

## Article

# Decolonial Embodiments: Materiality, Disability, and Black Being in Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida's *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso*

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**Abstract:** Grounded in, and in dialogue with, Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida's *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* of 2018, this paper interrogates a particular time and place of coloniality and racial capital's reproduction of Black fungibility in late twentieth-century Portugal, after formal decolonization in Africa and in the wake of Black migratory waves from the post/neo-colony (Angola in this case) to the former metropolis. Almeida's novel provides a literary intervention in grappling with the economic and institutional reinvention of anti-Blackness in Europe after settler colonialism, while also imagining and inscribing modes of Black being within and beyond the materialities of white supremacy. Towards this end and against the racial, gendered, and ableist logics of capital, the Black body in Almeida's novel becomes a site through which the relationships between humans and matter as well as mind and body are decolonially revised.

**Keywords:** Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida; Black being; decolonial; disability; embodiment

## 1. Introduction

In the span of the last ten years, beginning with the publication of her first novel, *Esse Cabelo* [*That Hair*] in 2015, Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida has become one of the most acclaimed and prized writers in Portugal and, though not the first, perhaps one of the most impactful Black writers in the country, the center of a colonial empire built on nearly six centuries of Black and indigenous dispossession, enslavement, and genocide. It is through the legacies, afterlives, and continuities of this anti-Black history that her award-winning literary production treks. Her characters, though embedded in this history, strive for and elaborate modes of being in a colonial world that radically revise and move beyond those that coloniality has established as normative. In this respect, her oeuvre represents a rich contribution to longer histories of Black cultural production and epistemic intervention, not only in the Lusophone world but in the Black Atlantic more broadly.<sup>1</sup>

Since the publication of Almeida's *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* in 2018, its critical reception in both academic and journalistic fields has focused above all on the migratory experiences of its two protagonists, Cartola de Sousa and his son Aquiles. This reception has, in paying most attention to the forms of racial discrimination faced in contemporary Portuguese society, pigeonholed the two characters, and by extension the novel's author, in the racialized category of "migrants." In this regard, such attention reproduces the very epistemes of anti-Blackness that continue to underpin notions of Portuguese-ness and Euro-peanness and against which the novel operates.

Moreover, a central component to the novel's insights into the machinations of racialization and contemporary economic structures of anti-Blackness that is often ignored concerns Almeida's tending to constructions of disability and the intersections of ableism, white supremacy, and racial capitalism. In other words, *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* brings to

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bear a critical lens on the quotidian and normalized forms in which racial and ableist power intermingle in the material context of contemporary Lisbon and the economics of Portugal after the formal end of its overseas colonial empire and transition into late capitalism.

In the midst of this historical backdrop, one can argue that the novel's diegesis revolves around a series of interwoven tensions, be they generational between Cartola and Aquiles, socioeconomic and racial within the contemporary organization of Portuguese society, and how Portuguese colonialism and its anti-Black legacies are understood and lived today. After all, Cartola was born and raised within Portuguese settler colonialism in Angola. His life trajectory begins in the village of Quinzau in the Zaire province, located in the northeastern corner of the colony, before migrating to the capital, Luanda, where he is educated and marries Glória. Through his status as an *assimilado*<sup>2</sup>—attained through the Portuguese colonial education system and consolidated through his employment as nurse and medical assistant to Portuguese doctor Barbosa da Cunha—he moves once again, now with his family, to the coastal city of Moçâmedes in the southwestern province of Namibe, to continue this line of work.

Cartola's life, and by extension, that of his family, is marked by the political and military transitions and instability of Angola, from colony to independent state, or from settler colonialism to neocolonialism, by way of decades of anticolonial armed struggle and civil war. We can situate the latter within the broader history of capitalism's reinvention after settler colonialism, particularly its usurpation of spaces and lives made precarious anew as surplus labor after the crumbling of colonial infrastructure and displacements of war and providing the material conditions for neoliberalist supply and consumption chains. It is precisely as surplus value that Cartola and Aquiles find themselves in Portugal as the country's own political economy shifts from decades of fascist rule to socialist policy in the 1970s to widespread embrace of neoliberalism under the umbrella of the European Economic Community beginning in the mid-1980s.

Although the novel does not overtly name these historical processes and the ways in which they reinvented anti-Blackness in the age of neoliberal capital, they permeate and inform the quotidian lives of the novel's protagonists. As Ana Lucia Trevisan and Regina Pires de Brito argue regarding the relative lack of overt references to such historical events, "the historical vector that serves as undercurrent to the plot is referred to merely between the lines—Angolan independence, civil wars, and the political tumult that followed independence"<sup>3</sup> (de Brito and Trevisan 2021, 148). However, this does not mean that the novel lacks a critical engagement between its characters and the materiality of colonialism, which impacts their respective trajectories.

The realities and *longue-durée* consequences of coloniality compose the social fabric of Cartola and Aquiles's lives in Lisbon, as well as those of community members. As I look to argue ahead, as the novel's diegesis unfolds, particularly with regards to Cartola and Aquiles's time in Lisbon, the colonial social fabric grows in impact and becomes increasingly more explicit in its relevance. This is certainly an intentional aesthetic choice by Almeida and her narrator—as well as for the voices of her characters—that traces the latter's growing consciousness of their material conditions. Such a consciousness revolves around, in many ways, the quotidian struggles and disillusionment felt by Cartola and Aquiles in relation to the anti-Black racial economic structures that have been normalized through and by Portugal's colonial history and reinvented contemporaneously. This bitterness is most acute for Cartola, for whom it then turns to quiet resignation, particularly as someone who subscribed to Portuguese colonialism's historiographies of itself as a former *assimilado*. Cartola's tragic resignation, not to be confused with acceptance, towards Lisbon's colonialist conditions is contrasted by Aquiles's quiet determination in forging and remaking life and embodiment amidst the racial and ableist materialities of the city.

This aspect of Aquiles's trajectory in the novel is central to much of Almeida's oeuvre and, arguably, to her own life. Her other novels and novellas, including *Luanda*, *Lisboa*, *Paraíso*, have been concerned with sifting through and critically historicizing the

interwoven layers of coloniality and anti-Blackness while imagining decolonial forms of Black selfhood that also rethink western imperial notions of the human. To this end, as we shall interrogate with regards to the latter novel, Almeida's reimagining of Black embodiment becomes a decolonial praxis of effacing colonial definitions of the human. In the process, the Black body is centered as a site in which the neoliberal state enacts violence and exploitation through grammars of race, gender, and disability. At the same time, however, Aquiles elaborates a grammar of his own by which these terms of race, gender, and disability are reimagined with regards to his own body, itself refashioned in how it inhabits racializing and ableist terrains.

