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On Plants and Regimes of Waste: Reading Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida's *A visão das plantas* in Times of Systemic Collapse

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Introduction: Meditations on Collapse/Collapsing Meditations

My main concern in this article is with the exhaustion of neoliberal and postcolonial governability, and more particularly with the sense of collapse that looms over the habitats and places of refuge that are used by the most privileged ones and that make such a logic possible. My main argument is twofold: colonialism (more a shifting presence and ideology than a continuum) has a less-known green face that counterposes and legitimizes more visible processes of extraction and dispossession. In our times, this aspect, which was promised as a haven for the privileged ones, seems to be more prevalent than ever, and yet it undeniably reveals its cracks, which are enormous and threaten life on a planetary scale. This green face involves the colonial genealogy of botanical gardens, but also hints at the belief that it is possible to generate safeguarded, green spaces for the privileged whilst nature is 'put to work' on an industrial scale in the rest of the globe.¹

Managerial responses to post-extractive sites; ongoing enclosure and the privatization of natural areas; 'eco-friendly' practices of dispossession of indigenous and racialized communities predicated upon the universality of notions of heritage and preservation; and more recently, attempts by the ultra-rich to colonize space and flee earthly wastescapes: the logic that exported dispossession to the entire planet, that funded extractivist enterprises in places where exceptions apply, creating open air mines like open air crimes, is related to gardening. The same force that made species, ecosystems and

¹ On this topic, see See Jill H. Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004); *Landscape and Power*, ed. by W. J. T. Mitchell (University of Chicago Press, 2002.); Donal P. MacCracken, *Gardens of Empire: Botanical Institutions of the Victorian British Empire* (Leicester University Press, 1997); Zaheel Baber, 'The Plants of Empire: Botanic Gardens, Colonial Power and Botanical Knowledge', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 46.4 (2016), pp. 659–79.

regions vulnerable and discardable found solace in artificially organized natural paradises. The same genealogy of theft and propagated debt also built greenhouses that simultaneously operate as places of refuge for vegetal and interspecies life, and as the expanded frontier that powers and expands the commodification of life itself, particularly starting with vegetal life.²

The ultimate colonial utopia consists, therefore, in the preservation of pleasurable and hospitable spaces, once the planet is destroyed, to be enjoyed by the privileged few who will manage to come off well and escape the planet's destruction. Present-day images of ultra-rich escapism involve trips to increasingly privatized exo-terrestrial territories and the abyssal depths, but also the privatization of nature. These escapist narratives, however, hide a less visible, albeit more pressing image: that of the garden as controlled, domesticated chaos, that of 'nature' as a class-restrictive beacon that will remain available no matter what. All these fantasies are symptoms and iterations of the failure of the colonial-modern project and the presence of untamed, 'wild' beings behind the patina of normality and control that such project mobilizes. Reading with Jack Halberstam, I am interested in reorienting our attention towards 'things that refuse and resist order itself'.³

In the following pages, I engage with plants and wasted lives in Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida's *A visão das plantas* to make sense of the role of 'contained' and 'looked after' nature as a platform for colonial governmentality and postcolonial dispossession within and beyond the Portuguese-speaking world. *A visão das plantas* is a short novel, written in 2019, that rewrites Raul Brandão's 1923 novel *Os pescadores* through the lens of one of its characters, Capitão Celestino, a former pirate and slave trader who has turned into a dedicated gardener during the last years of his life. If Brandão's classic work deals with the possibility of human dissolution within the ebbs and flows of oceanic life, with the familiarity with which Portuguese fishermen approach the engulfing and threatening waters of the Atlantic on an everyday basis, Pereira de Almeida chooses to maintain natural forces at the centre of fictional creativity by narrating Celestino's last days surrounded by the overarching presence of 'unruly' plants that threaten to make the pirate's family house collapse and disappear. In the novel, the plants interact with each other; they rest; they compel Celestino to fulfil their desires; and they even engage in fruitful conversations. They set up their own rhythm, which ends up being the rhythm of the novel and urges the reader towards an expanded, non-specist engagement with creativity and reception.⁴

² For a discussion of the reduced scope of Foucauldian biopolitics, which position the human figure at the centre of governability and control, see Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Plant Theory: Biopower and Vegetable Life* (Stanford University Press, 2016).

³ Jack Halberstam, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (Duke University Press, 2020), p. 3.

⁴ On plants and time, see Michael Marder, *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (Columbia University Press, 2013), especially pp. 93–118.

The work of the Afro-Portuguese writer Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida (b. Luanda, 1982) has received increasing critical attention over the last few years. Novels such as *Esse cabelo* and *Lisboa, Luanda, Paraíso* have been celebrated as critical considerations of the consequences and afterlives of Portuguese colonialism.⁵ *Maremoto* and *Bruma*, the two short novels that configure the trilogy *Três histórias de esquecimento* alongside *A visão das plantas*, have been read as ecocritical strategies that disrupt clear-cut divisions between the past and the present, the colonial and the postcolonial.⁶ Borrowing from this body of work, but also expanding it and shifting its focus, I believe that texts such as *A visão das plantas* pose a crucial challenge to criticism in general and literary criticism in particular, one that goes well beyond the Portuguese-speaking world. At stake here, I argue, is how we read and tell stories in times of collapse (although, it can be argued, such ‘disaster’ has always already happened, and is happening in real time from the beginning of the colonial enterprise). This view echoes Patrícia Vieira’s argument in favour of conceptualizing the relationship between literature and nature as mutually constitutive. For ‘natural elements not only surround but are constitutive of the body of writing we call Portuguese literature. The environment has *produced* Portuguese literature, as distinct from other literary traditions. But this relationship goes both ways; that is to say, texts have also contributed to the creation of the Portuguese environment.’⁷ From the standpoint of such interdependence between natural elements and texts, we can say that *A visão das plantas* is a meditative text, a strange one. Not much happens during most parts of the novel; the methodical act of turning the page seems to serve as a preamble to Celestino’s *muerte anunciada*. The point is that neither Celestino, nor any human presence in this regard, seems to matter much. In this context, thinking adopts a slower, non-human pace, but not one automatically associated with a romantic return to natural rhythms, with the possibilities of a new idealized pastoral. On the contrary, it is precisely the impossibility of relying on natural places of refuge for the privileged few that is at play here.

