

Intersectionality, Decolonial Mapping, and Rethinking Imperial Subjectivation in the Poetry of Olinda Beja

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Abstract:

This essay considers how Olinda Beja, born in 1946 in the African archipelago of São Tomé and Príncipe, seeks to produce a signifying chain that emerges from the centuries-long impact of imperial power on the world, particularly on those bodies and spaces it has systematically disenfranchised. Beja, in this sense, takes a further step by reflecting on ways to enunciate identity and collective struggle while proposing a decolonial mode of knowing. Beja's project is explored by means of theoretically interfacing, in addition to decolonial and postcolonial theorists, W.E.B. Du Bois's "double-consciousness" with Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's notion of "intersectionality" speaking to the confluences of imperial categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, and international movement that impact experience within the modern spectrum of power. To this end, this paper reads select poems from three of her collections spanning her poetic trajectory and oeuvre: *Bô Tendê?* [*Do You Understand?*] (1992), *No País do Tchiloli* [*In the Country of Tchiloli*] (1996), and *Aromas de Cajamanga* [*Aromas of Ambarella*] (2009).

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Innumerable writers across continents, languages, and histories have grappled with the formation of modern global power initiated by western expansion. This existence of imperial power – political, economic, racial, sexual, gendered—has been given different names by different branches of critical theory. Aníbal Quijano has coined it "coloniality" (1991) and Walter D. Mignolo has expounded upon Quijano's conceptualization with the term "colonial matrix of power" (*Darker Side*). Meanwhile, Partha Chatterjee, in *The Black Hole of Empire*, has identified the contemporary existence of empire as a "global practice of power" (1). Yumna Siddiqi has succinctly located Empire as "as an umbrella term for the different forms of Western hegemony over the rest of the world, be in political or military rule over an alien territory and the direct exploitation of its resources, or in the exercise of economic and cultural power in a more indirect way, through the flows of capital, goods, information, and people" (1). Meanwhile, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire* (2000) have attributed the same term to contemporary flows of capital and dominant global structures of production.

At a more abstract level, James Baldwin directs our attention to a "western system of reality" in which this global power is couched. We can take Baldwin's conceptualization even

further in order to consider how Empire places or subjectivizes individuals into its concomitant system of reality. We must, therefore, consider Empire as a discursive subject-constituting and subject-constitutive field that repeatedly categorizes bodies—and forms subjects from such categories—in agreement with the place they are to occupy in Empire’s spectrum of power. As a subject-constituting entity, Empire must also imply an economy of desire through which subjects are interpellated. This is not to claim that Empire is composed of one unitary imperial desire. Rather, it is constituted and reproduced by different desires toward domination—whether at the level of national empires, religious missionaries, or those tied to particular military, political, or economic exigencies specific to a geographic context.

While different national imperial projects devised nationally-inflected colonial systems of difference, these also contributed to a larger, inter-imperial, system of western meaning that sustained and signified the power of European (and later North American and Australian) states, elites, and particular bodies in racial, gender, sexual, and abled hierarchies of personhood and culture. Despite differences in how particular imperial projects articulated colonized bodies and spaces through different narratives (such as the white man’s burden and Lusotropicalism) these contributed immensely to the intersecting formulations of whiteness, heteronormativity, and abledness as paradigms of subjective normativity and epistemic superiority. It is to these discursive tenants of imperial power and its exercise that the aforementioned term Empire refers—a common field of meaning amongst imperial and nation-building projects through and for which bodies and spaces were appropriated, exploited, and/or discarded. In this sense, my use of the term “Empire,” as I have deployed it previously,¹ addresses a set of discourses shared, yet expressed in different ways, across western empires and nation-states in Europe and the Americas, serving and undergirding the exercise of economic, military, and political power and the imbalanced flows of capital and bodies. Empire here refers to a system of meaning inaugurated by European expansion that continues to inform western power exercised both globally and locally.

Many cultural products—literary, visual, material, and sonic – have also provided new idioms through which to examine, challenge, and move beyond the persistence of western/northern global hegemony. This has very much been the case with the oeuvre of Olinda Beja, evoking, appropriating, and reworking Empire’s signifiers in order to remap the signified terrain of power while bringing about anti-imperial forms of local and global consciousness. For Beja, this project has very much to do with her own personal trajectory.

An acclaimed poet, she is also the author of two novels and three collections of short stories, and is regarded as one of the leading literary voices of São Tomé and Príncipe, a West African archipelago along the equator.

Born in the San Tomean town of Guadalupe in 1946, she lived the first years of her life under Portuguese colonial rule, until her family relocated to Portugal during her childhood. More precisely, she spent the next years of her life in Viseu, in the Beira Alta province of Portugal's central region. She later earned her *licenciatura* in Modern Languages and Literatures from the University of Oporto and currently teaches Portuguese and Lusophone cultures in Laussane, Switzerland. Her father was a Portuguese national, while her mother's family continues to reside in Batepá, where Beja spends her time in São Tomé e Príncipe. Although little more is widely known about Beja's biography, she can be considered part of a wave of, according to Jared Staller, "dual-culture children in Portugal (born in São Tomé e Príncipe), where they lived with their families if they were mestiço or had been sent for education" (1). This has undoubtedly contributed to her work both in terms of experiences to place on the page as well as a unique lens through which to perceive the world, beyond São Tomé and Príncipe and the former imperial metropolis. As Staller also notes, moreover, similar exilic experiences were crucial to other "dual-culture children" (mestiço or not) of São Tomé e Príncipe who also "became remarkable poets, scholars, and expository writers" (2) that challenged imperial power; as in the cases of Francisco José Tenreiro, Caetano da Costa Alegre, and Alda Espírito Santo.