## 2. Cartola, Assimilation, and Life in the Metropolis

To better understand Aquiles's trajectory, we must first flesh out the fundamental tensions that underpin his relationship with his father, Cartola, as well as the material tensions between them and so-called Portuguese society. Cartola's own migrant experience engenders within him an internal tension between his historical understanding of Portuguese colonialism as an *assimilado* and his current subject-position within current racial and labor hierarchies in 1980s Portuguese society, to which we can add his own resignation to this subject-position in the current stage of coloniality and anti-Blackness in Portugal. It is this tension that also defines the generational gap between father and son. Aquiles was born in Luanda in 1970 to Cartola and his wife Glória, who remained in Luanda with their daughter Justina when the father and son journeyed to Lisbon in 1984. In the historical context of the *diegesis*, Aquiles was born during the armed struggle for independence within a family that materially benefited from the colonial system, though from a subaltern positionality that served to sustain colonial settlement. Cartola's life in colonial Angola thus underscores some of the strategic ambiguities of the reproduction of colonial power, with *assimilado* status providing a simulacrum of native participation limited to secondary and tertiary roles in the bureaucracy of colonial administration or in the sustaining of infrastructure. Cartola, through this colonial simulacrum, fails to perceive the negation of Black freedom under colonialist orders, themselves obscured during this late period of Portuguese empire, whereby colonies had been rhetorically rebranded in the public sphere as overseas provinces.

Aquiles, meanwhile, lives out the last five years of formal colonial settlement and the first nine years of independence, marked and marred by civil war, before moving to Portugal at age 14 in search of medical treatment for his foot. As a result, his understanding of the colonial past contrasts starkly with that of his father and is fleshed out as their time in Lisbon goes on, transitioning from what was supposed to be a short-term stay to seek medical attention to a permanent and criminalized residence. Within, or adjacent to, this tension between father and son is the tension, also developed throughout the *diegesis*, between the historicization of Lisbon taught to Cartola during his colonial education—the vision of a Lisbon he had dreamt of visiting (de Almeida 2018, 21)—and that in which he finds himself after empire. He struggles to come to grips with the reality that his threadbare and liminally privileged status during colonialism was rendered null and void during the reinvention of racial capitalism in the former metropolis. In other words, he finds his newfound status as a racialized migrant in the current stage of coloniality and racial capitalism at odds with the Black *assimilado* ontology through which he lived and understood colonial reality and history. Having bought into the notion of assimilation as Black mobility and “progress”—a supposedly redeeming quality of colonialism—during his years in Lisbon, he comes to the tragic realization that colonialism negates Black ontology and that a Black *assimilado* ontology is a complicated paradox within the epistemological terrains of coloniality.

Herein lies a Fanonian core to the novel—the anti-Blackness of coloniality forecloses Blackness from humanity, from ontology, and assimilation only confers humanity as far as certain criteria of humanity ascribed to whiteness are met by Black subjects. It is arguably this realization, and that of a former metropolis imagined in a colonialist way

that could harbor his phantasmatic place of privileged *assimilado*, that brings Cartola's internal tension to a head by the end of the novel. Cartola struggles to come to terms with what Frantz Fanon (2008) calls "the zone of nonbeing" where Blackness resides (xii) within the epistemological terrains of coloniality. Blackness, as rendered abject in coloniality's regime of meaning, can only aspire to whiteness. It is at this point that Cartola and Aquiles fundamentally diverge, whereas Cartola is unable to imagine a selfhood and world outside of the assimilationist promise of reaching (a colonial idea of) humanity through whiteness. Aquiles, I shall argue ahead, identifies the zone of nonbeing as a potentially liberational one for self-making—a zone under or through which coloniality's regime of meaning crumbles.

Margarida Calafate Ribeiro concisely and critically summarizes Cartola's crisis in the context of the aforementioned tensions wrought by empire:

What is at stake in Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida's book are the living and human ruins of empire, no longer via the figure of the ex-soldier of the Portuguese military nor of the returnee, but of whom lived on the other side of the line that colonialism traced: Black people and, in this case, the most complex figure that colonialism spawned—the *assimilado*, who for the first time in Portuguese literature is at the center of the narrative. The Tagus River—which in the Portuguese imaginary epitomizes all the stories of the Portuguese empire, and that from which these were projected in the "endless sea," and which bathes the metropolis in Cartola de Sousa's mind—offers no response because there is no response to the ruins of empire. There is no possible restitution for the lie and illusion. All that is left for him is a spectral citizenship in a fantasy land that history has transformed into a ghost. Lisbon does not exist. (Ribeiro 2020, 91)

Ribeiro pinpoints the crumbling of an imperial narrative on which Cartola and broader Portuguese society held—a version of Lisbon that does not correspond to the reality he now faces as a Black subject in a colonialist space. In this regard, he does not find Lisbon and the metropolis in ruins, but rather one that is reinvented in its coloniality. Ribeiro's framing of the novel through the "ruins" of empire is thus not sufficient in tending to and naming the ongoing mechanisms of dispossession, surveillance, incarceration, and exploitation that impact Black life in the city. Almeida, rather, demands that readerships, particularly Portuguese, but not only, shift focus from the frameworks of a crumbled empire to the machineries of anti-Blackness that provide the material foundations for Lisbon and Portugal's participation in late capitalism on the margins of Europe.

Cartola's resignation is inextricably tied to a traumatic shift in his understanding of the former metropolis itself, stemming from the new incarnations of coloniality in Lisbon and its mechanisms of economic exploitation. These are underpinned by and recycle colonial forms of racialization that come to mark migrant bodies and subjectivities as such. Within the context of the former metropolis, yet still a locale constituted by coloniality, these forms of racialization impact Cartola in ways distinct from those that positioned him as *assimilado* in colonial Angola, though with parallel and similar ends and logics—that of racially situating the Black subject within a socioeconomic paradigm as a site for the reproduction of capital.

Cartola's status as *assimilado*, as fragile and ephemeral as it is, is articulated and made evident not only by his subject-position within colonial divisions of labor in Angola and his historical views of the former metropolis instilled in him through a colonial education, but also by his buying into colonialist racial ideologies. For instance, when his daughter Justina visits him and Aquiles in Lisbon, accompanied by her daughter (Cartola's granddaughter), Neusa, Cartola tells her stories of colonialist folklore that serve to communicate a racialized order of the human world through metaphors of animality: "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" ["Neusa's grandfather told her the story of the monkey who made fun of the zebra's stripes and why one should not expect

much of people who are as dark as coal”] (de Almeida 2018, 131). The logics and procedures of assimilation operate within colonial orders as safeguarding their divisions of labor, with the idea of social mobility articulated in racial terms and thus aligned with colonial colorisms—the more one phenotypically or culturally approximates self with whiteness, the more valid their personhood and the closer they are to being human.

His presumed proximity to humanity, inscribed officially and politically by his assimilated status, which also conferred to him Portuguese citizenship (a colonial policy implemented in the last decade of Portuguese occupation), comes undone when decolonization strips away his citizenship, and, after arriving in post-imperial Portugal, he soon realizes that Portuguese citizenship is, and always has been, defined by whiteness, despite the rhetoric and policies of late Portuguese colonialism in Africa. Ribeiro further elaborates on Cartola’s shock at the paradox of being a Black subject who enjoyed greater freedom and privilege during colonialism than after.

