elite and a stratified social hierarchy among Black women, exemplified by Romena. Monteiro's focus on these figures seeks to re-appropriate and critically re-signify these female characters through literature, revealing their essential role in sustaining Angolan society. Their juxtaposition with Romena also exposes the violence inflicted by women of higher social classes on historically subaltern figures. Through the characters of Domingas, Josefa, and Mariela, Monteiro denounces the daily violence they endure, both in the master's houses and on the streets of Luanda. These characters give visibility to their inner worlds, marked by historical wounds reopened and re-actualized by decolonization. These wounds reveal the dynamics of power and showcase mechanisms for denouncing degrading working and living conditions while striving to implement resistance strategies against the abuse they suffer.

The following paragraph exemplifies Josefa's life in the *musseque* and explores the familial and generational ties between her, her mother Josefa, and her sister Esperança. It

traces a genealogy of women who, despite being oppressed and marginalized, employ small daily survival strategies to dream of and imagine a different future: “Olho à minha volta. Isto não se pode chamar de casa. Aqui não tem água nem luz. Casa é a de dona Romena, aqui é um muquifo. A mãe Josefa não gosta que se diga isso. Não gosta de verdade. Fica irritada e reclama que trabalhou muito para fazer a casa dela com blocos. Podia ser pior. Podia ser uma casa de chapa. Agora com a paz sonham com casa nova, com escola, com comida e bebida. Meu sonho é Esperança sair do musseque. Não quero ela burra, de barriga e a levar surra” (Monteiro 2018, 88).³²⁶

Romena and her daughters, the *zungueira* Domingas, and the domestic workers Josefa and Mariela reveal, through their stories, the starker and more unjust realities of Luanda, as well as the remnants of colonial structures reconstituted in the hierarchical relationships between various social groups. The relationship between Romena and her domestic workers exemplifies this dynamic. These women, from their situated positions, show how colonial racism, transformed into issues of colourism and classism,³²⁷ acts as both “um apagão e um arrastão”³²⁸ (Henriques 2016, 15), continuing to divide Angolan society into lives that count more and lives that count less in relation to their social status, despite political decolonization not corresponding to a deep decolonization of mentalities.

As Vitória navigates between feelings of estrangement and attempts at understanding, she begins to grasp Luanda’s complexities and contradictions. Through Romena, Vitória meets General Zacarias Vindu, an ambiguous figure with a love for poetry, and, with the help of Georgina, a Spanish researcher she encounters while searching for her mother at the Women’s Association, she manages to trace Juliana Tijamba and subsequently leaves for Huambo.

In Huambo, Vitória learns that Juliana was a comrade of her mother in both the anti-colonial struggle and the civil conflicts. This town, where her grandparents lived before their exile to Portugal, becomes a pivotal location for Vitória’s ongoing ‘Angolanization.’

³²⁶ “I look around me. This can’t be called home. There’s no water or electricity here. Home is mrs. Romena’s, this is a muquifo. Mother Josefa doesn’t like to be told that. She really doesn’t like it. She gets angry and complains that she worked hard to make her house out of blocks. It could be worse. It could have been a sheet metal house. Now with peace, they dream of a new house, a school, food and drink. My dream is for Esperança to leave the musseque. I don’t want her dumb, pregnant and getting beaten up” (my translation).

³²⁷ According to interviews conducted by Joana Gorjão Henriques (2016, 32), colourism significantly impacts Angolan society, with lighter skin tones often correlating with higher social status, while poverty is predominantly associated with darker skin. Discussing racism in Angola is complex, as ethnically only a small portion of the population is white (1%) or *mestiço* (2%). Nonetheless, being white or light-skinned confers a substantial privilege that the majority of the Black population does not possess. This imbalance of privileges is a direct and lasting consequence of the colonial structuring of Angolan society.

³²⁸ “A blackout and a dragnet” (my translation).

This process is marked by her progressive questioning of her grandparents' memories, cutting her hair, working on learning the local language and expressions, and ultimately discovering her Angolan name, Wayula, thanks to Juliana. Vitória embarks on a profound journey of reappropriation, understanding, though, that this recovery is always incomplete and fragmentary. She seeks to approximate to the characteristics historically denied to the local population by colonial administrative laws and sacrificed to assimilation policies: the language, local traditions, control and appreciation of one's body, and, finally, the Angolan proper names.

Juliana Tijamba embodies the direct connection to Vitória's lost mother and the inherent violence within this genealogy of loss. Specifically, she represents a 'geography of pain'³²⁹ where another group of women emerges in a contradictory manner: those who fought in the prolonged armed conflict.

In examining conflict to understand peace, *Essa dama bate bué* explores what feminist and interdisciplinary studies term 'gendered violence'—the physical and psychological impacts of violence and conflict on female subjects, focusing on their specific, situated, and embodied perspectives during the wars in Angola. This includes not only violence perpetrated by men against women³³⁰ but also violence committed by women against other women. Beyond its physical dimensions, gendered violence affects intangible aspects such as women's inner lives, memories, genealogies, and ancestral lineages, turning these into complex and contradictory spaces of investigation,

³²⁹ According to Françoise Lionnet (in Sousa, 2020, 200), the concept of "geographies of pain" delineates a historical-geographical space continuum shared by African and Caribbean women who endured various forms of violent disruptions stemming from slavery, colonialism, decolonization processes, and ongoing neocolonialism.

³³⁰ Sandra Sousa specifically emphasizes that, despite structural differences, the language and ideologies articulated by nationalist liberation movements often mirrored those espoused by imperial authorities. Drawing parallels between imperial development initiatives and the revolutionary agendas of modernization unveils striking similarities, particularly in the case of Angola. Referencing Andreas Stucki's analysis, Sousa (2020, 199) delves into the roles and violence experienced by Angolan women during the civil conflict. Similar to the Salazarist and colonialist efforts to involve Portuguese women in the Colonial War—through organizations like the National Women's Movement or by relocating wives, mothers, and daughters to the colonies to strengthen the white presence and maintain the unity of the Salazarist family in the colonial context—the MPLA also sought to make women 'visible' in their liberation program. The liberation movements aimed to transform the 'traditional African society' by integrating women into the revolutionary struggle. Liberation movements viewed women's contributions as essential for constructing united, egalitarian, and sovereign nation-states that could overcome political, cultural, and ethnic divisions. "Unexpectedly," writes Sousa (2020, 200), "men on both sides envisioned women's roles in a very similar way." Although liberation organizations accepted women fighters, the revolutionary movements did not lead to adequate recognition in terms of career roles, education, or gender equality, despite appearances. While revolutionaries promoted women's participation in political life, true emancipation and equal rights were postponed until the post-independence era and then continually delayed. Despite iconic images of African women with Kalashnikovs and the symbolic propaganda of the 'Angolan mother' transmitting new education and revolutionary knowledge, the crucial roles played by women were largely unrecognized and forgotten during the conflict and its aftermath.

particularly in relation to Vitória's memory vulnerability. In the narrative, Juliana discloses to Vitória that women within guerrilla groups led by men were considered as 'inferior,' and Rosa faced frequent mistreatment and the threat of sexual violence from a fellow comrade who was eventually killed by Rosa, causing her to become an enemy within the guerrilla group. Towards the conclusion of the novel, Vitória receives a letter from her mother revealing the harsh truth about her past—that she was tortured by the General Zacarias Vindu and subjected to sexual assault by multiple men, resulting in Vitória being born from one of these traumatic experiences—and expressing her unwillingness to reconcile. Additionally, Juliana discloses that she betrayed Rosa by orchestrating an ambush against her.

As Saidiya Hartman (2007, 69) states, “to lose your mother was to be denied your kin, country, and identity. To lose your mother was to forget your past.” In the novel, Vitória confronts not only the initial loss of her mother due to historical circumstances—leading her to construct an imagined narrative in which reconciliation seemed possible—but also her mother's rejection when she seeks affective reconnection. Essentially, she experiences the loss of her mother twice. This complicates Hartman's assertion for Vitória, as her mother is not merely lost but actively refuses to be found. Since reconciliation is denied, the process of reconnecting with her family, homeland, and identity thus becomes even more painful for Vitória.

Thus, the novel undermines any romanticized and direct genealogical reconstruction by highlighting how women perpetuated violence against each other, and maternal love was shattered by the brutality inflicted upon the maternal body.³³¹ *Essa dama bate bué* ultimately depicts the myriad violences of colonial and civil wars—family disownment, imprisonment, torture, hunger, and sexual abuse—as well as the often unspoken and silenced forms of violence, including those inflicted by women on other women. This is exemplified by figures like Romena, who maintains a privileged life in Luanda and showing no solidarity towards the impoverished women around her, and Juliana, who lacks gender solidarity toward Rosa. Furthermore, Vitória's narrative illustrates how the violence of war is perpetuated on the children of these female combatants. As the protagonist soon realizes, “com atenção dissimulada, Vitória observa

³³¹ In her PhD dissertation, Liz Almeida (2024, 259) examines the relationships among female characters in Monteiro's novel through the concept of “*dororidade*.” This neologism, coined by Afro-Brazilian activist and philosopher Vilma Piedade, combines ‘*sororidade*’ (sisterhood) and ‘*dor*’ (pain) to underscore the bond among Black women based on shared pain. *Essa dama bate bué* is a narrative permeated by pain, stemming from the protagonist's lack of affective memories with her mother and the disruption of women's memories due to colonial and patriarchal violence.

toda a mulher que aparente ter a mais ínfima semelhança com o retrato da mãe, mas o que encontra são mulheres transformadas em ruínas pela guerra” (Monteiro 2018, 200).³³² If, on the one hand, Vitória’s female genealogy represents a struggle against the erasure of her mother’s memory, on the other hand, it signifies a profound disruption of the conventional reinterpretation of affective family bonds, probing the extent to which colonial and decolonization violence have permeated the psychic and affective lives of both mother and daughter. This exploration culminates in a profound and potentially enduring separation between them.³³³

Proposing an ending that diverges from any romanticized or stereotypical resolution, Monteiro reveals the intricacies of interconnectedness and relationality in the aftermath of conflicts. The narrative lays bare the profound ruptures and contradictions within these relationships. The political experiences shared by the characters do not revive memories of affection, companionship, the projected and shared utopia, or the common enemy to be defeated; instead, they bring forth pain, conflicts, ambiguous choices, betrayals, and internal violence. Despite generational gaps, Vitória’s quest also marks a significant moment for all the women she encounters. As noted by Iolanda Vasile (2021, 247), the stories recounted by her mother’s companions serve as testimony. These women find in Vitória the attentive interlocutor needed to pass on their memories and fulfil Vitória’s vulnerable memory. In doing so, the weight of the past is partially alleviated through oral testimony. Through this ‘promiscuous’ female genealogy, Vitória establishes a complex connection not only with her mother and the past but also with her Angolan roots, providing multifaceted insights informed by situated and specific female perspectives amidst the turbulent recent history of the country. Juliana’s conclusive assertion underscores the plurality of these insights and memories, collectively revealing the impossibility of a linear reconstruction of the past and the present:

³³² “With covert attention, Victoria observes every woman who appears to bear the slightest resemblance to her mother’s portrait, but what she finds are women turned into ruins by the war” (my translation).

³³³ As explored in other novels within the corpus, *Essa dama bate bué* also addresses the themes of diasporic spectrality and limbo identity. Towards the conclusion of the novel, exhausted from waiting for a connection that appears increasingly unlikely, Vitória comes to the realization that she has lost any sense of returning home. The limbo state thus becomes her newfound space: “Fecha os olhos e imagina-se fora daquela tenda, do Huambo e de Angola. Ironicamente, não sabe para onde ir. Deixa-se então a pairar por cima dos escombros da casa incendiada, como se estivesse no limbo entre duas vidas. Para ela, a vida tinha-se tor nado um embaraço” [She closes her eyes and imagines herself outside that tent, outside Huambo and Angola. Ironically, she doesn’t know where to go. So she leaves herself hovering above the rubble of the burnt-out house, as if she were in limbo between two lives. For her, life had become an embarrassment] (Monteiro 2018, 182).

Vitória cai de joelhos em frente de Juliana e deita-se no seu colo, abraçando-lhe as pernas. Entre soluços e lágrimas pergunta porque é que ela não lhe contou a verdade. – Qual delas meu amor? A da tua mãe, a minha, a da tua família, a que querias ouvir, a verdade do general... Qual delas? – questiona Juliana, para continuar de seguida. – A vida não se controla. Me apareceste aqui sei lá como. Aqui mesmo nesta casa. Achas mesmo que não ouvia o meu nome na rádio? Não queria acordar o passado. Depois contigo aqui, senti que, para limpar a minha culpa, tinha o dever de ajudar-te (Monteiro 2018, 205).³³⁴

At the outset of the narrative, Vitória's primary objective appears to be the recovery and reconnection with her mother, as the loss of her mother represents her deepest vulnerability concerning her body, memory, territoriality, and ancestry. Initially, her search lacks a conscious political or public dimension; Vitória's journey is solely focused on reclaiming and prioritizing the affective and relational aspects associated with her imagined mother. As such, it is the narrative itself that leads to this engaged dimension. Although Vitória does not explicitly discuss or critically examine the political ideas and commitments that shaped her mother's life, the novel's conclusion shifts the focus to encompass political, public, and ethical questions. The impossibility of reconnecting with her mother becomes symbolic of the broader challenge of reconnecting with the two countries to which Vitória struggles to belong. Thus, one can observe that Vitória's pursuit of her mother's memory inadvertently, yet incompletely, revives both Portuguese and Angolan memories.

According to Susana Pimenta (2022, 71), this novel portrays a narrative of survival—or more precisely, of the urgent existence of a *mestiço* identity within a post-imperial (Portugal/Europe) and a post- and decolonial space (Angola/Africa). It represents a decolonization of an identity that was problematically defined during the colonial times and is now reclaimed through a critical examination of these identities. Despite historical violence, *mestiçagem* is asserted as a crucial and critical aspect of the process of repairing and restoring Vitória's inner life. Vitória's embrace of her new identity arises from a gradual deconstruction of the fixed discourses surrounding the colonial legacy of *mestiço* and assimilated identities. She also challenges the rigidity and absolutism of national identities—Portuguese and Angolan, European and African—

³³⁴ “Vitória falls to her knees in front of Juliana and lies on her lap, hugging her legs. Between sobs and tears, she asks why she didn't tell her the truth. – Which one, my love? Your mum's, mine, your family's, the one you wanted to hear, the general's truth... Which one? – Juliana asks, only to continue. – Life can't be controlled. You came to me here, I don't know how. Right here in this house. Do you really think I didn't hear my name on the radio? I didn't want to bring up the past. Then, with you here, I felt that, in order to clear my guilt, I had a duty to help you” (my translation).

exposing them as constructed and critical concepts that always obscure a more complex underlying history. Through this process of deconstruction, she affirms her connection to a broader diasporic genealogy.

Thus, her diasporic identity construction also includes a critical examination of the ambiguity within her female genealogy. Vitória understands the violence inflicted upon the women in her life and, for this reason, tries to forgive the violence subsequently inflicted on her. By revisiting her story and the stories of the women in her family (and, indirectly, of Angola), Vitória seeks to break the cycle of violence through forgiveness, exemplified by the symbolic forgiveness of her mother's abandonment: "Sente dó da mãe. Queria pegar-lhe ao colo. Acariciá-la até que adormecesse e não mais se recordasse dos homens que a violaram e da poesia mórbida recitada pelo general Vindu enquanto a torturava" (Monteiro 2018, 204).³³⁵

To conclude, I return to the sentence that opens the novel: "Chamo-me Vitória Queiroz da Fonseca. Sou mulher. Sou negra" (Monteiro 2018, 9).³³⁶ Genealogy, gender, and race³³⁷ emerge as indispensable frameworks for comprehending Vitória's journey, which unfolds contrary to her initial hopes of reuniting with her mother and finding a sense of belonging in Angola. Instead, her journey evolves into a gradual assertion of a self-defined, conscious, and situated identity—one that is not imposed by violent colonial stereotypes, albeit no less painful. This identity, shaped amidst the backdrop of the double maternal loss, nonetheless points toward a potential future. Vitória's story does not reconcile a pacific homecoming—"como se reconstrói uma casa, vai reconstruir a sua vida. [...]. Não quer ficar ali. Também não é ali a sua casa" (Monteiro 2018, 202)³³⁸—, rather, it represents a journey of reconciliation with her ancestral vulnerabilities. In fact, Vitória's final aim is not to 'heal' her wounds but to comprehend them. Throughout her

³³⁵ "She feels sorry for her mum. She wanted to hold her. Caress her until she cried out and no longer remembered the men who raped her and the morbid poetry recited by General Vindu while he tortured her" (my translation).

³³⁶ "My name is Vitória Queiroz da Fonseca. I'm a woman. I'm black" (my translation).

³³⁷ To complicate her identity and the violence surrounding her, Vitória is not only a woman and a Black woman, but also a sexually dissident Black woman, a facet of her identity she has learned to conceal from her family and society. Although her relationship with Catarina is recounted through a memory of one of their sexual encounters, Vitória's sexual dissidence does not become an identitarian label; she does not describe herself as a lesbian, even though she reacts to Romena's homophobic comment about lesbian love. Monteiro's focus is not on finding definitive answers for Vitória but rather on allowing her protagonist to explore all possibilities within her identitarian quest. Vitória rejects any normative constraints, including sexual norms. However, this aspect of Vitória's identity is not deeply explored throughout the narrative. Instead, it remains an element that characterizes her as someone always 'becoming,' a woman in constant construction, a body open to the fluidity of multiple identity formations.

³³⁸ "Like rebuilding a house, she is going to rebuild her life. [...] She doesn't want to stay there. That's not her home either" (my translation).

journey, she learns how to ‘stay with her wounds.’ She embraces her scars, integrating them as memories of her journey and evidence of her existence in both countries’ history.

Identity served as both the starting point and the destination in Vitória’s journey. While in the opening chapters she asserts her genealogy, womanhood, and Blackness, the novel progresses to explore deeply into the regimes of history and memory, aiming to grasp the significance of these existential dimensions for women’s generations enduring the aftermath of prolonged oppression. Despite ending with few and tentative resolutions, the narrative nonetheless portrays a reclaiming of self-understanding and self-assertion: her struggle seeks to assert her deliberate choice to embrace a specific identity—that of being a Black woman with a specific ancestral history.

4.2.3 Skin Archaeologies: The Afrodescendant Afterlife of Slavery in Joaquim Arena’s *Debaixo da nossa pele*

In *Essa dama bate bué*, a centrifugal movement is depicted, moving from Portugal to Luanda and then to the ‘*Angola profunda*,’ establishing a new Afrodescendant literary trope of return that captures the complex identity construction of the Afrodescendant generation. In contrast, Joaquim Arena’s *Debaixo da nossa pele: uma viagem* explores similar themes, such as the deep connection between historical occlusions and identity formation, but employs an opposite, centripetal movement towards the ‘*Portugal profundo*’ to uncover hidden colonial histories. *Debaixo da nossa pele* is a multifaceted text that defies categorization within a single literary genre. It blends autobiography with fiction, essay with memoir, and historical research with travelogue. The primary narrative follows the protagonist’s journey (Arena himself, although never revealing himself as the author, resembles another possible narrator) from Lisbon to the Ribeira do Sado region, and finally to Lagos, in search of traces of the last enslaved communities and to track Leopoldina’s genealogy. The narrative broadens to encompass several subplots: the historical and artistic recognition of the lives of African and Afrodescendant characters overlooked by history, as well as the narrator’s family diasporic story from Cape Verde to Portugal and his personal quest for identity.

Before delving into the analysis of the text, it is essential to address the historical and geographical specificity which Arena explores. This pertains to the present-day Alentejan community along the Ribeira do Sado, particularly in the villages of Rio de Moinhos and São Romão. The descendants of this community originate from enslaved populations brought to the area in the 15th century to work the local lands. Portuguese

historian Isabel Castro Henriques dedicates recent critical attention to this community. In *Os “Pretos do Sado”: História e Memória de uma Comunidade Alentejana de Origem Africana (Séculos XV-XX)* (2020), Henriques’ research builds on the late 19th-century observations of philologist and archaeologist José Leite de Vasconcelos. Vasconcelos documented a community of African origin settled in the Alentejo region of the Sado River Valley. In 1920, he noted the various terms used to describe these ‘dark-skinned’ people: *Pretos do Sado*, *Carapinhas do Sado*, *Atravessadiços*, and *Mulatos do Sado*.

Henriques’ research begins with the following observation: “os conhecimentos de que dispomos caracterizam-se pela fragilidade, pelo silêncio, pela grande ausência de informações, reflectindo o desinteresse perante esta comunidade, revelador de uma desvalorização do Africano que marcou profundamente o contexto ideológico português ao longo dos tempos” (Henriques 2020, 16).³³⁹ Starting from the documentary scarcity and limited knowledge available, Henriques attempts to reconstruct the history of this community through alternative documentation and oral histories and traditions. She suggests that the initial settlement of enslaved Africans in the Ribeira do Sado occurred at the end of the 15th century, following the first landing in Lagos in 1444 and the subsequent distribution of enslaved individuals towards the Alcácer do Sal area. According to Henriques, the enslaved population did not form a cohesive community but was instead dispersed regionally across various forced labour sites—such as *herdades*, *quintas*, *hortas*, and *pomares*—until the late 18th century. Henriques (2020, 133) emphasises that, beginning with the historical period when Pombaline legislation addressed the gradual abolition of slavery—specifically, between the 1761 prohibition on the importation of slaves into Portugal and the 1773 Lei do Ventre Livre—the existing community of 15th-century slave descendants was strengthened by new groups who settled in the region. This was facilitated by the influx of escaped slaves, *libertos*, and *alforriados* who settled along the left bank of the Sado River. Henriques shows that this area, scarcely populated by whites, served as a safe space for escaping slaves, primarily from southern Portugal and the interior regions of the Alentejo, allowing them to join the existing *mestiço* communities.³⁴⁰

³³⁹ “The knowledge we have is characterised by fragility, silence and a great lack of information, reflecting a lack of interest in this community, revealing a devaluation of Africans that has profoundly marked the Portuguese ideological context over the years” (my translation).

³⁴⁰ The history of *mestiçagem* within this community is closely intertwined with the abolitionist period. During this time, the gradual decline in the importation of enslaved individuals into Portugal led landowners to increasingly compel the reproduction of enslaved women, including through interracial relationships, to bolster the labour force (Henriques 2020, 129).

In fact, at the end of the 18th century, rice cultivation began to emerge as a means of subsistence for free Afrodescendant populations. Castro Henriques observes that by the end of the 19th century, the consolidation of this community coincided with a gradual ‘loss’ of African cultural specificities. Previously, these specificities had been evident in the cultural and religious syncretism fostered by various Black *confrarias* and *irmandades*. This ‘loss’ contributed to the community’s evolving identification as an ‘Alentejan community.’ While the culture of the Ribeira do Sado is now largely indistinguishable from Alentejano culture, remnants of its African heritage can still be seen in topography, the material culture of the region (such as traditional huts), and the cultural and poetic memory preserved in the oral traditions of the famous *Cancioneiro da Ribeira do Sado* or *Cancioneiro Popular do Alcácer do Sal*.