Drawing on her own experiences of exile and postcoloniality, Beja's poetic trajectory across her collections, as I shall explore below, offers an important rebuttal to the epistemic, subjectivizing, and historicizing functions of Empire. Firstly, we find a critical reflection regarding the imperial articulation of images of otherness, in this case that of a black cis-gendered womanhood, into which the poetic subject is interpellated. Her poetry thus provides insight into how otherness, as a set of floating signifiers, within imperial projects are inscribed onto bodies. In her case, being raised and educated in the metropolis meant that she was brought up and her identity formed in accord with these signifiers. The elaboration of otherness is, of course, an integral part of Empire's field of meaning and its repetitive reproduction of normative bodies, racial hierarchies, and subsequently global and local power. In response, I argue, Beja's poetry looks for ways in which to elude entrapment into otherness while also envisioning decolonial sites of knowledge and systems of meaning through which

intersubjectivity can exist without the imposition of definitive meanings on bodies. This form of decolonial mapping would be founded upon an ethics of destabilization that prevents the fixing of meaning, which is itself initiated by an approach to decolonial subjectivity based on the intersections of imperial categories of human social existence – race, gender, sexuality, ability, and labor. From this intersectionality, Beja’s poetry lays claim to a decolonial elaboration of identity by pinpointing the overlap of signifiers from such categories as a space for subaltern signification, epistemic disobedience, and decolonial solidarities.

Confronting Empire’s Formation of the Othered Subject

Beja’s first collection of poetry, *Bó Tendê?* [*Do You Understand?*] (1992) offers numerous poems reflecting on the consequences of moving to Europe as a young African girl, learning about herself and the world through imperial pedagogy. Within this particular collection, her poem “Visão” [“Vision”] provides a visceral example of this, beginning with the very first lines:

Quiseram fazer de mim uma europeia
e por esse motivo me arrancaram
das costas de mãe-África, minha mãe. (14)

Although the poetic voice never mentions specifically to whom the third person plural conjugations refer, she nonetheless underscores the interpellation she experiences, one that stems from a particular desire: “they wanted to make me European.” To become European, or to Europeanize her, as she goes on to reveal, implies adopting the western site of knowledge and narrativization as her own, viewing the world imperially, or better yet, learning to learn imperially.

Repuxaram meus cabelos, alisando-os
dando-lhes nova forma, esquecendo como
Medeia penteou os filhos de África.
Deram-me um colégio por escola
para aprender, enfim, boas maneiras e assim
poder entrar na sociedade. (14)

The altering of hair speaks to a praxis of corporal transformation according to both European standards of beauty, and underneath that, European standards of valid personhood articulated here as the appearance of “civilization.” In this regard, such a change of appearance

always goes hand in hand with European and imperially disseminated notions of social respectability; thus tying it together with the socializing goal of acquiring “good manners” in order to “enter society.” This Europeanization spoken of here does not, to be sure, suggest a racial transformation into whiteness, but a European retextualizing of the black body. This is, in other words, a learning to reinscribe the body and perform identity – at the intersection of race, gender, class, and sexuality—according to European knowledge of bodies (including the beauty thereof), time, and space, as the next lines of the poem illustrate below. As the above excerpt also suggests, moreover, the imposition of European ways of viewing and inscribing the othered body—part of the field of meaning through which the other is interpellated—also implies the displacement and erasure of non-European modes of knowing.

In this regard, Beja refers to Medea, the eponymous character of Euripides’ Greek tragedy, *Medea*; one in which the discursive binary of “civilized” versus “barbarian” – an early example of orientalism and discourse of ethnic/racial difference – frames the action. As the plot of the play goes, Medea is a princess of the barbarian, non-Greek, kingdom of Colchis, and is married to Jason. The latter divorces Medea in order to marry Glauce, princess of Corinth, a beacon of Greek civilization. As a result, Medea murders the children she had with Jason in addition to his new wife. As Albert Wertheim’s postcolonial reading of *Medea* explains: “As a woman and an ethnic Other, Medea is the victim of a double patriarchy or double colonialism” (337). A similar experience is evoked throughout Beja’s work, and the reference to Medea represents the celebration of an act against power. This is precisely what Wertheim extracts from the play:

The unexpected triumph of Medea despite her bloody deeds is the triumph not merely of a woman wronged but of female intelligence and, even more significantly, of the ethnic Other, who is always seen by the hegemonic culture as inherently less intelligent, less rational, barbarous, and literally or more often metaphorically female—and hence as an easy target for subjugation and exploitation by a masterful, intelligent, civilized, male “superior” society. (377)

Here Beja deploys the figure of Medea in yet another related fashion – as a maternal entity that practiced motherhood through political engagement against Empire; one that far exceeds any trite valorization of womanhood through motherhood. The act of filicide is an act of revenge but also bars the children from being placed into new modes of behavior and manners—like those experienced by Beja’s poetic I. Medea is thus evoked as a subversive

component of an anti-imperial mythology that resisted the incorporation of her children into Empire's realm of intersubjective meaning. Medea is, therefore, cited in the poem as a mother acting as a site of knowledge against Empire. Medea's combing of her children's hair, mentioned by Beja, speaks to the decolonial epistemology Medea bestows upon her offspring, a knowledge of their bodies and larger existence not subsumed by the forces of Empire. By denouncing the "forgetting of how Medea combed," Beja's poetic voice underscores the erasure of non-imperial forms of knowing; an erasure she experienced through her own interpellation into Empire as other.

This experience of interpellation outlined in the poem offers important insights regarding imperial subjectivation into otherness. The poem's focus on Europeanization points to a process that begins with the cultivation of an imperial ideal ego of black femininity; the discursive formation of the sign Beja is supposed to take on within Empire's signifying field. This is the sign/body that is to be performed, prepared for, and consumed by the white heteronormative male gaze that guides imperial signification. From this hegemonic scene of writing and reading social bodies, the ideal ego of black femininity is thus the crystallization and intersection of various forms of signified otherness, namely those pertaining to gender and race – the double colonialism mentioned by Wertheim above. These figurations of otherness come from those that have been imperially inscribed over the "absolute otherness" (Cixous & Clément 70-71) of non-European bodies through the monologism of imperial historicization and subsequent foreclosure of non-European voices from the global signifying process.

The brand of otherness into which the poetic subject is being interpellated is, more specifically, an assimilationist one—an image of otherness placed on the black bodies that are most in quotidian physical proximity with white bodies. This would pertain especially to the imperial post-slavery metropolis where the poetic subject finds herself, as well as to different ranks of colonial administration or business where employment for colonized natives was often contingent upon assimilation. The specular image that corresponds to the assimilated other is thus an imperial negotiation between the signified abjection of non-assimilated subjects and a consumable form of exoticness; a sign in flux across different imperial fantasies of otherness. Entering spaces of white presence and control thus entails an assumption of this particular sort of specular image of identitarian totality. As such, this assumption is always

regulated through the surveying function of a society whose intersubjective relations are imperially negotiated.