The trip to Lisbon activates in Cartola a series of dreams, from the practical matter of resolving his son’s health problem to the illusion of finding a Lisbon that would welcome him as a Portuguese man, an *assimilado*, that had imagined Lisbon as his metropolis, like that of the postcards, whites as being like Dr. Barbosa da Cunha (under whom he worked as a nurse), and himself as Portuguese. In truth, nothing, or no one, awaited him in Lisbon; his contact with Dr. Barbosa da Cunha soon dissipated. He would soon lie to himself about the documentation that recognized him as Portuguese. Aquiles’s problem would not be fixed, despite numerous surgeries. The Luanda he left behind would slowly be reduced to Glória’s requests and to her distant voice on the telephone. (Ribeiro 2020, 88)

Almeida, through Cartola’s experience, thus urges readers to adopt a critical grammar of race, coloniality, and power that he lacks in articulating and making sense of his slippery positionalities.

To this end, Cartola and Aquiles’s lives in Lisbon after colonialism and during Portugal’s transition into the neoliberal policies of Europe and the European Union demand that we be attentive to the always racialized forms of capitalist accumulation that have underpinned coloniality. We are, therefore, obliged to engage with capitalism as an always-already racial endeavor, drawing on Cedric Robinson: “the development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, as too did social ideology. As a material force, then, it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism” (Robinson 1983, 2). “Racial capitalism,” as a theory of power, names a system of micro- and macroeconomic relations that operates at different scales simultaneously and crosses historical periods from before the construction of Europe to its implementation as a concept and epistemological, political, and economic praxis through expansion. In the process, and by way, of expansion, Europe utilizes racializing processes as modes of defining itself through bodies that would in turn define the epistemic border between humans and exploitable sub-humans. Jodi Melamed (2015) thus articulates racial capitalism as “the complex recursivity between material and epistemic forms of racialized violence that are executed in and by core capitalist states with seemingly infinite creativity.” Cartola and Aquiles thus find themselves ensnared within the reinvention of racial relations of labor and capital via mass postcolonial migrations spurred on by capitalist wars on socialist projects against/after settler colonialism, the continued dispossession and displacement of indigenous life the world over, and the hyper-surveillance and incarceration of racialized beings.

These processes of reinvented racial and gendered structures of power and capitalist relations predicated on the aforementioned materialities of dispossession, displacement, surveillance, and incarceration are at the core of coloniality’s global reach and local expressions after settler colonialism. Coloniality, as a concept developed within a particular school of thought in the Americas, as discussed in the introduction, names the

epistemological life of racialized and gendered power at the service of imperialist and capitalist expansions, with the modern world rendered through western imperialist knowledge formations. Such formations become the basis of western humanism's epistemes, defining the human and the sub-human via Eurocentric notions of race, gender, sexuality, and disability.

It is through the epistemes of western humanism as the philosophical arm of imperial expansion that lives and bodies are rendered exploitable, dispossessable, and susceptible to the stripping of basic human rights according to the temporal and local exigencies of capital. Such categories, placed on bodies—thus rendering embodiments that are narrated from outside the subject—have come to define the frontiers between Europe and a non-white world and, by extension, define who is Portuguese and who is not, as Kesha Fikes (2009) points out in underscoring the social organization of post-imperial Lisbon according to a citizen/migrant dichotomy. Such epistemes are also evident in the formation and everyday regulation of a national racialized division of labor that was once overseas spread across settler colonies but now concentrated in the former metropolis. These very knowledge formations of coloniality are also materialized into Black life in the gaze of the Portuguese state—one that has criminalized and narrated Black bodies as the sites of the city's margins, as the margins of Portugueseness, not dissimilar to the early conceptions of Europe that constructed racialized lives as beyond the borders of Europe, beyond the borders of humanity. Within this epistemological paradigm and colonial gaze, Black life comes to embody the antithesis of Portugueseness, and Black bodies are seen, known, and inscribed as mere bodies, sites of non-ontology.

The materialization of these forces of everyday racial violence is also lived through the body, as Cartola and Aquiles come to understand. Cartola's shift in subject-position within a colonial division of labor that is both new and old following independence in the former metropolis necessitates a different form of embodiment that is at odds with that which conducted his *assimilado* labor in earlier decades. After Cartola's hopes of finding connections in Portugal run dry, he and Aquiles, in Lisbon, quickly find themselves ensnared in the construction labor force, building public housing high-rises that would soon be inhabited by the largely Black and other impoverished Portuguese residents that had established informal housing, known locally as "*bairros de lata*," on the margins of the capital. It was also through the labor of a largely African migrant workforce in the 1980s and 1990s that Lisbon grew as an urban center with middle-class housing and infrastructure, culminating in the city's hosting of the 1998 World Exposition, also known locally as Expo 98. Ribeiro thus inquires:

How often have we Portuguese people visited the 1998 Expo and the whole new Lisbon neighborhood on the banks of the Tagus, and that, little more than twenty years after decolonization, commemorated, once more, the feats of the Discoveries, reflected on the skin color of those who also built it? How often have the Portuguese on the metro looked at these groups of workers with tired gazes, discolored uniforms, and dark skin as part of those who built the Portugal from which we emerge today? (Ribeiro 2020, 89–90).

Almeida and her narrator thus painstakingly detail the everyday violence of the heavy labor, its long hours, and lack of protections—especially when negated or stripped of citizenship—that have been transubstantiated into the reinvented metropolis.

### 3. Coerced Embodiment and Colonial Materializations of Race

The labor conditions faced, coupled with the lack of protections and the excess of surveillance, enact upon Cartola and Aquiles a form of what we can call coerced embodiments that act as the materializing of racialization. Theorists such as Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe, among others, have developed critical grammars through which to understand these processes of Black subject formation through the body, in and across historical contexts, and the materialities of anti-Blackness. Sharpe refers to this process as

“blackening”, which happens in and through particular material spaces and sites where the body is rendered as part of this spatial matter, one that is part and parcel of broader materialities of capitalist accumulation. The material is thus both process and end, the physical and the symbolic that is placed on it, the financial and the geo-political, with the body at the crossroads and as the conduit of it all, particularly when the body is made into a fungible commodity. In other words, the body is the point where materiality and materialism meet.

In this regard, Sharpe and Hartman meditate on the signification relationships between physical spaces—ordered by colonial/white supremacist power—and bodies, with the former as racializing forces. Sharpe, in focusing on the ships of the Middle Passage while drawing on an assortment of literary works and Black feminist thought, recalibrates the spaces of the ship and what is left in their wake as metaphorical and material spaces where the “calculus of dehumaning” (Sharpe 2016, 73) is carried out. For instance, the walls and floors of the hold operate not only to contain enslaved bodies but also to inflict meaning upon them in the process. They become machines in the attempted murder of subjectivity and the transformation of bodies into enslaved subjects. They inscribe bodies with the signifiers of racial difference and the epistemological separation of them from humanity. Through their very materiality and the imperialist desire with which they were built and infused, such sites enact the violence of containment and dispossession that racially rendered enslaved lives into bodies for capitalist accumulation.

These sites need not be merely spaces of confinement of brick and mortar but are also the everyday violent praxis of ordering bodies within space, as Hartman points out with regard to the *coffle*—“a domestic middle passage, piracy, a momentous evil, and most frequently, a crime” (Hartman 1997, 32). The quotidian act of grouping serves a collective subjectivation—the transformation of selves into the abjection of Blackness, the praxis of dehumaning as one of enslaved subject formation. Hartman also underscores the aspects and consequences of white viewership of these sites of Black subjection. In other words, the elaboration of these sites serves for both the racialized formation of enslaved subjecthood as well as the everyday subjection of whiteness. Drawing on Hartman, the praxes and locales of confinement are also ones of spectacle for a host of white subject-positions, ranging from the master and their family to the overseer and even white sharecroppers.