In recent essays, Ann Laura Stoler has warned against interpretations of coloniality as ‘more of the same’, as a legacy.⁸ Colonial governmentality, Stoler

⁵ See Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida: *tecilã de mundos passados e presentes*, ed. by Sheila Khan and Sandra Sousa (Universidade do Minho, 2023); Margarida Rendeiro, ‘On How Post-Colonial Fiction Can Contribute to a Discussion of Historical Reparation: An Interpretation of *As Telefones* (2020) by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida’, *Comunicação e sociedade*, 41 (2022), pp. 43–59, doi:10.17231/comsoc.41(2022).3681; Margarida Calafate Ribeiro, ‘Viagens na minha terra de ‘outros’ ocidentais’, in *Heranças pós-coloniais nas literaturas de língua portuguesa*, ed. by Margarida Calafate Ribeiro and Phillip Rothwell (Afrontamento, 2019), pp. 291–307; Paulo de Medeiros, ‘Memórias Pós-imperiais: Luanda, de José Luandino Vieira, e Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso, de Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida’, *Língua-Lugar: Literatura, História, Estudos Culturais*, 1.1 (2020), pp. 136–49.

⁶ See Sandra Sousa, ‘Ecocumplicidade em *A Visão das Plantas* de Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida’, in *Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida: tecilã de mundos passados e presentes*, ed. by Sheila Khan and Sandra Sousa (Universidade do Minho, 2023), pp. 109–23.

⁷ Patrícia Vieira, ‘Introduction’, in *Portuguese Literature and the Environment*, ed. by Victor K. Mendes and Patrícia Vieira (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), p. 5.

⁸ Ann Laura Stoler, ‘Colonial Diffractions in Illiberal Times: Forecasts on the Future’, *Public Culture*,

argues, is more organic; it mutates, just like Celestino's garden. It is not always expressive, nor does it rely on human agency alone; often, it takes the shape of dispassionate neglect. Indeed, for Stoler, ruins should always be looked at from a transitive perspective, not so much as 'ruins' but rather as ongoing 'ruination'. Ruination opens up fertile ground for a genealogy of colonial violence that transcends the eventful and points at longer and less obvious regimes of exposure to vulnerability and disposability. From this angle, the creation of enclosed and privatized natural areas, the calculations behind the selective distribution of pollution and disposable objects/lives, and the selective accumulation of waste, emerge as part of the same governmental logic. The remaining sections of this article seek to examine the interconnectedness and the conditions of possibility of such logic.

Reading *A visão das plantas* in Times of Crisis

In what follows, I want to engage with *A visão das plantas* as an original and productive critical site that allows us to expand on Stoler's interpretation. This article examines the garden at the centre of *A visão das plantas* as a way of conjuring up the possibilities and limitations of reading and thinking in times of collapse, when the few surviving places of refuge on the planet are becoming more and more inaccessible and remain under serious threat.

Following Sandra Sousa, I argue that *A visão das plantas* is much more than a rewriting of the Portuguese national tradition under the lens of coloniality.⁹ Sousa challenges Nicola Biasio's view of the novel, which places emphasis on the memory of the Portuguese colonization of Africa and opens up the possibility of reconciliation through nature. In this article, I contend that the celebration of the restorative power of nature fails to grasp the continuities and linkages between multiple forms of colonial ideologies and projects in the past and the present. Framed in this perspective, *A visão das plantas* does not just prove that the much celebrated aforementioned 'familiarity' with the oceans made possible the slave trade (although that much is implied in the text and developed in a skilful and original way). We do not find here a fictional reinterpretation of Brandão's lyricism, or a postmodern pastiche, or a literary mise en abyme. Rather, Pereira de Almeida seems to be focusing on collapse and dissolution, on what happens when the nightmares created by humankind outlast it and keep haunting a depleted planet. Following Jamaica Kincaid's engagement with the centrality of gardening for the reproduction of imperial tropes,¹⁰ Sousa

33.1 (93) (2021), pp. 65–85. See also Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Duke University Press, 2016).

⁹ Sousa, 'Ecocumplicidade'. See also Nicola Biasio, 'Diálogo da natureza e um pirata: a ecocrítica por uma perspectiva descolonizadora em *A visão das plantas* de Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida', *Abril*, 13.27 (2021), pp. 137–49.

