

Margarida Rendeiro / Susan de Oliveira / Teresa Manjate (eds.)

# Writing of Women as Cultural Resistance

Deconstructing Memory Legacies in  
the Afro-Luso-Brazilian Atlantic





**unipress**

Culture – Environment – Society  
Humanities and beyond

Volume 8

Edited by

Joanna Godlewicz-Adamiec and Paweł Piszczatowski

Advisory Board:

Friederike Eigler (Georgetown University, Washington DC),  
Michaela Holdenried (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg /  
Stellenbosch University), Joanna Jurewicz (Uniwersytet  
Warszawski), Dolors Sabaté Planes (Universidade de Santiago  
de Compostela), László V. Szabó (Pannon Egyetem Veszprém /  
Univerzita J. Selyeho Komárno), Manfred Weinberg (Univerzita  
Karlova, Prag) and Monika Wolting (Uniwersytet Wrocławski)

The volumes of this series are peer-reviewed.

Margarida Rendeiro / Susan de Oliveira /  
Teresa Manjate (eds.)

## **Writing of Women as Cultural Resistance**

Deconstructing Memory Legacies in  
the Afro-Luso-Brazilian Atlantic

With 2 figures

V&R unipress

**fct** Fundação  
para a Ciência  
e a Tecnologia

**CHAM**  
CENTRO DE  
HUMANIDADES

**N NOVAFCSH**  
FACULDADE DE CIÊNCIAS SOCIAIS E HUMANAS  
UNIVERSIDADE NOVA DE LISBOA

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek  
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;  
detailed bibliographic data are available online: <https://dnb.de>.

This book was written for the Project Women's Literature: Memories, Peripheries and Resistance in the Luso-Afro-Brazilian Atlantic (<https://doi.org/10.54499/PTDC/LLT-LES/0858/2021>), funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology in Portugal.

© 2026 by Brill | V&R unipress, Robert-Bosch-Breite 10, 37079 Göttingen, Germany, [info@v-r.de](mailto:info@v-r.de), an imprint of the Brill-Group  
(Koninklijke Brill BV, Leiden, The Netherlands; Brill USA Inc., Boston MA, USA; Brill Asia Pte Ltd, Singapore; Brill Deutschland GmbH, Paderborn, Germany; Brill Österreich GmbH, Vienna, Austria)  
Koninklijke Brill BV incorporates the imprints Brill, Brill Nijhoff, Brill Schöningh, Brill Fink, Brill mentis, Brill Wageningen Academic, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Böhlau and V&R unipress.  
All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without prior written permission from the publisher.

Cover image: © Mónica de Miranda. From the series *Path to the Stars*. With the kind permission of the author.

Printed and bound by CPI books GmbH, Birkstraße 10, 25917 Leck, Germany  
Printed in the EU.

**Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Verlage | [www.vandenhoeck-ruprecht-verlage.com](http://www.vandenhoeck-ruprecht-verlage.com)**

ISSN 2940-6269 (print) | ISSN 2940-6277 (digital)  
ISBN 978-3-8471-1886-2 (print)  
ISBN 978-3-8470-1886-5 (digital) | ISBN 978-3-7370-1886-9 (eLibrary)

---

## Contents

Margarida Rendeiro (Centre for the Humanities, NOVA FCSH) / Susan de Oliveira (Federal University of Santa Catarina) / Teresa Manjate (Centre for African Studies, Eduardo Mondlane University) Mapping a Feminist and Decolonial Atlantic. Introduction to the Volume . . . . .	9
Margarida Rendeiro (Centre for the Humanities, NOVA FCSH) Not in the Name of the Father: Rethinking Memory and Paternity in the Works of Portuguese Women Writers of African Descent . . . . .	17
Ana Margarida Dias Martins (University of Porto (ILCML) / University of Exeter) Black Maternity in the Brown Atlantic: Maria Firmina dos Reis's <i>Úrsula</i> as a Narrative Placenta . . . . .	35
Ana Raquel Fernandes (CEAUL/ULICES – Centro de Estudos Anglisticos da Universidade de Lisboa, Universidade Europeia, Lisboa) Uneven Identities: Rethinking Women and Diaspora through the Literary and Artistic Work by Hélia Correia, Graça Morais and Paula Rego . . . . .	57
Carlos Garrido Castellano (University College Cork) Dismantling Patriarchal Hegemony and Neoliberal Authorship. Creativity and/as Care in the Work of Patrícia Portela . . . . .	73
Fernanda Barini (University College Cork) <i>Jovens instruídas buscam corresponder-se</i> : Traces of Agustina Bessa-Luís in Joana Bértholo's Writing . . . . .	89

Ana Aires e Castro (Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon) Reinscribing the Feminine Body: Exploring Agency and Resistance in Contemporary Cape Verdean Literature . . . . .	105
Inês Nascimento Rodrigues (Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra) Ancestral Postmemory: Women Writers and the Poetics of Inheritance in São Tomé and Príncipe . . . . .	125
Ana Rita Sousa (Bucarest University / Centre for the Humanities, NOVA FCSH) Memory and Movement: Women's Short Fiction in 21st-Century Guinea-Bissau . . . . .	157
Teresa Manjate (Centre for African Studies, Eduardo Mondlane University) / Sara Laisse (Catholic University of Mozambique) Women's Voices: Silenced and Murmured Stories between Portugal and Mozambique . . . . .	175
Tereza Virginia de Almeida (Federal University of Santa Catarina) Stella do Patrocínio: Between Madness and Poetry . . . . .	191
Miriane Pellegrino (FAPERJ Researcher) Women's Poetry Slam Championships across Lusophone African Countries: Contexts, Practices and Research . . . . .	211
Susan de Oliveira / Sophia Catarina Rosa / Stefane Ceola (Federal University of Santa Catarina) Ink, Silence, and Struggle: Rewriting Brazilian Literature from the Margins . . . . .	239
Patrícia Martinho Ferreira (Brown University) Listening to Domestic Violence through Portuguese Literature . . . . .	255
Teresa Manjate (Centre for African Studies, Eduardo Mondlane University) / Sara Laísse (Catholic University of Mozambique) Embodiment and Freedom in the Works of Énia Lipanga and Eliana N'Zualo. <i>Who we are and What we want</i> . . . . .	277