Hartman theorizes this quotidian (in the shape of the *coffle* and other forms of confinement) and exceptional spectacle (in the form of minstrelsy, blackface, and other racialized performativity) as being structured by enjoyment. This sort of enjoyment stands for a multitude of extractions that encompass economic exploitation and accumulation, sexual access, and the quotidian reproduction of whiteness. The witnessing and enactment of the abjection of Black life, making Blackness into a non-being, always-already consolidates the fantasy of white subjecthood and whiteness as human, as well as the broader economic and political underpinnings of white supremacy. Through the material apparatuses of white supremacist biopower—the control over collective life—that render the Black body as abject, we can also glean the materialist reproduction of whiteness. The Black body—violently made to embody abjection—becomes the material site through which colonialist subjecthood is reproduced.

This is precisely what Fanon points out in his revision of Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage—the physical and metaphorical event of subject-formation, the person’s transition from the imaginary into subjecthood within the symbolic order of meaning and social reality. It is the moment, or rather a series of moments, in which the subject is made to confront the image/*imago* of selfhood or the subject position it is to occupy. Lacan also terms this image—a specular image—that of the ideal-I (Lacan 2006, 76). The specular image is one of totality, which is always fictionalized, that ushers in the primordial form of subjecthood. In other words, “this form situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual” (76). The Imaginary thus refers both to an image (of a totalized, or to be totalized, body) that the subject is to occupy in the realm of social reality as well as to

what is imagined by not only the emergent ego but also by the symbolic forces of subject-formation and signification—where meaning and materiality are made and exchanged.

The physical terms of these racializing apparatuses may be slightly different in the context of living as Black in post-imperial Portugal, but the materialist processes and consequences for reproducing the structures of white supremacy and white subjecthood are fundamentally akin to those earlier stages of capital and anti-Blackness. It is in this vein that I echo Sharpe's observation that the hold takes on different forms today—"Carding, stop-and-frisk, family detention centers, holding centers, Lager, quarantine zones...are other names by which one might recognize the hold as it appears in Calais, Toronto, New York City, Haiti, Lampedusa, Tripoli, Sierra Leone, Bayreuth, and so on" (Sharpe 2016, 83). Beyond these sites and procedures of capture propagated by the state and its institutions, Cartola and Aquiles experience and undergo the coerced embodiment of abjectified Blackness and the calculus of dehumaning in Lisbon, both through the labor they are obliged to perform for the state and via the precarious housing in which they are forced to live. The signifiers of racialization that such spaces inflict and inscribe on the body materialize the racial categories of citizen and migrant.

Cartola and Aquiles live the afterlives and reinventions of the logics of anti-Blackness in the age of neoliberalism as they are inflicted and materialized through the body as it is racialized, dehumaned, and made exploitable. The materialities of anti-Blackness and capital must be coercively embodied by its fungible targets, who must become subjects of and for the local and global exigencies of capital. Just like the coffer and the hold, among other sites utilized to dehumanize in an attempt to erase a subjectivity in order to racially and coercively forge another as a labor force, the long hours and brutal work conditions faced by Cartola and Aquiles for little compensation, allowing them to barely live on the precarious margins of the city, enact the material mechanisms of anti-Blackness on their bodies that ensnare them into racialized life/death as blackened subjects. This process is rendered most starkly in the case of Cartola, as the reader is made to contrast his previous life as an *assimilado* with that under the blackening materialities that structure his life in Lisbon.

At various points in the novel, Almeida underscores and relates this racializing relationship between Black(ened) lives and the spaces of labor, as well as how it is lived by the bodies that are made into the matter of coloniality.

At the exit of the construction site, the servants briefly wait. They do not appear to know in which year they are. Some bring a sports bag to their waists, others come empty-handed, and others roll up their sleeves. They exit individually through the turnstile, through a narrow corridor, and find the city on their way home.

Their dissolution in the light lasts a little while. Nightfall assails them, although they have spent the day under the sun. They come with their bodies stultified. Once on the street, they look to the left and to the right as if they do not know where to go. They usually come with their shirts untucked and their cardigans overly bundled. Some bring in their pockets a comb that they use during those first minutes of off-time, still in front of the gate, using just one hand; they tap their afro-textured hair with the other so that they do not appear to have just woken up. They never wait for the co-worker behind them. (...)

The succession of tired grandparents, children, and grandchildren blossoms from the construction site like figures bursting forth from a painting in which they were still. Surprised midway through, the exit looks like an endless awakening. Each man is a singular being, but their exhausted expressions dissipate what makes them unique. For a few moments, at the last light of the day hitting the hoards, the men are disconnected from a story before having to return to it. Until they recognize the landscape, they do not know who they are. Their bodies take a long time to fit in once again to the frame of the life that awaits them at



home, disconnected from work. They catch the shuttle, the bus, and the metro, hidden under their hats. Soon it will be night, and they will have to confront the darkness and the empty hours. There is not enough time for their bodies to remember themselves. Having arrived at their marginalized neighborhoods, they place their plastic chairs at the entrance of their shacks and sit and watch the kids play soccer. (de Almeida 2018, 129–30)

The narrator's meditation in this passage consistently reflects the relationship between body and space—the materialization of the former as part of the emergence of the latter. The racialized and extracted body becomes part of the landscape that is built for and by a new stage of capital that remakes the body into a constructor (labor) of the built environment (building, construction site, infrastructure, etc.) and simultaneously a hidden fragment of said environment. Cartola, Aquiles, and the various generations of workers of African descent that file out of the construction site grapple with the transubstantiation they are made to undergo—the shifting of their bodies in the matter of capital.

This form of transubstantiation, of a colonial embodiment, is not a foregone conclusion, as Almeida's narrator seems to convey. Rather, it is a tension inflicted upon and reflected in corporal fragments, themselves serving as metonymies of the body, such as facial expressions that are "tired" but continue to hold each person's singularity, resisting the body's transformation into capitalist material. The space of labor is akin to a frame—a framework for the body that holds it and molds it into a new subjectivity for capital, one that is also expressed at a psychic level of self-recognition. In Almeida's narration, the psychic and the physical are hardly separable. Rather, the body as a whole is a site of knowing—"there is no time for the body to remember itself" (de Almeida 2018, 130), echoing Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theorization of the embodied subject (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 53).

Almeida, in this passage, conveys the embodied knowledge of racial logics as they are corporally and materially inflicted on Black lives. In this regard, there is an entire phenomenology of racialized life conveyed through material imagery that is simultaneously extension and containment of the body, traversing the atmospheric and the textural—"nightfall assails," "daylight hits," while clothing is "over-bundled," and uniqueness is dissipated by exhaustion. Such corporal forms of knowing—across the haptic, aural, visual, olfactory, and gustatory—laid out by Almeida do the work of dismantling mind/body divisions of the human and epistemology while also emphasizing that the world of racism is both material and materialist.