¹⁰ Jamaica Kincaid, 'The disturbances of the garden.' *The New Yorker* (2020), <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/09/07/the-disturbances-of-the-garden>> [accessed 1 July 2024].

highlights that *A visão das plantas* entails a critical exercise that challenges eco-complicity by investing in ‘ecoterapia para o imperialista [ecotherapy for the imperialist]’,¹¹ adding that Pereira de Almeida’s text excels at revealing the continuities of colonial and imperial violence in the present.¹²

While agreeing with Sousa on the need to read Pereira de Almeida’s work beyond a restrictive Portuguese-centred interpretation, as a powerful movement against the reproduction of colonial and racist tropes disguised under the seemingly universal master narrative of the Anthropocene, here I want to shift the emphasis from Celestino to the plants that give the novel its name. To good avail, the objective of dismantling false universalisms is achieved in *A visão das plantas* through a complex process of rescaling that has important consequences for the discussions on anthropogenic violence and more-than-human entanglements addressed in this special issue. Most of the plot takes place in a contained space, a walled garden located at a small coastal location in Portugal. This experience of voluntary confinement (for Celestino) contrasts with the pirate’s previous ‘openness to the world’ as a seafarer, and demonstrates that Portuguese colonialism relied not only on the expansion of universal values and free commerce, but also on the gatekeeping of enclosed zones of refuge and retreat. Both things are not just compatible with each other; they are each other’s condition of possibility.

A visão das plantas problematizes the idea that experiences of colonial mobility (such as those of the adventurer, the plundered, the pirate, the ‘discoverer’, the cataloguer, etc.) can relinquish itinerancy and uproot at ease when needed. When applied to Celestino, this belief simultaneously echoes the purported adaptability of Lusitanians that lies at the centre of the lusotropical ideology, and the recent reimagining of Portugal as the ultimate hospitable place, a supposed safe haven (politically, ecologically, socially) for digital nomads, golden visa holders, and in general for anyone who wishes to live a simple life surrounded by nature without the bustle of larger cities.¹³ It is important to underscore that this ideology updates and reproduces central tropes of Portuguese cultural identity, such as the idea of simplicity, proximity to nature and self-content. In both cases, malleability emerges as a transient relationship with space that paradoxically is also defined as a stable condition.¹⁴

¹¹ Sousa, ‘Ecocumplicidade’, p. 115.

¹² Sousa, ‘Ecocumplicidade’, pp. 112–13.

¹³ For a discussion of how Pereira de Almeida’s literary work engages with Portuguese national identity as entangled in processes of world-making, see Emanuelle Rodrigues dos Santos, ‘On Technology and Lost Connections: A Decolonial Approach to *As Telefones* by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida as a Hypercontemporary Novel’, in *The Hypercontemporary Novel in Portugal: Fictional Aesthetics and Memory after Postmodernism*, ed. by Paulo de Medeiros and Ana Paula Arnaut (Bloomsbury, 2024), pp. 141–56.

¹⁴ Throughout this text, I make the case for a more-than-human understanding of such a transit as a way of expanding and nuancing discussions on human migration and transnationalism. If Guimarães Franco has read Pereira de Almeida’s work as a proof of the *inseparabilidade* (a concept defined by Pereira de Almeida in her unclassifiable 2019 book *Pintado com o pé*), of the interconnectedness of stories, affects, memories, places, and spaces resulting out of the experience of migration, here I

Under this logic, Portugal (and *Portugalidade* [Portugueseness]) is imagined *and materialized* as a liminal shelter drifting amidst a fractured, hopeless, depleted, and refuge-less world.

Challenging this approach, the novel reveals the limits and the threats that might result from adopting such a standpoint. *A visão das plantas* does what its title promises by adopting a vegetal gaze that privileges the existence of the plants that Celestino has chosen to care for after spending most of his life plundering and profiting from harbour to harbour. Celestino builds a garden, but instead of becoming one with nature in the organic and lyrical way that Brandão depicted, a darker atmosphere permeates the everyday experience of the former pirate. Such sense of discomfort conveys the idea that there is something wrong at play in this garden, a rotting presence that dominates the story from beginning to end. The rotten presence that Celestino's garden represents epitomizes the contradictions of green colonialism: an ideology that mobilizes the discourse of environmentalism to continue managing and dispossessing most parts of the planet;¹⁵ the idea that nature could be managed in rational ways; and the belief that such management compensates for the extraction and the destruction, that it evens the score.

A visão das plantas follows the evolution of a house garden. Carnations, roses, trees, bushes, and aromatic herbs are maintained and tended with care by Celestino. The former pirate is the thread linking past and present, yet he is neither the main character of the novel nor what drives the plot forward; the plants are. In truth, however, it would be wrong to speak of a narrative plot in the conventional way, as this would imply differentiating Celestino from the plants, as though he were a superior locus of narrative attention by virtue of his humanity. As the garden grows and evolves, Celestino loses his humanity to become almost a vegetal being. Social relationships are hinted at, but in *A visão das plantas* the relationships among humans are inclined towards interruption and indifference. In fact, *A visão das plantas* challenges human-centred understandings of attention and indifference, reminding us, with Michael Marder, that it is our very incapacity (and unwillingness) to assume that plants interact that is often justified for the instrumentalization of vegetal life.¹⁶ Living a voluntarily secluded existence, with a kind of happiness resulting from the constant labour of planting, irrigating, and trimming, Celestino fades away until he finally dies and becomes at one with the plants. This is the more-than-human story that Pereira de Almeida builds in this short but powerful novel.

want to complicate such an approach by arguing for a redefinition of transits and transient states attuned to the sense of collapse and generic crisis described above. See Roberta Guimarães Franco, 'A "inseparabilidade" dos trânsitos na obra de Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida', *Abril*, 13.27 (2021), pp. 109–24.