While Isabel Castro Henriques provides depth and historiographical complexity to the communities of the Sado Valley, Joaquim Arena’s work builds on this historicity and combines it with literary creation and reinvention. Arena explores the ‘absence’ surrounding this ‘lost folk’ and seeks to reimagine the connection their present-day descendants appear to have lost with their ancestry tied to the legacy of slavery.

While Arena’s book echoes 19th-century Garrett literature, it situates itself within the contemporary historical, cultural, and identitarian research endeavours of Afropean movements, as well as recent Afro-Portuguese historiographic research. In this section, I argue for the pivotal role played by Arena’s text in embedding Portugal and Afrodescendant history and experiences within the broader Afropean critical debate. I also demonstrate how the precarious lives of enslaved people, evoked through Arena’s fictional reworking of history, remain concerns for Afrodescendant generations grappling with the contemporary “afterlife of slavery” (Hartman 2007). Much like Monteiro’s novel, Arena’s work delves beneath the surface of recent history, uncovering how the historical ‘absences’ of Portugal’s slavery past continue to resonate in the characters’ identity formation. This reveals that unaddressed and uninvestigated memory can become another form of vulnerability to contemporary violence for the new generation.

It is significant that *Debaixo da nossa pele* opens at an academic conference addressing the ‘Black presence’ in Lisbon, where the protagonist is invited as a token representative of “uma das minorias que habita esta cidade branca” (Arena 2017, 14).³⁴¹ The protagonist-narrator is captivated by Leopoldina, a retired school teacher, who discusses the African and Afrodescendant history of the city. During a later stroll in the

³⁴¹ “One of the minorities that inhabit this white city” (my translation).

Jardim Tropical, she reveals that she is a descendant of a former community of slaves from the Sado Valley region. The protagonist discloses that he has recently returned from Cape Verde, his native country, and finds himself “numa espécie de balanço da particular trajetória de uma família de imigrantes cabo-verdianos” (Arena 2017, 14).³⁴² This identity turmoil coincides with that of Leopoldina, who shares with the narrator her own fragmented genealogy: “Mostra-me um conjunto de nomes, datas de nascimento, óbitos, casais, filhos, netos, bisnetos, trinetos, numa ramificação cuja origem e o final acabam, por vezes, num enigmático ponto de interrogação” (Arena 2017, 33).³⁴³ In the process of exploring her origins, Leopoldina suffers a cerebrovascular accident, leaving her unable to speak and, consequently, unable to share her memories. As her final wish, she asks the protagonist to travel to São Romão, her birthplace, as a farewell to her roots. The final journey of Leopoldina coincides with the protagonist’s own journey into his story and an unknown history of the country.

From the outset, we understand the significance of the protagonist’s journey: it is a personal, philosophical, cultural, artistic, and identitarian exploration of a Cape Verdean reflecting on his diasporic family’s trajectory in Portugal: “Finalmente, nesta zona antiga da cidade começara também, por essa altura, outra metamorfose: uma família que, a pouco a pouco, se vai transformando em novos portugueses. As raízes de uma vaga obscura portugalidade, que irá criar em nós a ilusão de uma aventura extraordinariamente bem-sucedida. Na verdade, o mundo não muda. Nós é que mudamos” (Arena 2017, 67).³⁴⁴ This journey encapsulates the history of his country and intersects with the broader history of the global miscegenation and Black diaspora resulting from the Atlantic slave trade. This exploration intersects the biographical events and family genealogies of the protagonist and Leopoldina, as well as the search for similar connections in the histories of both notable and anonymous African figures forgotten by the Western culture, such as the Black figures in the painting “Chafariz d’El Rei,” Afro-British Dido Elizabeth Belle, the roman athlete Gaius Appuleius Diocles, Abraham Petrovitch Gannibal, Alexandre Dumas, Siríaco, and Andresa do Nascimento, among many other characters. Thus, the

³⁴² “In a kind of balance of the particular trajectory of a family of Cape Verdean immigrants” (my translation).

³⁴³ “She shows me a set of names, dates of birth, deaths, couples, children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, great-great-grandchildren, in a branch whose origin and end sometimes end in an enigmatic question mark” (my translation).

³⁴⁴ “Finally, in this old part of the city, another metamorphosis also began at that time: a family that, little by little, became the new Portuguese. The roots of an obscure Portugueseness that will create in us the illusion of an extraordinarily successful adventure. In fact, the world doesn’t change. We’re the ones who change” (my translation).

book aligns with a recent trend in critical studies aimed at reinterpreting Europe through the embodied experiences of diaspora subjectivities.

African Europeans: An Untold History (2020) by historian Olivette Otele is a recent example of an extensive endeavour of Afrodescendant historiography in Europe. However, it is notable that Otele's work does not mention the histories, figures, or experiences of Afro-Portuguese individuals, despite focusing on the Portuguese empire's predominant role in the transatlantic slave trade. This emphasis highlights the empire's pivotal role in the violent construction of a racialized modernity based on exploitable racial capital. Paradoxically, it overshadows the stories of dispossession, loss, resistance, community, beauty, and love experienced by Afro-Portuguese people over the centuries up to the present day. This omission reflects the tendency to regard Portugal as a peripheral historical and cultural entity compared to the rest of Europe, despite its significant influence in shaping colonial ideology in the Western world. Moreover, this tendency neglects the importance of Afro-Portuguese historiography, which is crucial for highlighting figures who, despite their marginalization, help us understand how the slave and colonial past continues to shape identity construction and, more importantly, the right to citizenship in Portugal.

While the Portuguese empire often remains the focal point of critical attention, Arena's work shifts this focus to the subjectivities that lived under this colonial regime and whose lives were shaped by this historical contact. Critics such as Calafate Ribeiro (2020a; 2020b) praise *Debaixo da nossa pele* for reconnecting—from the inside out—a broader Afropean/African European cartography. However, I argue that the opposite movement, from the outside in, is equally important. This movement aims to deconstruct the exceptionalism, or the 'Atlantic exception' created by Luso-tropicalist ideology, as Roberto Vecchi argues (2010), which Portugal has perpetuated over the centuries. This exceptionalism has rendered parts of its history invisible, particularly the histories of African and Afrodescendant communities. By grouping the lives of certain populations under a single, unifying category such as the 'empire,' we can see how exceptionalism masks specific and complex contexts that need to be recounted to reveal their current developments. Understanding these contexts allows for an analysis of the intersections and fractures in historical accounts and cultural representations. It also facilitates the study of how local trajectories intersect with international ones. Deconstructing exceptionalism involves examining the tensions between what has been forgotten and marginalized and how history is officially presented and handed down.

In other words, Arena's journey goes beyond merely 'mapping' the Afrodescendant presence in Portugal. It probes deeper into questions of identity, citizenship, community, and human rights, uncovering the real quest 'under the skin' of the country. His text deconstructs both the notion of Portuguese colonial exceptionalism and connects it to a broader system of oppression created by the West, despite irreducible differences. In addition, the text focuses not only on notable or well-known figures but also on the 'small lives' of African and Afrodescendant communities in Portugal and the diaspora. It reveals the importance and beauty of these lives despite the pervasive silence—almost naturalized—surrounding their existence in history, both within and outside of Portugal.

In *Afropean: Notes from Black Europe* (2019), Johnny Pitts concludes his journey in Lisbon by visiting Cova da Moura, which he provocatively describes as “a European favela” (Pitts 2019, 354). Observing a state of shared precarity for a part of the Afrodescendant Portuguese population, Pitts reflects on the country's recent past under the Salazar regime, noting that Salazar once claimed, “happy countries have no history” (Pitts 2019, 344). The dictator understood that erasing historical memory was a means to perpetuate oppression and discrimination against specific segments of the population. In contrast, contemporary Afrodescendant movements in Portugal assert that antiracist efforts must involve the reappropriation of lost historical memory. It is within this context that I read Arena's book, viewing it as a form of memory reappropriation crucial for uncovering the recollections and testimonies of lives, traumas, and fleeting moments of beauty that historical archives have omitted and concealed.

Following the two intertwined plots, the narrator makes it clear that pursuing the traces of colonial dispossession and racial slavery in that region is akin to chasing a history made of nothing, as exemplified by the visit of São Romão's graveyard:

O meu desejo de encontrar sepulturas que possam evocar um elemento do tempo da escravatura esbarra num portão de ferro e numa etérea tranquilidade de jardim esquecido. Meia dúzia de cedros montam uma espécie de guarda de honra, aumentando o sentimento de abandono e de precariedade que envolve todo este conjunto. Os mortos, independentemente da cor da sua pele, parecem definitivamente esquecidos (Arena 2017, 150).³⁴⁵

³⁴⁵ “My desire to find graves that might evoke an element from the time of slavery comes up against an iron gate and the ethereal tranquillity of a forgotten garden. Half a dozen cedar trees stand as a kind of guard of honour, adding to the feeling of abandonment and precariousness that surrounds the whole complex. The dead, whatever the colour of their skin, seem to have been forgotten for good” (my translation).

To elucidate this ‘history made of nothing,’ it is insightful to compare Arena’s journey with a similar quest in a different geography. In *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*, Saidiya Hartman travels from New York to Ghana in search of traces of slave communities and the popular memory of slavery. Despite the geographical and contextual differences, the outcomes of both quests are strikingly similar. During her visits to the former slave dungeons at Cape Coast Castle, Hartman realizes that the only truth emerging from this ‘place of trauma’ is that the slaves “were gone” (Hartman 2007, 101). In other words, such places of trauma can only express loss, not repair it. Hartman’s restlessness centres on the perception of slavery as a temporality that extends beyond the past, persisting into the present through the current “ongoing crisis of citizenship” (Hartman 2007, 100) for the Afrodescendant population. The author’s fervent effort to uncover traces of slave life seeks to address the pervasive sense—echoed also in the Portuguese context by Grada Kilomba in *Plantation Memories*—of being an integral part of a present and future still marred by slavery: “The stories we tell about *what happened then*, the correspondences we discern between today and times past, and the ethical and political stakes of these stories redound in the present. If slavery feels proximate rather than remote and freedom seems increasingly elusive, this has everything to do with our own dark times. If the ghost of slavery still haunts our present, it is because we are still looking for an exit from the prison” (Hartman 2007, 100).

This restlessness also accompanies Arena throughout his journey, as he realizes the impossibility of reconstructing and repairing the lost lives of the slaves and Black population of the Sado. The absent, the void, the *residuum*, and the fragment serve as the only silent interlocutors between the past and present of the Afrodescendant community. Thus, literature, as both a critical and imaginative tool, becomes a means through which Arena attempts to restore their inner lives despite enduring oppression: “Tento compreender como pode alguém mergulhar no rio da liberdade quando partes do corpo permanecem ainda de fora. Quero saber qual o efeito da longa noite de cativo sobre a geração liberta e o que os distinguia dos homens e das mulheres de hoje. Sobretudo, se viviam a plenitude do Sol ou se sobre ele restava algumas nuvens cinzentas, enquanto empreendiam essas longa viagem social; o que estava, afinal, presente e ausente no seu pensamento” (Arena 2017, 165).³⁴⁶

³⁴⁶ “I’m trying to understand how someone can dive into the river of freedom when parts of their body are still outside. I want to know what effect the long night of captivity had on the freed generation and what distinguished them from the men and women of today. Above all, whether they experienced the fullness of

While visiting the villages of São Romão and Rio de Moinhos, instead of direct evidences of the former enslaved people, Arena finds their legacies inscribed in the bodies of their descendants. This is exemplified by Etelvina, in whom he finds “na cor da sua pele, no seu cabelo, nas suas feições trigueiras, no silêncio do olhar, toda a história da antiga freguesia de São Romão do Sádão. Vejo os negros que aqui nasceram, viveram, trabalharam e morreram. Vejo-a como a prova viva do passado da aldeia” (Arena 2017, 148).³⁴⁷ The same legacy marks Efrigénia, who “tem os olhos cor de âmbar das caboverdianas da ilha do Fogo [...]. Imagino a cadeia da mestiçagem que chega até ela. A imperiosa conjugação de sangues que envolve este povo obscuro do vale” (Arena 2017, 151).³⁴⁸ Although these clear marks, it is surprising that the inhabitants either disown or, as in the case of Efrigénia, even deny the history of the enslaved people of the Sado valley. Efrigénia “responde com a certeza tranquila de quem não precisa de dados históricos, que *isso* nunca aconteceu na aldeia. Os daqui foram sempre brancos, ponto final” (Arena 2017, 151).³⁴⁹ As a consequence, the narrative reflection then turns to this collective process of ‘forgetting’ as a mechanism to ‘rectify’ a memory marked by disdain for their slave legacies—a past characterized by humility and pain, destined for public oblivion. As Arena (2017, 152) writes, “a defesa da identidade, é sabido, carrega sempre o risco de um conflito com o resto do mundo.”³⁵⁰

Similar to Arena’s reflections, historian Isabel Castro Henriques also notes that in the collective memory of the villages of Rio de Moinhos and São Romão, there persists a sense of shame and repudiation, coupled with a tendency to forget their heritage as descendants of enslaved communities: “O juízo de valor em relação à gente negra, toda certamente mestiça, vai no sentido claro da sua desvalorização” (Henriques 2020, 169).³⁵¹ Henriques argues that this denial of the past arises from a history of systematic discrimination and marginalization of these villages by neighbouring towns, such as

the sun or whether there were a few grey clouds above it as they embarked on these long social journeys; what was ultimately present and absent in their thinking” (my translation).

³⁴⁷ “In the colour of her skin, in her hair, in her shaggy features, in the silence of her gaze, all the history of the ancient parish of São Romão do Sádão. I see the black people who were born, lived, worked and died here. I see her as living proof of the village’s past” (my translation).

³⁴⁸ “Has the amber-coloured eyes of the Cape Verdean women from the island of Fogo [...]. I imagine the chain of *mestiçagem* that reaches her. The imperious combination of bloods that surrounds this obscure people of the valley” (my translation).

³⁴⁹ “Replies with the calm certainty of someone who doesn’t need historical evidence that *this* has never happened in the village. The locals have always been white, full stop” (my translation).

³⁵⁰ “The defence of identity, as is known, always carries the risk of conflict with the rest of the world” (my translation).

³⁵¹ “The value judgement towards black people, all of whom are certainly mestizos, is clearly aimed at devaluing them” (my translation).

Torrão. Furthermore, in the mid-19th century, driven by colonial scientific trends and violent ethnographic studies, these populations were treated as subjects for experiments aimed at examining their ‘Black characteristics’ and the ‘genetic’ relationship between the Portuguese and Africans (Henriques 2020, 170).³⁵² Cataria Albuquerque, a primary school teacher in Rio de Moinhos who dedicated much of her work to raising awareness and valuing the community’s ancestral heritage, denounces the current degrading practice of treating these villages as ‘zoological gardens’ for the ‘scientific’ purpose of tracing specific lineages through the somatic traits of the inhabitants. As a consequence, Albuquerque (in Henriques 2020, 171) asserts that “o lado intelectual desta gente nunca foi explorado, nunca os deixaram desenvolver essas capacidades.”³⁵³

To reclaim this identity from its negative historical associations, Arena weaves a rich tapestry of Afro-diasporic images, stories, and myths tied to the small villages along the Sado River. These fictionalized memories uncover the lives of former enslaved people, servants, manor houses, and mixed-race families, shedding light on the enduring impact of slavery, colonialism, and decolonization. At the same time, they bring forth stories of resistance, familial bonds, and community building, revealing the inner beauty and resilience of these often neglected communities.

By evoking a broader diasporic history spanning Portugal and Europe from the 15th century to the formation of Cape Verdean communities in the 1960s in Portugal, the character/narrator traces his ancestry within this larger narrative of displacement. He recounts the disruption of his family ties, explaining that his mother agreed to marry another man in Portugal to help her raise her children. The character’s story is subsequently marked by an early displacement to Lisbon and a difficult, painful relationship with his stepfather, who eventually dies from alcohol addiction. In contrast, his relationship with his mother is characterized by memory vulnerability—both hers, as her distance from Cape Verde results in a life of constant nostalgic longing for home, and his, as he grapples with an identity reconfiguration while investigating the past of his community: “Vivemos aqui os dois, como derradeiras personagens de uma história: ela

³⁵² The collective memory of the city of Rio de Moinhos is marked by the humiliation and violence experienced by local inhabitants during the 1940s *Exposição do Mundo Português*. These individuals were removed from the fields and detained in Alcácer, where they were subjected to stripings, examinations, and studies before being returned to the labour hubs (Nunes in Henriques 2020, 173). Additionally, the documentary *As Jóias Negras do Império* by Anabela Saint-Maurice recounts instances where state doctors conducted unauthorized examinations of hair and scalp, without prior notice or consent from the individuals involved.

³⁵³ “The intellectual side of these people has never been explored, they’ve never been allowed to develop these capacities” (my translation).

no outono do seu fôlego, eu a meio de um caminho ainda por definir” (Arena 2017, 205).³⁵⁴ The characteristics of diasporic family disruption, which I have previously analysed in other novels, are also present in *Debaixo da nossa pele*, situating these issues within a Cape Verdean perspective. These features include the melancholic dimension within the diaspora; cultural renegotiation and language loss; the issue of *mestiçagem* as a limbo identity; the motif of the diasporic ghost chasing a sense of belonging; and, finally, the dramatic figure of the *mestiço*, which the character embodies. Historically, this figure represents both the oppressor and the oppressed, particularly considering the involvement of *mestiços* in the transatlantic slave trade.³⁵⁵ Additionally, the book examines how identity categories such as ‘new Portuguese,’ associated with the new generations born or raised in Portugal, are problematically connected, blended, and simplified through another category, that of “novos *imigrantes* forçados” (Arena 2017, 275).³⁵⁶ Arena’s work also addresses the discourse surrounding Blackness and whiteness in contemporary Portugal, as well as racism and anti-racism, highlighting both possibilities and ambiguities. It explores the dangers of stereotyping, which traps individuals in reductive identities, and denounces prejudices rooted in a persistent colonial mentality. Furthermore, the text critiques the fallacy of colonial assimilationism and warns against the current risk of perpetuating post-assimilationism as a citizenship policy. This policy is based on systemic inequalities and demands cultural erasure to create a monolithic sense of Portuguese identity.

By tracing the genealogy of his own family spread across the globe, as well as that of Leopoldina dispersed by slavery, the character evokes scattered lives and fragmented families, encompassing horrors and beauties, all interconnected through devaluation, discrimination, and prejudice. These lives reflect historical and intercontinental movements of populations, whether forcibly transported or involved in diasporic circuits, where the concealed consequences of slavery and colonialism continue to result, in the majority of cases, in abandonment, poverty, and lack of opportunities. Arena’s text skilfully weaves together the hidden stories of various Afrodescendant characters, groups, and communities, giving them dignity and significant relevance in Portuguese literature.

³⁵⁴ “We’re both living here, like the final characters in a story: she in the autumn of her breath, me in the middle of a path that has yet to be defined” (my translation).

³⁵⁵ Arena dedicates a specific attention on this issue in the book: “Basta recuarmos no tempo para encontrar a nossa indelével marca na infâmia que é o tráfico negreiro, na figura dos últimos capitães que lucraram com o negócio, como renegados do avanço civilizacional” [We only have to go back in time to find our indelible mark in the infamy that is the slave trade, in the figure of the last captains who profited from the business, as renegades of the advance of civilisation] (Arena 2017, 154).

³⁵⁶ “New forced immigrants” (my translation).

Their lives and stories embody experiences and knowledge that have been excluded from national narratives. Their paths and struggles both represent and expose the slave and colonial violence that shaped the foundations of modern Portugal and Europe.

Challenging the linear concept of time in Western modernity, the protagonist's journey ultimately takes him back to where it all began: Lagos, where the first 230 slaves arrived in Portugal on August 7, 1444. Once again disturbed by the absence and oblivion surrounding the first enslaved individuals—both in the exhibition at the Mercado de Escravos and along the Ribeira dos Touros, where the construction of a car park unearthed 155 slave skeletons mixed with domestic rubbish—the protagonist feels compelled to act. Before leaving the city, he returns to the museum and steals a bone from the display case, taking it as the only proof of the tangible existence of the enslaved in the face of the country's deafening public amnesia. The bone's fragile texture becomes a tangible relic, a portal through times that reveals the shared vulnerability of captives across different eras. Through the use of imagination and fiction, this very bone brings the author closer to a fractured past. Suddenly, Leopoldina's ghost awakens: “O rumor do tempo, ficção onde cabem o brilho das asas de uma borboleta e uma galáxia, chega-me lentamente em forma de um poema perdido no espaço, acompanhado da imagem de Leopoldina com as irmãs e outros meninos cantando pela ribeira” (Arena 2017, 319-320).³⁵⁷

Thus, the title *Debaixo da nossa pele* evokes a double meaning. First, skin is portrayed as a site of vulnerability, or else, vulnerability as “a question of skin” (Cavarero 2016, 158). Second, in the text, skin is both corporeal and material as it is and symbolic and figurative, linked to the historical, social, cultural, and mnemonic layers and constructs that have obscured the knowledge, ancestry, and cultures of Black Portuguese communities. ‘Digging’ beneath the skin carries this dual significance: it uncovers African and Afrodescendant histories beyond their suffering in an effort to restore their dignity as human beings. Simultaneously, it denounces the relational, intimate, subjective, and affective dimensions of coloniality, which transforms the legacy of the past into something falsely perceived as historically ‘distant’ and objectively describable, namely, colonialism. In reality, the ‘banal’ and ‘everyday’ relationship with coloniality naturalizes colonial violence, embedding it ‘under our skin’ so deeply that even its most tragic contemporary repercussions are minimized into a disconcerting denial: ‘*this* has never

³⁵⁷ “The rumour of time, a fiction in which the glow of a butterfly's wings and a galaxy change, comes to me slowly in the form of a poem lost in space, accompanied by the image of Leopoldina with her sisters and other children singing by the river” (my translation).

happened.’ The book confronts this naturalized denial by digging deeper into the memory vulnerability of a widespread Afrodescendant community. Rather than focusing on corporeal vulnerability, Arena’s text emphasizes the vulnerability of memory that remains hidden beneath the surface of institutional memory and official history. ‘Under the skin’ of the country lies a memory that the Afrodescendant generation seeks to reclaim through various strategies, particularly through literature. The title, therefore, reflects the act of re-appropriating a forgotten or suppressed memory to imbue historical vulnerability with new, emancipatory meaning in the present. The text moves beyond the normalization of the phrase ‘*this* has never happened,’ illustrating that, despite the lack of objective restitution, there is and always has been so much life and history of the black community throughout Portugal.