The performance of this *imago* in the subjectivation of the assimilated other entails a reading of the body through the imperial forms of knowledge that formulated it—the imperial knowledge pertaining to bodies, both European and non-European. Beja’s poem thus brings to the forefront the pedagogical aspect of imperial subjectivation. It is not only the ideal ego/*imago* that is formulated by and embedded in Empire, but also the regulation of the relationship between the emerging subject and the *imago*. This regulatory function is itself widely disseminated at the quotidian level, particularly through the role of institutions. In this regard, Beja’s poem underscores the experience of metropolitan schooling. Being placed into Empire occurs, in other words, through Empire’s epistemology – a realm of knowledge that also stipulates *how* to know. The imperial signifying field is simultaneously text, reading, and re-inscription. This is also the tri-partite existence of the subject. Beja is thus taught how to read and understand the imperially formulated world in order to reproduce its field of meaning through her performance of imperially inscribed otherness.

Obrigaram-me a cantar todos os rios
montes, montanhas e até
ganhei um belo prêmio por saber tudo
sobre o mar e sobre a terra
...
Fizeram-me decorar todos os reis
seus nomes, cognomes, dinastias
mas esqueceram que na terra do cacau houve
um Amador
que foi mais bravo que o mais bravo dos reis de
Portugal. (14)

For Beja, every piece of imperial knowledge implies the erasure of a piece of non-imperial knowledge or act of knowing. The last four lines above pertain, in this case, to a piece of anti-imperial knowledge, much like the example of Medea. The evoked Amador is revered in postcolonial São Tomé and Príncipe as an anti-imperial figure for having led a slave revolt against Portuguese colonial authorities in 1595. The erasure, or “forgetting,” mentioned in the poem speaks also to the function of imperial historicization of events— what is inscribed and

what is omitted from the western narrative of History, and for what purposes. In this case, the purposes are inevitably multifaceted. This erasure of an anti-imperial act maintains intact Empire's representation of itself, and its European masculine core, as an impenetrable and superior entity while at the same time maintaining imperial fantasies of colonized subjects as inferior, needing of European presence, docile or, on the flipside, ungovernable. The comparison here refers to a particular positive quality—that of bravery—that becomes an integral part of the discursive makeup of western mastery (such as the European kings mentioned in the poem) while negated from the imperial articulation of otherness.

Like the imperial articulation of global terrains (rivers, mountains, and seas), the imperial articulation of blackness—as other—is thus the only one rendered accessible to the poetic subject. It is subsequently through this particular image of blackness that the subjectivized other comes to know themselves. This encapsulates the fundamental predicament to which W.E.B. Du Bois refers through “double consciousness”: “this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (3). The subjectivation into narrativized otherness within Empire implies an identity that has been constructed and is then observed and regulated from without. Du Bois's theorization of the “American Negro” notably begins with this split, which leads to others: “One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (3).

The Du Boisian theorization of racialized subjectivity—experiencing the realm of social meaning as other—points to a hyper-awareness of the regulatory function of this symbolic realm that is, itself, composed of interpellated subjects. As Fanon would further elaborate half-century later in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the gaze that regulates, disseminated among other interpellated subjects within Empire's signifying field, is intimately tied to the imperial production of the othered body. Not only is the body regulated, in other words, it is a signifier palimpsestically formulated through the reproduction of imperial meaning, the reproduced fantasies of otherness over which fantasies of white/bourgeois/male/heteronormative superiority could be performed and inscribed. The regulatory function would thus serve to ensure that the body continues to fit the signifier of otherness into which it is interpellated.

The fundamental crux of double-consciousness can thus be unpacked via Fanon's interrogations of “the lived experience of the black man” (89) as one framed by imperial

narrativization and knowledge, as Beja's poem also points out. Fanon notably speaks of the image of the body schema—"an image in the third person" (90). In regards to how his interpellated body comes to move and perform, in the everyday sense, through the realm of intersubjective meaning, he pinpoints the ordeal of the subjectivized other:

I make all these moves, not out of habit, but by implicit knowledge. A slow construction of my self as a body in a spatial and temporal world—such seems to be the schema. It is not imposed on me; it is rather a definitive structuring of my self and the world—definitive because it creates a genuine dialectic between my body and the world. (91)

The "looking at one's self through the eyes of others" in Du Bois's words implies, for Fanon and Beja, a living as a body/text whose movements and actions are inscribed *a priori* and are therefore part of a realm of meaning constituted as the product of Empire's desire for reproduction. Fanon's visceral awareness of the psychic experience of race is, moreover, an awareness that his body moves, thus producing meaning, in accordance with how it was taught to move by Empire's pedagogy of subjectivity. It is this conclusion that he succinctly summarizes: "not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man" (90).

Beja's body in her poem is thus guaranteed a place within Empire—as other—by following the identitarian roadmap that is implied by interpellation into the ideal ego. The voice behind the poem operates, therefore, through a fundamental cognizance that the body portrayed in the poem is one that had been narrated *a priori*. As such, the poem details how the body in question was placed into that particular text, as well as some of the signification mechanisms behind the formulation of the body/text.

The following stanza of the poem conveys more of the actions layed out for her body/text.

Tentaram fazer de mim uma europeia
e aconselharam até que quando um dia
chegasse a hora certa do amor
escolhesse alguém em cuja cor
se notasse bem a nobre raça
para que assim ficasse assegurado
aos descendentes da minha geração

o esquecimento total da negritude
 que resultou de uma loucura do meu pai...
 “tudo por bem eles disseram
 tudo por bem eles fizeram!” (14)

Part of the text—her story written for her—formulating her specular image of subjective totality implies, of course, particular sexual mandates that will enable her to reproduce the symbolic realm into which she is placed. The larger mandate ascribed to her, in order to reside in the metropolis, is the erasure of negritude mentioned throughout the poem, for the sake of the European-sanctioned and ventriloquized formulation and performance of black identity. Negritude, as evoked by Beja, means not only blackness, but formulations of blackness and knowledge that contest or reside outside of Empire; those that have also been foreclosed by Empire. As a subject, Beja’s interpellation implies the synchronization of her desire with that of Empire by circuiting it toward the signifiers of white superiority; formulating sexual and romantic desire as desire toward whiteness—the object of desire (sexual, racial, and social) for metropolitan life.