¹⁵ Here and throughout the chapter I borrow from Michael Marder's problematization of the environment and environmentalism as a human-centred, managerial enterprise. See Michael Marder, *Plant Thinking*, and Michael Marder, 'Elemental Portugal', in *Portuguese Literature and the Environment*, ed. by Victor K. Mendes and Patrícia Vieira (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), pp. 61–77.

¹⁶ See Marder, *Plant Thinking*, pp. 131–33.

While referring back to the ‘fishermen of men’ and the slave trader Celestino implies an intervention in the canon of Portuguese literature, this is never the main goal of the narrative. The page dedicated to the presentation of some of the sailors whose lives are explored in Brandão’s *Os pescadores* opens Pereira de Almeida’s novel, generating a connection between the two texts, but *A visão das plantas* makes space for a fictional account of Celestino’s last days. This approach is common within postcolonial works that explore the gaps in Western canonical literary traditions (we might think here, for example, of Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*) and write and speak back to the canon by shifting the focus from central to marginal characters, by expanding stories marked by structural silences and deliberate omissions.¹⁷ *A visão das plantas* does this in relation to *Os pescadores*, but Pereira de Almeida’s novel also creates a different story altogether by providing us with a more-than-human approach to the anecdotic last episodes of Celestino’s life. The pirate is recovered here not because of his former ambivalent marginality (as an outcast who is also slave owner and therefore an agent of imperialism); rather, he is mobilized as a kind of ghostly presence that, despite being ‘useless’ (when framed from a utilitarian and productivist point of view), is still present nowadays. From the onset, Pereira de Almeida urges a redefinition of reading: a radical act that goes beyond unmuting silenced voices within canonical texts and that invests in exploring the fractures at play within the configuration of the acts of writing and reading themselves.

As we turn the pages, Celestino retreats into the garden and fades from the narrative account, his voice appearing less frequently and becoming more dubitative and delusional as the plants expand and occupy the pirate’s family home. The first pages already generate the tension that will drive the story forward: on the one hand, Celestino wants to ‘morrer consolado entre as plantas, rodeado de tons e aromas’ [to die comforted by plants, surrounded by tones and aromas],¹⁸ seeing in nature a comforting and undemanding companion capable of granting spiritual peace in a person’s last days. On the other hand, the plants challenge that view, revealing that Celestino’s attempts at controlling the garden were unsuccessful and therefore representing ‘a fome da Natureza’ [Nature’s hunger] and ‘a dimensão de sonho da arquitectura’ [the dreamlike dimension of architecture] (p. 16).

Ultimately the garden prevails, frustrating the pirate’s attempts to make sense of a life of plunder, but also challenging the possibility of straightforward and human-centred interpretations. *A visão das plantas* confirms this hypothesis by denying any stable meaning to species and natural elements. Sea, land, earth, water, plants, and humans are mutable, but also mutually interdependent and

¹⁷ See *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (Routledge, 2003).

¹⁸ Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, *A visão das plantas*, published as part of *Três histórias de esquecimento* (Relógio D’Água, 2021), p. 19. Further references will be given in the text.

equally affected by the sense of putrefaction and decay that prevails in the novel. Crucially, humans are not given the privilege of interpretation. By the end of the novel, we read that ‘debaixo da terra, não parecia haver um segredo’ [below ground there does not seem to be any secret] (p. 62). This statement implies that Celestino’s new task as gardener might not be indispensable after all, but it also complicates readings of the novel that emphasize its connection with Portugal, Portugueseness and the Portuguese soil. In fact, as Celestino’s life becomes less relevant and more dream-like, a dream introduces us to a planetary nightmare that looks shockingly familiar:

[...] a Natureza conspira para nos adormecer, que no fim do mundo não há gente, só troncos doentes pelo chão, as mãos dos peixes, um caldo de nenúfares e baratas, ervas, esqueletos de ratos, fungos, cobras que comem espinhas, um caudal de domingos. (p. 20)

[Nature conspires to make us sleep, for at the end of the world there are no people, only sick logs on the ground, fishes’ hands, a broth of water-lilies and cockroaches, grasses, rats’ skeletons, funguses, thorn-eating snakes, a cascade of Sundays.]

This last fragment is crucial, for it sets up the tone of the novel and defines the literary and critical aspirations of *A visão das plantas*. Not only is any transcendent and sublime contemplation of nature out of the equation; the human figure has vanished from this apocalyptic scenario altogether, which does not mean that the consequences of capitalism and colonialism are irrelevant for the scene. On the contrary, the sense of decay prevailing over the dream can be clearly traced back to Celestino’s shady past. The rotten presence that crawls over the garden walls comes from the sea, invades the land as an excrescence of an ocean overfilled with the transits of plunder and forced displacement. The sense of an ending in this fragment is poetic, yet also excruciatingly material if we keep Celestino’s biographical account in mind. The pirate’s homeland is rendered unfamiliar and unrecognizable, becoming an abject presence that is ultimately left behind, shuffled within an indistinct planetary organic waste-landscape that keeps evolving and adapting new, ‘wild’ forms that are not defined beforehand.¹⁹ Importantly, this is a presence that goes beyond Portugal and the Portuguese-speaking world, but also that manages to illuminate the darkest linkages of a colonial ideology that can outlive its creators and that operates at planet-wide.²⁰

Conjuring up such a presence entails engagement with a colonial genealogy of environmental governability that universalizes Eurocentric notions of

¹⁹ On the idea of wilderness as a queer presence that cannot be discovered and owned, see Halberstam, *Wild Things*.