The above passage from Almeida's novel also underscores a reality in which the space of labor is ever-expanding and is inseparable from the space supposedly outside of it—that of dwelling and leisure. The entire city—the one that harbors and makes Black precarity through surveillance and extraction—becomes the larger and more encompassing frame that transforms the Black body into capitalist matter. Living on the physical and cultural margins of the former metropolis-turned-modern-European city is financially and epistemologically inseparable from the labor extracted from Black life. After all, it is through the extraction and marginalization of Black European life that Europe is rebuilt in the current stage of capital and coloniality.

#### 4. Rethinking Flesh and Matter from/against the Algorithms of Black Fungibility

One can argue that the entire plot is guided by the very tension of the characters between the coerced embodiment of anti-Blackness in this particular stage of capital/coloniality and the characters' refusal of it. In a later passage in which Aquiles wanders the empty streets of Lisbon at night, the narrator once again frames the body of the novel's protagonists as being in and with the materiality of the city—one that, as the imperial metropolis was built through empire, is an archive of imperial nostalgia.<sup>4</sup> Most interestingly, the line between the city's physical materiality and the material flesh of the body is blurred and somewhat reversed.

He is flesh of the flesh of things, made of the same marble and dark glass, similarly unknown, without form, made of the black material of the trees, of the benches, of the church towers, of the dead store windows to be sold again, of the posters on the walls, of the tarps covering construction sites, and of the pit they cover where secrets live. (de Almeida 2018, 169)

The city is also articulated in flesh. This underscores, one can surmise, the obscurity of racialized economic relations and the exchange value of enslaved bodies on which capital relies. It also revises Merleau-Ponty's theory that "beneath the objective space in which the body eventually finds its place, a primordial spatiality of which objective space is but the envelope and which merges with the very being of the body, as we have seen, to be a body is to be tied to a certain world, and our body is not primarily in space but is rather of space" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 149). Merleau-Ponty's argument here fails to account for the extractivism of racialized economic relations. Almeida, rather, conveys such relations of capital as a mutually producing body and space. The extraction of life from racialized Black bodies, past and present, goes unquantified. Aquiles, here, is made of the materiality surrounding him, but said materiality is also transformed from the exploited bodies into the built environment of the city. There is, thus, a history of economics that goes untold behind the objects the narrator names. How does one mathematically quantify the labor stolen—labor as the transformation of Black flesh into colonial/capitalist matter—and in turn transform it into the material building of the city?

This passage would seem to echo Fred Moten's dialogue with the passage cited above from Fanon pertaining to the latter's elaborated bodily schema from without and grappling with coerced embodiment:

This means that my body is made of the same flesh as the world (it is perceived), and moreover that this flesh of my body is shared by the world; the world reflects it, encroaches upon it, and it encroaches upon the world (the felt [senti] at the same time the culmination of subjectivity and the culmination of materiality). They are in a relation of transgression or of overlapping... (Moten 2018, 175)

The procedures of coerced embodiment share the flesh of the body with the world. In the context of coloniality's anti-Black operations and knowledge, the body is extracted and abstracted into the materiality of the metropolis's built environment.

The last line of the novel's passage above is most indicative of this. One can surmise that it is a reference to the "poço dos negros" and the Lisbon Street named after it—Rua do Poço dos Negros [*Street of the Blacks' Pit*]. The pit, historians have concluded, was opened in 1516 via royal decree of D. Manuel I as a mass burial site for dead and murdered enslaved people, not far from Lisbon's Casa dos Escravos [*Slave Market*], itself established in 1486—the locale to where stolen Africans were taken to be enslaved and sold to other parts of Portugal and Europe. In articulating the Aquiles's body as materially and historically connected to the pit and the layers of historicization (and asphalt) that have covered it, we are urged to consider the obscuring forces that mark Black fungibility. As a city built through Black fungibility, the pit also serves as a metaphor for the forces that have covered up its existence and that have transformed said fungibility into the building of the Portuguese metropolis and Europe, past and present—from the extraction of Black labor on sugar cane fields in former colonies or in Madeira (a colony-turned-autonomous region) to the same extraction in building the neoliberal capital.

What are the algorithms of Black fungibility in terms of the building of wealth and its materialization (of both white imperial wealth and Black fungibility, as one in the same) as space? In the case of Lisbon, we are speaking of a city that was nearly entirely rebuilt after an earthquake destroyed three quarters of the city, in addition to severely damaging several other cities in the country and reverberating across the Atlantic in the form of tsunamis. It is not hard to conclude the funding sources for such a large-scale rebuild as coming from the capital accumulated through enslaved labor in Portugal's southern Atlantic colonies as well as the transacted commoditized bodies of enslaved people to other

European colonial domains. The same can be said of the spatial expansion and development of the city in the decades and centuries following the earthquake, as well as the redevelopment of neighboring areas like Campo de Ourique and Sintra, which became, by the end of the 18th and throughout the 19th centuries, vacation havens of national and international aristocrats and monarchies.

Almeida conjures these histories of obscured algorithms of Black fungibility and lays them side by side with the current moment of Black fungibility as it materializes a neoliberal Lisbon. Just as the built sites of the city centuries earlier, like the church towers referred to by the narrator and materialized through earlier forms of transubstantiated bodies, live alongside the dark glass and the construction tarps that cover and see into the newly materialized city, via Aquiles's movement within the city, the reader is left to inquire and imagine as to how much wealth is accrued through one Black body. How many bodies (lives transformed into matter of accumulation) are unaccounted for in the monumentality of the city? How many lives were transformed into the physical matter of, say, the Pena National Palace in Sintra, the construction of which was ordered by King Fernando II in the mid-19th century over the ruins of an old monastery destroyed by the earthquake? How can we trace the repeated transubstantiations of lives into commodities into physical terrains—from body to sugar cane (for instance) to capital back to body/commodity and so on, particularly when we are speaking of transnational monarchies like King Fernando II of the House of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha-Koháry, for instance? Is this not the very strategy and consequence of coloniality and its relation to Black, Indigenous, and other racialized/colonized lives?

This line of questioning is echoed to a degree in Denise Ferreira da Silva's rebuttal to the Marxian stance that dismisses the role of enslavement and conquest as primitive stages of accumulation. In many ways, Ferreira da Silva is responding here to Marx's complicity in the abstraction and obscuring of Black and Indigenous fungibility when centering industrialized labor and manufactured commodities while ignoring the extraction of raw materials as commodities:

If there is something upon which Marxists do not disagree, it is that labor time materialized in a commodity accounts for its exchange value. What most do not question is what happens to materialized labor in the commodities that enter as raw materials (cotton) and instruments of production (the iron used in the spindle). What happens to these materializations of slave labor in Virginia and Minas Gerais working on conquered (Indigenous) lands (cotton) and extracted (gold) from conquered lands? My point with these questions is that if one accepts determinacy as it operates in the attribution of productivity to human activity—that is, that social time determines value—why is the claim not taken seriously that the accumulated (exchange) value that constitutes global capital includes both the surplus value appropriated from wage (contract) labor and the total value yielded by slave (title) labor on colonized lands? (Silva 2020 44–45)

Through Aquiles's movement and meditations on the materiality of the former metropolis, these questions and the obscuring mechanisms of coloniality and capital are voiced into the night of Lisbon and onto its colonially built environments. The material of coloniality, its physical and metaphysical worlding, is constituted by, yet further abstracts, the already obscured exchange values and fungibility (and its algorithms) of enslaved lives/coerced embodiments. The unnamed yet hinted-to pit—of Black death—is evoked in the novel as the repository of these questions as Aquiles knowingly or unwittingly walks over it, all the while finding himself inside of similar algorithms behind the built city.