This portion of the poem points toward a transition regarding an imperial formulation of black subjectivity within the metropolis. The imperially inscribed specular image of blackness into which Beja and Fanon are interpellated must lead to a trans-generational erasure, or gradual genocide, of blackness. This trans-generational signifying chain of the metropolis must lead, from one signifier to another, to the realization of the fantasy of a white Europe. In this regard, Beja’s poem reveals interracial sex to be a dialectical mode of achieving this imperial absolute of Europe—the inscribed universality/whiteness of Europeanness which has never fully existed. It is in this sense that Beja’s poem mentions the “folly” of her father—a European man in compromising this particular mission toward the absolute.

To be clear, the imperial goal of a white Europe operating within the poem, never means an eradication of alterity, for the fantasy of whiteness operates in tandem with the palimpsestic and floating fantasies of otherness. Europe, though, as the geo-cultural and political core and phantasmatic origin of universality—what Audre Lorde referred to as “the mythical norm” (116)—must be inscribed as the embodiment of such a core, the embodiment of the ideals of a global sphere of intersubjective existence purportedly molded by European civilization. In being mandated to perform and desire toward this goal, Beja reminds us of

Saidiya Hartman's argument pertaining to the subjectivation of the slave: "the slave is made to speak the master's truth and augment his power" (22).

The Intersectionality of Subjectivation

The grappling with Empire in this poem, particularly its subjectivation and circuiting of the desire of the othered body, in many ways lays the groundwork for Beja's larger *oeuvre*. It conveys the backdrop of imperial power and discourse against which her poetry, and especially her poetic site of articulation, emerges. More than touching upon different aspects of Empire and its modes of reproduction—imperial knowledge, foreclosure of non-western forms of knowing, fantasies of sameness and otherness, formulation of sexual desire—"Visão" provides a glimpse into the converging imperial categories that constitute the racialized and gendered subject residing within what Patricia Hill Collins termed the "matrix of domination" (18).

Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw has crucially named this intermingling of corporal categories that inform power and privilege "intersectionality." While her seminal essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," focuses particularly on the confluences of race and gender and the challenges facing black feminism, the term has a notably broadened scope. Crenshaw's concept and larger body of work can be seen, moreover, as an important contribution to, dialogue with, and theoretical addition to the school of critical thought on contemporary black feminism inaugurated by the Combahee River Collective. Through the work of both Crenshaw and other theorists, namely within Critical Race Theory, intersectionality has become a key framework through which to examine quotidian and institutional experiences of individuals across myriad categories such as ethnicity, disability, sexuality, class, education, age, and residence in addition to race and gender. From a legal perspective, Crenshaw's work lays bare the institutional blindness toward, and lack of protection for, individuals whose social experiences are informed by intersecting identity classifications. Citing a plethora of court cases involving discrimination toward black women in the United States in the realms of work and education, Crenshaw underscores the discrepancy between how both privilege and disenfranchisement operate and are experienced intersectionally. Her interrogations of the legal system, particularly cases affecting black women, reveal how anti-discrimination laws operate under single-classification systems. In other words, discrimination, as both a symptom and a practice of power, privilege, and

disenfranchisement, is only judicially legible in terms of “race discrimination, sex discrimination, or alternatively either, but not a combination of both” (Crenshaw 141).

Crenshaw’s work on intersectionality urges us to destabilize one particular category as the essence of social experience and thus approach the subject’s existence within the spectrum of power and inter-subjective meaning by how the different imperial classifications of bodies mentioned above interact in signifying one another. Beja’s poem, “Visão,” offers an interesting case study in intersectionality by narrating the subject’s interpellation through such intersecting categories. The signifiers making up these categories are inscribed at the level of the specular image into which she is interpellated. The formation of this *imago* does not, however, emerge spontaneously. It is, of course, the product of centuries of imperial historicization and imperial taxonomies of bodies. As an inscribed sign for the reproduction of Empire, the specular image emerges in response to the exigencies of the moment in which it is engendered. In this regard, the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality for her specular image are inevitably shaped by residing in the metropolis – a signified imperial space itself shaped by its claims to whiteness. The specular image at work in the poem also follows what is understood to be her European father’s “folly” in having a child with an African woman. Her existence, pre-interpellation, is thus regarded as compromising the metropolis’s Manichean ideals of whiteness.

The intersecting of categories at the level of the specular image are thus negotiated by the forces that inscribe, reproduce, and regulate imperial ideals. Imperial desire, that which must be reproduced, does not exist as a single embodiment. Rather, the ways in which meaning is inscribed at the service of imperial power varies by location and how that location is embedded within Empire. Beja’s poem deals specifically with the metropolis. In order to preserve the phantasmatic whiteness of the metropolis, and thus set her identity on a course toward retrieving that whiteness, her intersectional subjectivity is guided beginning with interpellation. Through her placement into the *imago*, this metropolitan desire toward whiteness must become her own, as the famous Lacanian dictum tells us, “desire is the desire of the Other” (*Écrits* 582). In becoming part of this economy of desire, she is taught how to think of her skin color through imperial discourses on racial otherness and sexual desire for white European men.

In circuiting her desire as a black woman with that of the imperial reproduction of metropolitan whiteness/Europeanness, she is to become the object of white heterosexual male desire. Her performance of the specular image must appeal to a metropolitan heterosexual cis-

gendered male gaze that is also interpellated into the desire for metropolitan whiteness. Her performance of womanhood, in other words, always carries racial implications, for it must be a particular version of black womanhood to be desired; a version calibrated through imperial masculine heterosexual fantasies of African women and notions of whitening this same othered body. The intersectional inscription of the black female body by the signification forces of Empire highlight another piece of the politics behind the imperial contexts of interracial sex celebrated in Lusotropicalist discourses. This would be the underpinnings of white supremacy and the trans-generational erasure of blackness at the heart of the championing of miscegenation.