²⁰ This view complements Hilary Owen’s and Claire Williams’ interest in decentring Portugal’s geocentrality through a critical gesture that entails a self-reflective transnational analysis that involves ‘plural centres and the analysis of power’. Claire Williams and Hilary Owen, ‘Introduction: Transnationalizing Portuguese Studies’, in *Transnational Portuguese Studies*, ed. by Claire Williams and Hilary Owen (Liverpool University Press, 2020), pp. 1–20 (p. 9).

sustainability and cleanliness (through the construction of botanical gardens, for example, but also through the more extensive practice that leads to the enclosure of nature for the enjoyment of the few) whilst overshadowing persistent and unevenly distributed regimes of waste. *A visão das plantas* speculates on this genealogy, which implies distributing value and deciding on what is worth preserving, how, why and for whom.

A key feature of this genealogy is an idealized notion of nature as an unspoiled and resilient reservoir that will be there despite all odds. Colonialism and botanical science share a common genealogy that becomes clear when we look at the history of botanical gardens, those microcosms that brought the impression of universalism closer to metropolitan spaces.²¹ Less commonly acknowledged is the fact that coloniality also lies behind universalist and exclusionary notions of environmentalism that not only keep the human figure at their centre as they rely on interlinked and mutually interdependent specist, racial, and social hierarchies. To this, we have to add that fascism was possible due to a technosphere and a biopolitical imagination tested first on plants and animals and only later on 'dehumanized humans'.²²

Likewise, the image of pristine natural reserves is increasingly associated with the obsession with cleanliness and contagion of Capitalocenic and pandemic times. The issue is that these connections are not just connections. Often, they take the forms of mutations. These mutations compel us to look for the new and the unexpected instead of just tracking the old within the new. They urge us to map the unexpected consequences of long-term, slow violence as they harbour pervasive, not always obvious, futures.²³

A visão das plantas does this very effectively. The plot frustrates attempts at searching for a final moral message, a lesson to be learned. Celestino's moral, physical and psychological decay is not matched by the state of his garden. In fact, quite the opposite is true: as the old pirate collapses, the plants seem to become lusher. Celestino should die and nature should live on, offering a kind of more-than-human compensation, but this is not the entire story. As the plants that take Celestino's 'quintal a beira mar' [garden by the sea], the novel evolves and expands in illogical, non-deterministic ways. Revenge and poetic justice are moral things, that is to say, human things. Here the story is other: as the narrator mentions, 'as plantas viam o jardineiro como as plantas vêem. Não se sentiam agradecidas [the plants saw the gardener as plants are used to seeing. They did not feel grateful]' (p. 39).

The main effect resulting from such narrative strategies is disorientation. Throughout the novel, we find clues suggesting sameness and relationality, yet

²¹ See MacCracken, *Gardens of Empire*; Baber, 'The Plants of Empire'.

²² On humanization and dehumanization, see Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I Am* (Fordham University Press, 2008); Cary Wolfe, *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

²³ See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011).

this feeling is dismantled in the next paragraph. At some stage we read that:

Celestino sabia que a Natureza não se condói, via agora que ela não aprende. Mas a noção da sua teimosia perfeita pareceu-lhe assentimento. Era livre de morrer, de amar e de ser amado pelas flores. O Sol, as folhas, as ameixas, os abetos também eram seus. Também eram ele. (p. 38)

[Celestino knew that Nature is not moved by compassion, he saw now that she does not learn. But the notion of her perfect stubbornness seemed like assent to him. He was free to die, to love, and be loved by the flowers. The Sun, the leaves, the plums, the firs were also his. And they were him too.]

Pages later, we feel the anguish that the old pirate experiences when becoming almost a plant struggling for air and light. Plants are presented as nourishing and comforting only to become ‘um molar que esconde a sua necrose com um esmalte reluzente’ [a molar that hides its decay with a shining enamel] (p. 35).

Not only does Celestino’s garden act in ‘odd’ ways, it also rejects categorization, offering instead a kind of ‘wild anarchitecture’ that ‘unmakes’ the certainties of colonial/modern/patriarchal temporal concatenations.²⁴ Although plant species are often identified, the text also refers to them as ‘the plant/s’. Each specimen, as well as the garden as a whole, are granted agency: the focus is on what plants *do* and *feel* instead of on what they *are*. The garden therefore exists beyond the social, as a kind of purulent present invisible to, but invading, the social texture of a small community by the sea. The pirate is presented as a strange and unpleasant kind of debris expelled by the ocean after having dedicated his entire life to dubious maritime enterprises. Celestino is not a *retornado*, as his arrival in Portugal is not related to the end of any conflict. Nor does he attempt to reorientate himself within the ‘recovered motherland’. Instead, Celestino is the return of the colonial repressed, not so much a corpse or a ghostly presence but rather a rotten, organic living entity, someone (or something) that refuses to die.

Thus, we read:

O mesmo mar que o cuspira, permitindo-lhe o regresso, zombava dele, num último lance de ironia, tornando-o em terra uma curiosidade para a imaginação das almas puras. Domesticara-o: enjaulara-o num jardim. (p. 70)

[The same sea that had spat him out, allowing his return, was ridiculing him, in a last stroke of irony, turning him on land into a curiosity for the imagination of pure souls. It had domesticated him: it had imprisoned him in a garden.]