---

Luana Barossi (Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina) / Daviane Moreira e Silva (Universidade Federal de Jataí) The Architecture of Segregation in <i>Solitária</i> , by Eliana Alves Cruz . . . . .	295
Federica Lupati (Centre for the Humanities, NOVA FCSH) Deconstructing the Past, Building the Future: Reading Brazilian Indigenous Women Writers against Western Epistemologies . . . . .	311
Luca Fazzini (CEComp/FLUL) Afropolitanism and the Black Atlantic: Aesthetic Survivals and Significant Geographies in Contemporary Atlantic Fiction in Portuguese . . . . .	331
Notes on Contributors . . . . .	353
Subject Index . . . . .	361
Place Name Index . . . . .	365
Authors and Artists Index . . . . .	367



---

Margarida Rendeiro (Centre for the Humanities, NOVA FCSH) /  
Susan de Oliveira (Federal University of Santa Catarina) /  
Teresa Manjate (Centre for African Studies, Eduardo Mondlane  
University)

## Mapping a Feminist and Decolonial Atlantic. Introduction to the Volume

*“Piedade não é para nós”*

Noémia de Sousa, “Moças das docas”<sup>1</sup>

*Obrigada por me lembrares, amiga*

*Que não é sossegadamente* Que a vida passa –

Ana Luísa Amaral, “Carta a Lídia sobre a Poesia que se achou perdida”<sup>2</sup>

*O silêncio é sabedoria milenar*

Márcia Wayna Kambeba, “Silêncio Guerreiro”<sup>3</sup>

### Setting the Tone

This volume argues that women’s literature and cultural production across the Afro-Luso-Brazilian Atlantic constitute a powerful form of feminist and decolonial resistance. Through literature, women across Brazil, African Countries where Portuguese is the Official Language, and Portugal challenge patriarchal authority, and forge alternative genealogies and epistemologies that transcend national borders and disciplinary silos. They reimagine the Atlantic not only as a historical space scarred by displacement and violence, but also as a vibrant terrain of memory, cultural intervention, and speculative possibility. Echoing Noémia de Sousa’s defiant reminder that “there is no pity for us,” the voices gathered here refuse narratives of passive suffering, affirming instead the dignity and agency of women who challenge colonial and patriarchal legacies.

Literature is not peripheral to politics but a cultural praxis—at once archive, testimony, and speculative force—through which histories are narrated, identities forged, and futures envisioned beyond the violence of the colonial past. Drawing on feminist, decolonial, African, and Afro-diasporic thought, the essays

---

1 *Pity is nor for us.*

2 *Thank you for reminding me, my friend, /That life does not pass/ Quietly.*

3 *Silence is millennial wisdom.*

gathered here trace cartographies of relation, care, and resistance, foregrounding the transformative power of women's writing to generate epistemic renewal. From oral testimony to speculative fiction, poetry slams to archival recovery, these texts create space for gendered histories to be written otherwise.

Prepared in the year when former Portuguese African colonies commemorate the 50th anniversary of their independence, this volume resonates with the struggles, memories, and aspirations that continue to shape postcolonial identities and feminist resistance across the Afro-Luso-Brazilian space. It also reflects on the persistent legacies of colonialism that remain deeply embedded in Brazil, African countries, and Portugal—legacies that underscore the ongoing necessity of decolonial critique and feminist intervention.

This book is largely the product of the research project *Women's Literature: Memories, Peripheries, and Resistance (WomenLit)*, funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology in Portugal. Conducted between 2022 and 2025, *WomenLit* brought together a vibrant and diverse team of scholars affiliated with universities and research centres across Portugal, Brazil, Mozambique, and Angola. In addition to producing critical scholarship—disseminated through articles in various peer-reviewed journals and academic volumes—*WomenLit* extended its reach through multimedia initiatives, namely the documentary *Guardians of Memories, Keepers of the Word* (2024), co-directed with Portuguese filmmaker Raquel Freire, and the 30-episode podcast *Todas as Vozes: Conversas com Mulheres do Atlântico Afro-Luso-Brasileiro* [All Voices: Conversations with Women of the Afro-Luso-Brazilian Atlantic], widely accessible on major platforms.<sup>4</sup>

The editors of this volume themselves embody the Afro-Luso-Brazilian Atlantic, reflecting the transatlantic scope and collaborative spirit that underpin this work. Yet the insights presented here extend far beyond the scope of a single initiative, informed by a constellation of projects whose methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and findings enter into productive dialogue. Collectively, these projects contribute to the construction of a transnational and interdisciplinary field of inquiry concerned with literature, visual culture, and memory across the Afro-Atlantic world. Among them are *Women of the Brown Atlantic*, funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council in the UK; *ARTFICTIONS: Assessing the Contemporary Art Novel in Spanish and Portuguese*, funded by the Irish Research Council; *Mulheres nas literaturas e artes visuais: as representações de indígenas e afro-brasileiros(as)* [Women in Literature and Visual Arts: Representations of Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian Women], funded by the Brazilian Federal Agency for Support and Evaluation of Graduation Education (Capes);

---

<sup>4</sup> All publications, podcast episodes, and multimedia outputs developed under the *WomenLit* project are available at [womenlit@fcs.unl.pt](mailto:womenlit@fcs.unl.pt).

and *Lisbon as an Afro-Atlantic City*, also supported by the Foundation for Science and Technology in Portugal.