The intersectional formation of the operative specular image in the poem lays the blueprint for the subject's performance of identity as the response to Empire's desire, namely that of metropolitan whiteness. In considering intersectionality as the confluence and interplay of signifiers of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and health, we must also examine how this interplay is guided and negotiated by the demands of the particular narrative in which the intersectional sign is couched. It is within the phantasmatic narrative of metropolitan whiteness that Beja and her poetic subject experience this particular interplay. We can thus think of this form of subjectivation as its own experience of hybridity.

Both a widely contested and oft-cited theoretical term within the study of colonial discourse and imperial power, both during and after formal colonialism, hybridity has become both an object of study and part of a critical lexicon. Homi K. Bhabha notably brought the term to the forefront of colonial discourse studies as a way of problematizing claims to cultural origins and authenticity; as a "partializing process" (163) that calls for "the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination" (159). Bhabha, in other words, re-inaugurated the use of the term, from its colonialist origins of racial-mixing, as a way to think through identities, both individual and collective, as formulated through colonial discourses of race and ethnicity. In this sense, the term stands for a contestation of discursive binaries and phantasmatically fixed notions of sameness and otherness.

Since Bhabha's introduction of the term in his essay "Signs Taken for Wonders" in 1985, numerous theorists have offered important dialogues and responses to the term's implications and historical weight. Robert J. C. Young's *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Culture and*

Race provides a book-length exploration of the term, offering a critical genealogy of its use within colonial discourse and as a theoretical tool against it. Avtar Brah and Annie Coombes published, in 2000, an entire collection of essays dedicated to the topic with contributions from scholars including Donna Haraway, Jo Labanyi, John Kraniauskas, and Ann Laura Stoler. In her *Writing Diaspora*, Rey Chow gets to the crux of the critical contestation toward Bhabha's deployment of the term:

What Bhabha's word "hybridity" revives, in the masquerade of deconstruction, anti-imperialism, and "difficult" theory, is an old functionalist notion of what a dominant culture permits in the interest of its own equilibrium. Such functionalism informs the investigatory methods of classical anthropology and sociology as much as it does the colonial policies of the British Empire.

Bhabha's development of the term is not, however, limited to the emancipatory possibilities of hybridity. In his elaboration of the ideological mechanisms behind hybridity, namely the Derridean concept of *différance* as the postponement of meaning, Bhabha does not fail to note how such a postponement is also central to the "productivity of power" (165). Hybridity's tones of functionalism underscored by Chow point to the fact that hybridity does not displace imperial power's right to signify; itself reproduced through its own modes of hybridity and performance namely in the discursive (re)formations of otherness. Stuart Hall arguably best theorized this modus operandi of western imperial power in his famous lecture "Race, the Floating Signifier" – where the sign of racial otherness is approached as a palimpsest, constantly rewritten in order to fit the demands of imperial power.

In discussing the possibilities of decolonial resistance, I wish to avoid here a utopian or even naïve understanding of the political impact of postcolonial literatures that contest current configurations of global power and imperial categories of human life. Such literary products reside, as we know, at the margins of cultural circulation, and this circulation itself depends largely on metropolitan readership and how such products are placed within metropolitan and western narratives. Therefore, as much as a literary work may problematize imperial knowledge, by deploying Bhabhan notions of hybridity and instability, the work is, to varying degrees, limited in its global political impact due to the continuity of imperial control over canonization and dissemination. A work derived from a colonial past and/or the intersecting modes of imperial power can, nonetheless, offer new and decolonial modes of global and intercultural understanding.

In this regard, Beja's poetry gestures toward an imagining of global space against imperial signification through her own intersectional experience of power, time, and space outlined in "Visão." While Bhabha's use of hybridity contests the dichotomous foundations of imperial thought—self/other, inside/outside, civilized/savage—by theorizing the presence of one inside the other, intersectionality may offer a reformulation of hybridity as the intermingling of different signifiers of otherness in the subjectivation of the othered body. Like Bhabha's conceptualization, this sort of hybridity also implies a constant postponement of meaning in how the subject is placed within the imperial inter-subjective signifying field. Racial signifiers, for instance, postpone and rewrite signifiers of gender and class. In the case of the interpellation portrayed in Beja's poem, the poetic voice traces the relationship between racial signifiers of otherness as manipulated and rendered toward a particular circuiting of sexual desire—for the sake of metropolitan desire; that is, the reproduction of whiteness and concomitant elision of blackness.

The intersection of imperial categories of corporal and subjective signification that marks social experience is one of floating signification, to borrow Stuart Hall's metaphor mentioned above. What Crenshaw's work on intersectionality teaches us is that imperial otherness, such as that into which Beja is interpellated, is never rendered by one imperial category. Bhabha's formulation of hybridity effectively points to the instability that characterizes imperial categories and figurations of phantasmatic otherness, floating from one figuration to another; hence his seemingly contradictory statement regarding the "productivity of colonial power" as a series of "shifting forces and fixities" (159). The temporary fixity of otherness, such as the moment of interpellation in which the individual is placed into the specular image/signifier of identitarian totality, is predicated on the interplay and mutual postponement of signifiers of otherness. After all, the subject in Beja's poem is not interpellated as simply a black subject. The social experience she is to have in life, for Empire, in accord with Empire's desire is predicated on more than racial signifiers. In order to partake in the reproduction of the imperial symbolic toward its phantasmatic goals, she must experience it as a black heterosexual woman born in Africa, transplanted to the colonial metropolis, desiring of sexual relationships with European men and desiring of a trans-generational return to filial whiteness.

In this sense, the intermingling of imperial categories of otherness at the intersection is contingent upon and guided by imperial desire and the demands of the particular imperial

symbolic realm into which the subject is placed. “Visão” concludes, however, with a response to this placement and the gradual erasure of blackness of which she is made to participate:

Conseguiram fazer de mim uma europeia
 só que se esqueceram de cortar
 o cordão umbilical que ficou preso
 nas raízes da velha eritrineira
 que meu bisavô plantou em Molembu. (15)

Part of the response against the trans-generational trajectory of black erasure on which she is set implies her own resignification of a trans-generational past. In opposition to the realm of knowledge into which she is placed through metropolitan schooling, the final stanza offers a revised, decolonial map of time and space, which Beja further develops later in her work.