A *visão das plantas* seems to be open to allegorical interpretation. Celestino’s garden, his ‘quintal a beira mar’, allows for a facile reference to national identity and to the centuries-old luso-tropicalist trope of Portugal as a small stripe of land stolen from the ocean and projected towards it. Yet, I would argue, the

²⁴ Halberstam, *Wild Things*, p. 29.

novel, as well as the trilogy in which it is included, resists straightforward interpretation. The common trope uniting the three novels is wasted lives that nevertheless keep moving for unknown reasons. It is, however, impossible to assume that such phenomena are direct consequences of past acts. In the same way, the presence of Celestino, Bruma, and Boa Morte de Silva on Portuguese soil is clearly connected to colonial itineraries, but their stories are not uniform or lineal. On the contrary, all three novels are open to unforeseen linkages and concatenations between multiple colonial histories and postcolonial designs, ultimately flagging up the all-pervasive, more-than-human impact of the modern-colonial project whilst shunning straightforward explanations. But if this is the case, then how to read *A visão das plantas*? What is, ultimately, the story that these plants tell, and to whom are they talking?

A sensible answer to these questions is provided by the recent work of Françoise Vergès. In several essays, Vergès has argued against the idea that a cleaned and confined environment could imply a way out of the nightmare popularly called Anthropocene. For Vergès, contained cleanliness and ordered vegetalia was central for the calculations of capitalism. Cleaned, 'natural' environments were the condition of possibility of a system of extraction that kept the gendered and racialized bodies of the 'cleaners' out of sight. Domestic and physical labour was mobilized and displaced as part of a regime of accumulation that relied on a logistics of waste (including disposable and extractive nature and wasted lives) to materialize a universalist logic of value. Waste and nature, contained unruliness and suppressed surplus, come together in Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida's *A visão das plantas*, coincidentally published in 2019, the same year as Vergès's essay. The journey of Celestino in the novel echoes the kind of redemption that walled natural spaces offer in Vergès's apt reconceptualization of more-than-human regimes of waste and value (the image of the so-called 'tropical botanical garden' in Lisbon, the place where the novel is set, easily comes to mind here). The attentiveness with which the former men-of-arms look after the garden space reveals the underside of an anthropocenic pastoral, in which recourse to the land and the flora can be mobilized to generate a safeguarded postcolonial amnesia.

A solid warning against a return 'home' by way of a turn to nature is presented in the novel in the form of a discussion on furniture and trees. In the central pages of the novel, Celestino mentally wanders around the cargo that returned to Portugal in the form of precious wood from exotic chopped trees. 'Os troncos haviam feito a rota dos homens, deitados como nem a estes era permitido [The trunks had followed the path of men, laid out as was not permitted even to them]' (p. 51). The pirate wonders about 'a vida da árvore secular, agora deitada sobre a mesa, presa pelo torno, como um cadáver enviado para longe de sua casa' [the life of the secular tree, now lying on the bench, secured by the lathe, as a corpse sent far away from home] (p. 52). What matters here is that the spoiled lives of trees are neither a symbol of a certain historical

period nor a symbol of anything. Rather, they are an eloquent preamble to a long-term genealogy of extractive violence and interspecies systems of valorization, specialization, and speciation at the same time. In a brief moment of lucidity, Celestino explains that ‘mais do que todos os móveis da casa, a madeira escura narrava a história da sua dissolução com uma ironia de que a viúva não podia suspeitar’ [more than all the pieces of furniture at home, the dark wood narrated the history of his dissolution with an irony that the widow could not suspect] (p. 52). Here coloniality acquires the shape of cancelled and discarded lives. It is the sexed and interspecies violence that renders nature and energy a commodity that explains the dissolution of Celestino.²⁵ Importantly, at the end of the novel Celestino does not just die; he dissolves into the garden, into his ‘Casa Portuguesa’, but this dissolution is not a peaceful return to nature, but rather part of the process of expansion of a rotting living thing. The trope of the Portuguese house has been a constant element in contemporary Portuguese literature. In Pereira de Almeida’s *A visão das plantas*, we find a rather original iteration of the trope, one that combines isolation (through the image of the walled garden) with the sense of decay and the rotting presence of *vegetalia*. In the novel, the wild, exuberant presence of plants overflowing the architecture is not relegated to tropical scenarios conquered by the Portuguese; such wilderness is ‘at home’, yet Celestino’s house — and, by extension, the mainland strip of land in which he settles — is dissolving into the oceans, becoming less firm as we turn the pages. Importantly, such a dissolution seems to affect traditional critical apparatuses as well, urging for a radically alternative approach to colonial transits and postcolonial interspecies governability.

