

# Women's Issues: African Writers Fighting Portuguese Colonialism in the 1950s

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**Abstract** This essay approaches the literary production by female intellectuals who opposed Portuguese colonialism in Africa, recognising their active role in history, as well as the cultural and political processes that influenced their writing and its repercussions. Experiencing multiple forms of subalternity – of class, race and gender – women like Alda Espírito Santo, Alda Lara, Noémia de Sousa Deolinda Rodrigues and Manuela Margarido were committed to the creation of new ways of writing and forms of conceiving the world. Playing a fundamental role in the literary, political and cultural environment of the second half of the 20th century, they circulated in spaces in which they questioned male hegemony, discussing gender issues and exercising multiple forms of resistance. This article will consider how the demands of women in the process of political decolonisation have often been reduced to the label of 'women's issues', the idea of unification of struggles having been privileged instead.

**Keywords** Decolonisation. Gender. Resistance. Women intellectuals. Africa.

**Summary** 1 Intersections and Production of Historical Narratives about Anti-Colonial and Black Cultural Movements. – 2 Women's Writing, Anti-Colonialism and the Struggle Against the Portuguese Regime: Some African Female Writers. – 3 Conclusions.



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## **1 Intersections and Production of Historical Narratives about Anti-Colonial and Black Cultural Movements<sup>1</sup>**

Intellectuals such as Paulette Nardal, Suzanne Césaire, Alda Espírito Santo, Alda Lara, Noémia de Sousa and Deolinda Rodrigues had, in the last century, a determining role in the anti-colonial struggle and in the creation of networks aimed at this struggle: they participated in newspapers, magazines, produced prose and poetry, asserting themselves in the literary, political, and cultural environment of the time. These women committed themselves, in different ways and with different perspectives, to the political causes of their time and their communities, with the consolidation of new ways of writing, of interpreting, of conceiving the world, but also in associativism and in clandestine or semi-clandestine networks. Their contribution to the future independent states, but also to the literary history of their countries and, more generally, to literature in Portuguese or French and the associated imagery is therefore undeniable. As far as their political conscience is concerned, in addition to the struggles for the dignification of the feminine and for the right of women to have a voice and an active role in society, it will suffice to recall the reflections of Paulette Nardal in October 1946:

Se peut-il que des femmes martiniquaises restent indifférentes à cette passionnante gestation? Est-il vrai que des femmes instruites n'écoutent pas les nouvelles de la radio, ne lisent pas les journaux? Se peut-il qu'elles ne comprennent pas que leur devoir de citoyennes est de suivre la réalité politique et sociale et de l'expliquer à leurs sœurs moins éclairées mais qui ne manquent pas pour autant de bons sens? Est-il vrai que des dizaines de milliers de femmes se refusent à aller déposer un bulletin dans l'urne les jours d'élection, se refusent à «refaire le monde», à fabriquer l'Histoire? Elles n'ont donc pas conscience de leur éminente dignité de personnes humaines, de la possibilité qui leur est donnée de changer la face du monde?

Si telle était la vérité, je désespérais des femmes de mon pays. (Nardal in Sharpley-Whiting 2009, 67-70)

Can it be that Martinican women remain indifferent to this fascinating gestation? Is it true that educated women don't listen to the news on the radio, don't read the newspapers? Can it be that they do not understand that their duty as citizens is to fol-

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low political and social reality and explain it to their less enlightened sisters who do not lack common sense? Is it true that tens of thousands of women refuse to go and drop a ballot in the ballot box on election days, refuse to 'remake the world', to fabricate history? Are they not then aware of their eminent dignity as human persons, of the possibility given to them to change the face of the world?

If this were the truth, I would despair of the women of my country.

These women were, and continue to be, even in oppositional discursive and anti-colonial or post-colonial constructions, marginalised in the historical narrative and relegated to the almost aprioristic category of predecessors of contemporary male intellectuals. The influence of classical Marxism has, in this sense, favoured the idea of unification of struggles and the reduction, albeit often complacent, of such claims to the label of women's affairs and "women's issues", with the contribution of guerrilla aesthetics and armed conflict and discursive representations based on masculinity.

The social awareness and gender concerns present in Nardal's text also characterised the printed material produced by intellectuals such as Alda Espírito Santo, Alda Lara, Noémia de Sousa or Delinda Rodrigues. While all coming from territories at the time under Portuguese rule, they often diverged in their writing, ideological positioning, and life choices. While they all lived through the process of political decolonisation in their countries, their literary reception and canonisation had developments with specific characteristics that differentiated them from those experienced by men who produced culture at that time. Here we return to the case of the Nardal sisters: Jane Nardal and Paulette Nardal played a key role in reference magazines for the cultural manifestation of Pan-Africanism, such as *La Dépêche Africaine* (The African Dispatch), a magazine that called for synergy among Algerian students, Tunisians, Indo-Chinese, West Indies and Senegalese in denouncing the inequities to which, at the educational level, their respective countries were subject (Sharpley-Whiting 2002, 34). The Nardal sisters were, however, identified as representatives of a kind of "proto-négritude", precursors of the theories of Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor. We are faced with what Tanella Boni defined as "généalogie au masculine" (meaning 'male genealogy', Boni 2014, 62) for although in Paulette Nardal a consciousness of race was already present, her production ended up being marginalised in favour of that of, for example, Aimé Césaire, who used the term *négritude* for the first time in issue three of the newspaper *L'étudiant noir* (The Black Student), in 1935. Authority functioned as a legitimising category that, to-

gether with the categories of gender, class and race,<sup>2</sup> developed its role in the power relations that determined access and the visibility of some critics, journalists or authors at the expense of others. This category had, therefore, concrete effects in the process of definition, redefinition and adjustment of power relations in the intellectual and cultural circles of the time, and this was reflected in the processes of identity elaboration, in the forms and contents that asserted themselves as representative of a particular community or in the building of nations.