What unites these efforts is not only a shared commitment to feminist and decolonial inquiry, but also long-standing dialogues and intellectual complicities nurtured over years of collaborative engagement. These relationships—woven within and beyond institutional walls—are grounded in trust, shared languages, and a determination to build epistemologies that honour the memory, creativity, and resilience of women across the Afro-Luso-Brazilian Atlantic. Contributors to this volume hail from institutions in Portugal, Brazil, Mozambique the UK, the US, and Ireland, at different stages of their academic journeys. What binds them is a conviction in the transformative power of literary and cultural labour. This book, then, is not merely the outcome of institutional projects but the materialisation of sustained affective, political, and epistemic knowledge—an archive of academic complicity rooted in collective resistance, curiosity, and care.

### **Reading the Atlantic Otherwise: A Feminist and Decolonial Method**

This volume adopts a distinctly feminist and decolonial approach to the Afro-Luso-Brazilian Atlantic, not simply as a geographic or historical formation, but as a methodological orientation. To “read the Atlantic otherwise” is to foreground the lives, texts, and voices of women—particularly those long silenced or distorted by colonial and patriarchal narratives—and to recognise their cultural labour as a site of epistemic transformation. This entails a shift: from extractive knowledge practices to ones grounded in relation, care, and resistance; from nation-based canons to transatlantic entanglements of memory, survival, and creativity. In this sense, the volume echoes Ana Luísa Amaral’s evocation of a life lived without quietude—one that remains alert to memory, attuned to disquiet, and committed to awakening silenced histories.

The contributions in this volume are situated in the intersecting legacies of colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and neoliberalism, and they mobilise feminist and decolonial thought—especially as articulated by Indigenous, Black and Afro-diasporic women in Brazil, African countries with Portuguese as official language, and Portugal—to create space for alternative ways of knowing and narrating. This includes not only critical readings of literature, but also the recovery of submerged archives, the affirmation of oral and communal memory, and the recognition of affective and aesthetic modes as legitimate forms of knowledge production. Echoing Márcia Wayna Kambeba’s “Silêncio Guerreiro,” [Warrior Silence] the chapters engage silence not as absence but as a repository of ancestral wisdom and a strategy of decolonial survival.

This volume's approach is deliberately plural and situated. It draws from within the specificity of Lusophone contexts and the lived experiences of the women who inhabit and write them. This situatedness enables a transversal methodology that connects disparate geographies—Mozambique and Brazil, Cape Verde and Portugal, Guinea-Bissau and Sao Tome—through shared grammars of resistance and cultural survival.

To read the Atlantic otherwise is also to rethink the literary itself: not as an object of detached analysis, but as a mode of political and poetic intervention. The chapters gathered here foreground forms such as poetry slams, metafiction, oral history, and hybrid texts that challenge genre boundaries and unsettle Eurocentric assumptions about authorship and authority. Across these diverse forms, women's writing emerges as both a counter-memory and a speculative force, imagining worlds beyond the violence of the colonial past and its neoliberal afterlives.

This methodological orientation is deeply collective and intergenerational. Many chapters draw on dialogues between writers across time, nations, and positionalities—reclaiming lineages, reviving interrupted genealogies, and forging solidarities that transcend linguistic or disciplinary borders. In this sense, the volume does not merely analyse literature; it performs a feminist and decolonial reading practice: one grounded in relation, critical listening, and the desire to build epistemologies otherwise.

To read the Atlantic otherwise, then, is to make space—for complexity, for contradiction, for voices that unsettle. It is to accept fragmentation without abandoning connection and, above all, to remain attentive to the many ways in which women write, resist, and remember across the Afro-Luso-Brazilian world.

## Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This volume is anchored in a constellation of theoretical frameworks that include Black feminism, decolonial theory, intersectionality, postcolonial critique, and memory studies. While it draws inspiration from global critical traditions, its lens remains resolutely situated within Afro-Luso-Brazilian realities. Here, feminist and decolonial are not abstract categories, but grounded practices of survival, remembrance, and resistance against colonialism, patriarchy, and racial capitalism.

Our methodological posture is transnational, interdisciplinary, and intergenerational. Rather than imposing a singular canon or epistemology, the volume embraces plurality and relationality, attending to the ways gendered knowledges emerge through situated encounters, affective ties, and cultural interventions. Concepts such as cartographies of resistance, epistemic renewal,

post-memory, and cultural labour illuminate how literature becomes both an archive of historical fracture and a generative site for imagining otherwise.

We draw strength from a critical genealogy of feminist and decolonial scholarship that has opened new avenues for reading women's cultural production across the Lusophone world. Inocência Mata and Regina Dalcastagnè, as consultants of the *WomenLit* project and leading scholars in this field, have been central to shaping this work. We also honour Ana Luísa Amaral, who, as an early consultant, encouraged and inspired this project from its inception but sadly passed away in its early stages. Foundational studies—Dalcastagnè on female representation in Brazilian narrative (2007), Mata's co-edited *A Mulher em África* (2018), Eurídice Figueiredo (2020), Hilary Owen and Phillip Rothwell (2004), Hilary Owen and Anna Klobucka (2014), and Margarida Calafate Ribeiro (2007), among others, —illuminate the intersections of gender, coloniality, and memory that underpin this collection. By engaging with these seminal works, the introduction situates the volume within wider debates on feminist resistance, decolonial critique, and the reimaging of the Afro-Luso-Brazilian Atlantic.