The novel’s final scene is especially relevant in this matter. When Celestino dies, Padre Alfredo does not feel guilty for not having been able to make the old pirate confess and embrace Catholicism; rather he feels jealous: ‘As palavras escondiam cobiça. Nas suas mãos pias, todas as plantas morriam’ [The words concealed jealousy. In his pious hands, all the plants tended to die] (p. 87). This excellent final line reveals that we shouldn’t read Celestino’s history in moral terms or from the point of view of human history. The despair of the priest bears witness to the durability of two colonial regimes, one based on ideology and social values, the other on the distribution of ‘unruly’, more-than-human nature. At some point, the narrator wonders about the following possibility: ‘não eram as plantas, que não fazem perguntas, muito mais proveitosas do que o aborrecido padre, com os seus olhos culposos?’ [were not plants, which are not used to asking questions, much more fruitful than the bored priest, with his guilty eyes?] (p. 47). Plants can live well with ideological control, but also outlive it. The plants that grow without measure and control are the root/rot

²⁵ On the intersections between sex, gender and coloniality, see Hilary Owen and Anna M. Klobucka, *Gender, Empire and Postcolony: Luso-Afro-Brazilian Intersections* (Palgrave, 2014); *Lusosex: Gender and Sexuality in the Portuguese-Speaking World*, ed. by Susan Canty Quinlan and Fernando Arenas (University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

that prevails and explains our future-less present. It is the latter that outlasted the former as a rotting presence. If Celestino's story teaches us anything, it is the impossibility of keeping that rot out of sight.

Celestino's actions are paired in the novel with a sense of impunity and assumed innocence, a feeling akin to the one that Gloria Wekker attributes to white supremacy and racism.²⁶ This becomes clear if we look at the episode in which Celestino gets rid of the human cargo of his slave ship, an episode that is described dispassionately. The act of suffocating the Black individuals that the ship was carrying with quicklime, to later on discard the dead bodies, is presented as a botanical process, as if Celestino were just following the necessary steps to achieve the best organic process: 'Os negros viram que um pó caía sobre eles, mas não entenderam o que se passava' [The Blacks saw that a dust was falling on them, but they did not understand what was happening] (p. 36). Likewise, Celestino's incapacity to fit within a world he was not meant to survive in is also expressed through his incapacity to understand the organic evolution of his garden. The plants don't just outlive Celestino; they also outgrow the pirate. Even when Celestino attempts to think of himself as a plant that wants to consume everything and that only rests when it has covered up the work of humans, the garden allows itself to ignore the old pirate's human ambitions. At the end of the novel, the haunting presence of a colonial dystopia that outlives its creators is conjured one more time, as we read that 'quase fora deste mundo, o jardineiro deixara de ser o jardim, porque o jardim se tornara jardineiro do jardineiro' [almost out of this world, the gardener was no longer the garden, because the garden became the gardener's gardener] (p. 85).

Spatio-Temporal, Interspecies Disjunctures, and Concatenations

In this article, I have argued in favour of understanding *A visão das plantas* as a critical intervention into the politics of time and temporality operating within and beyond Portugal and the Portuguese-speaking world. Writing in 2024, Paulo de Medeiros and Ana Paula Arnaut pressed for an historical engagement with the hypercontemporary, pointing out that writers and readers share an acute awareness of the sense of urgency that shapes our times, a sense that nevertheless does not impede critically conjuring up the contradictions of the present. For Medeiros and Arnaut, the capacity to glimpse the past amidst the glitter of the more recent brings together three cornerstone names within twentieth-century Portuguese literature, namely José Saramago, Lídia Jorge and António Lobo Antunes.²⁷ Younger writers — amongst whom Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida is included — will share with the older generation 'the unabating confrontation with the violence that permeates the present as well as

²⁶ Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Duke University Press, 2016).

²⁷ *The Hypercontemporary Novel in Portugal: Fictional Aesthetics and Memory after Postmodernism*, ed. by Paulo de Medeiros and Ana Paula Arnaut (Bloomsbury, 2024), p. 2.

the intense dedication to form and its use as a registration of that same violence that also provides readers with some possibility of resistance.²⁸

Bearing these arguments in mind, the question arises: how can we categorize *A visão das plantas*? Is the novel just a postmodern reinterpretation of the Portuguese literary canon? An expression of the inadequacies of stories from the past for making sense of a postcolonial present that nevertheless refuses to let colonialism go? A story of denial and delusion? A critical take on neoconservative gestures of retreating into agrarian idylls? An anticipation of social experiences of confinement and lockdown? All these dimensions are certainly captured in Pereira de Almeida's short novel. Such a multiplicity of approaches displaces the figure of Celestino to a secondary role, making space for a daring problematization of the contemporary from a green, interspecies angle.

The contemporary entails a theoretical approximation to time that exceeds the emphasis on the present tense, on 'now'.²⁹ If this is the case, the interspecies enquiry into the afterlives of colonialism, as well as the problematization of human-centrist approaches to colonial and postcolonial histories, complicate straightforward chronological classifications and canonical definitions of the contemporary. *A visão das plantas* remains difficult to ascribe within a certain, unique temporality, something that becomes clear if we remember that Pereira de Almeida is rewriting Brandão's *Os pescadores*, but even more so if we think of the slow-paced narrative action and the marginal place that Pereira de Almeida's main character occupies in the novel. More than this, *A visão das plantas* warns against uniform understandings of time and temporality, revealing how the absence of Afro-Portuguese narratives in literary debates clearly points to the cracks and structural inequalities at play within a national cultural field that still sees itself as mainly European and white.³⁰ On another level, Pereira de Almeida's Celestino is more and less than Brandão's character, which means that *A visão das plantas* is much more than a postmodern citation of *Os pescadores*; the vanishing presence of the former pirate brings additional layers into the temporal formation of the contemporary. Amongst these we find plant time and the ghost of national literary genealogies, but also the fractured, overlapping temporality of green colonialism and systemic collapse.