In *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman’s journey culminates in Gwolu, a small village in northern Ghana once situated along the slave route. Confronted yet again with the scarcity of evidence regarding the lives of ordinary enslaved individuals, Hartman listens to a group of girls singing a song that recounts the experiences of the enslaved and their diaspora across the Americas: “Their mothers and grandmothers had been unable to speak about Gwolu’s past, so the girls spoke for them” (Hartman 2007, 169). This reveals the intergenerational reclamation of the past as a contemporary effort to locate and ground identity formation in dialogue with historical narratives. As Hartman (2007, 168) writes, “old identities sometimes had to be jettisoned in order to invent new ones. Your life just might depend on this capacity for self-fashioning. Naming oneself anew was sometimes the price exacted by the practice of freedom.” Similarly, Arena’s novel concludes with a recollection of Leopoldina, her sisters, and other unnamed children singing by the river, ‘preserving’ the memory of five unknown ‘*negras do Sado*’: “*D’além vêm as cinco pretas, todas cinco da Guiné/Elas vêm de lá p’ra cá, elas vêm de lá p’ra cá/Dançando o saricoté, saricoté saricolá*” (Arena 2017, 320).³⁵⁸ If the previous generation forgot, as the journey along the Sado demonstrated, the narrator realizes that Leopoldina and her youngest descendants have not forgotten. Thus, their singing becomes part of a broader cultural and poetic memory³⁵⁹ among the descendants of enslaved people in the Sado region. They

³⁵⁸ “From over there come the five black women, all five from Guinea/They come from there to here, they come from there to here/Dancing the saricoté, saricoté saricolá” (my translation).

³⁵⁹ This ancestral memory is mostly preserved within the famous song *Ladrão do Sado*, also known as *Ladrão dos Pretos*. While official documents are scarce and the work of historical reconstruction relies on fragments of often unofficial documentation from private archives, it is the oral memory of the Sado communities, along with various legends and cantigas passed down orally, that preserves the traces of this Sado population. A central figure in this orally transmitted popular memory was Ananias Grosso, born in São Romão do Sado in 1918 and deceased in 2013, who collected memories and testimonies and composed

are the keepers of these fractured memories, re-signifying them through their identity formation, in which the memory of enslaved people is honoured as the foundation for building new memories and identities. The connection between the people of the Sado Valley and the narrator's 'creole Odyssey' is not defined by their shared suffering or endurance, but by the aspirations that fuelled their yearning for freedom. The true legacy left by the fugitive enslaved for the newest generation is the ongoing struggle to escape, resist, and defeat slavery in all its old and new forms.

4.3 Language II

4.3.1 Decolonial Grammars: Counter-Aesthetics as a Poethical Project

Walter Dignolo (2017, 16) asserts that border thinking represents the epistemic singularity of every decolonial project. By 'border thinking,' he refers to a specific form of 'migrant consciousness' that originates from and is situated within the 'Third World.'³⁶⁰ This concept is further explored through the diasporic routes of individuals dislocating from the 'Third World' to the 'First World.' Consequently, this border epistemology diverges from the territorial and imperial epistemology, which is based on theological and egological knowledge policies. Historically, these policies were grounded in the suppression of both sensibility and the geo-historical location of the body and all embodied experiences, enabling the Western theo-politics and geo-politics of knowledge to be proclaimed as universal. Border epistemologies thus constitute decolonial projects aimed at deconstructing the privileged 'vision' of Western epistemologies, which claim to be imbued with 'enlightened' reason in contrast to the 'Rest' of the world.

and recited verses to recall the African ancestry connected to these places. According to Isabel Castro Henriques (2020, 167), Ananias Grosso was a poet and spokesperson for this community. Indeed, Ananias also features as an important character and interlocutor in Arena's text. The *Ladrão dos Pretos* is a poetic genre with a musical and dialogic impromptu, usually sung during working hours in the rice field (and mainly sung by women) and it differs from the Alentejan singing style (Giacometti in Henriques 2020, 179) due to its Afrodescendant references. Through its verses, it expresses a long history of resistance against the darkness of colonial oppression and continues to resonate through the materiality of the voice, preserving the tangible cultural heritage of these communities: "A Ribeira do Sado/Ó Sado, Sadeta,/Meu Olhos não viram/Tanta gente preta/Quem quiser ver moças/Da cor do carvão/Vá dar um passeio/Até São Romão/Quando eu cheguei/À Ribeira do Sado/Vi lá uma preta/De beijo virado/Se tiver resposta/Responda-me à letra/De beijo virado/Vi lá uma preta" (Henriques 2020, 183).

³⁶⁰ I use the terms in inverted commas because they are categories constructed from a Western perspective. As Dignolo (2017, 19) explains, the 'Third World' was not a self-designation by its inhabitants but rather a label imposed by social groups, institutions, languages, and categories of thought from the 'First World.' This hierarchical relationship stems from the false myth that the development and modernization of 'Third World' countries could only occur under post-imperial conditions.

Mignolo (2017, 20) also highlights the distinction between the ‘sensitivity of the world’ and the ‘vision of the world.’ Inscribed within privileged Western epistemology, the concept of ‘vision’ has historically obscured affections, sensory experiences, and the corporeality of subjects, linking knowledge exclusively to ‘reason.’ Subjects who critically reflected ‘through their bodies’ on liberation from colonial oppression were themselves inscribed in and by modern/colonial languages. As a result, they needed to create categories of thought absent from the vocabularies of European political theory, economy, and culture. They had to contemplate the borders they inhabited—not the borders of nation-states, but the epistemic and ontological borders of the modern/colonial world. In other words, they needed to develop new decolonial grammars to express different conceptions, representations, and sensitivities of the world, even while using the languages imposed by colonial oppression, as seen in Latin America and in the African continent. The use, reuse, appropriation, misappropriation, mastication, devouring, and recreation of colonial languages have thus become tools for developing new grammars that articulate a different way of inhabiting both the border and the world. The new grammars created through border thinking are essential for decolonial reflection on the diverse spaces these bodies occupy. When these subjects write in modern, imperial Western languages (Spanish, English, French, German, Portuguese, or Italian), they do so with their bodies at the border. By reinventing language in this manner, they manifest their specific world sensitivity and attempt to restore what was stolen by colonial oppression.

What, then, is the connection between decolonial grammars and aesthetics in literature, particularly in the corpus under analysis?

In modern ideology, politics and aesthetics have been strictly separated, with aesthetics being associated with a purely contemplative realm through which the white subject, elevated to the status of a universal arbiter of aesthetic appreciation, determines the ‘formal’ laws of an ordered, known, and mapped Western world. This formalism has historically been used to construct and uphold racial hierarchies and, more in specific, racial regimes of representation. As a consequence, racial regimes of representation shape modern aesthetic grammars by deeply connecting Blackness and its potential representations to the sole realms of aberration, mistranslation, and dereliction. Thus, those who claim that an aesthetic project lacks an inherent theoretical framework, or that it exists without a deeper structure, merely perpetuate the modern aesthetic paradigm, which asserts that aesthetics cannot convey a political or theoretical program.

In contrast, the decolonial grammars I discuss challenge this assumption by asserting that in an anti-Black world shaped by colonial modernity, Blackness is first of all and always a radical critique of the very modern forms that render Black subjects unrepresentable outside colonial violence and deformation. Consequently, I argue that decolonial grammars based on embodied ‘border epistemologies’ function as counter-aesthetic projects that contest the aesthetics of modernity, where the Black subject can only exist as an aberration. In this sense, these grammars are ‘poethical’ projects—simultaneously political, ethical, practical, and poetic—because they work to re/de/compose new forms of representation and sensibility of the ‘border’ world affected by the historical wounds of modernity. They do not separate the aesthetic from the political; instead, they converge through political, ethical, practical, and poetic means to give ‘form and voice’ to what modernity has rendered radically impossible to represent: the inner life of historically oppressed subjects.

This focus on decolonial grammars aligns with the collective literary efforts of Black artists within the Luso-Afro-Brazilian diaspora, as defined by Almeida (2023, 68), which seek to restore the inwardness of Black individuals. These new grammars are crucial for expanding and developing modes of representation and narration that amplify the voices of those who have been relegated to perpetual objectification and denied self-representation due to colonial oppression.

The following sections will analyse how the three novels discussed in this chapter present ‘decolonial grammars’ through their alternative aesthetic construction. Specifically, the experimentation with language and the manipulation of literary genres serve as aesthetic tools to engage with memory vulnerabilities shaped by colonial history, racist violence, and the intergenerational transmission of trauma. By engaging with language and literary genres, these novels provide a distinct ‘voice’ to their characters—the children of the diaspora—countering the oppressive regimes of racial representation that affected their genealogies. I will argue that the misappropriation of the Portuguese language and traditional Western literary genres serves as a central concern in contrasting the historical racial accounts of injury linked to both bodily and enunciative vulnerability.

First, I will examine how Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida’s *As Telefones* reworks a specific literary genre of the diaspora—the telephone call—formulating a language that seeks to recreate the ‘idiosyncratic discourses’ affecting distant mothers and daughters within the diaspora as a consequence of prolonged colonial oppression. Next, through a linguistic analysis of Yara Nakahanda Monteiro’s *Essa dama bate bué*, I will explore how

the misappropriation and linguistic occupation of traditional Angolan languages—discouraged during colonialism and often rendered ‘mute’ for new generations—contribute to a critical revision of enunciative vulnerability produced by colonial language policies and transmitted by family memory. Finally, in Joaquim Arena’s *Debaixo da nossa pele*, I will highlight how the blending of literary genres, incorporating concepts such as ‘*escrevivência*’ and ‘critical fabulation,’ serves as a critical, methodological, and aesthetic approach in order to revisiting the violence inherent in the language of the colonial archive and attempting to get closer to the inner lives of both the enslaved and their descendants in Portugal.

4.3.2 Idiosyncratic Diasporic Discourses: Giving Voice to the Telephone

Beyond its important thematic innovation, which brings visibility to the inner and intimate dynamics of female diasporic relationships, *As Telefones* is a novel that demonstrates the importance of linguistic and literary genre processing in effectively narrating and conveying the profound experience of separation.

Synecdoche is the rhetorical figure that underpins the text, beginning with the title, which combines a feminine article with a noun normally marked as masculine. The objective is twofold: it generates a sense of strangeness and estrangement—feelings that the two women experience throughout their lives due to dislocation—since the feminine article creates an obvious grammatical disagreement with the masculine noun that follows. Additionally, it conveys a sense of physical transformation through the novel’s exploration of the Black diasporic female experience and genealogy, which is traced not through the physical body (which remains absent) but through the telephone—a symbolic fragment that gestures toward the broader concept of the ‘diasporic cyborg body.’ The neologism suggests that, in order to survive, mother and daughter must become ‘telephone-women,’ their corporeal absence re-embodied only through the voice transmitted through the device. The title serves both as a personification of the object-icon and, through synecdoche, as a symbiosis of the individual identities of mother and daughter into a specific diasporic ‘vocal identity.’ In this way, the aesthetic cohesion of the text aims to “tomar o outro pelo seu ouvido”³⁶¹ (Almeida 2020, 25), forming an ontological-grammatical foundation for this specific diasporic identity.

³⁶¹ “Catch the other by the ear” (my translation).

As Djamília Pereira de Almeida (2023, 79) stated, the book is an homage to the telephone call as the specific literary genre of the diaspora. For this reason, Almeida gives ‘materiality’ to the voices of this genre through specific aesthetic choices. *As Telefones* combines different voices and narrators, primarily through long monologues by Solange and her mother, Filomena, over the phone. These monologues are presented in alternating chapters, allowing the reader to hear only one voice during the calls and feel the separation, as the words of the other female interlocutor are deliberately omitted: “O fogo de Deus vai queimar isso tudo e daqui a muito pouco tempo está tudo bem, e vamos estar juntas, somos muitos a orar, filha, aqui já ninguém está a comer, estamos sempre a orar e vai passar tudo, filha, está bem? Pronto. Que vozinha é essa? Não chora, filha, senão a Mamã também vai chorar, tens de fazer força e ser forte, filha, que Deus gosta que a gente seja forte e vai tudo passar. Vai ficar tudo bem, está, filha, estás a ouvir?” (Almeida 2020, 45-46).³⁶²

The narration mainly focuses on Solange’s first-person reflections and thoughts on her relationship with Filomena, while the chapters featuring Filomena’s voice are presented in italics, depicting her phone conversations with a silent Solange. As in Almeida’s other novels, a third-person narrator appears throughout the narrative, interrupting these monologues to document Solange’s visit to Luanda to spend time with her mother during the holidays, Filomena’s trip to Lisbon to be with her daughter, and, more generally, to reconstruct—through internal focalization—the painful yearning for a mother-daughter relationship over the years. This third-person perspective reveals the feelings that the two women are unable to express to each other due to the estrangement caused by their separation.

There are practically no conventional external dialogues in the novel. The continuous shift of perspectives—the internalized gaze of each character, the gaze they project onto others, and the heterodiegetic narrator’s point of view—allows for a more complex representation of the mother and daughter by depicting their inner lives. In her critical reflection on the novel, Almeida (2023, 79) states that, beyond narrative strategies, the mother and daughter invent additional discursive conventions and patterns of conversation. These include silences, references, allusions, and half-truths. Almeida

³⁶² “God’s fire will burn it all away and in a very short time everything will be fine, and we’ll be together, there are many of us praying, child, no one is eating here anymore, we’re always praying and everything will pass, child, okay? There. What’s that little voice? Don’t cry, child, otherwise Mummy will cry too, you have to be brave and strong, child, because God likes us to be strong and everything will pass. It’s going to be all right, okay, daughter, are you listening?” (my translation).

refers to this discursive form as ‘idiosyncratic discourse’ or ‘paralactic,’ which is based on telephone speech (*parole*). These narrative and discursive strategies evolve into cohesive aesthetic approaches that prevent any stereotypical or superficial portrayal of the characters. As Coutinho points out (2022, 129), the aesthetic of the novel deconstructs any typification of the colonial ‘subaltern’ or the postcolonial ‘migrant,’ thereby questioning any form of identity polarization in favour of psychological and affective complexity. What follows is an example of this ‘idiosyncratic discourse’:

Agora, de vez em quando, do outro lado da linha, a voz de Filomena é triste. Deixou de fingir estar bem-disposta. Dou conta de que não sei como reagir. Ficamos as duas em silêncio. Ou neve para lá, chuviscos por cá, furacões, tornados, “vinte e sete Celsius”, “oitenta e seis Fahrenheit”, Donald Trump, “essa tal de senhora dona Theresa May” e uma receita de couve-flor gratinada. Costumo ligar-lhe apenas para a ouvir respirar. Ri por se saber ouvida, como se falasse a um pretendente. Deliciosamente envergonhada. Ouço o fumo do cigarro sair-lhe do nariz, “sabes, filha, ainda não te contei, deixei de fumar”. Talvez ela ouça o fumo sair do meu nariz. Quase consigo escutar o batimento do seu coração (Almeida 2021, 31).³⁶³

In addition to the narrative strategies, the sense of incompleteness is also conveyed through the specific arrangement of the plot on the page. As Margarida Rendeiro (2022c, 52) demonstrates, although it is a paginated narrative, on several pages the page number is deliberately omitted by the author. This suggests that the reader must undertake the same effort as Solange to piece together her story, making visible and even corporeal the sequence of a narrative that has suffered cuts and appears only spectrally: “The reconstruction of the sequence of pages becomes a metaphor for the reconstruction of links absent and lost in the process of identity-related (un)belonging within a decolonial project that is based in the affective experience of the diasporic body” (Rendeiro 2022c, 52).

All these poetic elements are employed to aesthetically anchor the novel’s central theme—the sensibility toward the absence of the physical body. Almeida’s aesthetic choices allow readers to ‘sense’ a way of experiencing the world through the diasporic separation of the two women. The use of the telephone call as a literary device—a genre

³⁶³ “Now and then, on the other end of the line, Filomena’s voice is sad. She’s stopped pretending to be in a good mood. I realise I don’t know how to react. We’re both silent. Or snow there, drizzle here, hurricanes, tornadoes, ‘twenty-seven Celsius,’ ‘eighty-six Fahrenheit,’ Donald Trump, ‘that lady Theresa May’ and a recipe for cauliflower au gratin. I often call her just to hear her breathe. She laughs at being heard, as if she’s talking to a suitor. Deliciously embarrassed. I hear cigarette smoke coming out of her nose, ‘you know, daughter, I haven’t told you yet, I’ve given up smoking.’ Maybe she hears the smoke coming out of my nose. I can almost hear her heartbeat” (my translation).

not yet explored in Portuguese fiction—aims to decolonize literary and artistic sensibilities. It challenges hegemonic perspectives, still shaped by the colonial experience, that diminish the complexity and painful history of the diaspora. In other words, the novel becomes an aesthetic exploration, through a decolonial literary genre, of the Black female Afro-diasporic experience and the trauma connected to dislocation. It also addresses the struggles related to the current coloniality of power that shapes both the physical and affective lives of Black women in the diaspora. *As Telefones* offers a new diasporic grammar that allows readers to understand and ‘feel’ the pain, longing, yearning, struggles, and love involved in transatlantic, colonial, post-imperial, and diasporic separation. Specifically, it provides the Black female diaspora with a language of its own, enabling a true interpretation of that experience from a situated and embodied ‘poetic’ standpoint.

By centring vocality on multiple levels—ontological, poetic, aesthetic, and formal—*As Telefones* challenges the Western literary canon, which traditionally relies on written forms of memory preservation and transmission. Instead, it embraces diasporic and African oral traditions as a means of preserving female memory heritage, particularly through the character of Filomena. Filomena endeavours to pass on Angolan traditions, stories, and fragmented memories to her daughter. This heritage is conveyed through the oral materiality of Filomena’s voice. In so doing, the novel “decolonises that experience from the principles of legitimacy and authority that are constructed by means of the grammar supplied by so-called western and European epistemology” (Rendeiro 2022c, 55). Filomena’s oral and ‘local’ grammar blends with Solange’s Portuguese tradition, and despite the inevitable clashes, a new grammar—a new ‘world-sensing’—is created. This decolonial grammar enables the literary restitution of the material voice of the inner and psychic lives of the two women within the diaspora. It highlights a long history of affective deprivation for Black women, but also demonstrates that, despite separation, Black women possess their own vocal strength to reclaim what was lost.

4.3.3 ‘Artivism’: Misappropriating Injuries through Linguistic Ancestry and Narrative Dissociation

Essa dama bate bué presents an alternative form of decolonial grammar by reintroducing Angolan ancestral and native languages, such as Umbundu and Kimbundu, into the novel’s aesthetic construction. This strategy aims to ‘occupy’ and transform the Portuguese language, which has historically obscured the ancestral memories of Vitória’s

genealogical line. By doing so, the novel disrupts canonical literary conventions and broadens Vitória's 'vocality,' providing her with new words and grammars to understand both her past and her present.

As argued in Chapter 2, the linguistic endeavour is a defining characteristic of contemporary Afrodescendant Portuguese literature. This strand has emerged as a 'dissident archive' (Di Eugenio, Biasio 2024) which encompasses the discussion of the relationship between the Portuguese language and the 'other' languages that the colonial world has limited, silenced, and oppressed. From the anticolonial struggles to the present day, the 'critical assimilation' (De Marchis 2020, 249) championed by significant figures such as Amílcar Cabral and José Craveirinha has evolved into a continuum of literary and linguistic practices and strategies aimed at perturbing European Portuguese in relation to African languages. One of these movement was initiated in Portugal by intellectuals in the 1970s such as António Cruz and continued by the recent *geração do bué* in Portugal, and is marked by a common internal processing of the language that both Africanizes and disrupts hegemonic Portuguese. This process forges also a common connection with other Portuguese-speaking countries (mainly Brazil and Lusophone Africa) by 'emptying' the concept of Lusophony of its meaning as a mythology and nostalgic dream of a 'unified community' of Portuguese-speaking peoples (Lourenço 1996, 162-163).

To analyse Monteiro's use of language in relation to the representation of memory vulnerability, I begin by referencing the *geração do bué* to which the author belongs. According to Susana Pimenta (2022, 64), *bué* is an Angolan word from Kimbundu (meaning 'a lot') that entered informal Portuguese in the 1970s. Paradoxically, through the frequent use of the word, Portugal has gradually erased its African origin from the country's linguistic memory. Although the term was officially registered in the 2001 *Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa Contemporânea* of the Academia das Ciências de Lisboa, coordinated by linguist João Malaca Casteleiro, it was Boss AC, a Portuguese singer of Cape Verdean origin and a pioneer of hip-hop in Portugal, who established the term as a linguistic landmark of Lisbon's suburban counter-culture through the success of his song "Bué de Rimas." The term *bué* evokes a generation (now in their 40s) that constitutes an urban body of multiple geographical origins. This generation represents the descendants of the African diaspora of the 1980s, who grew up in Portugal and contributed to a linguistic blending of various cultural identities within Portuguese territory.

This brief history of the term provides context for the title choice of Monteiro's novel. In an interview, Monteiro (in Wieser 2024, 73) states: "É interessante também partilhar que o título do livro, *Essa dama bate bué!*, foi uma tentativa de ocupação linguística, porque 'bué' é uma palavra angolana, e achei que seria interessante ter esse título num livro, porque traz uma parte da minha identidade."³⁶⁴ From its very title, the novel asserts a linguistic occupation as a form of reclamation against the erasure and appropriation of African cultural and linguistic aspects by Portugal, which often fails to acknowledge the ongoing contributions of African societies to Portugal's current mixed identity. This linguistic occupation thus serves as a space for reinforcing Vitória's identity on an aesthetic level. It acts as a means to counter historical enunciative injuries by misappropriating the colonial racial discrimination conveyed through linguistic repression. As a consequence, Angolan Portuguese evolves into an affective linguistic space, where Vitória signals yet another attempt at reclaiming her roots.

Nevertheless, this Afrodescendant process of linguistic occupation differs from various forms of 'calibanisation' (De Marchis 2022, 249)—including translingualism, critical linguistic assimilation, distortion, and hybridisation—employed by earlier generations of African authors such as Ungulani Ba Ka Khosa, Uanhenga Xitu, Luandino Vieira, Manuel Rui, and Mia Couto, among many others. These authors, who were among the last witnesses of the Portuguese colonial empire, tackled the issue of subjugation wrought by the imposition of the Portuguese language during colonialism. They created characters and linguistic strategies that not only revalorized local languages but also highlighted the perversity of assimilationist policies. Demonstrating great multilingual mastery, these authors 'played' with diverse languages to produce works with significant literary and political qualities, thereby affirming the cultural autonomy of their countries. In contrast, the *geração do bué* contends, in many cases, with a history of linguistic loss. The efforts of this generation often focus on recovering, studying, simulating, and recomposing a fragmented, or 'mute,' linguistic heritage. This heritage has been impacted not only by colonial history and its policies but also by the distancing effects of diaspora and, frequently, by estrangement from familial ancestral lineages.

In attempting to recompose a 'lost language,' Monteiro's integration of Angolan idioms with Portuguese can be likened to the concept of 'artivism.' According to Fernanda

³⁶⁴ "It's also interesting to share that the title of the book, *Essa dama bate bué!*, was an attempt at linguistic occupation, because 'bué' is an Angolan word, and I thought it would be interesting to have that title in a book, because it brings a part of my identity to life" (my translation).