## 5. Between Racialization and Disability

While emigration to Portugal brings forth substantial shock and trauma for Cartola, having lived in colonial Angola as an *assimilado*, the everyday challenges stemming from

this migratory movement are different for Aquiles as he is subjected to several surgeries to “correct” the “deformity” of his heel, for which he is named, all while providing arduous labor on construction sites. As a child of the independence movement and born too early to remember much of the settler colonial period in Angola, and although born into a lower-middle class family economically anchored in his father’s earlier assimilated status, the precarity he is forced to live in the metropolis is arguably less shocking and traumatic for him since he arrives in Lisbon without the false expectations of a frail Portuguese citizenship and favorable historical narrative of the metropolis. Rather, Aquiles lands in Lisbon with a much different embodied knowledge of Angolan history in which the precarity left by Portuguese settler colonialism and official decolonization overlapped with the ongoing civil war, one scene of many in the global war for neoliberalism against the futurity of postcolonial liberation. This history as it unfolds is itself lived and articulated by Aquiles through disability and through an ableist world.

Disability in the novel is aesthetically deployed in ways that transgress itself and the limits of character representation and identity. Aquiles is not the only character that is overtly codified as disabled, even in the limited ways in which disability is understood in white supremacist colonial forms—that is, in the form of “apparent physical and sensory disabilities rather than cognitive and mental disabilities or chronic illnesses” (Schalk 2022, 9); and in terms of individual identity rather than in broader structural and intersectional terms. Aquiles’s mother, Glória, has been bed-ridden for decades as a result of a complication during Aquiles’s birth. From her bed, once shared with Cartola, she writes to and receives letters from him, as well as telephone calls during the father and son’s later years in Lisbon.

In thinking about and through disability in critical ways and towards decolonial paradigms of the body, it is important to follow and cite the work of scholars of disability studies and crip theorists in situating disability as not merely “a minor issue that relates to a relatively small number of unfortunate people; it is part of a historically constructed discourse, an ideology of thinking about the body under certain historical circumstances” (Davis 2014, 2). Sami Schalk, moreover, drawing on the interventive project of crip theory, reiterates “a move away from a primarily identity-based approach to disability and toward a theoretical approach that seeks to trace how disability functions as an ideology, epistemology, and system of oppression in addition to an identity and lived experience” (Schalk 2022, 8). Scholars like Schalk (2022) and Alison Kafer (2013) underscore the importance of examining disability as ideology, epistemology, and system of oppression intersectionally and how it is intimately interlocked with colonial systems of racialization, gendering, and exploitation. In Aquiles’s case, as a Black migrant construction worker in the (former) colonial metropolis, disability is never limited to a specific part of his body (the foot) nor to a specific set of infrastructural obstacles. Rather, disability encompasses material (discursive and physical) structures that inform and render coloniality and capitalism, operating in tandem with and mutually reproducing regimes of racialization, gendering, and economic exploitation.

Jasbir Puar’s critical framing of disability as part of an assemblage tied to mechanisms and longue-durée histories of empire is particularly useful in meditating on Aquiles’s trajectory through Almeida’s novel: “Assemblages of disability, capacity, and debility are elements of the biopolitical control of populations that foreground risk, prognosis, life chances, settler colonialism, war impairment, and capitalist accumulation” (Puar 2017, xvii). Along these lines, and in theorizing the ways in which empire, settler colonialism, and racial capitalism practice and are indeed dependent upon the everyday practice of debilitating or maiming lives deemed and mandated as exploitable—these constituting the quotidian of biopower—Puar centers debility over yet tied to disability in complex ways. As she expounds, while pinpointing the intersections of debility and racial capital, “I mobilize debility as a connective tissue to illuminate the possibilities and limits of disability imaginaries and economies. Debilitation as a normal consequence of laboring, as an “expected impairment,” is not a flattening of disability; rather, this framing exposes the

violence of what constitutes a normal consequence” (Puar 2017, xvi). Puar’s intervention on this point is particularly helpful given that it centers on the materiality of the body as the target of modern imperial biopower the world over. It is in the body, and in terms of the body, power is assembled.

In this regard, Puar’s critical grammar of debility as part of an assemblage alongside disability and capacity contextualizes and historicizes the making of disability as both a western humanist/imperialist discursive category of otherness and a practice of biopower that enacts a myriad of bodily harms that we see materialized in Aquiles’s heel and in his mother Glória’s partial paralysis stemming from childbirth under the precarity imposed by settler colonialism and imperial militarism. Debility thus begins to help us name the misrecognized causes of what has been termed disability as it has come to be coopted by state and corporate powers. The imperialist and capitalist making of debility also reproduces western imperialist notions of disability/capacity binaries by inflicting violence on bodies (particularly of the global south) and, in the process, marking said bodies with the signifiers of alterity that uphold ableist concepts of the human.

Drawing on Puar’s theorization, the relationship between racial capital/coloniality and disability is a complexly generative one in which the material and epistemic lives of the former forge relations of bodies and spaces while also naming and categorizing bodies according to ability and subsequently to humanness. The material operations of coloniality on racialized bodies and along gendered lines are lived, known, and often misrecognized through the body in terms of health and institutional (in)access to care. For instance, the interlockings of disability/debility and racial capitalism are evident throughout Aquiles’s life, from birth in Angola and through the numerous surgical interventions that were supposed to medically “correct” his foot. What is considered in the novel to be Aquiles’s birth “defect” and Glória’s childbirth complications are inseparable from global racial forms of precarity. Despite Cartola’s relatively privileged status, which he believes confers more perks than it actually does, and his paternalistically sanctioned employment as a nurse under Dr. Barbosa da Cunha, his family is still barred from accessing healthcare. As a result, he delivers Aquiles in his and Glória’s bedroom, from where Glória would no longer walk out on her own.

Beyond the visible physical disabilities of two of the novel’s characters, we can also read the material responses (that is, physiological rather than just physical) of the body to the everyday violence of racial capital in the metropolis in the overlapping precarious forms of labor, residence, and hypersurveillance. In other words, the material calculus of dehumanizing to which Sharpe refers renders Black abjection in terms of disability—as both the colonialist naming of otherness as well as the different forms of maiming, the inflicting of violence has long-term consequences for the body. I utilize the term “maiming” here, drawing on Puar, as one that conjures the various forms of material violence that serve the economic ends of racialization and the transformation of colonized life into the corporal matter of empire.

Almeida’s development of Aquiles’s character in the novel traverses numerous historical and material elements in the maiming of global Black life, including wars of neoliberalism in the postcolony and against its sovereignty, which physically maim and displace; the precarity of postcolonial life, which led to a lack of access to healthcare; and finally, Black migration to the former metropolis in search of care, but only leading to the quotidian transformation of Cartola and Aquiles’s lives into bodies of profit and part of the materiality of the neoliberal metropolis as it becomes part of the European community. Aquiles lives and renders these knowable through his body as he grapples with the material layers of transnational anti-Blackness in the neoliberal period. His bodymind is a material archive of both these forces and his forging of selfhood. It is not as a disabled person that Aquiles lives in the world. Rather, he lives and signifies the world through and against the mechanisms of maiming, the physical and metaphysical structures of (dis)ability, and the disabling logics of colonialist racism in the metropolis.