A visão das plantas succeeds in leaving the reader puzzled without offering an alternative chronology. By staying with the time, 'obscurity' and 'potentialities' of plants,³¹ by adopting the ceaseless and methodical rhythm of vegetal growing

²⁸ Medeiros and Arnaut, *The Hypercontemporary Novel*, p. 2.

²⁹ See Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays* (Stanford University Press, 2009); Terry Smith, 'Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity', *Critical Inquiry*, 32.4 (2006), pp. 681–707.

³⁰ Considering the absence of Afro-Portuguese fictions in the context of contemporary literary and critical production in Portugal would imply dealing with a wider array of temporal categories, including belatedness, avant-gardism, or futurism. Such an approach would also call canonical historical periodization into question.

³¹ Marder, *Plant Thinking*.

and decay, the novel seems to reject the need for alternative conceptualizations altogether. Instead, it poses the challenge of reimagining what reading in times of systemic collapse might look like. Such a challenge entails giving up human centrality and problematizing agency-driven approaches to literary production and consumption. For, as Pereira de Almeida's literary garden seems to suggest, our future-less now is not just the result of planned dispossession and colonial governability, but also of interrupted futures past, of the planetary consequences of truncated, yet living regimes of waste and neglect. Reading (from) Pereira de Almeida's garden is essential for grasping the contradictions of a contemporaneity that goes beyond straightforward violence (although it includes a fair share of it). *A visão das plantas* provides us with a dystopian-yet-realistic take on a future beyond anticolonial emancipation, but more accurately it points to the unsustainable logic of colonial and capitalist formations that render everything — including the human beings that set them into motion — expendable. Crucially, by joining Celestino in his safeguarded retreat, we realize that the tragedy has already happened; that it keeps happening in real time through a constant and selective redistribution of vulnerability and slow violence.

The fiction of Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida rejects straightforward readings, bringing the reader into a zone of discomfort that nevertheless remains productive and critically attuned to the present. First published in 2019, *A visão das plantas* interrogates spatiotemporal entanglements — problem-spaces, to put it with David Scott³² — from a perspective that goes beyond continuist understanding of postcolonial experiences. In this, Pereira de Almeida's novel breaks ground in opening up space for a reconceptualization of new forms that expand the contemporary without becoming obsessed with categorizing and canonizing these emergent creative practices. Read alongside recent work by Portuguese visual artists also concerned with the colonial (and anticolonial) genealogies of gardening — the decades-long work of Vasco Araújo and the Portuguese Pavilion at the 2024 Venice Biennial created by Mónica de Miranda, Sónia Vaz Borges, and Vânia Gala comes to mind³³ — *A visão das plantas* might seem too pessimistic and lacking focus, almost removed from the urgency of the above-mentioned artistic and curatorial projects.

A cursory glance at the narrative would seem to foreclose any space for resistance — any desire to counterpose alternative, 'wild' genealogies opposed to the normative history of gardening. *A visão das plantas* might also convey the impression of relinquishing critical awakening, the moment of realization of a hidden truth that Araújo's creative work developed in Lisbon's Tropical [*sic*] Botanical Garden highlights.³⁴ In exchange, Pereira de Almeida's novel takes

³² David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Duke University Press, 2004).

³³ <<https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2024/portugal>>.

³⁴ See *Portugal não é um país pequeno: contar o 'império' na pós-colonialidade*, ed. by Manuela Ribeiro Sanches (Cotovia, 2006).

up the arduous task of framing how we read and write nowadays anew, making space for temporal entanglements that do not disregard the challenges and, we must add, the pleasures of interspecies overlapping histories and experiences.

In conclusion, *A visão das plantas* demonstrates that green colonialism may be best approached and understood as ‘the garden becoming gardener of the gardener’, as an entanglement of nature and culture in which both terms are, and have always been, mutually constitutive.³⁵ Likewise, the consequences of energy colonialism also underscore the threats of dismissing systemic collapse through an emphasis on planetary — and, we must add, interstellar — ultra-rich escapism. Pereira de Almeida rightly points the finger at the appropriation of the radical sociality of *marronage* by the asocial 1%, glimpsing at a complex temporality in which exposure to impending and increasing disasters coexists with the enclosure and privatization of spaces of refuge and ‘nature’.

From this angle, *A visão das plantas* renders Portuguese colonialism visible and thinkable as a planetary enterprise. The novel rescales the relationship between literature and ‘nature’. It shifts focus from human-centred depictions of the environment to the political economy of colonality, which as we have seen, simultaneously relies on expansion, extraction, and overconsumption, on the one hand, and on the configuration of walled, safe, ‘natural’ spaces, on the other. The novel undertakes an original glance at the Portuguese literary canon that remains attentive to the specific ways in which colonial nature outlives the regimes of truth and power and specific genealogies of accumulation. In the novel, the only limit to Celestino’s plants seem to be the even more unapologetic expansion of the ocean. Plants and rising tides are part of the same unknown force that points at the logic, but also the limits, of green colonialism. *A visão das plantas* excels at mapping the rot that remains when we address the political from a merely human perspective.

This article has attempted to see in Celestino’s garden not just a tomb, but also a productive site responsible for the organic engineering of a pervasive colonial present-future that refuses to let go. *A visão das plantas*, in short, is an invitation to imagine a shared, multispecies agency lying below and beyond false distinctions between the unruly jungle and the trimmed garden. It seems to me that this is an unmatched point of departure for an alternative, interspecies, planetary genealogy of literature in Portuguese as well as for a critical meditation of what reading and thinking in times of collapse might entail.

³⁵ See Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016).