Vilar (2022, 26), artivism refers to a type of politically engaged art that reinterprets the transmission of colonial memory through various media and platforms. Blending the words ‘art’ and ‘activism,’ the term was coined in the 1960s to recognize protests against the Vietnam War and the student and counter-culture movements. In the mid-1990s, with the advent of the Internet, artivism reemerged in critical discourse to illustrate not only political art practices but also to reevaluate the definitions of politics and art. Vilar (2022, 41) further states that the concept of the ‘third diaspora’ arises from this practice, referencing Goli Guerreiro to explain the cultural exchanges occurring in Atlantic geographies and the global South, primarily through online networks. These exchanges establish non-white and counter-hegemonic artistic repertoires in contemporary culture. Based on this perspective, Vilar situates her definition of artivism within the conceptual framework of postmemory, and states that “é um instrumento de descolonização do olhar e das artes, além de ser um terreno que inaugura novas possibilidades de debates a partir do olhar do sujeito que reclama sua visibilidade e reconhecimento. Vários filhos de pessoas providas de territórios antigamente colonizados fazem de sua arte um manifesto [...]”(Vilar 2022, 28).³⁶⁵

From an aesthetic perspective, interpreting Monteiro’s novel through the lens of artivism is particularly compelling. Through various artistic forms, including writing and the visual arts—as illustrated in figure 5³⁶⁶—the author persistently revisits colonial linguistic policies and the prohibitions these policies imposed on the use of native languages and their transmission to descendants.³⁶⁷ Monteiro reimagines these politics

³⁶⁵ “Is an instrument for decolonising the gaze and the arts, as well as being a ground that opens up new possibilities for debate based on the gaze of the subject who demands visibility and recognition. Many children of people from formerly colonised territories turn their art into a manifesto [...]” (my translation).

³⁶⁶ According to the artist, the Portuguese language served as a ‘technology’ in the construction of the Portuguese colonial project, leading to a ban on native Angolan languages such as Kimbundu. The image reproduced is part of *Kimbundamento*, Monteiro’s artistic project which aims to reclaim this language silenced by colonial oppression. Using stamps and ink, Monteiro ‘occupies’ pages of a Portuguese dictionary with words in Kimbundu. This act allows the erased and colonized language to regain its space, activate its symbolic memory, and be recognized for its contribution to the evolution of modern Portuguese. The aim of the project is to unsettle and lead the public to reflect on the policies of linguistic colonization and their consequences for new generations of Africans and Afrodescendants. Figure 5 exemplifies this artistic practice with the word ‘Mbundu.’ In the image, above the word ‘negro,’ the Kimbundu translation is stamped, aiming to erase the negative and pejorative meanings attributed to ‘negro’ in the Portuguese dictionary, such as ‘escravo,’ ‘o diabo,’ ‘maldito.’ At the 2024 edition of Fólio, the Óbidos International Literature Festival in Portugal, Monteiro’s art project evolved into a full-fledged exhibition/performance titled *Kimbundamento – Palavras dadas ao chão*. Dictionary pages and stone fragments stamped with Kimbundu words physically occupy the São Martinho Chapel, drawing attention to the violent link between linguistic politics and religion as instruments of colonial domination, while also reflecting on the potential for inner deconstruction through artistic practice.

³⁶⁷ As Giorgio De Marchis (2022, 246) states, colonial policies were characterized by a total disregard for local languages. Local expressions were portrayed as inferior, wrong, ugly, poor, and backward compared to Portuguese. Consequently, the colonial system prohibited African languages in public administration and

through her artistic endeavour to ‘bring voice’ to languages that have often become ‘mute’ to the children of the diaspora. Although Monteiro does not speak these languages, she artistically works to partially and incompletely recover them, integrating them fragmentarily into the text and blending them with Portuguese. The result is a language as complex as the recovery of its ancestral memory. This approach is not a philological restoration but rather an artistic-linguistic re/de/composition that imparts a specific aesthetic quality to her writing and arts.

cultural life, forcing the use of the colonizer’s language. De Marchis highlights that assimilation was one of the policies that most exacerbated division and discrimination in the colonies, with the mandatory use of Portuguese significantly contributing to these harmful policies. Between 1917 and 1961, a series of laws established Portuguese language proficiency as one of the five conditions for attaining assimilated status. For instance, Decree 77 of 1921, issued by the Provincial Governor of Angola, José Maria Mendes Ribeiro Norton de Matos, mandated the teaching of Portuguese in missions and prohibited the teaching of African languages. The *assimilados* were also compelled to abandon their African names and adopt Portuguese ones. The aim of enforcing Portuguese monolingualism in African countries was impracticable due to the lack of sufficient material conditions provided by colonial policies for the population to achieve a high level of linguistic competence. This created a diglossia where Portuguese became an instrument of alienation for the *assimilados* and of discrimination for the *indígenas*. Since most parts of the population could not achieve proficiency in Portuguese and therefore were not assimilated, they were excluded from civil rights, ensuring a potentially limitless labour pool. In this way, the colonial system implemented its policies of domination using Portuguese as a shield. Although assimilation was numerically limited, post-independence leaders chose, as Amílcar Cabral argued, to make Portuguese the official language of the five countries, seeing it as an instrument of liberation and national unity. The colonial system’s devaluation of African languages progressively reduced the number of their speakers, which led to an increase in Portuguese speakers in the post-independence period. However, this increase must contend with the centuries-old devaluation of local languages, which are still strongly affected by colonial prejudices and discriminated by parts of the population.

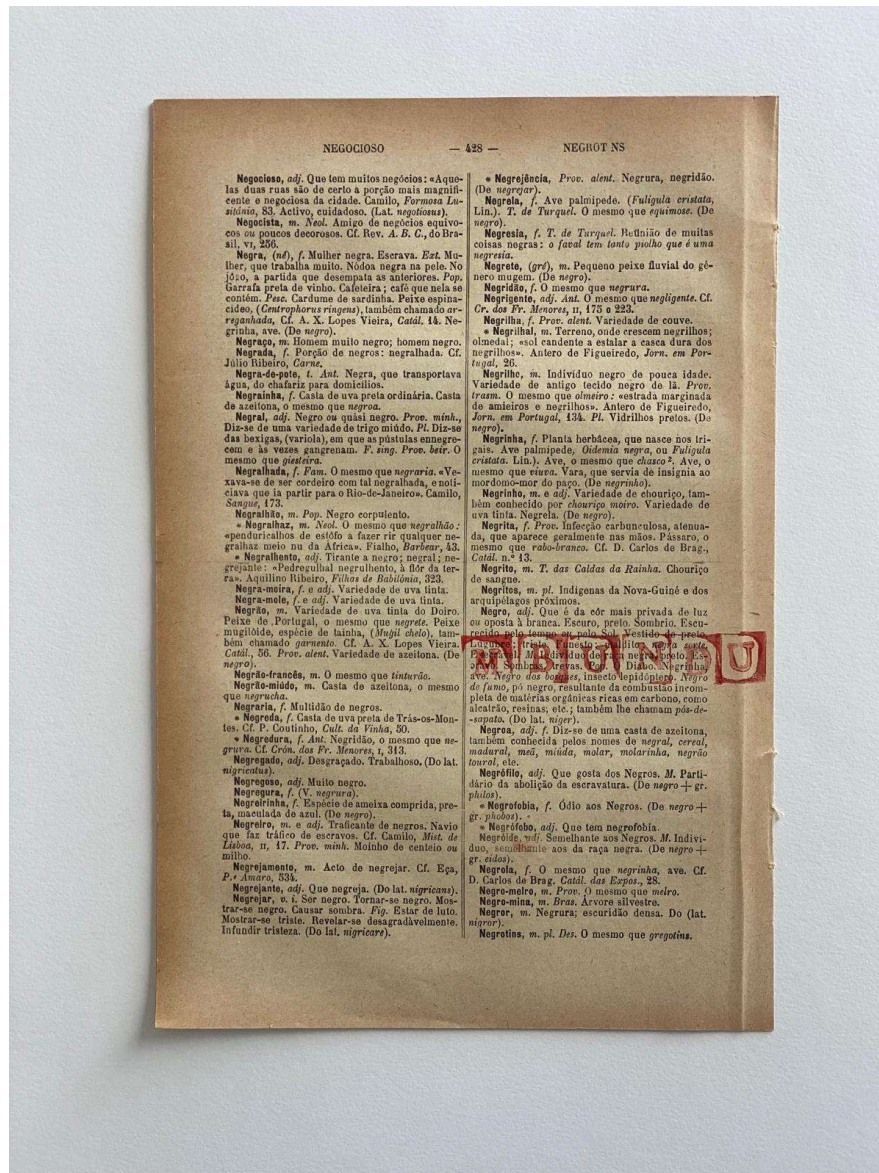


Figure 5 – Yara Nakahanda Monteiro, *Kimdundamento* | *Mbundu* (2024)

In *Essa dama bate bué*, Umbundu and Kimbundu are ‘mute languages’ also for Vitória. Her memory vulnerability is partly produced by a lack of connection to her ‘maternal’ language. Language, along with the body, is the first element that distances Vitória from her home country. While specific moments in the novel focus on the linguistic aspect of the Angolan Portuguese—such as the night out in Luanda with Katila, Romena’s daughter, when she teaches Vitória to add vowels to words ending in consonants—there is a general narrative dissociation between Vitória-narrator and Vitória-protagonist concerning the linguistic outset of the novel. The protagonist learns from other characters how to navigate the language, whereas the narrator already seems to know part of these languages, integrating them into the narration and dialogues. For instance, in the first chapters of the novel, Vitória, like an omniscient narrator, recounts

the life of her grandparents in Angola and their exile to Portugal. This narrative dissociation reflects how postmemory functions at a linguistic level, recreating and simulating a language that has been partially reconstructed by the non-witness/non-speaker. Thus, the language partially reappears while narrating that specific past: “O avô [...] via a implosão do nacionalismo como uma reviravolta insidiosa contro a serenidade colonial. No entanto, ficava pasmado com a attitude de Portugal: lavara as mãos. Parecia-lhe que não sabiam como resolver a grande *maka* que estava instalada” (Monteiro 2018, 11).³⁶⁸

An example of linguistic occupation in the novel follows. In this scene, Vitória recounts the conversation of the women in Huambo as they speculate on who might have set fire to Juliana’s house: “Não se compadecendo Mariquinhas, durante o funeral, juntou-se a mais duas *kuribotas*. Entre elas trocam probabilidades prováveis e improváveis. Vitória escuta-lhes a língua a trabalhar. Questionavam se tudo não teria sido feitiço de Pedro. Se teria sido ele a lançar o fogo. Podia ser *mulôji*. De outra mulher, que o fez fazer isso, acha Mariquinhas” (Monteiro 2018, 178).³⁶⁹

In analysing the use of language in the novel, Iolanda Vasile (2021, 248) refers to the concept of ‘cultural pluralism’ coined by Luís Kandjimbo. This concept highlights the need to include multiethnic and plurilingual works in the three constitutive segments of Angolan literature: oral texts, literary texts written in national languages, and literary texts written in Portuguese. Vasile introduces a fourth element in relation to Monteiro’s novel: the cultural pluralism developed within the Portuguese/Angolan diaspora. This additional dimension enriches the portrayal of Angola and its characters through a diasporic perspective, reclaiming the right to linguistic and aesthetic belonging despite dislocation.

Vitória’s effort to get closer to a ‘maternal’ language includes an unconscious work of deconstruction of assimilation also from a linguistic point of view. For example, Vitória reconstructs the marriage of António and Elisa through the words of the local population: “Com o casamento – e nas palavras do povo –, o avô António avançava a raça” (Monteiro 2018, 81).³⁷⁰ When recollecting Rosa’s birth and the discovery of her dark-skinned colour,

³⁶⁸ “Grandpa [...] saw the implosion of nationalism as an insidious blow against colonial serenity. However, he was astonished by Portugal’s attitude: it had washed its hands of the matter. It seemed to him that they didn’t know how to resolve the great *maka* that had been installed” (my translation).

³⁶⁹ “Mariquinhas was not sympathetic, and during the funeral, she joined two other *kuribotas*. They exchange probable and improbable probabilities. Vitória listened to their tongues working. They wondered if it had all been Pedro’s spell. If he had been the one to set the fire. It could have been *mulôji*. Of another woman, who made him do it, Mariquinhas thinks” (my translation).

³⁷⁰ “With the wedding – and in the words of the people – Grandpa António was advancing the race” (my translation).

the narrator reports António's frustration by stating that "ao contrário das expectativas, a primogénita não puxou o bom e branco ventre da progenitora" (Monteiro 2018, 81).³⁷¹ In the novel, expressions with clear colonialist and racist legacies that suggest a 'positive whitening' of the population recur through a critical lens. This demonstrates how colourism is indeed a colonial legacy reintegrated into contemporary Angolan society. For instance, having a *bom ventre* implies the ability to produce offspring with a lighter skin tone than the previous generation. Joana Gorjão Henriques (2016, 32), in her book *Racismo em Português*, conducts a series of interviews in Luanda, revealing additional expressions such as *vida mulata* (indicating a well-lived life due to racial and social 'elevation') and *adiantar a raça* (referring to someone who marries a light-skinned person). These expressions, still in current use, highlight the privilege afforded to certain groups based on lighter skin tone, which correlates with higher social status and recognition. By critically reproducing these colonial expressions, Monteiro confronts the linguistic injuries inflicted by colonialism on both her ancestry and her own identity. The legacies of these expressions continue to influence racial relationships, imaginaries, affective ties, and perceptions in both countries. In contrast, the incorporation of Umbundu and Kimbundu words and expressions in the novel becomes a radical act of misappropriating this colonial linguistic injury, emphasizing the effort to restore these languages as integral to Vitória's identity formation.

While the linguistic efforts and deconstructions guide Vitória on her journey to uncover the roots of her identity and her complex bond with her mother, the act of narration itself becomes a crucial element in the construction of the text.

It is intriguing to observe how narrative dissociation extends beyond Vitória to other female figures, such as Aunt Isaltina and Mariela, who recount the violence they endured in various contexts through first-person narration and their unique psycholinguistic sensibility. However, the moment when Vitória's first-person narrative abruptly shifts to the third person is particularly significant. This narrative dissociation is intricately tied to the linguistic question and occurs precisely when Juliana reveals Vitória's real Angolan name: Wayula. As the protagonist begins to embrace her identity as a Black woman through acts of cultural reappropriation and misappropriation, the narrative transition to a heterodiegetic perspective occurs at this crucial moment of linguistic reconnection—one that is deeper, more intimate, and ancestral, as the language of the name directly

³⁷¹ "Contrary to expectations, the firstborn did not pull out her mother's good, white womb" (my translation).

engages with questions of identity and genealogy. Monteiro (in Tavares et al. 2021, 155) elaborates on this progressive narrative dissociation: “Outra coisa que fiz neste livro, quando a Vitória passa por um processo de transformação, que é um processo violento, em que ela se descobre como mulher negra, foi retirar-lhe a voz como mulher, porque à mulher negra ainda não é permitido falar.”³⁷² Thus, this narrative shift reflects the transition and progressive transformation of her identity. It is not that she stops being Vitória, but that she becomes something more. This is the moment when she truly finds herself, yet this self is socially relegated to silence. As Monteiro states, (in Tavares et al. 2021, 155), “na verdade, ela pode falar, mas a questão é: quando nós falamos, quem nos escuta?”³⁷³

Thus, it becomes evident that analysing the structuring of narrative voices, alongside the work of linguistic occupation, is crucial for understanding the depth of the novel, which is conveyed through its aesthetic aspects. The shift in narrator has a profound impact on the reader, who experiences a poignant estrangement and distancing from the familiar voice they were accustomed to hearing. Vitória’s pain and vulnerability are therefore recreated through the aesthetic of the text, aiming to evoke in the reader an understanding of what it means to ‘become’ a Black woman in the aftermath of historical oppression, within the enduring shadow of violent coloniality.

4.3.4 Afrodescendant Critical Fabulations: Turning the Black Inner Life Imaginable

In the case of *Debaixo da nossa pele*, a critical analysis of linguistic choices intertwines with methodological considerations and issues of textual genres. In this section, I argue that Joaquim Arena’s construction of the novel is grounded in both a research and literary endeavour that aligns with the methodological and aesthetic approach termed ‘critical fabulation’ by Saidiya Hartman.

In her most recent book, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Hartman (2019, 6) seeks to “illuminate the radical imagination and everyday anarchy of ordinary colored girls, which has not only been overlooked, but is nearly unimaginable.” To achieve this, Hartman employs a methodology she first developed in her groundbreaking article “Venus in Two Acts,” called ‘critical fabulation.’ Critical fabulation is theoretically,

³⁷² “Another thing I did in this book, when Vitória goes through a process of transformation, which is a violent process, in which she discovers herself as a black woman, was to take away her voice as a woman, because black women are still not allowed to speak” (my translation).

³⁷³ “In fact, she can speak, but the question is: when we speak, who listens?” (my translation).

methodologically, and aesthetically grounded in Black feminist theories and approaches to the colonial archive. It primarily addresses the (im)possibility of interpreting historical sources about the affective and inner lives of Black subjects—and Black women in specific—during slavery, utilizing the critical perspectives offered by intersectional theories.

The official colonial archives on slavery—always presented from the perspective of the empire—exist only in the dimension of perpetually portraying Black subjects, made aberrant and derelict, in the scene of racial subjugation. These records particularly expose the wounded and violated body and analyse the slave trade from the viewpoint of market issues and commercial relations, reducing the body to mere flesh for sale. Since official narratives are produced by centres of power, historical records and archives become, as Hartman (2008, 2) describes, “a death sentence,” silencing again the enslaved and relegating them to the status of commodities and corpses. To rewrite the lives of the nameless and forgotten, Hartman proposes the concept and methodological tool of critical fabulation. With an ethical care for the archive, this approach intersects the fictional, speculative, and historical to imagine what cannot be verified, reclaiming the lives of the past and constructing a collective biography of the deceased. Hartman acknowledges the impossibility of fully representing the captives, which is why she refuses to fill in the gaps and provide closure to their stories. In this sense, critical fabulation becomes a ‘what if?’ This method respects the “black noise” (Hartman 2008, 12) of the dead enslaved. Thus, critical fabulation advocates for reshaping the tensions between fact and fiction in exploring the stolen lives and voices of Black subjects. This hybridity between fiction and non-fiction, literature and history, and the aesthetic and the political permeates Hartman’s notion of critical fabulation, adding depth and complexity to the inner lives of Black subjects.

Additionally, the concept of critical fabulation is intrinsically linked to the reclamation of beauty within a broader context of historical violence. Through this methodological and poethic approach to the colonial archives, Hartman aims to highlight the presence of beauty, which she views as specific manifestations of life and experience despite the spaces of violence, precarity, poverty, and complete denial of rights that these subjects inhabit. In this context, the inherent beauty in the lives of Black communities across time becomes an aesthetic through which they can, although partially, escape violence. Thus, beauty creates possibilities within spaces of confinement, becoming a form of radical subsistence within those very spaces. Through critical fabulation, beauty

emerges as a critical tool for investigating the inner lives and the affective relations of those who suffered oppression. Hartman's critical fabulation is a political and aesthetic exercise grounded in the revision of imperial archives, aiming to render historical subjects and facts visible beyond the mere violence they endured. The specific aim is to make the beauty of lost Black lives imaginable.

In the context of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora within the Portuguese language, particularly in discussions stemming from Afro-Brazilian literature by Black women, it is crucial to explore the concept of '*escrevivência*' as articulated by Conceição Evaristo, alongside its relationship with critical fabulation. Coined in the mid-1990s, *escrevivência* merges '*escrever*' (to write) and '*vivência*' (experience) to underscore its deep-rooted genealogy of racial and gendered situated experiences. It emerges from the everyday life, memories, and personal experiences of Afro-Brazilian individuals and communities, notably starting with the figure of the enslaved Black mother (*mãe preta escravizada*). *Escrevivência* is not merely self-writing or autobiographical fiction that exclusively centres on individual narratives, as such genres often risks focusing only on the individual subject. Instead, it embodies a writing practice aimed at articulating a discourse that inherently invokes a collectivity. Brazilian scholars like Fátima Lima (in Herminio 2022) and Caroline Barbosa (2024) explore the connection between *escrevivência* in fiction and critical fabulation in non-fiction. Both concepts converge in their critical reimagining and fabulation of what has historically been deemed impossible, rendered possible through literary expression. Thus, the hybridity of literary genres, combined with the embodied and situated experiences of the Black community, provides a meaningful context for the concepts of *escrevivência* and critical fabulation. In my view, these approaches become essential theoretical and creative tools for understanding Arena's text.

As previously argued, to trace the legacies of the '*negros do Sado*,' Joaquim Arena must contend with a history made of absence. The text embodies this void, this constant search, through a meta-narrative reflection on the pursuit of traces of the enslaved and the impossibility of fully recovering them through writing. The character defines his writing effort during his journey as a "narrativa de aproximação"³⁷⁴ (Arena 2017, 165), in which writing does not aim to substitute the lost enslaved and their descendants. Instead, writing can only witness the absence and the emptiness left by their passage. In other words, "escrever para colmatar o vazio, registrar para exorcizar o peso do nada" (Arena 2017,

³⁷⁴ "Approximation narrative" (my translation).

147).³⁷⁵ These voids are accompanied by a series of paintings, portraits, sculptures, and photographs of objects, strangers, family members, documents, and landscapes that complement the narrative. The emptiness, absence, or impossibility of witnessing—evident in the portraits and photographs—intersects with the stillness captured in these images. Words and images together interrogate this presence-absence, embedding themselves in the critical-aesthetic method of critical fabulation to ‘approximate’ the common life of this collective multitude of characters.

The use of images is a notable feature shared by both Arena and Hartman’s texts. Saidiya Hartman describes the series of pictures and photographs included in her work as a “fiction of love” (Hartman 2007, 101). Since love longs for an object—in this case, the common former enslaved individuals in both Ghana and the Sado Valley—the pictures (figure 6 and figure 7) in both texts underscore the effort to highlight the blank spaces left by the disappearance of the enslaved. Words and pictures work together in order to find traces of those subjects. Together, they reveal the impossibility of fully filling this void left by the enslaved.