This final stanza can be read as a blend of resignation and triumph; the former in terms of her interpellation into a particular version of Europeaness, or at least an other for the European phantasmatic self. Meanwhile the triumph seems to lie in a resistance to metropolitan imperial desire—a political stance against the erasure of blackness by laying claim to a version of Africanicity that has not been signified by imperial power. In this sense, Beja’s poem gestures toward a formulation of non-imperial knowledge that had been foreclosed from the moment of imperial interpellation, by evoking a particular spatially and temporally localized act carried out by her great-grandfather. The planting of the tree itself can be understood as an inscription on space, an act of knowing not based on larger forces of power. As such, Beja calls upon not only a sign of identity but also a form of knowing that fundamentally diverges from the version of imperial otherness she confronts through interpellation. In addition to avoiding imperial notions of non-Europeaness, Beja also avoids falling into essentialist conceptualizations of identity, evoking an unfixed site of knowledge that is itself always in negotiation *vis-à-vis* the impact of imperial power on the world.

Double-consciousness from the Intersection

“Visão,” one of Beja’s early poems sets the epistemological tone for her later *oeuvre*, particularly in its evocation of competing sites of knowing – pertaining especially to the imperial narrativization of Europe, and therefore, the bodies that circulate within it. From there, the poetic voice in “Visão” elaborates what we may refer to as an emergent decolonial form delinking—coined by Walter Mignolo, but drawn from Aníbal Quijano’s earlier

formulations of coloniality and the colonial subject's need to "desprenderse" from Eurocentrism's episteme (1991). Mignolo would later translate and expand Quijano's thesis into a fleshed-out call for "delinking from coloniality, or the colonial matrix of power" (Mignolo, *Darker Side* xxvii). More importantly, Mignolo connects delinking to "epistemic disobedience" which

leads us to decolonial options as a set of projects that have in common the effects *experienced* by all the inhabitants of the globe that were at the receiving end of global designs to colonize the economy (appropriation of land and natural resources), authority (management by the Monarch, the State, or the Church), and police and military enforcement (coloniality of power), to colonize knowledges (languages, categories of thoughts, belief systems, etc.) and beings (subjectivity). (Mignolo, *Epistemic Disobedience* 45)

The poem itself develops around these two sites of knowing – the imperial and a decolonial option that is opened by epistemic disobedience—and their inherent tension. Moreover, it is through the budding decolonial site of knowing—or decolonial gnosis, drawing on Mignolo (*Local Histories* 12)—in the final stanza, however, that Beja reflects on the process of interpellation that occupies the preceding bulk of the poem. It is only at the end, in other words, that we begin to grasp the poet's scene of writing as it dialogues against History.

At the core of this decolonial gnosis, from which emerges a particular mapping of time and space in Beja's later poetry, is a reclaiming of the signification dynamics of her poetic voice's intersectionality. Through this negotiation of the signifying process across imperial categories, Beja's work gestures toward the undoing of such categories by destabilizing their claims to truth. In this regard, Beja's poetry draws parallels in terms of cultural politics with those of Gloria Anzaldúa, particularly the latter's formulation of *la mezcla*, Anzaldúa's own version of critical hybridity. Anzaldúa's term points toward a constant resignification of categories—ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality—in order to open contemporary power's spectrum of monolithic identities. Such a call to arms is based on each individual's renegotiation of these categories. Where Anzaldúa's *la mezcla* and Crenshaw's intersectionality theoretically differ from Bhabha's hybridity is in their approach to social and symbolic existence *vis-à-vis* imperial categories of human life and global time/space. Whereas Bhabha focuses on interstitiality, residing in the critical space between categories, Anzaldúa and Crenshaw focus on the overlapping of categories from which, especially for Anzaldúa, new

identitarian spaces can emerge and displace those that have been established, fixed, and shifted by the spectrum of imperial power.

It is precisely this open-endedness regarding postcolonial identity that can be found in Beja's aptly titled poem "Identidade" from her collection of poetry, *No País do Tchiloli* (1996). "Identidade," moreover, contains an additional important and related strand regarding Beja's work—her relationship with São Tomé and Príncipe from where she emigrated at a young age and returned later in life. The title of the collection is of particular relevance to Beja's larger political project. The term *tchiloli* refers to both a San Tomean theatrical piece and a particular approach to theater and performance originating in colonial São Tomé and Príncipe as a form of cultural resistance to Portuguese authority. *Tchiloli* was the San Tomean Creole name given to the production by a local theater company of *Tragédia do Marquês de Mântua e do Imperador Carlos Magno*, originally written in the sixteenth century by the Madeiran poet Baltazar Dias. The legacy of the original *tchiloli* continues today with the annual performance of *Auto de Floripes* on the streets of Príncipe island by its entire population. Considered a *tchiloli*, *Auto de Floripes* itself embodies the cultural politics of the original *Tchiloli*, staging a medieval battle between Christians and Moors through the use of San Tomean language and cultural signifiers in addition to improvised props and diegetic space.

In this regard, *tchiloli* has come to stand for a mode of cultural production based on the appropriation and resignification of previous cultural products from both Europe and Africa. Such a performance, moreover, represents a signification of European history by the postcolony. As such, the *tchiloli* emerges as an act of knowing. Regarding San Tomean history and its cultural formation prior to and following colonization, Inocência Mata posits the nation as the result of various cultural encounters between identities and cultural expressions that were also products of dynamic political and cultural forces: "São Tomé e Príncipe, mestiça nação africana que concilia elementos de culturas já então mestiças quando da sua integração, é o resultado de um doloroso processo transculturativo que prolongou por muitos séculos" (18). As Mata indicates, thus avoiding a blind celebration of colonial cultural dynamics, San Tomean cultural expressions such as *tchiloli* are born of violence and resistance. It is the dialectic of struggle—political and cultural—that has engendered what is for Mata a postcolonial Atlantic, a "redistribuição do mundo atlântico, de nova configuração do mundo através dos Oceanos" (18). Within the remapping of the world through European expansion, Mata underscores the ways in which local cultural practices within São Tomé and Príncipe, as part

of the postcolonial Atlantic, have fostered non-imperial forms of knowing, rethinking, and historicizing such a mapping.