## Cartographies of Resistance

The volume's editorial logic is guided by relationality and resonance. While the chapters span diverse geographies, genres, and scholarly perspectives, they are unified by three central interventions reframing the Black Atlantic to include Lusophone genealogies; centring women's writing as a decolonial archive; and demonstrating how literary production operates as cultural and political resistance in postcolonial contexts.

By focussing on women's cultural production, the volume intervenes in several key areas of scholarship. It challenges the Anglophone dominance of Black Atlantic studies by foregrounding Lusophone voices and genealogies; it reorients Lusophone literary studies away from Eurocentric paradigms toward a feminist transatlantic framework; and it affirms literature as testimony, archive, and speculative force, enacting decolonial and feminist futures.

Rejecting rigid thematic divisions, the editors adopt a relational structure that allows chapters to converse across national, disciplinary, and generational boundaries. The essays move from foundational genealogies to embodied practices and cosmopoetic futures, each chapter offering a singular intervention while contributing to a broader cartography of resistance.

The opening chapters lay conceptual and historical groundwork. Margarida Rendeiro reframes Portuguese postcolonial literary studies through the lens of Afro-descendant women writers, revealing how their narratives disrupt patriarchal-symbolic orders and reimagine kinship, memory, and belonging through

maternal and collective epistemologies. This conversation continues with Ana Margarida Martins who turns to Black maternity in the Brown Atlantic, exploring tensions between chosen and repudiated maternal lineages and situating the maternal as a site of both affective rupture and political possibility. These concerns with memory and affiliation extend into Ana Raquel Fernandes's analysis of the literary and visual works of Hélia Correia, Graça Morais, and Paula Rego, where diasporic identity emerges as an uneven terrain of ambivalence and creative reinvention. Carlos Garrido Castellano shifts the focus to contemporary Portuguese authorship, proposing alternative models of creativity grounded in care and collaborative imagination that challenge the logics of neoliberal productivity. This sequence closes with Fernanda Barim Camargo who traces the spectral presence of Agustina Bessa-Luís in Joana Bértholo's work, showing how intergenerational feminist correspondence functions as both epistemic inheritance and imaginative opening.

Building on these genealogies, the volume then turns to the enduring legacies of colonialism in Lusophone Africa. Ana Aires e Castro examines Cabo Verdean literature's reclamation of female bodily autonomy as a gesture of freedom against colonial and patriarchal inscriptions. Inês Nascimento Rodrigues introduces the concept of *ancestral postmemory* to examine how San Tomean women writers activate embodied and affective connections to silenced colonial pasts, transforming literary practice into a decolonial act of memory and resistance. Feminine memory and narrative movement take centre stage in Ana Rita Sousa's discussion of twenty-first-century Guinea-Bissau literature, where displacement and storytelling become acts of cultural and political assertion. The section closes with Teresa Manjate and Sara Jona Laisse who explore women's writing between Mozambique and Portugal, revealing how silenced or murmured voices disrupt inherited historical narratives and open space for alternative remembrance.

The next movement explores poetic and performative interventions, where literature and orality become embodied forms of political action. Tereza Virgínia de Almeida presents a powerful reading of Stella do Patrocínio's utterances from psychiatric confinement, revealing how her voice unsettles the boundaries between madness and poetry, erasure and survival. Performance and activism come to the fore in Miriane Peregrino's fieldwork across the PALOPs, where she investigates women's poetry slam championships as dynamic spaces of research, community, and feminist mobilization. This engagement with marginality and resistance continues with Susan de Oliveira, Sophia Catarina Rosa, and Stefane Cola, whose study of Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian literatures highlights writing, silence, and poetic struggle, articulated alongside new editorial projects and women's collectives, as strategies for rewriting dominant literary imaginaries from the margins.

Shifting toward embodied experiences and the politics of listening, Patrícia Martinho Ferreira examines representations of domestic violence in contemporary Portuguese literature, framing listening as both an ethical imperative and a narrative strategy capable of unsettling silence. Questions of body and freedom are then explored by Teresa Manjate and Sara Jona Laisse in their reading of Énia Lipanga and Eliana N’Zualo, showing how Mozambican women writers negotiate identity, history, and self-definition. Luana Barossi and Daviane Moreira da Silva close this movement with a close analysis of *Solitária* by Brazilian Eliana Alves Cruz, mapping the architecture of racial segregation through spatial and bodily metaphors that reveal how the colonial continues to haunt urban and intimate life in contemporary Brazil.

The final chapters of the volume gesture toward speculative and decolonial futures, in which ancestral knowledge and transatlantic survivals open paths for reimagining resistance. Federica Lupati engages with Brazilian Indigenous women writers, highlighting how their narratives dismantle Western epistemologies while proposing alternative cosmologies rooted in ancestral and ecological continuity. Bringing Afropolitanism as conveyed in the writing of women to the fore, and critically rearticulating it through the lenses of significant geography and survivance, Luca Fazzini concludes the volume by arguing that this approach offers a powerful framework for analysing contemporary Portuguese-language Atlantic fiction, illuminating how African and Afro-diasporic women’s literatures reinscribe colonial histories, subaltern memories, and transoceanic cultural forms as dynamic, politically charged sites of aesthetic resistance and epistemic reconfiguration.