Figure 6 – Joaquim Arena, *Ribeira do Sado* (2017)



Figure 7 – Saidiya Hartman, *Gwolu – defence wall* (2007)

Despite the void, there remains a concern to grasp how to approach the lives of enslaved people in order to understand what impact forced labour, servitude and

³⁷⁵ “Writing to fill the void, recording to exorcise the weight of nothingness” (my translation).

oppression had on the subsequent generations, and to understand how this oppression still projects itself onto the present: “Mas não podemos fugir à maior criação da nossa mente, ao maior investimento que a nossa imaginação alguma vez fez, que é o próprio tempo. A minha dúvida, então, é como fazer para projetar no espírito o presente árduo de trabalho e de servidão?” (Arena 2017, 165).³⁷⁶

To address this question, the narrator employs a true process of critical fabulation throughout various parts of the book. This approach blends historical facts with fictitious imagination, exploring the diverse lives of the characters under investigation. What follows is an example of ‘approximation narrative,’ where the narrator delves into the past of Pedro Fogueiro and Aurélio da Preta, distant relatives of Leopoldina. This exploration focuses on their experiences during the transition period following the abolition of slavery and their efforts to forget their past as a means to erase the social stigma associated with it:

Pergunto o que pensavam, por exemplo, Pedro Fogueiro e Aurélio da Preta sobre os seus antepassados e como lidavam com essa mácula que carregavam na pele. Acredito que estes neófitas da liberdade optassem por sacudir o véu da História e esquecer o calvário dos seus pais e avós. É o rio que transporta a vida; a sua água continuaria fresca, os prados floridos e os montes cobertos pela sua atmosfera de paz. [...] Como poderemos adquirir uma nova identidade a partir da servidão sem trair a nossa ancestralidade? Que harmonia é esta que se segue aos grilhões e às coleiras metálicas? Que rios e florestas teve o Sado de ajudar a substituir na memória ou a renegar no espírito? Que alma nova em forma de borboleta, no seu voo inescapável, foi essa que abandonou, num sopro, o mundo dos ancestrais para entrar numa modernidade que se quer absoluta? (Arena 2017, 166).³⁷⁷

Perhaps the most impactful moment in the narrator’s ‘approximation narrative’ is the attempt to imagine not only the landing in Lagos of the first enslaved in Portugal back to 1444, but also the inner life of those enslaved:

³⁷⁶ “But we can’t escape the greatest creation of our mind, the greatest investment our imagination has ever made, which is time itself. My question, then, is how do we project the arduous present of labour and servitude into our minds?” (my translation).

³⁷⁷ “I wonder what, for example, Pedro Fogueiro and Aurélio da Preta thought about their ancestors and how they dealt with this stain on their skin. I believe that these neophytes of freedom chose to shake off the veil of history and forget the ordeal of their parents and grandparents. It is the river that carries life; its water would remain fresh, the meadows flowery and the hills covered in its peaceful atmosphere. [...] How can we acquire a new identity from servitude without betraying our ancestry? What harmony follows shackles and metal collars? What rivers and forests did the Sado have to help replace in memory or disown in spirit? What new soul in the shape of a butterfly, in its inescapable flight, has abandoned the world of the ancestors in one breath to enter a modernity that wants to be absolute?” (my translation).

Pergunta o escravo, em silêncio: quem pensas tu que és? [...] Observo-te todos os dias com atenção. Aos domingos colocas o teu chapéu e vais adorar o teu deus, com a tua voz barbuda ergues-te diante de mim e gritas que és meu dono e que minha vida está em tuas mãos. Mas eu sou mais do que o meu corpo que aqui se expõe despido sem necessitar de um bom casaco ou de sapatos. Sou os olhos dos meus antepassados que te olham enquanto circulas com as mãos atrás das costas. Da tua fome e da tua sede não haverá o mínimo vestígio e das tuas feridas apenas a viciosidade purulenta e fétida. Mas é apenas o verbo que agora ensaio. A esperança de poder continuar a respirar, pois que um homem deve viver de ações, da sua boca, dos seus dentes, da sua voz, dos seus músculos e da sua força. Na agonia da paralisia dos grilhões o verbo, ainda que soprado para o interior do espírito, impede a destruição total de quem vive condenado não à morte mas ao cativeiro (Arena 2017, 319).³⁷⁸

These examples demonstrate how the use of critical fabulation, or else the ‘approximation narrative,’ becomes an effective methodological-aesthetic tool for the partial restitution of the inner lives of enslaved people and their descendants. Specifically, this approach highlights the necessity of breaking the rigid boundaries between textual genres, reconfiguring and blending them as the only way to approach a complex narrative of loss and dispossession. The interplay between language and textual genre thus becomes a foundational and essential aspect of the text’s aesthetic-political cohesion, allowing readers to perceive the profound sense of precarity linked to the memory of slavery and its legacy. This approach also encourages to explore diverse aesthetic tools for experimenting with restitution and re-signification, finding a specific grammar to articulate the silence of voices forgotten in history. The perception of this silence is deeply rooted in the Western collective psyche, transmitted through languages, rituals, and cultural practices designed to sustain it. Joaquim Arena’s work thus invites us to examine also the genealogies of textual genres, understanding to what extent these are rooted in colonial structures and grammars and recognizing the necessity of reinventing them to restore an inwardness that has been historically denied.

³⁷⁸ “The slave asks quietly: who do you think you are? [...] I watch you carefully every day. On Sundays you put on your hat and go to worship your god, with your bearded voice you stand before me and shout that you are my master and that my life is in your hands. But I am more than my body, which is exposed here naked without needing a good coat or shoes. I am the eyes of my ancestors that look at you as you walk around with your hands behind your back. There will be no trace of your hunger or thirst, and your wounds will only be a purulent, fetid viciousness. But it’s only the verb that I’m rehearsing now. The hope of being able to continue breathing, because a man must live by his actions, his mouth, his teeth, his voice, his muscles and his strength. In the agony of being paralysed by shackles, the verb, even if blown into the spirit, prevents the total destruction of those who live condemned not to death but to captivity” (my translation).

4.4 Spaces II

4.4.1 Opening Concealed Maps: Vulnerable Paths of Return

As observed in the previous chapter, the first three novels in this corpus depict a post-imperial journey of assimilated characters from Cape Verde and Angola to Lisbon in pursuit of a ‘promised home’ in Portugal, a consequence of perverse colonial policies. These novels create new urban maps where Lisbon is portrayed through an African and Afrodescendant sensibility, highlighting its precarious aspects, spaces, objects, and subjects. Thus, Lisbon and its periphery remain the primary focus of spatial representation.

On the other hand, the three novels under examination in this chapter ‘open’ different maps, more concealed and less explored. As we have seen, major cities such as Lisbon and Luanda are present, but they do not uniquely dominate the spatial centrality of the narratives. Instead, the dimension of extra-peripheral spaces, often overlooked in the literary cartographies of both Portuguese and African geographies, intersects with the protagonists’ journeys. Thus, Lisbon and Luanda become parts of broader geographical and spatial realities. While *As Telefones* navigates an imagined spatiality and geography due to diasporic separation, Monteiro and Arena’s texts explore specific spatialities scarcely addressed in Portuguese literature: An Alentejo with African heritage in *Debaixo da nossa pele* and a mystical Huambo marked by the scars of war in *Essa dama bate búé*.

This openness towards less explored spaces and geographies addresses the need to return to and rediscover those areas outside the centre/periphery dialectic. These spaces are fundamental to the deep exploration of Afro-diasporic genealogies, community histories, and personal identities. The vulnerability inherent in memory and space is not only confined to capital cities—both imperial and colonial—but extends to numerous places that have hosted (and continue to host) specific dynamics of violence, marginalization, and precariousness, as well as resistance, solidarity, and community. These novels investigate those ‘extra-peripheral’ spaces as part of their identity quest for countering memory vulnerability.

This final section analyses the Portuguese Afrodescendant “modes of self-writing,” to quote Achille Mbembe (2002), within their specific genealogies, also through the resignification of vulnerable extra-peripheral spaces. Mbembe argues that identity presupposes territoriality, which he defines as “the vivid consciousness of place and mastery of it, whether by birth, by conquest, or by settlement” (Mbembe 2002, 266).

According to the philosopher, the cult of locality—home, the intimate space, and the inherited estate where close, personal ties are strengthened by membership in a common genealogy—is where territoriality is most evident. Thus, citizenship emerges from the combination of both ideological categories (membership and origins) and spatial categories (territory and locality). The sense of citizenship translates into the possibility of enjoying a home (or at least a sense of belonging), but also the ability to exclude others from this sense of home, the right to be protected, and access to collective goods and situated resources. What happens, then, to those subjects who experience various forms of diasporic dislocation? How can they construct a sense of identity when territoriality, and specifically locality, are denied? Mbembe (2002, 266) refers to these subjects as bearing a “wounded identity.” Through the idioms of kinship—relations such as filiation, genealogy, and ancestry—these identities engage in differentiated practices to reappropriate their lost (or more frequently deprived) territoriality/locality as a constitutive part of their identity construction process.

Specifically, I will begin by analysing the novel *As Telefones* by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, which serves as a ‘hinge text’ connecting the other two works. From a spatial perspective, the novel doesn’t focus on physical space as much as it explores the absence of a common territoriality due to diaspora, which becomes the main element of vulnerability in Solange’s identity formation. In response to this absence, the text examines the relationship between bodies and specific objects in transit between Angola and Portugal, which act as substitutes for the bodies of the two women in their mutual absences in every day’s spaces.

In contrast to the “paradigm of immobility” (Coutinho 2022, 131) present in Almeida’s novel, the works by Yara Nakahanda Monteiro and Joaquim Arena use the journey as a central motif, highlighting the protagonists’ search for their own genealogies and interrupted filiations. These texts are complementary because they depict centrifugal journeys—journeys away from well-known urban centres, but in opposite directions. *Essa dama bate bué* portrays a journey from Portugal to Luanda, and then further into the city of Huambo. In this progressive estrangement, I will analyse how Vitória’s socio-symbolic relationship with the urban space of Luanda, and later with the complex mythological dimension of her ancestral city, is deeply intertwined with the violence and precariousness resulting from prolonged conflicts and the formation of her identity. Additionally, I will explore the novel through the concept of ‘counter-return,’ a specific literary trope in Monteiro’s artistic works.

Joaquim Arena's *Debaixo da nossa pele*, on the other hand, depicts a journey in the opposite direction of Monteiro's, towards the interior of Portugal, tracing the lost genealogies of the descendants of enslaved people from the Sado region, as well as the author's own diasporic memory between Cape Verde and Portugal. As I will argue, Arena's work invites us to interrogate the seemingly silent landscape of the Sado Valley, which appears to bear no 'ecological memory' of the era of slavery and abolition. However, this landscape is deeply intertwined with the corporeal experiences of its inhabitants and the 'maps of moral freedom' they have traced in the aftermath of oppression. In this context, I aim to explore in Arena's text the spaces inhabited by former enslaved and their descendants, which embody both the vulnerability imposed by historical regimes and the freedom that emerged in their wake.

Despite the varying spatial contexts of these extra-peripheries, they remain shaped by structural inequalities that leave individuals and communities vulnerable to contemporary forms of violence, while simultaneously giving rise to strategies of resistance. As Margarida Calafate Ribeiro (2019b, 59) notes, each act of cartographic rewriting represents a political effort to reclaim territoriality once expropriated by colonial violence. The power to narrate history through diverse spaces—imaginative maps, cities, peripheries, and extra-peripheries—enables a process of re-founding and re-formation, which in turn fosters a movement toward asserting a sense of belonging.

4.4.1 Missing Territoriality: Objects as Imaginative Diasporic Maps

Unlike Monteiro and Arena's texts, *As Telefones* by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida does not directly focus on the physical spaces inhabited by its protagonists—Lisbon and Luanda, respectively. Instead, the narrative emphasizes the absence of a corporeal relationship between the mother and daughter due to diasporic dislocation, and the physical absence in each other's daily lives extends to their imaginative perception of the spaces they occupy. The diaspora not only disrupts their physical presence but also erodes the imagined materiality of the places they are estranged from. As I will argue, the only mediation through which the characters access their respective locations is via the transit of objects imbued with the aura of the two women and, by extension, the two cities that separate them. The sense of vulnerability experienced by Solange and Filomena also arises from their unfamiliarity with the spatial realities that each navigates in their daily lives. *As Telefones* emphasizes the more poignant dimension of the absence of a home as a shared familiar and affective locality where a specific sense of identity could flourish.

It highlights the insurmountable spatial concerns resulting from the impossibility of return.

As Ana Paula Coutinho (2022, 131) highlights, Almeida's novel, like her other works, does not directly depict the actual journeys and transits between Angola and Portugal. Instead, it focuses on the narration that occurs after these transits, revealing the struggles of social and geographical mobility and the inability to return home. Like many of Almeida's other characters, Solange and Filomena are trapped in their respective 'immobility' in Lisbon and Luanda, nurturing a hope for homecoming and a shared family life. This paradigm of immobility particularly challenges the subsequent generation of 'children of the diaspora,' who live, sense, and think at the 'border' between two countries, two continents, and two histories. Solange is a daughter of this specific diaspora. Unlike Aquiles, who travels to Lisbon with his father, she finds herself alone in Portugal with an unknown aunt and without both maternal and paternal figure.

From this perspective, it is significant that the novel begins with one of the few descriptive scenes set in Lisbon, serving as the starting point for Solange and Filomena's 'telephone' story: a telephone booth disposal centre located just off the motorway at the city's entrance: "Na auto-estrada, de soslaio, um cemitério de cabines telefónicas, à entrada de Lisboa. É o lugar onde as desmontam, agora, já que não as vemos na ruas. [...] Portas, dobradiças, fios, auscultadores, pernas, braços, entranhas amontoados em pilhas. [...] Mas fiquei ali, como se, perdida entre as cabines, um dos telefones pudesse tocar" (Almeida 2020, 9).³⁷⁹ In a landscape marked by the ruins of a century advancing—also technologically, as the novel highlights through the continual evolution of devices and spaces dedicated to telephone connections—the relationship between mother and daughter is immediately framed by the unresolved dislocations caused by past violence. The telephone, as previously discussed, serves as both a metaphor and a synecdoche for these female diasporic 'cyborg bodies,' which exist solely through the vocal materiality transmitted via telephone wires. The figure of a cemetery of telephone booths extends this cyborg metaphor/synecdoche to a spatial dimension, symbolizing the beginning and foretelling the end of a narrative about women's affections, irreparably shaped by the experience of colonialism, decolonization, diaspora, distance, and technology.

³⁷⁹ "On the motorway, a cemetery of telephone boxes at the entrance to Lisbon. It's the place where they dismantle them now, since we don't see them on the streets. [...] Doors, hinges, wires, handsets, legs, arms, entrails piled up in heaps. [...] But I stayed there, as if, lost among the booths, one of the telephones might ring" (my translation).

The separation between mother and daughter, initially caused by the Angolan civil war and later exacerbated by various economic hardships, is highlighted by a few encounters in both Lisbon and Luanda. In Lisbon, Filomena attempts to reconcile the city with her ‘assimilated imagination’ of the former colonial metropolis, while in Luanda, Solange expresses that “regressar a Luanda parece-se menos com voltar a casa do que com ser esmagado pela vida” (Almeida 2020, 56).³⁸⁰ In these brief encounters, mother and daughter attempt to re-establish an emotional bond that, over time, has become increasingly difficult to recover due to a distance that is not merely geographical but, more significantly, internal. During these meetings, the emphasis on physical space seems to dissolve, shifting instead to their difficult and suffered interpersonal relationship—“A sala, a cozinha, as roupas das duas e até a rua desapareceram” (Almeida 2020, 48).³⁸¹

Due to the distance, the spaces in the novel are not inherently intelligible to the two women—there are scarcely any precise descriptions of the locations. Instead, these spaces become meaningful through a constellation of objects that, despite the women’s physical absence from each other’s lives, seem to act as intermediaries between them and the environments they inhabit. The objects in these diasporic spaces serve as traces that the women carry from the geographies they occupy, allowing them to bridge the gap between their lives ‘over there’ and ‘over here.’ Unlike in Almeida’s other novels, where spaces often communicate their own significance—as seen with the antiphrastic bairro of Paraíso—in *As Telefones*, it is the relationship with objects imbued with the aura of the women’s lives that renders their respective geographies at least imaginable. One example is Solange’s genealogical search for her mother at the beginning of the novel, where she attempts to understand Filomena through a long series of ordinary objects, common spaces, and parts of the body: “Condor, sargação, vazia, palha-de-aço, bicicleta, centurião, atleta, capataz, algoz, sineta, altar, plantação, santa, balão, guardanapo, algodão, pão, queimada, floresta, ribeiro, gato, poça, fossa, perfume, lume, cambalhota, desiderato, bicarbonato, avestruz, mãe, tesoura, torno, olho, padrão, jóia, passatempo, mão, junta, prego, canal, quem és tu?” (Almeida 2020, 10).³⁸²

A particularly significant passage in this context is the scene where Solange examines the objects Filomena brings with her in her suitcase during their rare encounters.

³⁸⁰ “Returning to Luanda feels less like coming home and more like being crushed by life” (my translation).

³⁸¹ “The living room, the kitchen, their clothes, and even the street disappeared” (my translation).

³⁸² “Condor, sargasso, flank steak, steel wool, bicycle, centurion, athlete, foreman, executioner, bell, altar, plantation, saint, balloon, napkin, cotton, bread, fire, forest, stream, cat, puddle, pit, perfume, light, somersault, desideratum, bicarbonate, ostrich, mother, scissors, lathe, eye, pattern, jewel, hobby, hand, joint, nail, canal, who are you?” (my translation).

These objects not only convey how Filomena's presence integrates into the spaces she inhabits on the African continent but also reflect the mother's constant desire for connection with her absent daughter within those objects and spaces:

Lugares de onde me trazes histórias: um *bungalow* no Quênia, um alfaiate em Harate, uma varanda em Windhoek, uma castanha-de-caju em Adis Abeba, uma malária cerebral em Joanesburgo, com camarão tigre em Maputo, um táxi em Lagos. Uma escova de dentes roubada num avião, um frasco de paracucua, cola para mascar, uma garrafa de óleo de palma, os meus dentes de leite, uma capulana, pulseirinhas de ouro, um colar de cobre, uma cassete de Koffi Olomide, fotografias de Benguela. Penso que te escondo uma novidade quando és quem a transporta, levando-a em viagem e revelando-a, em Lisboa, sobre a cama (Almeida 2020, 82).³⁸³

A central moment in the text is highlighted by the transit of objects between Luanda and Lisbon, particularly when Filomena gives Solange her baby teeth, which her aunt had previously sent to her mother. These inorganic body parts, transformed into simulacra of a daughter raised at a distance, become part of the various objects that contribute to the imagined geographies of Solange's growing body in Lisbon: "Sem que a menina soubesse, a tia roubava bocadinhos do corpo de Solange à medida que este os dispensava, dando lugar a outros. Ao longe, a mãe fazia-se a sua fada dos dentes, imaginando como a filha mudava, suspirando para que não se esquecesse de si" (Almeida 2020, 77).³⁸⁴ Decontextualized objects, undefined spaces, and inorganic body parts thus characterize the diasporic way of maintaining affections across different worlds and vulnerable spaces.

According to Margarida Rendeiro (2022c, 46), *As Telefones* introduces the need for a rupture in the stability of the imaginative geographies³⁸⁵ that underpinned colonial

³⁸³ "Places you bring me stories from: a *bungalow* in Kenya, a tailor in Harate, a balcony in Windhoek, a cashew nut in Addis Ababa, cerebral malaria in Johannesburg, tiger prawns in Maputo, a taxi in Lagos. A toothbrush stolen on an aeroplane, a bottle of paracucua, chewing glue, a bottle of palm oil, my milk teeth, a capulana, gold bracelets, a copper necklace, a cassette of Koffi Olomide, photographs of Benguela. I think I'm hiding something new from you when you're the one carrying it, taking it on a journey and revealing it on the bed in Lisbon" (my translation).

³⁸⁴ "Unbeknown to the girl, her aunt was stealing little pieces of Solange's body as she dispensed with them, making room for others. In the distance, her mother played the tooth fairy, imagining how her daughter was changing, hoping that the daughter wouldn't forget her" (my translation).

³⁸⁵ Edward Said's concept of 'imaginative geography' is central to his broader critique presented in his seminal work, *Orientalism*. Imaginative geography refers to the process by which the world is divided into familiar and unfamiliar regions, often accompanied by cultural, political, and social stereotypes. This mental mapping shapes how 'we' (the in-group) define 'them' (the out-group) by emphasizing differences and distinctions. Rather than being based on empirical realities or geographical facts, imaginative geography is constructed through cultural narratives based on the conviction of the West's supremacy. Consequently, it plays a crucial role in how Western societies perceive the 'Rest.' The 'Rest' is not merely a geographic area but a cultural, mediatic, social, political, and artistic construct imbued with exotic and

projects and continue to underpin neocolonial ones. The novel disrupts simplistic or dichotomous perspectives on the transits between Portugal and Angola, challenging the reduction of the painful diasporic movement—where affect, filiation, genealogy, ancestry, and heritage play vital roles—to a mere ‘migration story.’ It also brings to light other sensibilities and concerns related to the theme of return, a literary trope widely represented and studied within contemporary Portuguese literature, but rarely analysed through an Afrodescendant lens. In fact, the novel does not treat the issue of return as an easy possibility of ‘homecoming’ to Angola; Solange does not feel at home there, despite her connection to her mother. Although any tangible possibility of return is denied, what remains is the search for a female genealogy that might offer a sense of ancestral connection to her mother’s homeland. In other words, it is through ancestry—symbolized by the repeated Lingala phrase “bobe Yo, bobe Yo” spoken by Filomena—that a potential connection to her mother’s history can be forged, transcending any form of territoriality: “Não sei viver sem saber que não te posso tocar, que não te vou ver amanhã, nem depois de amanhã, nem para a semana, mas que, apesar disso, persistes – nenhures? Além. A tua energia longínqua ampara-me, mesmo sem estar ciente dela. Torna a minha presença na Terra ‘a nossa situação’” (Almeida 2020, 34).³⁸⁶

Through a reflection on the absence of a shared territorial and local framework for forming affections and identity, the novel highlights the challenges faced by Black women like Filomena and Solange. Indeed, the lack of a common ground for building affective bonds prompts them to denounce “nossa filiação truncada, deitada abaixo, reerguida, mastigada, de novo enfundada, logo arrasada. [...] O século deformou o nosso amor” (Almeida 2020, 33).³⁸⁷

To conclude, the novel interrogates the vulnerability of space as a total absence of common territoriality and locality where family ties and affections could otherwise flourish. In contrast, the next two novels under analysis transform this lack of common territoriality and locality into the driving force of the narrative. They explore the genealogies interrupted by the numerous historical violations endured by Afro-diasporic

often derogatory stereotypes, which serve to justify Western dominance and colonial ambitions. Thus, imaginative geography functions as a form of cultural hegemony, where the dominant group imposes its worldview and ideology on others, marginalizing and misrepresenting the cultures and peoples it describes. This process helps to maintain power structures by perpetuating a simplistic and hierarchical view of the world.

³⁸⁶ “I can’t live without knowing that I can’t touch you, that I won’t see you tomorrow, or the day after, or next week, but that, despite this, you persist – nowhere? Beyond. Your distant energy supports me, even if I’m not aware of it. It makes my presence on Earth ‘our situation’” (my translation).

³⁸⁷ “Our truncated, torn down, rebuilt, chewed up, sunk again, and then destroyed affiliation. [...] The century has deformed our love” (my translation).

communities. The journey thus becomes a central motif, used to explore themes of quest, self-awareness, and identity reappropriation in order to contrast the vulnerability and loss of memory ‘inherited’ from both the public discourses and family ties.