Most importantly for Beja's political stance, *tchiloli* implies a particular decolonial scene of writing, one of constant reinvention from which global events are inscribed outside of, or in opposition to, imperial modes of historicization. The very title of Beja's collection thus sets the political tone for many of the poems that follow, both in tracing an ethics of signification for emergent scenes of writing – such as that of the poet herself – and in carrying out a decolonial production of meaning that challenges and effaces the imperial categories confronted in Beja's earlier "Visão." We can, therefore, observe a shift in cultural/political objective from one collection to the next, from grappling with Empire and her placement in it, to searching for decolonial modes of signification.

Like her notion of selfhood, São Tomé and Príncipe emerges, especially in "Identidade," as a sign in flux following formal colonialism and in its postcolonial relationship with Empire. In this regard, Beja's poetic articulations regarding the postcolony carry a profound affinity with her own quotidian plight with colonial discourse, both having been signified by imperial entities and placed within imperial desire. As such, both appear in a state of postcolonial renegotiation.

Por vezes procuro-me
por toda a ilha...

farrapos de mim voam em círculos fatais
no chão dos milhos e das mandiocas
possuindo os ramos entreabertos
das plantas rastejantes

From the very beginning of the poem, her own identity and the postcolony/sign are configured as overlapping terrains of unfixity and openness, a permanently incomplete project underscored by the ellipsis at the end of the first stanza. Moreover, the two incomplete signs inform one another, as consistently renegotiating herself and her scene of writing is contingent upon her persistent resignification of San Tomean space. More importantly, this space in flux emerges as the ideal setting to grapple with, and overcome, the intersectional imperial signification of her body. It is no wonder, then, that the second stanza is driven by potent

imagery of the fragmentation of her body undergone at the moment of interpellation into Empire.

This evocation of the interpellated other through an imagery of destruction and pieces caught in an infinite whirlwind of death—communicated by fatal circles arguably in reference to the palimpsestic nature of imperial signification—offers yet another crucial insight into the conceptualization of power through intersectionality. This particular stanza calls attention to Empire's operation of intersectionality as one centered on fragmenting the body and its actions including skin color, genitalia, and hair. The fragmenting schema of the imperial signification of otherness operates by inscribing racial, sexual, gender, and class meaning onto the fragments as they become pieces of otherness. The circularity noted in the poem also speaks to this imperial dialectic into which the othered body is placed. It is also in this regard that Beja establishes a parallel between the circulation of her body/sign within Empire and that of the former colony as an imperially signified space and set of bodies to be consumed.

It is, therefore, through the evocation of San Tomean space that Beja seeks to reclaim the fragments of her interpellated self as well as the right to (re)signify them. The postcolony is not configured here, though, as a sort of blank space for identitarian inscription. Rather, it seems to embody the postcolonial renegotiation sought by the poetic voice. In this regard, her relationship with São Tomé and Príncipe, as a locale of return, is more than a simple search for a lost origin in hopes of establishing a sense of identitarian totality. The fatalistic imagery deployed to convey imperial fragmentation seems to imply a cognizance that such an objective is unattainable. In this regard, the poem, particularly the final stanza, appears to frame her search—not for a past lost at the moment of departure, but of a future to be inaugurated and reinaugurated:

eu quero continuar a procurar-me
na orla infinita das praias e das gentes (126)

The allusion to an infinite margin, like the border as a site of negotiation between overlapping categories—emphasizes the permanent indeterminacy of postcolonial signification. Furthermore, the final line evokes this as an infinite interplay between an infinite number of shores (themselves margins) contained within the larger infinite margin at the beginning of the line. The endless number of shores and people reveals a space of collective articulation pertaining to time, space, and bodies. In this sense, the border or margin for Beja represents a metaphorical space constituted by subjectivities that are themselves borders—individuals

located at the intersection of various epistemological categories and, thus, sites of signification in negotiation. Subsequently, the signification of space and self occurs through a dialogic negotiation with other subjectivities/sites of signification. This entails an open postponement without political grips over reality and monologic claims to truth.

This particular collection of poetry, *No País do Tchiloli*, can be thought of as enacting the infinite journey of postcolonial signification (of self, space, and community) and reflecting on the contours of one's scene of writing. In this sense, many of the poems that compose the volume grapple directly with the fragmented nature of an earlier imperial specular image of herself—a collection of pieces signified together through Empire's desire.

Borders and the Mapping of a Decolonial Sign-System

The development of the poem, as read here, is predicated on a consciousness of the intersection, a mode of thinking in terms of race and gender, not as separate entities, but as overlapping parts of a social experience within the power-driven realm of meaning. This is, in other words, like Du Boisian double-consciousness, an awareness of both as intersecting parts of the same tentative imperial whole that is the sign of the other. The space of the intersection, also a sort of border constructed by overlapping categories of humanity and personhood, always implies a thinking and performing through and/or against each category not as its own free-standing entity, but as a relational, inscribing device of power. In this sense, Du Bois was, at the time of writing *The Souls of Black Folk*, already theorizing the effects of intersectionality. Frances Beale notably unpacks this intermingling of categories, particularly race and gender (and to a lesser extent, class), by conceptualizing it as “double-jeopardy” (Beale) not as “two thoughts” (Du Bois 3), but as the yoking of multiple forces of power and social organization producing one form of thinking.

Olinda Beja's evocation of borders or margins serves to articulate the intersectionality of her experience within and against Empire, in addition to gesturing toward an uncontained quantity of scenes of writing. As such, Beja's poetry presents the various layers of power, privilege, and resistance that go into what Mignolo coined “border gnosis”—“absorbing and displacing hegemonic forms of knowledge into the perspective of the subaltern” (*Local Histories* 12). As Mignolo explains regarding his use of the term “gnosis,” it is one “that would take us away from the confrontation—in Western epistemology, between epistemology and

hermeneutics, between nomothetic and ideographic ‘sciences’—and open up the notion of ‘knowledge’ beyond cultures of scholarship” (9). By cultures of scholarship, Mignolo is speaking of course to those that have cemented their claims to global truth through and for western imperial power. In recovering the term “gnosis” or gnoseology,” Mignolo attempts to announce a space for subaltern knowledges outside of an imperial lexicon. For Beja, subaltern knowledge and its implied scenes of writing grapple with the forms of power that have marginalized them and/or engendered them, as is the case with her own border politics of intersectionality.