Throughout the day, he is rarely able to forget his body. The other men on the construction site are more agile than him. To not be left behind, he writhes in pain. He has an open wound on his right foot from shifting his body weight to the good side of his body. His right leg is muscular. The shin of his left leg is rachitic. Naked, he appears to be half man and half child. Broken in half, on one side he is a son, and on the other he is a failure. He attempts to be fast and has learned to disguise. He is the first to finish, the first to arrive, but he knows he is slowly killing himself, that he ages early, and that his body will quit on the way home. He was born ruined but needed to reach his youth in order to erase himself before catching fire. And so, straining himself and clenching his teeth, his day is spent faking in order to not fall behind. The agony of his right leg becomes an internal agony—the feeling of pretending to be who he is not—that of not being born to do a particular thing and not knowing who he is. (de Almeida 2018, 167).

The passage relates Aquiles's navigation and forging of life through the discourses and societal life of ableism that have posited his existence in terms of deficit and ruin while living the material forces of dehumanizing labor. His body is physically transformed by these, condensed in the muscularized form of his right leg, in permanent agony from the weight placed on it. However, as an earlier passage underscores, the material forces of coloniality and capital are felt and corporally known by all workers in different ways, thus preempting a reader's sense that disability is only lived by Aquiles. Exhaustion, chronic pain, disorientation, and depression are merely a few of the material consequences faced and made knowable by others, as is the case with Cartola: "Cartola, seated at the table of the living room, scribbles on pages, too tired to know what he is writing, and leafs through a sports paper. It is Friday, and the kitchen reeks of rot. There is nothing to eat or watch; they sold the television. Cartola disappears into the bedroom and plunges into bed on an empty stomach" (de Almeida 2018, 168).

The aforementioned exhaustion, chronic pain, disorientation, and depression are all unvisual and non-sensory forms of disability that are, as a result, illegible in typical institutional understandings of disability. The basis of this is, as Schalk and Kafer point out, a colonialist understanding of disability as strictly physical—and with limited notions of physicality—which is predicated on the legacies of Cartesian dualism and concepts of the human relying on separation of mind and body. Almeida effectively draws our attention to the inseparability of the mental, physical, and external material worlds. Cartola's depression is materially caused and materially lived—the racial economic reality of life in Lisbon, in contrast to the narrative of Portugueseness—racial inclusion and mobility promised by assimilation impact the electro-chemical matter of the brain in its psychological and physiological response, as well as impact the material ordering of his life in Lisbon. The materiality of his and Aquiles's space of dwelling is one that archives, reflects, and signifies (e.g., the smell of rotting and lack of food) the absence and void—a march towards the erasure of life in the transformation of the body into a site of economic accumulation.

The impossibility of separating mind from body is also conveyed at the very beginning of the previous passage—"[Aquiles] is rarely able to forget his body" (167). It is in the context of this inseparability—one that confronts centuries of western philosophy—that the term *bodymind* becomes of paramount importance in disentangling coloniality's epistemes from the materiality of the human. Schalk once again concisely articulates the concept of *bodymind* and its stakes with regards to the signifying logics and epistemes of coloniality:

The term *bodymind* insists on the inextricability of mind and body and highlights how processes within our being impact one another in such a way that the notion of a physical versus mental process is difficult, if not impossible, to clearly discern in most cases. [...] *bodymind* cannot be simply a rhetorical stand-in for

the phrase “mind and body”; rather, it must do theoretical work as a disability studies term.

[...] bodymind is particularly useful in discussing the toll racism takes on people of color. As more research reveals the ways experiences and histories of oppression impact us mentally, physically, and even on a cellular level, the term bodymind can help highlight the relationship between nonphysical experiences of oppression—psychic stress—and overall well-being. While this research is emergent, people of color and women have long challenged their association with pure embodiment and the degradation of the body as unable to produce knowledge through a rejection of the mind/body divide. (Schalk 2018, 5–6).

As Schalk points out at the end of the passage, the stakes for disavowing the mind/body divide concern the temporal influence of this philosophical paradigm in the *longue durée* of coloniality and its racial and gendered ascriptions of human and nonhuman differences. As interrogated more in depth in the introduction, to be considered human means to possess not only both mind and body, rather than merely embodiment, but more importantly, to possess a mind in control of the body as the everyday practice of reason.

Such dualist presuppositions and notions of the human inform the built environment and epistemologies of ableism that Aquiles encounters in Lisbon—structures that repeatedly articulate and interpellate his selfhood in terms of deficit, particularly as he is thrust into the domains of labor exploitation that mark racial capitalism after empire in the former metropolis. Amidst this backdrop, the diegetic life of Aquiles is not merely about his foot per se and how the material/discursive contents of ableism construct his foot as “deficient.” Rather, Aquiles’s foot operates also on the plane of metaphor and metonym for the modes of anti-Black racialization in not only contemporary Portugal but also across the time-spaces of coloniality that signify Black bodies in terms of disability and deficiency vis-à-vis the normativity of white selfhood and citizenship. In the metropolitan social terrains of anti-Blackness, Black lives are defined along the lines of disability as foreign bodies marked by a phantasmatic lack of nationality, resulting from the long-durée imperialist construction of the Portuguese nation and state, which defined itself from the early modern period onwards as oppositional to the worlds that Portuguese expansion came to signify as non-white and non-Christian, and subsequently, as sub-human in the western humanist concept of man and the West.

Despite the laments of his parents and the possible disappointment of hegemonic gazes that oversee his physical labor as insufficient and negate his intellectual labor due to the color of his skin, Aquiles exudes a particular resilience and determination to cultivate modes of being and bodymind against the ableisms of coloniality, in opposition to the tragic resignation of his father. Aquiles takes on the same arduous labor in the form of construction as his father. He does not aspire, moreover, to be a “good” cog in the machinery of capital and the material development of the metropolis. Rather, he looks to survive and resist the materialities of anti-Blackness that surround him and inflict themselves upon colonial grammars of race and disability. This is without falling into the ableist pitfalls of super-crip discourses: “a person with a disability, deployed in cultural production as someone who embodies the hegemonic belief that disability is an adversity to be overcome” (Morris 1991, 100).

Aquiles’s diegetic trajectory is never about “overcoming” in the ableist and anti-Black worlds, especially not in an individual sense. Instead, Aquiles, through his own lived experience in a world and temporo-spatial context that colonially situates him in capital as Black and disabled, along with the material conditions these imply, comes to represent a radical decolonial potentiality in rethinking the (post)colonial world he inhabits. Aquiles’s role in the novel’s diegetic space, at some level, is arguably a foil for Cartola’s tragedy within coloniality, but relatedly and beyond this, he is a site of knowing—materialized by yet against coloniality and its ontological and epistémico-material logics. His reflections on the city, as well as those of the narrator, gesture towards a decolonial understanding

of the material and the corporal as intimately tied. In other words, through and surrounding Aquiles, the novel articulates what Denise Ferreira da Silva proposes as a materialist approach to reading the world—“one that includes imaging of what happens and has happened as well as what has existed, exists, and will exist otherwise—all and at once” (Silva 2020, 43).