4.4.2 A Counter-history of Return: Geographies of Violence in the Quest for Identity

The urban dimension of Portuguese-speaking African literatures, particularly from Angola and Mozambique, has attracted critical attention for its exploration of the continuity of power dynamics and asymmetries between colonial and postcolonial spatial configurations and their literary representations. Dating back to colonial times, urban areas with significant white colonial populations—such as Luanda and Huambo in Angola, Maputo and Beira in Mozambique—were characterized by policies that prominently enforced racialized spatial and social structures. Even after the abolition of the *Estatuto dos Indígenas*, clear discrimination persisted within the social order, rooted not in specific legal frameworks but in entrenched social practices and corporeal markers. The ‘phenotype’ continued to signify an urban status linked not only to ‘inferior citizenship’ but also to genuine social exclusion. Consequently, these cities became divided into ‘double cities,’ marked by a wealthy European centre and an extensive, ‘underdeveloped’ African outskirts, each constructed with different materials, techniques, and cultural practices. This urban modernity transcended the lifespan of the Empire, continuing unabated despite decolonization.

Vitória Queiroz da Fonseca encounters this reality upon her arrival in Luanda in 2003. She faces a city where “tudo mata”³⁸⁸ (Monteiro 2018, 39), as asserted by Romena Cambissa. Luanda emerges from the ravages of a long civil war, with its signs evident throughout the city. From the airplane, the houses appear to be arranged as if following a “carpet bombing” pattern (Monteiro 2018, 27). In Chapter 6, which depicts Vitória’s arrival, Luanda undergoes a process of personification, transforming into a distinct female character. The city is described as a “útero de poeira e cimento”³⁸⁹ (Monteiro 2018, 28), awakening under the rain: “Acontece a metaforização do corpo urbano: abandona a sonolência, vibra agressivamente e vai para a luta da sobrevivência” (Monteiro 2018, 32).³⁹⁰ From the first insights, Luanda exhibits a raw violence that subjects specific

³⁸⁸ “Everything kills” (my translation).

³⁸⁹ “Womb of dust and concrete” (my translation).

³⁹⁰ “The urban body is metaphorized: it abandons its sleepiness, vibrates aggressively and goes into the fight for survival” (my translation).

segments of the population—poor children, women, beggars, and the residents of the *musseques*—to extreme precarization. Initially described as a city entrenched in the struggle for survival alongside its most vulnerable inhabitants, Luanda gradually becomes more familiar to Vitória. Over time, her perspective shifts, allowing her to better understand the city, which appears to bear the same violence that its most precarious residents endure daily at the hands of the ruling elites: “Domingo. Luanda ainda não acordou, recolheu-se no sossego. É um animal exausto que decidiu prorrogar o seu despertar. Todos têm direito à cidade, mas massacraram-na com a sobrecarga do peso de tantos corpos. De segunda a sábado, os bairros das elites e os *musseques* levam os seus excessos ao centro histórico. Luanda já pouco aguenta” (Monteiro 2018, 85).³⁹¹ Much like the vulnerable portrayal of Lisbon in the previous chapter, Monteiro’s depiction of Luanda transforms the city into a living character, embodying the struggles, challenges, and precarious conditions it shares with its inhabitants.

Soon, Vitória realizes that discrimination and social exclusion in Luanda continue to perpetuate the legacy of colonial systems. The theme of ‘exclusion,’ as embedded in the city’s architectural design, resonates with Tania Macêdo’s (2008) seminal study and is echoed in Monteiro’s literary representation. Luanda’s urban space, as both an architectural and political construct, reflects the city’s unequal distribution of spaces and people based on colourism, class, and gender. These divisions are remnants of the colonial exclusionary project imposed on the Angolan capital. Vitória understands that classism, sexism, and colourism dictate the distribution of spaces, streets, zones, and neighbourhoods throughout the city, reserving a life of privilege for the elite while relegating “os do resto do mundo”³⁹² (Monteiro 2018, 107) to a precarious and violent existence. This dynamic is epitomized in the scene at the entrance of a disco during Vitória’s first night out in Luanda, where admittance is determined by a hierarchical chromatic scale: whites are admitted by default, followed by ‘*mestiços*,’ and finally, privileged Blacks. This colour line not only segregates whites and Blacks, and rich and poor in public spaces, but also influences affective relationships and decisions regarding who can live and who must die within the city.

³⁹¹ “Sunday. Luanda hasn’t woken up yet, it’s retreated into the quiet. It is an exhausted animal that has decided to prolong its awakening. Everyone has the right to the city, but it is being massacred by the weight of so many bodies. From Monday to Saturday, the elite neighbourhoods and the *musseques* take their excesses to the historic centre. Luanda can no longer stand it” (my translation).

³⁹² “Those of the rest of the world” (my translation).

Thus, the colonial bipartite division into the ‘city of the settler’ alongside the ‘city of the colonized’ persists as the operational framework in the ‘decolonized’ city. Vitória encounters a city where the centre is marked by access to privileged spaces and goods—a legacy of prolonged exploitation of the city’s peripheries. Conversely, these margins are characterized by deprivation, inhabited by communities supporting and sustaining the functioning of the centre. This division underscores dichotomies such as safety/unsafety and clean/dirty, echoing insights from decolonial feminist scholar Françoise Vergès (2022, 87) who asserts that “hygiene has a racial and class history.” From this perspective, decolonized Luanda bears an unsettling resemblance to post-imperial Lisbon, as discussed in earlier chapters. The impoverished residents of the *musseques* and other marginalized areas of Luanda are spatially segregated by these boundaries, exposing them to precarious living conditions. The contrast between healthy, privileged bodies and those exhausted by fatigue and deprived of the material means to sustain life further marks the city’s divisions. These bodies become an integral part of the human landscape of Luanda that Vitória encounters.

Following Romena’s advice—not to look at the pain and suffering of others to avoid becoming depressed—the sight of the city prompts a profound reflection on the nature of privilege and the sharp division between social classes, both in Angola and in relation to the diaspora in Portugal. Confronted with the suffering of others, Vitória repeatedly questions what her life would have been like if her family had not been exiled to Portugal. The juxtaposition of others’ vulnerability with her own privilege and right to a ‘good life’ raises critical and ethical questions about the material, social, political, and geographical conditions that underpin such privilege. The following passage exemplifies the protagonist’s interrogation of the violent privilege enjoyed by the Angolan upper-middle classes and the public vigilance that removes the precarious lives of the majority from view:

Em frente ao restaurante e na areia, as espreguiçadeiras são guardadas por seguranças. Estes certificam-se de que quem vai à beira-mar almoçar não é assaltado por visões reveladoras acerca do resto do mundo. Incautamente, falham. Uma criança, que, hipoteticamente, não terá nem chegado pelo mar, nem pela entrada do estabelecimento, surge como atirada do céu a deambular pelos guarda-sóis. Estende a mão e toca na barriga. Dão-lhe dinheiro. Uma

empregada entrega-lhe uma sandes. Depois, com a ajuda de um guarda, é retirada dali. Passamos o resto do dia em animada cavaqueira (Monteiro 2018, 107-108).³⁹³

Compared to novels by authors born and raised in Angola, such as Ondjaki's *Os Transparentes* (2012), Monteiro's book reflects a unique sensibility tied to the socio-urban perception of Luanda, particularly from the perspective of those 'returning' from the diaspora. In the novel, Vitória learns to 'observe' Luanda, discerning its violence and contradictions while initially interpreting it through a series of Western and stereotyped images. As her journey progresses, she learns to deconstruct these perceptions. For example, its stance regarding the exploitation of the elderly porter in the Romena building illustrates this process: "Chegamos ao andar de Romena. O senhor Timóteo pousa a mala. Da testa, escorre-lhe o suor pesado da mala transportada. Eu poiso a vergonha dos meus queixumes" (Monteiro 2018, 27).³⁹⁴

To extend the narrative beyond Vitória's diasporic perspective, the story employs internal focalization to present the viewpoints of several of Luanda's inhabitants. Chapter 12, for instance, explores Luanda and its post-conflict reality through three characters: the 'ancestral' vision of the fisherman Kabetula, who reveals that the spirits are weary from so much suffering; Romena, through her privileged life; and Mariela, who provides a long interior monologue about life in the *musseque*. While Vitória observes the 'surface of suffering' by noting the violent social contrasts and the extreme precarity of others, Mariela offers intimate insights into the true experience of living in precarious conditions. Through a female genealogy of pain, Mariela illustrates how social consciousness can challenge and counteract distorted and stereotypical views of life in the *musseque*: "Por isso me revolta como tratam o musseque. Isto não é lixeira feita de gente. Nos ignoram, nos gozam na cara porque falamos mal, cheiramos mal, vivemos mal. Já não choro. Chorava antes, no antigamente" (Monteiro 2018, 90).³⁹⁵

³⁹³ "In front of the restaurant and on the beach, the sun loungers are guarded by security guards. They make sure that those who go to the seafront for lunch aren't assaulted by revealing visions of the rest of the world. Incautiously, they fail. A child, who, hypothetically, hasn't arrived either by sea or through the entrance to the establishment, appears as if thrown from the sky, bouncing off the parasols. He reaches out and touches his belly. They give him money. A waitress hands him a sandwich. Then, with the help of a guard, he is taken away. We spend the rest of the day in animated conversation" (my translation).

³⁹⁴ "We reach Romena's floor. Mr. Timóteo puts down my suitcase. The heavy sweat drips off his forehead because of the suitcase. I put down the shame of my complaints" (my translation).

³⁹⁵ "That's why I'm disgusted by the way they treat the musseque. This isn't a rubbish dump made up of people. They ignore us, they make fun of us because we speak badly, we smell badly, we live badly. I don't cry any more. I cried before, in the old days" (my translation).

Following Vitória's journeys throughout the city, she keeps mapping the spaces she encounters. She explores both public, private, and intimate spaces, and within them, she perceives the material and symbolic force of the numerous forms of violence that still permeate decolonized Angolan society. Consequently, the first half of the novel focuses on analysing Vitória's initial phase of identity search within a 'geography of pain,' which is inevitably intertwined with her relationship with the city. Thus, Luanda progressively becomes a real character in the novel, and Vitória learns how to situate herself within this urban geography. As the street poet Betinho proclaims at the entrance to a disco, Luanda is portrayed as a great '*dama*' who '*bate bué*.' This expression, which gives the novel its title, reflects a process of linguistic re-appropriation, analysed previously, and extends to an urbanistic perspective. Vitória learns to reshape and reappropriate her identity through the city's violence and vulnerability, leading her to position herself within the dynamics produced by a recent past, which are materially inscribed in the fabric of the city. Understanding who she is also means understanding what it means to be a Black woman of the diaspora whose location is inscribed within a broad system of urban violence.

A significant portion of the Angolan literary imagination is centered on the city of Luanda, which has been extensively depicted in literature, particularly since the 1950s (Ribeiro 2019b, 41). In contrast, *Essa dama bate bué* not only provides a diasporic representation of Luanda but also expands the literary map to include an Angola less frequently explored in literature by following Vitória's journey to Huambo. Yara Nakahanda Monteiro, discussing the stark social disparities in Luanda, states in an interview that "é importante também frisar que Angola não é Luanda: Luanda faz parte de Angola, é a capital, é a cidade de Angola, mas, em termos de geografia do país, é mínima" (Monteiro in Wieser 2024, 78).³⁹⁶ In this context, Vitória's search for her mother leads her to her hometown in the country's hinterland. Consequently, her quest for identity is also shaped by this other geographical and urban dimension.

The motif of the 'journey'—both beyond Portugal and within the 'many Angolas' which constitute Vitória's affective maps and genealogies—becomes central to understanding the novel. Particularly significant is the journey back to Huambo, where a crucial part of Vitória's identity and historical understanding unfolds. This journey represents a 'post-imperial return,' contrasting with the conventional narratives of return

³⁹⁶ "It's also important to emphasise that Angola is not Luanda: Luanda is part of Angola, it's the capital, it's the city of Angola, but in terms of the country's geography, it's minimal" (my translation).

extensively explored by Margarida Calafate Ribeiro in *Uma História de Regressos* (2004). *Essa dama bate bué* stages this postcolonial return, reversing the traditional ‘Ulyssean narrative’ upon which Portuguese and broader European empires were constructed and narrated. Vitória’s journey is more intricate, as it acknowledges that a significant part of her identity—and that of many Afrodescendants in Portugal—develops outside of Portugal and Europe. To fully grasp the ‘colonial fracture’ embedded in Vitória’s subjectivity, it is essential to recount her narrative of belonging and the ancestral connections she has with a land that was once part of the empire and subjected to a violent program of total exploitation.

In this context, Vitória’s counter-return to Huambo can be interpreted through the lens of myth. Huambo emerges as a ‘concrete territoriality’ within Angola’s vast human and cultural geography, closely linked to the provinces where her affective ties were formed, particularly those of her grandparents. Huambo also symbolizes her birthplace and the backdrop of war, where her mother is presumed to have struggled for the country’s Independence and during the civil conflict. Drawing on Sandra Jatahy Pesavento, Liz Teles de Sá Almeida (2024, 241) asserts that the temporality of the myth of origin resides in the past, and its narrative aims to reconstruct that past to solidify a sense of identity in the present. In this regard, the foundational myth plays a crucial role in how belonging to a community is represented, encompassing both symbolic and concrete dimensions. Grandmother Elisa emerges within the narrative as a guardian of memories and, consequently, of the mythology of the Querioz da Fonseca family—a role that contrasts with António’s tendency toward forgetfulness. In Chapter 11, familial mythology intertwines with Angolan folklore as Grandma Elisa recounts a myth about the origins of the centre of the world, aligning it with the location where she married António:

A mãe de todas as mães e de todas as coisas pediu ao soba Grande, que pediu ao *kimbanda*, que descobrisse onde era o centro do mundo. Isto é, o lugar que une os reinos lá de cima com os daqui e os de lá de baixo. O *kimbanda* subiu ao morro mais alto, aquele que tem a forma de uma faca ou, na língua local, forma de *omoko*. No topo do morro, o *kimbanda* bateu, com toda a força, os pés na terra. Uma fenda gigante abriu-se. Da fenda, o *kimbanda* tirou duas palancas negras com chifres de ouro e dois falcões com asas de diamante. Cada um deles foi enviado para um dos quatro cantos do mundo. Por fim, o *kimbanda* atirou-se a si próprio para dentro da fenda. Foi em queda livre pela garganta da Terra e chegou ao sítio para onde o dedo da avó Elisa apontava quando nos contou esta história: Kamacupa, na província do Bié. À sua espera, já estavam os dois falcões e, pouco depois, chegaram as palancas. É em Kamacupa

que está o centro do mundo, o umbigo do mundo. Os meus avós casaram-se lá (Monteiro 2018, 81-82).³⁹⁷

Upon her arrival, Vitória must confront the realities of these spaces, negotiating the mythology conveyed through family memories with the vulnerabilities shaped by long-standing stratification of conflicts. Consequently, Huambo emerges as a region geographically marked by violence. While Luanda reflects the social asymmetries inherited from colonial urban structures, Huambo bears the physical scars of the war for independence and subsequent civil conflict. The colonial-style buildings lining the streets are riddled with bullet holes, and the orphans of Huambo serve as living reminders of the violence wrought by war. By drawing a comparison that dismantles any idealized views of the children in Huambo's suburbs, they evoke memories of children from the Black neighbourhoods of Lisbon:

Os meninos do Huambo, de barriga inchada e umbigo saído, vão-se juntando ao chamamento da refeição. Não se assemelham aos meninos do Huambo de Manuel Rui, cantados pelo Paulo de Carvalho, ou, pelo menos, como os tinha imaginado. São os meninos do bairro negro de Zeca Afonso, da periferia de Lisboa. Uns estão sentados no chão, e outros em latas vermelhas de óleo de palma. Matam a fome que ainda não matou a esperança que sobrevive da fé (Monteiro 2018, 138).³⁹⁸

Bodies and spaces are deeply intertwined by the recent wounds of war. The inhabitants of this space are predominantly women and children—abandoned, orphaned, and, above all, amputated bodies, like that of Juliana Tijamba, who is missing a leg. Recalling both the corporeal and symbolic image of amputation, Cinthia Belonia (2023, 45) asserts that observing amputees in Angola continuously brings the memory of the war into the

³⁹⁷ “The mother of all mothers and all things asked the soba Grande, who asked the *kimbanda*, to find out where the centre of the world was. That is, the place that unites the realms above with those here and those below. The *kimbanda* climbed to the highest hill, the one shaped like a knife or, in the local language, the shape of an *omoko*. At the top of the hill, the *kimbanda* slammed his feet into the earth with all his might. A giant crack opened up. From the crack, the *kimbanda* took out two black palancas with golden horns and two falcons with diamond wings. Each one was sent to one of the four corners of the world. Finally, the *kimbanda* threw himself into the crevice. It went free-falling down the Earth's throat and arrived at the place where Grandma Elisa's finger was pointing when she told us this story: Kamacupa, in the province of Bié. Waiting for her were the two falcons and, shortly afterwards, the palancas arrived. Kamacupa is the centre of the world, the navel of the world. My grandparents got married there” (my translation).

³⁹⁸ “The children of Huambo, with their bellies swollen and their navels protruding, are joining in the call to eat. They don't look like the boys from Manuel Rui's Huambo, sung by Paulo de Carvalho, or at least as he had imagined them. They are the kids from Zeca Afonso's black neighbourhood on the outskirts of Lisbon. Some are sitting on the floor, others on red cans of palm oil. They kill the hunger that hasn't yet killed the hope that survives on faith” (my translation).

present, as if one is still experiencing that past. The vulnerability of the past is compounded by everyday precariousness, symbolized by the fire in Juliana's orphanage-house, where all her adopted children perish. For Vitória, seeking her roots in Huambo necessitates confronting the precariousness of these bodies, as they are integral to the decolonized map she is exploring, embodying the living traces of the violent recent past. To understand peace and her mother's decision not to meet her, Vitória must first learn to navigate the painful memories of war embedded also into 'this part' of Angola. Huambo becomes a pivotal space where Vitória grapples not only with her own vulnerable memories but also with the enduring historical wounds that still scar Angola as an independent nation.

During her time in the space that shaped her family's mythology, Vitória learns to measure herself against the distorted family narratives of the past. She critically interrogates her grandparents' lost paradise, set against the backdrop of Huambo's lingering trauma in the post-conflict period. The city's unhealed wounds and Vitória's bleeding wound converge when Rosa chooses not to meet her daughter. The novel concludes with a profound sense of unresolved pain, symbolized by a shared open wound that continues to bleed. Yet, this wound also opens to a different temporality: it represents a period of waiting, endured by the Angolan people as they patiently believe in the possibility for healing. In the words of Juliana Tijamba: "Pode parecer estranho, mas, aqui, te queremos todos bem. Espera, Vitória. Espera só. És de um povo que está à espera, que espera, sempre" (Monteiro 2018, 206).³⁹⁹

4.4.3 Situated Walking/Writing: Maps of Moral Freedom

"Escavar o passado é uma operação delicada da qual ninguém sai incólume,"⁴⁰⁰ wrote Portuguese poet and journalist Eduardo Pitta (2013, 9). This sentence came to mind as I read the news in the Portuguese newspaper *Público* reporting, in July 2023, the commencement of an archaeological project aimed at studying the presence of enslaved Africans in the Sado Valley between the 15th and 18th centuries. According to Rui Gomes Teixeira, the director of the fieldwork, this project aims to uncover a part of Portuguese history that has been largely neglected in material archives. Additionally, it seeks to challenge the prevalent perception in Portugal that Africans and people of African descent

³⁹⁹ "It may seem strange, but we all love you here. Wait, Vitória. Just wait. You belong to a people who wait, who always wait" (my translation).

⁴⁰⁰ "Digging up the past is a delicate operation from which no one emerges unscathed" (my translation).

are foreign to the nation by providing archaeological evidence of their long-standing history. Indeed, the term '*pretos do Sado*' used to describe the slave descendant communities in the region subtly perpetuates social prejudice and exclusion, highlighting the need for a more inclusive and complex understanding of Portugal's African heritage.

As the article notes, this project actively involves prominent Afrodescendant organizations, including Djass and the Batoto Yetu Portugal Association. It is part of the larger research initiative titled "Ecologias da Liberdade: Materialidades da Escravidão e Pós-Emancipação no Mundo Atlântico," funded by the Fundação para Ciências e Tecnologias (2022-2024). This project aims to investigate the environmental impacts of colonialism and slavery through a comparative study of the Sado Valley in Portugal and Cacheu in Guiné-Bissau. Additionally, it seeks to understand how individuals articulated notions of freedom within the social constraints imposed by slavery. On August, 5, 2023, at Monte do Vale de Lachique, near São Romão do Sado, a ceremony was held to honour the victims of slavery and acknowledge African ancestors and their contributions to Alentejo culture. The event featured musical, artistic, and performances by groups of Afrodescendants

As I read the news, I reflected on all that such excavations cannot recover and the rituals that cannot awaken what has been lost. My thoughts then shifted to other forms of excavation, such as those found in literature, which delve into the geographies of memory tied to the legacy of slavery. In this context, Joaquim Arena's *Debaixo da nossa pele* introduces a distinctive stylistic and linguistic approach to address the historical absence left by slavery and its descendants in the Sado Valley. In this section, I aim to explore the spaces and maps that embody both the vulnerability imposed by historical regimes and the freedom that emerged in their wake, as depicted in Arena's texts. My focus will be on the spaces inhabited by former slaves and their descendants, which serve as vital sites for identity formation within Portugal. Additionally, I highlight how Arena's literary investigation brings attention to the vulnerable spaces to which these individuals were initially relegated, and how they later inhabited, occupied, and reinvented these spaces through radical misappropriating acts.