Across these five movements—genealogical foundations, colonial aftermaths, poetic and performative resistance, embodied listening, and cosmopoetic futures—the volume unfolds as a multi-voiced, transnational dialogue. Together, these chapters reveal how literature and cultural production name violence, reclaim memory, and imagine life otherwise, beyond the strictures of patriarchy, colonialism, and epistemic exclusion.

Ultimately, this volume asserts that to read the Atlantic otherwise is to engage with women’s writing as archive and method, counter-memory and speculative force. It is to recognise, in the literary and cultural work of African, Afro-diasporic, and Indigenous women, not only acts of remembrance but also blueprints for decolonial futures. Mapping these cartographies of resistance, the chapters invite the reader to listen closely, think relationally, and imagine expansively—contributing to a feminist and decolonial Atlantic that is both a critical project and a living practice of solidarity.

## References

- Amaral, Ana Luísa. 2017. *What's in a Name*. Porto: Assírio & Alvim.
- Dalcastagnè, Regina. 2007. "Imagens da mulher na narrativa brasileira." *O Eixo e a Roda: Revista de Literatura Brasileira* 15: 127–35. <https://doi.org/10.17851/2358-9787.15.0.127-135>.
- Figueiredo, Eurídice. 2020. *Por uma crítica feminista: Leituras transversais de escritoras brasileiras*. Porto Alegre: Zouk.
- Kambeba, Márcia Wayna. 2018. *Ay Kakyry Tama – Eu moro na cidade*. São Paulo: Jandaíra.
- Mata, Inocência, and Laura Cavalcanti Padilha, eds. 2018. *A Mulher em África: Vozes de uma margem sempre presente*. Lisbon: Edições Colibri.
- Owen, Hilary, and Phillip Rothwell. 2004. *Sexual/Textual Empires: Gender and Marginality in Lusophone African Literature*. Vol. 2 of *Lusophone Studies*. Bristol: Department of Portuguese and Latin American Studies.
- Owen, Hilary, and Anna M. Klobucka, eds. 2014. *Gender, Empire, and Postcolony: Luso-Afro-Brazilian Intersections*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ribeiro, Margarida Calafate. 2007. *África no Feminino: As mulheres e a Guerra Colonial*. Porto: Edições Afrontamento.
- Sousa, Noémia. 2016. *Sangue Negro*. São Paulo: Kapulana.

---

Margarida Rendeiro (Centre for the Humanities, NOVA FCSH)

## Not in the Name of the Father: Rethinking Memory and Paternity in the Works of Portuguese Women Writers of African Descent

Quem viveu não fui eu, filho parido de uma pátria  
que insiste em reconhecer-me como bastardo.

Telma Tvon, *Um preto muito português* [2024, 35]<sup>1</sup>

To lose your mother was to be denied your kin, country,  
and identity. To lose your mother was to forget your past.

Saidiya Hartman, *To Lose Your Mother* [2007, 85]

*Se dire des choses quelles seules comprennent. J'espère, murmure la matrone,  
qu'elles se parlent. L'ombre est aussi la forme que peuvent prendre nos silences.*

Léonora Miano, *La Saison de L'Ombre* [2013, 22]<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

In *A Canon of Empty Fathers: Paternity in Portuguese Narrative* (2007), Phillip Rothwell, drawing on Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, investigates how symbolic representations of "empty paternity" permeate Portuguese literature. These representations provide a compelling lens through which to examine how literature negotiates the contradictions of a nation long defined by imperial ambitions—contradictions that continue to reverberate in contemporary cultural and political landscape. The issue extends beyond the imperial "father of the nation," a role often appropriated by authoritarian leaders. The same symbolic structure informs both historiographical constructions of solitary national icons and literary texts across various authors, where the motif of absent paternity reveals a persistent national anxiety. Portugal's colonial and imperial experience was marked by a chronic sense of inferiority in relation to other European powers—a psychopolitical dynamic that mirrors the subject's instability in the absence of symbolic anchoring. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos aptly

---

1 It was not I who lived, but a son birthed by a homeland that insists on recognizing me as a bastard. All translations are mine unless otherwise mentioned. [All translations are my unless otherwise mentioned].

2 Saying things to each other that only they understand. "I hope," murmurs the matron, "that they speak to one another." The shadow is also the form that our silences can take.

observes (2003), Portugal has long wavered between the roles of Prospero and Caliban—an internal tension that continues to resonate in its literary and historical narratives.

Yet, the framework of empty paternity does not remain confined to Portugal's imperial past; it also resurfaces in more recent literary voices, albeit in new and significant ways. It was not until 2023 that the Portuguese translation of Rothwell's book was published.<sup>3</sup> In the period between its original release and its translation, the Portuguese literary landscape witnessed the emergence of Black Afro-descendant Portuguese authors—many of them women—who began publishing in the second decade of the twenty-first century and were, unsurprisingly, excluded from Rothwell's study. In their narratives, the motif of empty paternity persists but the dialogue with the father figure – entwined with the nation – is markedly transformed. These fathers, one might argue, not only abandoned their offspring but denied them recognition, rendering their children illegitimate in both familial and national terms. Unlike earlier national narratives, which revolved around the absent father(land), these women writers engage with the absent mother, perhaps as a response to historical erasure and the silencing of Afro-Portuguese identities.

This essay explores the symbolic dialogues in the narratives of Afro-descendant women writers, arguing that in their narratives, the significance of the father figure is replaced by that of the mother. Through an analysis of various texts, it demonstrates that an internal dialogue with the mother—also often a physically absent figure—becomes the means through which structural silences of a nation still grappling with its colonial ghosts are confronted and articulated.