The physical matter surrounding Aquiles in the metropolis is central to this gesture, as we have considered earlier, in understanding the material workings of racial capital as well as gleaning the possibilities of decolonial embodiment and radical corporalities in an anti-Black and colonialist world. This articulation by both the narrator and Aquiles destabilizes western humanist divisions of subject and object, whether these are projected onto the separation of person and external matter or the division of mind (as the metaphysical site of consciousness and subjecthood) and body (as supposedly purely material). Once again, Ferreira da Silva provides helpful grammar for grappling with this type of intervention:

Without the subject and its form, the world becomes the stage of indeterminacy, that is, of the thing or matter released from the grips of the forms of understanding. Beyond Kant’s forms and laws (and rules), Hegel’s Spirit (whose materiality is also that of phenomena), and the concepts and categories of historical materialism (but as a constituent of Karl Marx’s raw material), all that exists and happens refers to the thing or prime matter. (Silva 2020, 43–44).

Indeterminacy, for Ferreira da Silva, offers the possibility of disruption of the aforementioned western humanist divisions as well as its adjacent categories of race, gender, and (dis)ability. Indeterminacy also intervenes against humanist and Marxist materialist logics of causality, including the algorithms of labor and labor time to value. We see in Aquiles an often diegetically understated, sometimes ambivalent, but persistent, indeterminacy that counters the determinist logics of ableism that pathologize particular lives, contributing in parallel to the logics of colonial racism that we have explored. The colonial categories of life—human and dehumaned—are supposed to determine how each one is played out within the coercive mechanisms of coloniality and capital. In this regard, Aquiles’ indeterminacy is an act of refusal that, throughout the novel, he quietly seeks to understand and embody. Amidst and in opposition to Cartola’s tragic resignation and (post)colonial trauma of selfhood, Aquiles’s everyday praxis of refusal through indeterminacy (of self and matter) comes to embody the undetermined possibilities of the Black decolonial future.

## 6. Conclusions: Unbecoming Matter

The novel concludes with the deaths of Iuri and then Pepe, friends and neighbors in Paraíso, a heavy loss wrapped in the conditions of precarity that all four face on the outskirts of the metropolis. Pepe’s son Iuri dies after the detonation of a grenade the latter finds amongst the alcoholic inventory of his father’s tavern. Pepe’s guilt for his son’s death and the impending police investigation regarding his possession of arms led him to commit suicide days later. It is Aquiles who finds Pepe’s body hanging outside the window, and eventually a one-line suicide note is found directed to Cartola, reading “Perdoa-me, Cartola, meu irmão preto” [“Forgive me, Cartola, my Black brother”] (de Almeida 2018, 221). The deaths of their dear friends, who, together, helped cultivate an affective space of solidarity and community, oblige Cartola and Aquiles to once again remake and reimagine life in the coloniality of the metropolis.

The last lines of the novel stage the end of Cartola’s trajectory as such, symbolized and materialized in the form of a cartola [top hat], lending him his long-time nickname. After purchasing a top hat from a local shop, Cartola walks to the bank of the Tagus, where his eyes follow the river’s current, “e, como o rio não supportasse olhá-lo a direito nem lhe respondesse, desconversando num marulhar ambíguo, o homem tirou a cartola, jogou-a à água, e virou costas” [“and, as though the river could not stand to look straight



at him or reply to him, quipping in its ambiguous tide, the man removed his top hat, threw it into the water, and turned his back”] (de Almeida 2018, 229).

One can read this closing passage as the final resignation of Cartola, a surrender that implies a particular and ultimate death materialized and symbolized by the drowning of the piece of matter that bears his name, a physical stand-in for the man himself. A more generative reading, however, would posit this act of death as one that leaves the reader with the possibility of decolonial self-creation, with the top hat’s drowning or even setting sail back to Angola via the old colonial maritime tracks from the Tagus to the south Atlantic, signaling the transition from an identity colonially bestowed upon him during a previous stage of empire.

Relatedly yet more importantly, and with greater ramifications for decolonial possibilities, Cartola’s discarding of the top hat may be read as a potentially radical undoing of the aforementioned separation of form and matter that undergirds modern western thought, including racial formations. Drawing once more on Ferreira da Silva, this gesture enacts a refusal to engage, to maintain thinking within the limits of the very distinction between matter and form, which cannot but request the onto-epistemological pillars of modern thought in order to assemble its grounds” (Silva 2020, 42). Reading Cartola’s gesture this way destabilizes western thought from Aristotle to Kant, with the top hat (and his very name, which derives from the name of the object) materializing the form, with form as the discursive act of naming, which also serves to contain. His very act of purchasing the top hat, as if acquiring and reclaiming his name through a materialized mode—turning form (his name) into matter—already represents this destabilizing of western metaphysics.

In Aristotle’s political thought, he designates a constitution or the discursive ratification of a state as giving form to matter, which would be the bodies that inhabit within and under the state; in a way, that form is to delineate the limits of matter, confining matter in onto-epistemological bounds and making matter only knowable through form. Similarly, in *De Anima*, Aristotle ascribes the soul as the form of the body (matter), with the soul as the repertoire of behavior that either the body performs or that is projected onto the body. In both of these examples of Aristotelian separation of form and matter, we see the mechanisms of racialization, in which form is the realm of coercive signification that onto-epistemologically confines the body as matter into legible sign systems for the logics of capital. The novel’s conclusion thus leaves the reader with decolonial possibilities of in which form as colonial artifice and machinery is shattered, and matter untethered by form is the site of futurity. In the process, new modes of being in the world are potentially rendered. To conclude, Ferreira da Silva names this possibility: “The method I am after begins and stays with matter and the possibility of imaging the world as *corpus infinitum*” (Silva 2020, 42). The discarding of form as an epistemological edifice of coloniality also opens the possibility for new modes of intersubjectivity and relationships between bodies as and with matter, best conveyed at the novel’s end through Cartola’s formless body.

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## Notes

- For a better understanding of the depth and repercussions of Almeida’s work within a broader context of Black life and diaspora in the Lusophone world, I urge readers to engage her oeuvre alongside the essay “As veias abertas da Afrodescendência” by Évora and Mata (2021).
- Assimilation, in the context of Portuguese colonial rule, was part of a broader system of racial classification officialized in the last several decades of colonial settlement and statehood. complex racial system of colonial positionalities through the Estatuto do Indígena [Indigenous Statute] that the Portuguese instituted in their continental African colonies (Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique). Different iterations of the Statute existed officially from 1926 to 1961, though its racial and cultural divisions

of labor and power pre-existed and outlived its official life and conferred a fraught and liminal form of Portuguese citizenship to those who adhered to western cultural practices (dress, proficiency in the Portuguese language, adherence to Christian religious formations, and other criteria). Without the status of *assimilado*, Black subjects of the colonies were categorized as *indígenas* [Indigenous] and had effectively no civil rights, no legal rights, nor citizenship. For more, see Penvenne (1995) and Jerónimo (2015).

3. All translations into Portuguese are my own.

4. For a profound study of Lisbon as a city of imperial nostalgia, see Peralta and Domingos (2019).

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