As I have observed, the protagonist's journeys often involve minimal, circumscribed routes aimed at closely analysing details, traces, ruins, and marks overlooked by official historiography, where the hidden history of a vast community of African descendants is partially revealed. In the essay "A melancolia dos eléctricos," (2021) Joaquim Arena intricately describes the process of connecting to the sites of the

African diaspora, spanning from ancient times to the contemporary days, by emphasizing the embodied and situated experiences of each individual involved:

O sentimento do lugar é também constituído pela pausa e pela soma das experiências. Incluindo a da escravidão e outros cativos. Outros destinos. Também é legado, como extensão dos construtores desse lugar. O passado surge na forma das coisas banais, assim como o presente, sem que o olhar se sinta particularmente atraído. Coisas e afectos, dimensões cruzadas. Tal como uma cómoda, o naperon sobre a mesa e bibelots baratos, o candeeiro a petróleo, a aldrava-mãozinha de ferro que bate à porta. O olhar que espreita a rua das águas-furtadas. É tudo experiência. Passado e presente (Arena 2021, online).⁴⁰¹

In *Debaixo da nossa pele*, rather than a journey, the protagonist's path resembles the act of slow walking through places of hidden memories. In the essay "Camminare e/è cartografare: Beyond Eco*Walking" (2021), Daniela Allocca and Gaia Del Giudice, through a feminist lens, interpret walking as a situated act of ecological politics that highlights our embeddedness in specific socio-historical, cultural, and environmental spaces. The researchers also examine the transition from walking to writing, exploring how this act transforms embodied experiences into poetics: "La scrittura spaziale del cammino come una sorta di poetare nello spazio, un poetare che dinamizza lo spazio grazie all'inesco del gioco tra reale e irreale/surreale, un continuo spostamento di senso che libera l'energia creativa dei luoghi. La pratica del camminare intesse relazioni attraverso una pratica incarnata, una connessione corpo-mente-cuore-paesaggi che fa confluire ricerca, esplorazione dei territori e ricerca spirituale" (Allocca, Del Giudice 2021, 169).⁴⁰² In *Debaixo da nossa pele*, the protagonist engages in 'situated walking' as an embodied practice to tap into the energy and knowledge embedded in historically significant places for the Afrodescendant Portuguese past. Through this process, he seeks to uncover the hidden stories of a broader community by exploring the spaces they inhabit(ed). He articulates this concept of 'situated walking' within the text in these terms:

⁴⁰¹ "The sense of place is also constituted by the pause and the sum of experiences. Including slavery and other captivities. Other destinies. It is also a legacy, as an extension of the builders of this place. The past appears in the form of banal things, as does the present, without the eye being particularly attracted. Things and affections, crossed dimensions. Like a chest of drawers, the napkin on the table and cheap knick-knacks, the oil lamp, the little iron knocker that knocks on the door. The gaze that peers down the street from the attic. It's all experience. Past and present" (my translation).

⁴⁰² "The spatial writing of walking as a kind of poetising in space, a poetising that energises space by triggering the interplay between the real and the unreal/surreal, a continuous shifting of meaning that releases the creative energy of places. The practice of walking weaves relationships through an embodied practice, a body-mind-heart-landscapes connection that brings together research, exploration of territories and spiritual search" (my translation).

Estrada e rio que nos levam e depositam num lugar qualquer das suas margens. Entregamo-nos ao seu curso porque sabemos que para onde quer que nos conduzam esse lugar terá sempre a forma da nossa própria casa, pois que a viagem nada mais é do que a vida, na familiaridade e na distância. A caminhada, o movimento que precede o pensamento, ato que tradicionalmente leva à descoberta e ignição para a evocação romântica e o despertar de sentimentos que possam levar-nos a um estado de graça inicial. O que menos interessa é a nossa localização geográfica, já que aprendizagem, essa, é uma constante durante todo o caminho (Arena 2017, 133-134).⁴⁰³

By combining critical fabulation with the act of walking/writing as situated and embodied practice, the protagonist embarks on a poetic exploration that traverses both physical landscapes and imagined realms. Thus, the text unfolds through three distinct cartographies: a geographical one, tracing the protagonist's movement from Lisbon to the Sado Valley and Lagos; a memory-based cartography, delving into the genealogies of slavery tied to the inhabitants of São Romão and Rio de Moinhos and the protagonist's own Cape Verdean 'creole Odyssey'; and an historical/artistic cartography, involving numerous characters—both known and unknown—who populate Black and diasporic African-European historiography. In this section, I will specifically elaborate on the intersection between the first and second 'cartography' presented in the text.

In the initial part of the protagonist's walk/writing through the city of Lisbon, urban reconnaissance reconnects, among many other Black figures, with the memory of the enslaved population in the capital. The protagonist reflects on the historical processes of Christianity, imperial capitalism, and goods extractivism that progressively reduced Black bodies to mere physical entities devoid of interiority, "destinados a passar à posteridade como pássaros cegos e sem alma" (Arena 2017, 22).⁴⁰⁴ The reduction of enslaved lives to mere flesh, stripped of subjectivity, is reflected in the colonial public, political, and spatial denial of dignified mourning at their death. As a result, the precariousness of enslaved lives in Lisbon is mapped onto two specific locations: they were cast down the Quebrada de Santa Catarina and later into the Poço dos Negros in the Madragoa district. Arena's text reflects on the spatial positioning of these bodies within

⁴⁰³ "A road and a river that take us to and from any place on its banks. We surrender to their course because we know that wherever they lead us, that place will always have the shape of our own home, because travelling is nothing more than life, in familiarity and distance. The walk, the movement that precedes thought, the act that traditionally leads to discovery and the ignition for romantic evocation and the awakening of feelings that can lead us to an initial state of grace. What matters less is our geographical location, since learning is a constant throughout the journey" (my translation).

⁴⁰⁴ "Destined to pass into posterity like blind, soulless birds" (my translation).

slave-holding Lisbon, not only in terms of their extreme exploitation—through which the city was sustained—but also in terms of their ultimate disposal. For colonial policies, the bodies of the enslaved dead were deemed unworthy of mourning, discarded and buried beneath the city’s foundations, deep in the Poço dos Negros. As Arena (2017, 22) observes, the enslaved were left with only “o Poço dos Negros e o lençol da cal como derradeira morada.”⁴⁰⁵ This unsettling connection between the city’s foundations and the forgotten bodies of the enslaved—subjected to total violence in both life and death—becomes a central spatial concern in Arena’s walk/writing through Lisbon. It prompts a rethinking of the city in relation to its Afrodescendant communities and the persistent spatial vulnerabilities they endure.⁴⁰⁶

Thus, the protagonist introduces a harsh geography marked by the extreme vulnerability of a community—a geography that recurs across various eras explored within Afrodescendant cultural memory. This includes the mass grave buried beneath a modern car park in Lagos, where the corpses of the enslaved intermingle with rubbish; the precarious conditions of those enslaved and brought between the 15th and 18th centuries to the Sado region for forced work in the fields; the settlements in that region after the end of abolition, serving as places of refuge from landowners who refused to enfranchise their ‘property’; the miserable conditions of workers in the rice fields in the 20th century; the long series of peripheral bairros along the Estrada Militar on the outskirts of Lisbon, occupied by Cape Verdean migrants and impoverished inland Portuguese from the 1950s onwards; and the urban bairros where Afro-diasporic subjects were crowded while awaiting medical care. The text, therefore, presents a spacetime continuum where the Black population continuously faces oppression and precarity within the spaces they inhabit. At the same time, it explores the forms of resistance these communities have enacted against that oppression.

Arena’s text deconstructs the conventional notions of spatial and temporal uniqueness, proposing instead a spiralling spacetime continuum that contrasts with the rationalized, ‘ordered’ space and linear time of Western modernity. In this dimension, past

⁴⁰⁵ “The Poço dos Negros and the shroud of lime as their final resting place” (my translation).

⁴⁰⁶ Reflecting on the bodies buried beneath the foundations of Lisbon invites us, at this final stage of analysing the novels in the corpus, to envision a continuity of temporality and spatiality in the Portuguese capital. The enslaved bodies cast into the depths of the Poço dos Negros in *Debaixo da nossa pele* seem to resurface in Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida’s *Maremoto*, joining the many other unmourned and forgotten bodies from Portuguese history. These figures form, alongside Boa Morte, a real ‘army of the dead’ that haunts Lisbon’s streets today (as argued in Chapter 3). This evokes a circularity of time and space—both a return to a traumatic, unresolved past and an imaginative exercise that challenges the Western notion of linear, ordered, and progressive timeline—establishing a thread that links the six works analysed in this dissertation.

and present continuously converge on the same plane. The spaces traversed, imbued with memories, become ‘zones of contact’ between different geographies, temporalities, and genealogies. As seen in the first part of the text, set in Lisbon, this approach also applies to other locations in the Afrodescendant Portuguese cartography, such as the Vale do Sado—particularly the villages of São Romão and Rio de Moinhos—and the city of Lagos. Thus, the journey’s centrifugal movement and spiralling timeframe provide a fresh perspective on Afrodescendant history and culture, gradually shifting the focus from the dominant ‘viewpoint’ of Lisbon and its imperial archive toward ‘minor’ and less visible memories, histories, and geographies.

In his book *Cativos do Reino: a Circulação de Escravos Entre Portugal e Brasil, Séculos 18 e 19* (2012), Renato Pinto Venâncio contends that it is common in Portugal to view slavery as an ‘external’ phenomenon, primarily linked to Brazil, where most enslaved individuals were sent. This perspective frames Portugal merely as a ‘transit hub’ for this ‘human commodity,’ thereby neglecting the profound impact that slavery has had—and continues to have—on the socio-cultural fabric of Portuguese society. In contrast, the various settlements of enslaved groups and their descendants in the Sado region illustrate that slavery was indeed present in Portugal, extending beyond the confines of the Lisbon metropolitan area. This region thus serves as a critical space for examining the diverse forms of miscegenation between the enslaved and the white population, as well as the ethnic-cultural syncretism, linguistic intermingling,⁴⁰⁷ and the occupation, appropriation, and adaptation of vulnerable geographies shaped by the slave diaspora.

The protagonist recognizes this counter-history of slavery in Portugal as a ‘rooted’ presence, and his aim is to trace it within the geographies of the last communities of descendants of enslaved individuals. From a spatial perspective, the narrative voice, upon reaching the Sado Valley, upsettingly observes that neither the geography nor its inhabitants seem to carry any ‘ecological memory’ of a past that, while distant, is also recent.

The most prominent example of ‘geographical memory’ in the Sado Valley is the cultivation of rice, a practice and knowledge introduced by Africans who settled in the

⁴⁰⁷ Arena devotes a section of the book to the encounter with Luísa Baião, the oldest woman in São Romão and a descendant of enslaved people. Afrodescendency thus becomes not only a somatic feature but also a linguistic one, marked by a distinct way of speaking Portuguese—“*lingriça, vrido*” (Arena 2017, 180)—which forms a genuine “*léxico de palavras da língua do povo atravessadiço*” [lexicon of words from the language of the *atravessadiço* people] in the author’s words (Arena 2017, 180).

area at the beginning of the 18th century (Henriques 2020, 143). The narrative highlights how the current trend toward mechanizing rice cultivation represents yet another act of erasure regarding those who brought this agricultural practice to the region. Thus, the work performed by machines today is built upon “o trabalho iniciado pelas mãos de escravos” (Arena 2017, 131).⁴⁰⁸ This erasure of the knowledge and history of the individuals behind rice cultivation in the Sado Valley reflects a broader process embedded within the territory and its geography. Consequently, the protagonist’s journey seeks to interrogate this geographically inscribed absence, recognizing that dealing with the history of a specific space entails also acknowledging the larger history of racial capitalism.

Colonialism and slavery—along with their associated technologies, particularly the total exploitation of land and natural resources through the plantation system—had a devastating impact not only on the colonies and countries where the enslaved were trafficked, especially Brazil, but also on Portugal and its environment. Although the presence of enslaved communities in Portugal was not as substantial as in Brazil, these communities nonetheless left a significant mark on the territories where they were forced to labour, and where they later developed strategies to resist and assert their freedom. In this framework, Arena’s text examines the geographical effects of colonial oppression in ‘*Portugal profundo*,’ viewing it not merely as a historically circumscribed exploitative force but as a lasting impact of land exploitation following the decline of the empire. While colonial agrarian policies were driven by capital and state imperatives based on racialized exploitation, these internal relations appear to persist in the aftermath of oppression in the Sado Valley. Arena notes that although the inhabitants of the villages may not remember the colonial agrarian landscape of their ancestors, they do recall the enduring legacy of exploitation that followed, which reinstated similar exploitative dynamics for the region’s workers. Efrigénia, a resident of São Romão, either does not recall or deliberately chooses to forget the history of slavery. Nevertheless, she shares with the protagonist “sobre as injustiças e a opressão social que reinavam no tempo da sua infância e dos ventos de mudanças que trouxeram a reforma agrária ao vale” (Arena 2017, 151).⁴⁰⁹ Thus, Arena’s exploration examines how the logic of former exploitative spaces persists, re-actualized in contemporary spatial arrangements in Portugal. This

⁴⁰⁸ “The labour initiated by the hands of slaves” (my translation).

⁴⁰⁹ “About the injustices and social oppression that prevailed during her childhood and the winds of change that brought agrarian reform to the valley” (my translation).

manifestation is evident not only in production—specifically in rice cultivation—but also in the ongoing historical concealment of communities marked by inequality and impoverishment.

In this context, Isabel Castro Henriques investigates the enduring effects of violence stemming from the exploitative agricultural colonial system by analysing the labour dynamics of the Sado communities in the rice fields during the late 19th and throughout the 20th century. The historian specifically highlights the pronounced gendered division of labour, which becomes even more stark when intersected with racial categories. The ‘*mondadeiras*,’ women tasked with wading into the swampy waters to remove weeds from the rice plants, were physically drained by the harsh working conditions and the effects of paludism. According to local oral traditions, these women, often descendants of enslaved people, were referred to as ‘*pretas dos pés rachados*’ or ‘*do calcanhar rachado*’ (Henriques 2020, 152; 170), a label that underscores the extreme marginalization and discrimination faced by the Afrodescendant population due to corporeal consumption. This term not only reflected the physical toll of labour exploitation in the rice fields but later became a more generalized expression for the entire ‘*negros do Sado*’ community. Thus, language serves as a record of what memory forgets. More broadly, the labour-intensive nature of life persisted even after the end of slavery, with landowners exploiting the workers and retaining more than half of the rice harvest proceeds, leaving the labourers with minimal compensation.

In the context of forced dislocation, it was necessary for the enslaved to align the imposed new world with an internal and affective map that encompassed both ancestral lands and their reconfiguration within the new country. Despite the past creation of enslaved syncretic practices—which span from cultural and religious customs and habits to the inhabitation of spaces—designed to endure and integrate into the territory (Henriques, 2009), the protagonist of *Debaixo da nossa pele* faces the current challenges in connecting the landscape of the Sado region to its African and ancestral roots: “As falas e os costumes que eu ouvi de Leopoldina tornam quase irreal qualquer ligação a mares, montanhas e floresas de África. O continente ancestral foi como que varrido das suas memórias e pensar África não podia ser mais um ato de fê, quando tudo em volta tinha de ser reconstruído: a fala, o modo, o corpo e o território, numa transição para a própria sobrevivência” (Arena 2017, 166).⁴¹⁰

⁴¹⁰ “The words and customs I heard from Leopoldina make any connection to the seas, mountains and flowers of Africa almost unreal. The ancestral continent had been wiped from her memories and thinking

The protagonist, initially seeking these legacies within the geography of places, will soon come to understand that they must be sought elsewhere. The text clearly illustrates that these legacies are embedded in the bodies of the twelve current inhabitants of São Romão. Beyond the vulnerability inherent in diasporic geographies, these individuals embody a profound history of community resistance. As previously discussed, the text underscores the impossibility of fully reconstructing and restoring the lives and struggles of the enslaved and their remote descendants, as they lack any form of historical public recognition—such as a graveyard or monument—to honour and mourn their lives. What remains, then? What remains is the acknowledgment of the absence, the more or less voluntary silence and oblivion surrounding that history. However, through critical fabulation, this absence becomes less pronounced, revealing the hidden and imperceptible connections between that space and those bodies, between that geography and those memories. Despite the concealment of memory, that specific bodies in that specific space leak a genealogy of experiences that connect temporalities, identities, knowledges, and continents:

Ainda assim, olho para estas figuras como pessoas que triunfaram sobre a estupidez humana e a injustiça social; sobre o mal institucionalizado, graças à decência com que enfrentaram cada dia das suas vidas. Não optaram por registrar as suas desgraças e os impasses das suas consciências, cadastrar toda a mesquinhez da autoridade pública e privada. Nos olhos dos seus descendentes há uma linha impercetível de retidão de caráter e de inconformismo. A mesma que fez esboroar a memória de ofensa sofridas, do desprezo e da maldade quase protocolar, e a recusa em habitar um mundo que se esgotava em si próprio. Num mundo de saberes, onde os salões da casa da História estão apinhados de teses que esgotam quase todos os terrenos aráveis possíveis, sinto-me como um jovem poeta lírico, recrutando às pressas para pôr em verso essa gesta que acaba nos 12 últimos mohicanos, numa aldeia sonâmbula, à beira do Sado. Levo comigo os gestos de Etlvina, Efrigénia e do guardador das águas, essa permanência inquietante e obstinada no olhar, traços de sobrevivência e da resistência moral das consciências (Arena 2017, 169-170).⁴¹¹

of Africa could no longer be an act of faith, when everything around her had to be rebuilt: speech, manner, body and territory, in a transition for survival itself” (my translation).

⁴¹¹ “Even so, I look at these figures as people who triumphed over human stupidity and social injustice; over institutionalised evil, thanks to the decency with which they faced each day of their lives. They didn’t choose to record their misfortunes and the impasses of their consciences, to register all the pettiness of public and private authority. In the eyes of their descendants there is an imperceptible line of uprightness of character and non-conformity. The same line that made the memory of offences suffered, of contempt and almost protocol malice, and the refusal to inhabit a world that was exhausted in itself, crumble. In a world of knowledge, where the halls of the house of History are crowded with theses that exhaust almost all possible arable land, I feel like a young lyric poet, hastily recruiting to put into verse this gesture that ends with the last 12 Mohicans, in a sleepwalking village on the banks of the Sado. I take with me the

By linking genealogies of body, space and memory, the text addresses the themes oppression and vulnerability, transforming them into what I would call a ‘map of moral freedom’ embedded within the body-land-memory of these communities. This refers to the corporeal-geographical inscription of the lives of these communities following the historical end of slavery and the silent reconfiguration of their life after oppression mainly through miscegenation with the white population of the area.

To understand this ‘map,’ it may be helpful to interpret the Sado communities in a manner similar to the formation of spaces and groups in the Caribbean and Latin America, historically formed through experiences of resistance and escape from slavery and colonial systems. Depending on their specific historical and geographical contexts, these communities have been known by various names.⁴¹² In the context of Portuguese-speaking countries, in Brazil they were initially called *mocambo*, and later *quilombo*. Isabel Castro Henriques (2019b, 135) illustrates how the practices of *mocambo/quilombo* were integral to the resistance of the enslaved and represented a new form of fugitive socialization against the exploitation of sugarcane plantations in former African colonies, such as the *mocambos* in São Tomé e Príncipe. Previously, Afro-Brazilian activist and scholar Beatriz do Nascimento (1985) had emphasized the connection between African and Brazilian *quilombos* in the 17th century and the importance of this link in shaping the concept in Brazil. Castro Henriques (2019a, 9) further points out that a unique and unprecedented case in Europe is the *mocambo* in Lisbon, which, from the 15th to the 19th century, served as a space where fugitive and freed enslaved individuals formed an extended community also with the most impoverished part of the Portuguese population. Apart from the origins of the *bairro do Mocambo* in Lisbon, as Venâncio (2012) also asserts, there is no evidence of other forms of *mocambos* or *quilombos* in Portugal. This is largely because, although slavery existed, it did not evolve into the large-scale system of exploitation in the country as seen in Brazilian fields and households, or other parts of Latin America. However, this does not imply that various strategies of escape and resistance to colonial and slave oppression were absent in Portugal. On the contrary, many

gestures of Etelvina, Efrigénia and the water keeper, that restless and obstinate permanence in their gaze, traces of survival and the moral resistance of consciences” (my translation).

⁴¹² These communities are known as *Cumbes* in Venezuela, *Palenques* in Colombia, *Maroons* in the English-speaking Caribbean and the southern United States, *Bush Negroes* in Guiana and Suriname, *Marronage* in the Dominican Republic and the French-speaking Caribbean, and *Cimarrones* in Cuba and Puerto Rico (Gomes, Schwarcz 2018, 666).

thoughtful and deliberate acts of resistance were employed to counter these oppressive systems.

Despite the inherent diversity and particularities of these different realities, it is notable that the communities inhabiting these spaces, and engaging in resistance from the 16th century to the present, consistently challenge the colonial archive's portrayal of their existence. These communities are depicted in colonial narratives solely as illegal and outlawed spaces to be repressed, with the intent of returning their inhabitants to forced labour. From the Luso-Afro-Brazilian perspective, *mocambo* and *quilombo* communities challenge this reductive portrayal, demonstrating that their history extends far beyond the oppressive geographies imposed by the imperial archive, which perpetuates the notion that the categories of 'Black' and 'enslaved' are eternally co-extensive. In contrast, these communities embody the possibility of imagining Black existence beyond the constraints of perpetual slavery. In this sense, *quilombos* are not merely havens for fugitive enslaved—a view that risks being narrowly defined by juridical interpretations—but rather, they evolve into rich epistemological, cultural, genealogical, and political systems in constant transformation. These communities represent an ongoing process of current reconfigurations, where the collective experiences of *(r)existência* against historical and contemporary oppression persist, adapt, and evolve. Incorporating a decolonial feminist perspective, these territories and communities emerge as a “radical promise” (Vergès 2021, 22), serving as a foundation for challenging contemporary forms of oppression.

Thus, it is evident that Joaquim Arena's text does not directly address *quilombismo*, and to argue otherwise would be an historical distortion. With this argumentation, I want to demonstrate that the protagonist's exploration of the past, along with the complex ability to survive, resist, and reinvent oneself despite the oppressive system in the Sado Valley, is suddenly transformed through interactions with the twelve local inhabitants. These interactions make the protagonist realize that what he sought was not a tangible place. There is no physical *quilombo* among those villages, but rather a moral one which stems from the 'moral resistance of consciences' embodied in the spirit of the last '12 Mohicans' still living in the Sado Valley, to use Arena's words. Both the space and its inhabitants either do not recall or deliberately forget their past. However, it is precisely when diasporic subjects, who embody remote and diverse yet complementary experiences, meet that the 'map of moral freedom' silently emerge from beneath the skin and the layers of occulted memories. For this reason, the protagonist realizes that these two villages no longer represent a territory to be reached in search of evidence of a

forgotten existence; Arena acknowledges that São Romão and Rio de Moinhos are not merely physical spaces but embodied experiences rooted in the corporeal memories of those who inhabit them. These spaces offer alternative knowledge and epistemological perspectives on the community's identity, shaped by centuries of struggle. In this way, the two villages along the Sado River no longer reflect solely Alentejan, African, or Afrodescendant search for identities, but also the collective Afrodescendant memory of the nation, lying beneath the surface of official history. Through the 'moral resistance of consciences' among the inhabitants, the history of resistance in these communities does not cease to exist because the descendants seem to have forgotten their past. Bodies and embodied memories continues to carry with them these places into a spacetime continuum, transforming them into a meeting point and common ground for the Afro-diasporic population. Here, hope and the struggle for better living conditions emerge as shared experiences that unite these communities in Portugal.

As Arena (2017, 267) writes, “falar de nós também é descobrir o outro.”⁴¹³ In a continuous narrative that intertwines the past and present, Portugal and Cape Verde, and Europe and Africa, the protagonist, through the experiences of the Sado communities, reconnects his family history—his ‘Creole odyssey’—to a broader diasporic geography. Despite their differences, this geography embodies a common quest for liberation from oppression. In this context, the ‘map of moral freedom’ emerges as a shared territoriality where Arena seeks to situate contemporary Afro-diasporic conditions, drawing from diverse histories and perspectives. Thus, the text concludes with a powerful and poetic re-enactment of a song sung by Leopoldina and other children from the Sado valley, which serves as a poignant moment of ancestral revival, transcending the colonial archive of oppression. From this song arise “all the initiatives, actions, gestures, songs, rituals that night or day, hidden or visible, represent a radical promise” (Vergès 2021, 22) for achieving freedom in the past, present, and future of the African diaspora.