## Empty Paternity and Primordial Motherhood

In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, relational dynamics with the mother and the father play as symbolic placeholders a constitutive role in the formation of the subject. The mother, as the child's first significant other, belongs to the realm of the Imaginary, where the child experiences a primary—but ultimately illusory—sense of unity. Her desire—perceived yet enigmatic—positions the child within a web of demand and libidinal investment that remains unresolved. The father's intervention – more precisely, the symbolic function Lacan terms the *Name-of-the-Father* – marks a decisive rupture from the Imaginary into the Symbolic order. This paternal function does not simply represent a biological figure but rather operates as a signifier that interrupts the dyadic fusion between mother

---

3 Phillip Rothwell. *Pais vazios. Corrupções da Paternidade na Literatura Portuguesa*. Transl. Tomás Vallera. Porto: Edições Afrontamento, 2023.

and child, instituting the law of prohibition—most notably, the incest taboo—and enabling the child's entry into language, difference, and social structure (Lacan, 2006). The paternal metaphor displaces the mother's desire with a structuring law, establishing subjectivity through absence and lack (Lacan, 1992). When this function is foreclosed—rather than repressed—the subject is barred from full integration into the symbolic order, a condition Lacan associates with psychotic structures (Lacan, 1993). Far from being a mere figure of command, the father establishes the grammar of subjectivity—defining what can be desired, spoken, or even imagined.

In this light, the notion of the “empty father” can be understood as a figure whose symbolic position formally persists but is no longer invested with normative or structuring authority, signalling a broader crisis of the paternal metaphor in contemporary subjectivity. In *A Canon of Empty Fathers*, Rothwell engages Lacanian psychoanalysis to explore how paternal figures function—or fail to function—as symbolic anchors in Portuguese literature. He identifies the trope of empty paternity as a recurrent motif, not only in fictional texts but also in broader cultural and political imaginaries. This symbolic vacancy is evident in the self-fashioning of national leaders who presented themselves not as fathers of actual children but as patriarchs of the nation—figures of authority unmoored from biological or personal legitimacy. António de Oliveira Salazar, who led one of Europe's longest-lasting authoritarian regimes under the corporatist *Estado Novo*, stands as a paradigmatic example of this constructed paternal identity. This symbolic logic reappears in figures like Sidónio Pais, the authoritarian president of the First Portuguese Republic assassinated in 1918, as well as in historical and mythical figures such as King John I (1357–1433), Prince Henry the Navigator (1394–1460), and King Sebastian (1557–1578). Whether literary, political, or legendary, these figures reveal a recurring projection of paternal authority onto hollow or absent foundations—a dynamic Rothwell interprets through the Lacanian lens of failed or evacuated symbolic fatherhood.

Rothwell traces this pattern across nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary texts, identifying two pivotal moments in the history of Portugal: the Liberal Revolution of 1820 and the Carnation Revolution of 1974. Both revolutions profoundly disrupt the legitimacy of the paternal figure, while the authoritarian regimes of Pais and Salazar sought to restore it—paradoxically reinforcing its symbolic emptiness. In Lacanian terms, the paternal function operates as a symbolic ‘No’ that forecloses the possibility of a ‘Yes,’ with significant ideological and psychoanalytic implications. Here, ‘No’ and ‘Yes’ signify, respectively, the prohibition and affirmation of subjectivity. Through the works of writers such as Francisco Gomes de Amorim, Almeida Garrett, Eça de Queiroz, José Régio, and António Lobo Antunes, among others, Rothwell demonstrates how the crisis of paternity operates not only as a narrative strategy but also as an ideological

concern. With the rise of capitalism, the market increasingly usurps the paternal figure's authority and its symbolic power of prohibition, exacerbating feelings of alienation and betrayal. In these texts, the absent or hollow father functions less as a recurring motif than as a generative space for interrogating authority, identity, and national belonging.

Paulo de Medeiros, in his review of Rothwell's study, raises a critical limitation: its exclusive focus on male writers. He asks whether women writers might engage with – or diverge from – the motif of empty fatherhood in distinct ways (2009, 186). This observation becomes particularly relevant when we turn to postcolonial literature by Portuguese women writers—especially in the wake of the Carnation Revolution, which overthrew the *Estado Novo*, ushered in democracy, and accelerated capitalist restructuring. In *Caderno de Memórias Coloniais (Notebook of Colonial Memories, 2009)* by Isabela Figueiredo and *O Retorno (The Return, 2011)* by Dulce Maria Cardoso, the corrupted function of paternal authority remains central. Not only are the fathers physically absent—unable to enact paternal authority directly—but also their symbolic presence in the post-imperial national imaginary reveals the extent to which the end of the colonial order emptied their function. The fathers of the subjects in both narratives are no longer present – have either disappeared or passed away. And yet, their memory persists with emotional and ideological force. These and other post-1974 narratives constitute what Margarida Calafate Ribeiro describes as a symbolic “posthumous dialogue with the father figure, transfigured at times into the Portuguese nation, at others into the very image of Portuguese colonialism in Africa” (2016, 31). The post-memory inherited by the children of empire—specifically the descendants of colonial officials, ex-combatants, and others—is “a specific form of memory, rooted in an ethical relationship with the experience of the parents/of the country, of which the children feel themselves to be heirs, and which demands recognition both within the family and in the public sphere” (Ribeiro 2016, 34). This memory work becomes an attempt “to reconcile an excess of individual memory on the part of the parents with the failure of public memory” (Ribeiro 2016, 37). Rothwell's *Canon of Empty Fathers* reveals that the father-as-nation is not a post-1974 invention and “the link, in Western discourse, between empire and the father figure is hardly a novel conjunction” (Rothwell 2007, 21). Rather, he has haunted Portuguese literature since at least the nineteenth century. But the Carnation Revolution sharpened this spectre's contours, intensifying feelings of alienation and betrayal by exposing the contradictions embedded in patriarchal-nationalist symbolism.