In one of her most recent collections of poetry, *Aromas de Cajamanga* (2009), one can find yet another step taken in Beja’s poetic engagement against Empire. Like her earlier collections, the title, and indeed many poems within the collection, evoke significant imagery pertaining to the postcolony. As in *No País do Tchiloli*, the poems of *Aromas de Cajamanga* also labor toward a constant negotiation of São Tomé and Príncipe as a postcolonial nation/sign within global intercultural space. As such, Beja’s work regarding São Tomé and Príncipe is never isolated from a farther-reaching project of thinking global spaces against the grain of an imperial episteme. In this sense, the collection seems to gesture toward a decolonial re-mapping; the formulation of a postcolonial sign-system in constant renegotiation through the infinite interplay of borders, as seen in “Identidade.” This particular poetic mission of Beja’s is enacted in her poem “Escridão” [“Darkness”], also from *Aromas de Cajamanga*.

A sinfonia do tempo dilata-se no areal
da praia entontecida no teu ventre
a cúpula das árvores espreita a névoa do Cão
Grande (140)

The first line tellingly articulates a relationship between time and space—that which is to be narrativized as the poem progresses. The titular darkness of night conveys, in itself, the overlap of time and space; the night sky being the spatial entity that envelops the immediate physical/visual field, but that pertains to a particular, albeit cyclical, period of the day. Equally notable is this rendering of time and space in relation to the “dizzying shore” that once again evokes a border imagery and Beja’s overarching approach to decolonial meaning.

In the time-space of the night’s darkness with which Beja dialogues, and thus enunciates her own unfixed signifying chain:

abrem-se mãos e desmembram-se veias

onde perpassam sombras de Brasis longínquos (140)

Beja performs, here, a tentative mapping of imperial destruction by locating the “dismembered veins” in “far-away Brazils.” The plural form of Brazil is particularly curious as it refers to the early imperial Portuguese nomenclature for the colonial piece of land and circulating bodies therein. In this sense, Beja poignantly reminds us of the imperial epistemic violence of naming and signifying—the mapping of the imperial world is mutually potentiated by the physical violence enacted over bodies and spaces. The persistence of the evoked shadows of these “Brazils,” also underscores the constant decolonial tussle against Empire and its modes of global signification.

As a form of decolonial mapping, Beja’s formulation of a tentative sign-system operates through a *mélange* of historical signifiers pertaining to the violence of imperial meaning and knowledge, geographic landmarks, and Empire’s subalternizing processes including slavery. Such a sign-system is born out of, but operates against, Empire. It is one that fundamentally acts as a border space—a signification area where existing and emerging terrains and forms of intersectional consciousness (spawned or not from Empire) can rethink themselves and/or build new solidarities and open-ended collectivities. Beja appears to build on this sign-system in the next stanza:

a aragem tépida do teu céu da boca
traz à lembrança flores de algodão que se espraíam
nos areais vermelho-sangue de Fernão Dias (141)

Much like the decolonial scene of writing at work in the poem, the titular night continues to bring forth meaning to the open-ended decolonial sign system, bringing, in this case, the memory of African slave labor evoked by the “flowers of cotton.” Within the context of Empire, as rendered in the poem, slave labor operates in strong relation to imperial mapping; hence the mentioning of Fernão Dias, a frontiersman of colonial Brazil whose charting of vast amounts of territory permitted its incorporation into Portuguese authority as well as into Empire’s signifying field.

Beja notably uses the term *espraíar*, which can be translated as “to sprawl” or “disseminate.” The root of the word in Portuguese, *praia* [beach] is perhaps most interesting with regards to the poem’s political engagement. Beja utilizes, once more, imagery of shores and borders, constructed, in the case of slavery and slave-based economies, through displacement, diaspora, and the subsequent formation of myriad intersectional subject-

positions. Here, diaspora forced by Empire-driven slavery, points to the disseminated site of subaltern articulation spread across the globe. Having deeply contributed to imperial historicization and the right to signify implied therein, Beja seeks to rethink slavery, without eliding its profound consequences felt today, by calling on the radical potential of the African diaspora within the proposed sign-system and decolonial path. The slave subject-position, as well as the contemporary diasporic subject-position, always entails, for Beja, the potential for delinking and decolonial signification. The poem, therefore, attempts to open the border/sign-system to slavery's dissemination of subject-positions, again, as a signifying field over and against Empire, from where to rethink self-hood and global time-space. The use of *espraiar* reiterates that the path toward decoloniality must, for Beja, be in constant negotiation and thus function as a borderland for the interplay of further emerging and existing borders.

In this sense, the evocation of borders, shores, and intersectionality articulates not only a decolonial epistemology of selfhood, but more importantly, a strategically shifting ground for decolonial intersubjectivity. This can be considered a subaltern solidarity in the wake of colonialism and the in the face of its perpetuated metaphysics in different local contexts. Beja's destabilized conception of identity would, in other words, open new forms of communal existence. Such an open-ended collective would be consistently reformulated through a similarly destabilized system of meaning operating in opposition to that of western hegemony.

Conclusion

We can thus see a sort of progression in terms of Olinda Beja's political project and stance pertaining to Empire, across her collections of poetry. Her first volume, *Bó Tendê?*, offers a multi-layered reflection on the interpellation into imperial otherness while doing so from a nascent decolonial scene of writing. The contours of this scene of writing are then more fully fleshed-out in her third collection, *No País do Tchiloli*, as a border entity in constant dialogic renegotiation with other borders/scenes of writing. Meanwhile, Beja's later collection, *Aromas de Cajamanga*, offers a further developed praxis of decolonial writing, namely laboring toward a postcolonial sign-system from which to rethink global space and time in opposition to Empire and its modes of signification. Throughout her work, Beja has traced an epistemological trajectory—ways of knowing and signifying both locally and globally—that can contribute important perspectives to allied, anti-imperial political practices.

Notes

¹ See Silva. *Subjectivity and the Reproduction of Imperial Power: Empire's Individuals*. 2015.

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