⁴¹³ “Talking about ourselves is also discovering the other” (my translation).

Conclusions – Welcoming Unknowns: Literature as Negativity, Mourning, and Hospitality

Nada as fará desaparecer
por isso chora o que quiseses
sobre as tuas cicatrizes.

Elas limitam a tua invisibilidade
por isso escreve o que puderes
sobre as tuas cicatrizes.

Gisela Casimiro, “Cicatrizes” (from *Erosão*)

How can we weave together the threads of this thesis without returning to a central theme that has underpinned this work from the outset—the ongoing issue of restitution following oppression in Portugal? This reflection offers a final opportunity to address the research questions raised at the beginning of my doctoral investigation.

The year 2024 marked a significant milestone for Portugal, commemorating fifty years since the end of its dictatorship, and for Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, and São Tomé and Príncipe, celebrating the end of colonial occupation. It also served as a prelude to 2025, when these nations will celebrate fifty years of Independence. However, these celebrations have not diminished or resolved the ongoing debate, active since the early 1990s, regarding Portugal’s—as well as other European nations’—responsibility in acknowledging the deep wounds of colonial history and pursuing restorative policies. Despite the urgency of this issue, Portugal, like many European countries, has consistently postponed meaningful engagement, deeming it unnecessary. As a result, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) convened in May 2014 at the Reparations Commission conference—an important moment in advancing the international debate—and identified Portugal among the European nations from which they seek reparations.

In April 2023, Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, contradicting a position he took six years before,⁴¹⁴ acknowledged that the time had come for the country

⁴¹⁴ In 2017, during a visit to Gorée Island, a key slave-trading hub off the coast of Senegal, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa commented on Portugal’s role in the slave trade. He noted that Portugal began abolishing slavery in the 1760s after recognizing its ‘injustice.’ However, he failed to mention that Portugal had the longest history of European involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, forcibly transporting about 6 million Africans between the 15th and 19th centuries. He also overlooked the fact that while slavery was abolished on the Portuguese mainland in 1761, the trade to Brazil persisted, with full abolition across all Portuguese territories only occurring in 1869.

to ‘assume responsibility’ for its past, and finally, on April 2024, the President presented official apologies for the crimes committed during the transatlantic slave trade and the colonial era, and acknowledged that there is a need for reparations: “Há acções que não foram punidas e os responsáveis não foram presos? Há bens que foram saqueados e não foram devolvidos? Vamos ver como podemos reparar isso” (Sousa in Adam 2024, online).⁴¹⁵ Many, including Evalina Dias, project manager of Djass in Portugal, and Brazilian officials such as Minister of Racial Equality Anielle Franco (Lusa 2024b, online) and Minister of Culture Margareth Menezes (Lusa 2024c, online),⁴¹⁶ have urged President Rebelo de Sousa to back his significant remarks with concrete actions. This call for action is especially pressing given the ongoing delays in the realization of the slavery memorial designed by Kiluanji Kia Henda, which has become emblematic of the broader debate surrounding Portugal’s responsibility in acknowledging its colonial past. Expanding the discussion beyond Portugal and Brazil, Humberto Adami (in Rodrigues 2024, online), Vice-President of the Brazilian Black Slavery Truth Commission, asserts that Portugal has to apologise “não só ao Brasil, mas a todos os cidadãos negros, que são descendentes daqueles que foram sequestrados em África. [...] O debate da reparação da escravidão é um debate internacional que não envolve só o Brasil e Portugal, envolve muitos outros.”⁴¹⁷ Despite the president’s remarks, the Portuguese government has stated that there are currently no specific processes or programs to implement concrete reparation policies. It has reiterated its commitment to following ‘the same approach’ as previous administrations (Lusa 2024c, online).

While many discussions and debates within the Lusophone Atlantic space have focused on the ‘material concerns’ of potentially defining the parameters of Portugal’s compensation within a framework of justice and economics, others emphasize the ‘irreparable’ nature of such hypothetical reparations. In this regard, Santomean historian

⁴¹⁵ “Are there actions that have not been punished and those responsible have not been arrested? Is there property that has been looted and not returned? Let’s see how we can make amends” (my translation).

⁴¹⁶ As is evident, Brazil responded swiftly to the issue of reparations, recognizing the ongoing impact of Portugal’s slave-owning past on the structural inequalities that still affect the country. In light of this, Franco’s team also initiated discussions with the Portuguese government to explore how these statements could be translated into concrete actions. The question of reparations in Brazil, however, is particularly complex, as historian Ana Lúcia Araújo points out. She notes that it would be problematic to seek compensation solely from Portugal without also addressing the role of the Brazilian government. This is because Brazilians, even those born in Brazil, played a significant role in the Atlantic slave trade from its beginning, making both Portugal and Brazil deeply implicated in the same historical issue (Araújo in Gorjão Henriques 2014, online).

⁴¹⁷ “Not just to Brazil, but to all black citizens who are descendants of those who were kidnapped in Africa. [...] The debate on reparations for slavery is an international debate that doesn’t just involve Brazil and Portugal, it involves many others” (my translation).

Isaura Carvalho affirms that “há coisas que são irreparáveis: pior do que os danos materiais foram os danos a nível da nossa auto-estima, das mentalidades e da capacidade de decidirmos por nós” (Carvalho in Gorjão Henriques 2014, online).⁴¹⁸ Carvalho’s reflection points also to an often-overlooked issue: the dependency embedded in the concept of reparations. As currently approached, reparations appear to establish a new form of dependency, with European countries still dictating the terms. As such, this reinforces a sense and a position of ‘inferiority,’ where former colonial powers who once exploited the colonies are now expected to ‘take care’ of them. For reparations and restitution to become a meaningful paradigm, African nations and Afrodescendant communities must assert themselves as the primary agents in shaping these policies, prioritizing their own needs and expectations. Without this shift, there is a risk of perpetuating the old colonial dependency, providing only a superficial—or worse, neocolonial—‘resolution’ to the colonial wound.

As argued, Portuguese Afrodescendant literature has positioned itself around the theme of restitution. Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, in her poetic reflections, identifies the ‘restitution of inwardness’ as a key collective project of Afrodescendant authors from the Afro-Luso-Brazilian diaspora. This form of restitution is as vital and necessary as the much-debated restitution of looted cultural goods. However, only Black and Afrodescendant authors of the diaspora can carry out this project, as it involves reclaiming and restoring their own inner consciousness and world—what Almeida describes as giving “uma *mente* a nós mesmos, ou estamos dando a nós mesmos uma mente que sempre esteve aqui” (Almeida 2023, 67).⁴¹⁹ For this reason, this type of restitution represents a concrete action that avoids falling back into the old dynamics of colonial dependency, creating space, through literature and more generally the arts, to manifest their own needs and necessities in restoring dignity to their subjectivities long stolen by the history of colonial oppression.

In the course of this work, I have explored how restitution occurs in the six novels of the corpus also through the vulnerabilities the characters exhibit, the languages and aesthetics they propose, and the spaces they explore and embody. Following this analysis, which considers the potential emergence of a counter-aesthetics of vulnerability, a key question arises: in these novels, does the characters’ restitution of inwardness ‘heal’ the

⁴¹⁸ “There are things that are irreparable: worse than the material damage were the damages to our self-esteem, our mindsets, and our ability to make decisions for ourselves” (my translation).

⁴¹⁹ “A *mind* to ourselves, or are we giving ourselves a mind that has always been here” (my translation).

wounds they carry in their bodies and memories, and does it, in some way, repair their history as well as that of the lacerated social and political body of Portugal?

A close reading on the characters, aesthetic choices, and conclusions of the novels reveals, in my view, a distinct tendency that could be described as ‘negative’—not in a qualitative sense, but in terms of rejecting the reproduction of pre-established, easily comprehensible content and aesthetic standards, both in plot and literary form.

Firstly, as argued, many of the characters appears to be ‘morally ambiguous,’ uncomfortable, opaque, or even complicit in the colonial system to which they themselves are vulnerable. This is especially evident in figures like the *assimilados*, such as Cartola de Sousa and Eugénio—who is also implicated in patriarchal violence against his wife—and Boa Morte da Silva, whose hands are stained with the blood of his African compatriots during the colonial war. Ambiguity also persists in Vitória’s grandfather, António Queiroz da Fonseca, who denies her the chance to reconnect with her ancestral history, as well as in Angolan women like Juliana Tijamba and Rosa Chitula, who perpetrate violence against one another, with Rosa refusing reconciliation with her daughter. This opacity is also present in the ‘assimilated memories’ of Glória and Filomena, Angolan women clinging to false colonial hopes of a better future for their children, and in the forcibly erased memories of the Sado villagers, shaped by an anti-Black rejection internalized by Portugal’s racist history. These characters defy simplistic dichotomies, where Black subjects are often portrayed solely as passive figures suffering under oppression. Instead, their stories reveal a deeper, more complex individual, psychological, and historical reality that remains largely unexplored in the Portuguese literary realm.

The conclusions of these novels seem to move in this direction. Many characters either die or disappear into the crowds of Lisbon, as in the case of the three *assimilados*. Others, like Filomena, Solange, and Vitória, fail to realize their dreams of living together or reconciling with their loved ones. Still others, such as the protagonist of Arena’s novel, are left grappling with a deafening absence of answers regarding their genealogies and relationships. In other words, the novels do not offer simple resolutions or suggest an easy ‘escape’ from the characters’ conditions of bodily vulnerability and fractured memories. Instead, the conclusions raise more questions than they answer about the temporalities and subjectivities they depict. Ultimately, these endings prompt a continual questioning and interrogation of the reality they portray.

By ‘negativity’ in these novels, I do not mean passive disillusionment or resignation regarding their ‘resolutions.’ Rather, I refer to a refusal to serve as vehicles for simplified narratives of reparation or to present themselves as symbols of healing. In fact, the concept of ‘negativity’ in Black arts emerges from Black artists and scholars who critique the expectation that Black art must always be reparative, soothing, or cathartic in response to the colonial past. This ‘Black negativity’ challenges the public and critical fascination with the assumption that Black artistic productions inherently always aim to repair. Paraphrasing perspectives from Black and decolonial feminism, the paradox of this widespread ‘reparative demand’ placed by the world on Black art lies in its call for the redress of a history whose violence has never truly ended. The Middle Passage, colonial violence, exploitation, discrimination, racialization, dehumanization, necropolitics, and structural precarization have not ceased but have merely reconfigured themselves as anoriginary and unfinished historical displacements that continue to ‘tear the world’ apart. In these terms, redress and recuperation would be configured solely as a limiting or restraining effort of that violence, demanded solely and exclusively from the Black subjects and their productions. How can one demand reparation if that same history continues through other forms? Given the persistence of this violence, including in relation to the theme of healing, the means available for reparative action currently seem insufficient. In other words, the insistence on reparation, healing, and recuperation ultimately seeks to place Black art at the service of the grammar of that same political system that perpetuates this violence, paradoxically demanding that Black art should repair what the system itself continues to sustain.

To resist this ‘soothing subsumption’—which merely reinforces racial subjugation—‘Black negativity’ emerges as both a content and aesthetic effort to evade such political grammar and socio-cultural expectations. Instead, it anchors itself in alternative figurations of indeterminacy, opacity, fragmentation, ambivalence, implication, ruination, and openness, elements which, as Rizvana Bradley (2023, 34) notes, “emerge from this irreparable wounding, from the vertigo of black experience, disclosing the immanent rupture of every suture.”

In this light of ‘Black negativity,’ I interpret the corpus as a final reflection. The conclusions of these novels reveal a form of ‘negativity’ that resists being reduced to simple, soothing subsumptions. Instead, they linger in fragmented stories, where moments of beauty emerge through the exposure of the inner lives of the protagonists. This ‘negativity,’ in my view, is reflected also in the aesthetic forms and choices examined

throughout this thesis. Either through the choices of narration, or of composition, or of language, these texts convey a sense of fragmentation, opacity, open circularity, silent occupation, stolen reappropriation, ruination, and deliberate openness. The spatial settings similarly evoke themes of ruination, degradation, waste accumulation, the decontextualization and dispersion of objects and subjects, separation, and underground or underwater dimensions, reflecting both urban and environmental absences. Rather than offering ‘complete’ or ‘exhaustive’ narratives, these novels present residual stories of vulnerable lives that persist and resist despite the weight of oppression. What emerges from this analysis is not a ‘totalizing narrative,’ but rather diasporic experiments with fragments, residues, and ruins: collages of letters, phone calls, diaries, fragmented memoirs, and blurred literary genres. These incomplete ‘counter-forms’ aim to disrupt the expectation of a cohesive, linear narrative that suggests easy redress. Instead, their fragmentary nature embodies and gives voice to the complexity and depth of the Afro-diasporic experience, flowing in and out of the historical spacetime continuum in which they are embedded. It is within this continuous fluctuation between content and form that these novels call for an attempt to ‘vocalize’ the Afrodescendant experience, inviting readers to engage with it in an ‘opaque,’ fragmentary, and, above all, open manner.

In response to the broader call for reparations for colonial wounds—a demand often echoed by readers, critics, and scholars—what sets these novels apart is their embrace of ‘negativity,’ where recuperation or reparation is not easily grasped. This is because recovery and redress remain impossible in a context where violence is continually reiterated in new forms, despite decolonization and democratization. In other words, these novels do not offer a false promise of healing that serves as a balm for Portugal’s lacerated political and social body.

For this reason, the novels do not idealize or simplify the themes of healing or suturing the colonial wound; nor do they treat ghosts as mere haunting essences to be exorcised. On the contrary, I believe that the selected texts invite readers to contemplate what it means to ‘stay with the wound’ and ‘stay with the ghost.’ This notion of ‘staying with’ prompts a reflection on the complexities surrounding the (im)possibility of reconciliation with the past, attempting to escape the logics that reduce healing and reparation to mere political subsumption. In this body of texts, the protagonists’ vulnerable conditions are not simply ‘cured’ through a romanticized, cathartic path. Rather, these novels conclude—albeit in different ways—without offering easy terms of appeasement or overcoming specific vulnerabilities, both corporeal and mnemonic.

Instead, they ‘live-with’ and ‘become-with’ the wounds and ghosts of their historical spacetime continuum, emphasizing that colonial trauma is not solely an issue for the Portuguese Afrodescendant community; rather, it is a collective responsibility of Portuguese society as a whole. Thus, their works are not a project of reparation in the traditional sense but rather one that encourages reflections on why the conditions and tools for such reparation are still lacking.

At this stage, one might ask: what, then, is the ultimate outcome of this ‘living-with’ and ‘becoming-with’ the ghosts and wounds? I propose interpreting these texts as final reflections on the necessity of critical mourning and the cultivation of a sense of hospitality within literature.

In the essay “*Melancolia e luto, nostalgia e saudade*,” Roberto Vecchi (2021, 87) acknowledges that the act of burying the dead is essential not only to grant them peace but also to restore peace to the living and to the fabric of social life. As Eduardo Lourenço (2014, 11) previously observed, the work of mourning in Portuguese society in the aftermath of both dictatorship and colonialism, with all its psychoanalytic and collective dimensions, has remained largely incomplete. The continued refusal to symbolically bury and mourn these historical ‘corpses’ perpetuates the language of melancholy tied to that past, as explored in detail in Chapter 2 regarding Portugal’s colonial loops, aphasias, unthoughts, and unconscious. Although, Lourenço noted that literature was gradually becoming one of the few spaces where attempts were made to engage with and rework the complexities of both the nation’s past and its present.

The theme of mourning is central in many novels of the corpus. This is evident both in novels analysed in Chapter 3, where diasporic characters in Portugal struggle to find a place for their bodies to be mourned amidst precarity, and in Chapter 4, where the absence of the bodies of the witnesses makes it seem impossible to mourn a violent and silenced past. Always viewed through the lens of ‘negativity,’ mourning does not take place in these texts. The incompleteness of mourning further underscores how these novels represent a form of waiting—symbolically marked by the conclusion of Yara Nakahanda Monteiro’s novel—, a reflective pause to understand the historical and contemporary reasons that prevent Portugal, and other countries, from fully ‘burying the dead’ of the past. At the same time, these texts critically reflect on how present-day diasporic displacements bear an urgent need for dignified recognition, a recognition that only mourning, as an ethical acknowledgment of the finitude and value of the other’s life, can provide. In this way, mourning in these novels is not confined to the past, nor does it seek

to silence the ghosts of history with posthumous rites. Instead, mourning is situated in the present, serving as a necessary response to the ongoing production of vulnerable and precarious lives by deeply entrenched historical forces. It is in this sense that Yara Nakahanda Monteiro (in Lusa 2024d, online) has recently stated, “é uma história que precisa de ser revisitada porque o luto precisa de ser feito para avançarmos de mãos dadas.”⁴²⁰

Recognizing the urgent need to affirm the dignity of the most vulnerable lives—those ‘bodies in relation’ within contemporary post-imperial Portuguese society—these novels, in various ways, seem to grapple with the creation of ‘hospitality’ for these characters within the literary text. Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, in fact, proposes the idea of a ‘poetics of hospitality’ as a central component of the collective Afro-diasporic project of restoring inwardness to Black subjects in fiction and the arts. For Almeida, literature becomes a space of belonging and habitation, even amid the displacements of the diaspora. To make a character feel ‘at home,’ despite the hostilities of their environment, is to create a space where their inwardness can flourish in its limitlessness, counteracting any colonial vision that drastically reduced it to the point of nullifying it. Creating hospitality in fiction, therefore, involves shaping the conditions—through language and imagination—that allow the characters’ inner lives to grow not only within the text but also within the reader’s mind. Hospitality, in this sense, becomes an invitation to welcome even the most remote, unknown and ambiguous character into the reader’s consciousness. As Almeida puts it, it calls for “uma suspensão dos preconceitos pela qual até mesmo leitores relutantes possam se ver sendo hospitaleiros com um desconhecido” (Almeida 2023, 89).⁴²¹

Thinking of this poetics of hospitality in relation to highly vulnerable characters relegated to extreme precariousness encourages deep reflection on a stranger’s innermost inwardness—particularly when their body, memories, and subjectivity are most exposed to violence. In other words, considering a poetics of hospitality in the frame of vulnerability invites us to regard subjects in their full dignity, even at the moment when this dignity is most violently denied. Reading this body of texts as a process of ‘living-with’ and ‘becoming-with’ highlights the necessity of affirming the right of every subject

⁴²⁰ “It’s a story that must be revisited, as mourning is necessary for us to move forward together” (my translation).

⁴²¹ “A suspension of prejudices, through which even reluctant readers may find themselves offering hospitality to a stranger” (my translation).

to appear, belong, and exist—even in precarious or wounded forms, as bleeding wounds or ghostly presences—within the literary text.

I conclude my reflection by addressing the final question posed at the opening of this thesis: is it possible to imagine an aesthetics—or counter-aesthetics—of vulnerability within these texts? By examining the re/de/composition of four key elements that, in my view, explore vulnerability in various ways by ‘performing’ it through the text, I sought to understand how these novels engage with new aesthetic features to ‘decolonize’ the racial regime of representation. This regime has traditionally depicted the Black vulnerable subject as a passive, tragic emblem, reminiscent of the ‘wounded captive body’ in a perpetual state of subjugation. The disruption of a time conception marked by separability, determinacy, and sequentiality; the introduction of new characters into the Portuguese literary landscape; the linking of bodily and mnemonic vulnerability with that of territoriality; and the innovative use of literary genre and language to ‘give body and mind’ to these subjectivities—all work, in distinct ways, toward the emergence and visibility of the inner lives of these figures, despite their exposure to the total violence of coloniality. In this sense, an aesthetics of vulnerability prompts us to consider vulnerability in conjunction with responsibility—not in the sense of guilt or blame, but as Marianne Hirsch (2016, 84) defines it, as the “ability to respond”: to respond to racial accounts of injury through the creative misappropriation of the wound and the ghost. This aesthetic approach becomes a counter-aesthetic—not anti-aesthetic, which would imply a radical impossibility—but one that responds to historically produced vulnerability through new ‘forms’ of expression. These forms of responsiveness to vulnerability foster specific Black aesthetic encounters that seek to erode the modern grammar from which this long-standing corporeal and enunciative pain emerges. Such responsiveness, operating through negativity, resists any simplistic rhetoric that ‘burdens’ Black aesthetics with reparative expectations, expanding the notion of redress into a broader collective consciousness.

As Denise Ferreira da Silva (2022, 273) asserts, decolonization should represent “the restoration of the total value expropriated from Native lands and Slave bodies under total violence.” In other words, decolonization calls for the reconstruction of the world through the creation of legal, economic, social, cultural, and political structures of reparation, through which global capital returns the full value it continues to extract from the enslaved body’s productive capacity and Native lands. However, as has been reiterated, the persistent reconfiguration of such violence under coloniality systematically

impedes the creation of these structures, because colonial violence remains ongoing. Before we can envision how to design these ‘architectures of reparation,’ Black and decolonial feminisms urge us to critically rethink accounts of racial subjugation in the contemporary context, since the frameworks inherited from modernity are insufficient to fully articulate or demand decolonization. These feminist perspectives invite us to turn toward the epistemologies, counter-aesthetics, and cultural resistance practices of Black, Indigenous, Creole, and Southern cosmovisions, which demonstrate that both knowledge and action can be liberated from the constraints of modernity’s worldview. This liberated thinking (embodied theory) and practice (decolonial praxis) opens the possibility of a radical departure from the ‘known’ world produced by modernity.

In this sense, thinking about vulnerability—which, as we have seen, extends beyond the human and links to the long history of colonial dispossession and exploitation of non-human bodies and territories—enables us to envision the dismantling of the world as we know it. Indeed, the counter-aesthetics of the six novels analysed provide accounts of racial subjugation of bodies, memories and spaces that were never present in the archive of Portuguese colonial modernity. Thus, they offer ‘decolonial grammars’ to give voice to the inwardness of characters deeply (up)rooted in specific territories, rendered vulnerable and precarious by both past and present colonial policies. While in Portugal, the conditions for constructing new juridical-economic and social architectures to restore the total value stolen from subjects and lands—historically plundered and still exploited today—seem by now unattainable, Portuguese Afrodescendant literature is rethinking the links between relationality, vulnerability, aesthetics, spatiality, and the historical regimes of bodies and memories. This is done through the poethic potential of literary imagination—a potential that is always political, ethical, practical, and poetic at once. The radically transformative power of this poethic potential lies in its ability to offer temporary hospitality, even to the most ambiguous, vulnerable, and precarious unknowns—too often abandoned in the world as we know it—within the reader. It is perhaps from this radical act of hospitality that we can begin to envision dismantling the world as it is and reimagining another world where the architectures of decolonization can finally take root.

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