From the collapse of a national order once anchored in the ideals of the patriarchal family and the “humble-but-happy home,” another figure emerges: the orphan. In *Órfãos do Império: Heranças Coloniais na Literatura Portuguesa Contemporânea (Orphans of Empire: Colonial Legacies in Contemporary Por-*

*tuguese Literature*, 2021), Patrícia Martinho Ferreira identifies the orphan as a critical trope in postcolonial literature. Reading works published after 1974, Ferreira shows how the orphan destabilizes narratives of family, nation, and empire. As a dystopian metaphor, it marks the breakdown of colonial order and reflects the ongoing ambiguities of national identity (Ferreira 2021, 38–39). While often metaphorical, orphanhood becomes deeply personal in *Esse cabelo*, by Luso-Angolan writer Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida. As Ferreira notes in her reading of *Esse cabelo*, orphanhood becomes affectively and symbolically aligned with the maternal absence:

A orfandade a que me refiro diz respeito à relação da narradora com a figura materna, simultaneamente presente e ausente, aliás, como o seu cabelo. O desapontamento de Mila com o seu cabelo revela, em certo sentido, a estranheza e a timidez sentidas perante a mãe. Aceitando esta associação, dir-se-á que no desejo de fidelidade procurado por Mila [...] se esconde o vazio provocado pela ausência da mãe, [...] aquela que, se estivesse presente, a teria porventura ensinado a honrar a africanidade metonimicamente representada pelo cabelo. (Ferreira 2021, 239)

[The orphanhood to which I refer concerns the narrator's relationship with the maternal figure—simultaneously present and absent, much like her hair. Mila's disappointment with her hair reveals, in a certain sense, the strangeness and shyness she feels toward her mother. Accepting this association, one might say that the desire for fidelity Mila pursues [...] masks the emptiness left by her mother's absence [...] who, if present, might have taught her to honour the African heritage metonymically represented by it.]

Two key insights emerge. First, literature has long functioned as a site for negotiating national identity—often grounded in the presumption that national belonging, however contested, ultimately holds. Even when literary subjects voice alienation or betrayal, they rarely question whether the nation—or the paternal figure it symbolizes—acknowledges them as its own. Paternity may be destructive, castrating, or absent, yet its legitimacy remains unquestioned: orphans and fathers still recognize one another. But what if that recognition never occurs? What if the nation refuses to see its children? What if the paternal figure is incapable of symbolic rupture—because he never acknowledges the child as his? In this regard, Ferreira's reading of *Esse cabelo* offers a compelling clue: the idea of a primordial motherland, centred on the maternal figure. If the corrupted function of paternity is rendered void by the father(land)'s refusal to recognize the child, the child turns instead to the mother. The question then becomes: to what extent can this turn be made without reinscribing the maternal bond as an incestuous fallback?

The emergence of Black Afro-Portuguese writers in the 2010s marks a turning point in Portuguese literature, introducing a polyphony of voices long excluded from dominant postcolonial narratives. These writers confront lived experiences

and inherited memory that remain unrecognized in hegemonic memorial discourses—discourses in which many Portuguese do not see themselves reflected. In doing so, they open pathways toward a postcolonial society that affirms plural experiences of belonging. Notably, this wave has been led by women writers, whose work has received growing recognition through awards, translation, and scholarly attention. The sections that follow examine how the figure of the father—or the nation as symbolic father—is interrogated in this literature, and how, in the absence of paternal recognition, the primordial maternal bond is reimagined. This return to the mother, however, is not unambiguous: it signals a longing that is affectively rich but also fraught, tracing a thorny path through the entangled legacies of colonialism, gender, and belonging.

### Disfigured Paternity and the Question of Heirship

The erasure or failure of the father figure recurs as a central motif in the work of Portuguese women writers of African descent, signalling broader anxieties around belonging, memory, and national identity. As Rothwell argues, this motif often manifests as a form of “hollow paternity,” marked by emotional absence or a symbolic void—men unable or unwilling to embody the roles traditionally associated with fatherhood. Far from a marginal trope, paternal breakdown becomes a defining thread in their narratives. Fathers are frequently unknown or unnamed, as in *As telefones* (2021b) by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida and *Essa dama bate bué!* (2018) by Yara Monteiro. In other cases, they are present yet unfit for fatherhood—a theme explored in *Os pretos de Pousaflores* (2011), by Aida Gomes, *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* (2018), by Almeida, and echoed in *O canto da moreia* (2019), by Luísa Semedo and *Maremoto* (2021) by Almeida. Even when physically present, these fathers—or the fatherland—often fail to provide emotional coherence or a stable sense of identity. This more subtle form of paternal insufficiency, which explicitly conflates the notions of ‘father’ and ‘fatherland’, emerges in *Esse cabelo* (2025a), as previously discussed, and continues in Telma Tvon’s *Um preto muito português* (2024) and in Almeida’s latest work, *O livro da doença* (2025).

In *As telefones*, a first-person narrative, the absent father is not so much mourned as erased: he is never mentioned. Instead, the story centres on the emotional relationship between Solange, a daughter raised in Lisbon by her maternal aunt, and Filomena, her mother, who remains in Luanda. Their long-distance bond becomes the emotional and structural axis of the novel, quietly asserting the sufficiency of maternal care in the father’s absence. By contrast, *Essa dama bate bué!* offers a more direct confrontation with paternal trauma. Vitória, born in Angola but raised by her grandparents near Lisbon,

returns to Luanda in search of her mother, Rosa Chitula. Her father is unnamed and absent but central to the narrative's core violence: we learn he raped Rosa, prompting her to kill him and disappear. Vitória is left in the care of her maternal grandparents, among them António Queiroz da Fonseca—an “assimilated” patriarch steeped in colonial values. His authority, preserved through privilege in colonial Angola, survives into exile in Portugal but ultimately unravels within a household marked by female suffering: Rosa flees, Isaltina is institutionalized, and Francisca recedes into marginal domesticity. In both Almeida and Monteiro's works, paternal authority is not only described as broken—it is dramatized as traumatic rupture, producing silences and generational displacement. The father does not merely fail; he wounds. And yet these ruptures also initiate a reorganization of kinship, foregrounding how maternal and collective networks can sustain identity in the wake of patriarchal collapse.

A more nuanced form of paternal inadequacy appears in *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* and *Os pretos de Pousaflores*, where the father remains physically present yet emotionally and ideologically compromised. In the former, Cartola — a nurse and self-described “assimilated” man—has internalized imperial ideals, only to watch them collapse together with colonialism in the wake of Angolan independence:

Em todos os espelhos se reflectia a derrota. Nada mudara por sua causa. Não passara a ninguém o que tinha aprendido. Pusera comida na mesa, mas deixara quebrar-se um elo. Nem sequer ensinara ao filho a sua língua. [...] Tinha condenado o filho a não ter história por medo de que ele não se conseguisse erguer se a conhecesse. (Almeida 2018, 152)

[In every mirror, defeat was reflected. Nothing had changed because of him. He had passed on none of what he had learned. He had put food on the table but had let a vital link break. He hadn't even taught his son his language. [...] He had condemned his son to have no history, out of fear that, if he knew it, he wouldn't be able to rise.]

Cartola provides materially but cannot transmit cultural belonging. His failure stems from colonial shame—a silence that erases ancestral memory. Silvério, the father in *Os pretos de Pousaflores*, also retreats from paternal responsibility: after rupturing with his Angolan partners, he returns to inland Portugal, leaving his children in a liminal space between erased origins and an unwelcoming homeland. Over time, both men are diminished—Cartola loses his faculties; Silvério becomes a ghostly presence, described by others as mad or already dead. Their children inherit not guidance, but isolation: Aquiles, like Mila in *Esse cabelo*, becomes one of the “generations of the alienated” (Almeida 2025a, 8)—condemned to a postcolonial solitude they did not choose. Intergenerational transmission of trauma continues in *O canto da moreia*. Eugénio, abandoned by his father and unloved by a stepfather, ultimately fails to become a nurturing

father himself. His inability echoes Rothwell's insight into how "the destruction of fathers in their generation and the next" leads to men who "have never learned how to be true fathers" (2023, 223):

- Eu não vos mereço. Que o menino seja bem mais do que alguma vez fui, esperemos que o nome do avô não seja para ele um fardo.
  - queres que te diga o quê? Que foste o pai sonhado? Não, não foste, eu tinha seis anos quando saíste de casa.
  - Quando me expulsaram.
  - Pai, não sejas injusto.
  - Sim, quando me portei mal, ou pelo menos pior do que o costume. (Semedo 2019, 219)
- [– I don't deserve you. May the boy become much more than I ever was. Let's hope his grandfather's name won't be a burden to him.
- What do you want me to say? That you were the father I dreamed of? No, you weren't. I was six years old when you left home.
  - When I was thrown out.
  - Dad, don't be unfair.
  - Yes, when I misbehaved—or at least behaved worse than usual.]

Boa Morte da Silva, the Angolan Black soldier in *Maremoto*, similarly fails. Writing to the daughter he has never met, he narrates a legacy of war, guilt, and shame: "*Dor de pai procura coração da filha até ao fim do mundo. Vou esconder-te da minha dor, minha Aurora. Vou cegar minha dor para a minha dor não encontrar teu coração. [Father's pain searches for his daughter's heart to the ends of the earth. I will hide you from my pain, my Aurora. I will blind my pain, so it won't find your heart.]*" (Almeida 2021, 102). In old age, and nearing death, both Eugénio and Boa Morte recognize their paternal failures—offering a final, though inadequate, gesture toward healing. It is worth mentioning that all 'assimilated' Black fathers undergo a moment of shame in which they recognise that their failure is deeply entangled with the collapse of the symbolic colonial order that had long constrained their capacity to act as African fathers.

In families where paternal presence is ostensibly stable, the structure of feeling remains fractured. In *Um preto muito português*, this solitude is amplified through a symbolic conflation of fatherhood and fatherland, exposing the nation's refusal to recognise the children of empire as rightful heirs. Here, national belonging is not denied through legal means but through affective disavowal: the nation, like the father, refuses to claim its children: "Não sou um cidadão exemplar [...] estou à margem de uma sociedade que se quer imaculada e de raízes meramente lusitanas [I am not an exemplary citizen [...] I stand on the margins of a society that wants itself to be immaculate and of purely Lusitanian roots]" (Tvon 2024, 106). Mila's reflections in *Esse cabelo*—"Foram elas que me ensinaram a perceber a importância das diferenças que hoje me fazem falta [They were the ones who taught me to understand the importance of the very differ-