In this brief contribution, I will try to demonstrate how these dynamics ended up influencing, albeit in a specific way, on the trajectory and production of the African women writers mentioned above. It seems essential to me to emphasise, to this end, that the exclusions and inclusions that resulted from the narratives produced at the time, the way in which the works circulated and the places in which they circulated were directly related both to colonial narration (at the level of female propaganda and racial narration), and to the penetration of this narration in subjects and communities that were colonised, racialised or suffered gender oppression (Quijano 2019).

## 2 Women's Writing, Anti-Colonialism and the Struggle Against the Portuguese Regime: Some African Female Writers

In the 1950s, a shift in colonial propaganda undertaken by the regime of Salazar to alleviate international pressure on the colonial situation was accompanied by a progressive intensification of the White settlement of Angola and Mozambique. Despite the regime's insistence on the idea of a single, multi-continental and multi-racial nation, contexts of coercive and de facto forced labour, commonly referred to as a *contrato* (contract), continued to materialise until 1974. The *Metrópole* (Portugal) occupied a privileged place in the axis of the empire, which was based on race and in which the feminine was reduced to strongly stereotyped roles. In Portugal, the perpetuation of gender subalternity was guaranteed thanks to the action of feminine associations that reiterated women's connection with household activities, procreation and the education of the 'children of the motherland'.

Associative entities such as the OMEN (Organisation of Mothers for National Education, founded in 1936) or the Portuguese Female Youth (MPF, dependent on OMEN) reproduced the concept of the

<sup>2</sup> The author implicitly refers to Angela Davis, *Women, race and class*, New York, Random House, 1981. On a purely theoretical level, the role of the variable "authority" in this reference is intriguing.

woman as reproducers, guardians of the home, educators of children and exemplary nationalists. As women were recognised as having a fundamental role in the building and maintenance of the nation, they ended up being relegated to a rear-guard role, which, if compared to men, was merely figurative. On various occasions, the female figure ended up being used by the *Estado Novo* (literary, the New State, name of the Portuguese regime) as a legitimising body for government policies and as a vehicle for national or imperial propaganda, as was the case of the National Female Movement in the colonial war (1961-74). As regards the condition of women in colonial territories, specifically in African territories, it was aggravated by the weight of racial stereotypes, by forced assimilation and by the violence that characterised both urban and rural conglomerates, causing black women to be racialised, objectified and sexualised. As the Salazarist regime based its colonial propaganda on the appropriation of the Luso-tropicalist theory of Gilberto Freyre – supporting an idea of the high capacity of miscegenation of Portuguese men in the tropics –, black women suffered at that time multiple oppressions, with gender or sexual oppression often being denied or romanticised.

Corresponding to these events, the 1950s saw the emergence of literature written by women, the circulation, diffusion and affirmation of which was anything but linear. If, in many cases, one can speak of openly anti-colonial productions, which were subsequently valued and celebrated by the Liberation Movements, such productions had in some cases a humanist and Roman Catholic character (Alda Lara) while in others they were clearly militant (Deolinda Rodrigues). In addition, this factor not only had an incidence on the circulation of the printed works, but is also fundamental because it allows us to understand how, despite common concerns regarding the oppression and suffering that their people experienced at the time, gender consciousness had its own manifestations in literary production. These women writers often addressed themes that would be taken up by their contemporary male poets and writers (Pan-Africanism, *négritude*, anti-colonialism, brotherhood and sisterhood, the struggle against oppression, etc.) even though they had been marginalised by official narratives, had suffered political repression or had even been silenced by their peers. Despite having contributed to the renewal of the imaginary and to the construction of new identities on a literary level, the Marxist-inspired idea of the unification of struggles played a fundamental role in the dissemination, critical fortune and identification of these writers as 'precursors' of national literature.<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, besides their – widely recognised – literary

**3** The cataloguing of these writers as 'precursors' of anti-colonial or engaged literature from their countries of origin goes beyond a question of periodising African liter-

and intellectual merits, they had, too, that of occupying a space that was denied to them by the operating mechanisms of the societies in which they lived (Davis 1990). In the case of Alda Espírito Santo and Noémia de Sousa, these writers, belonging to the colonial cultural elite, contributed in a relevant way to the affirmation of their respective national literatures, to writing in the Portuguese language, and to the visibility of black women and black female intellectuals, both being polyhedral personalities dedicated to various activities: poetry, teaching, translation, essay writing.

Cases like that of Alda Lara and Deolinda Rodrigues, both Angolan writers, demonstrate the disparities of the colonial system through the divergent trajectories that the two writers followed. What is in question are not, in this case, distinct life choices. Lara was a doctor and Rodrigues a guerrilla, yet one can recognise that the options of the latter - whose dream was to be a doctor in the service of Angola, just like Lara - were influenced by colonial brutalities, by the mechanism of exclusion that made black women the most oppressed subjects of the colonial system, and whose power the young woman reversed through the choice of armed struggle. Despite their radically different conditions, both these writers experienced, at distinct levels, colonial oppression and gender-related oppression. For this very reason, understanding in what forms, and with which intensity, these women experienced oppression is a useful tool to deepen the understanding of the logics of power, as well as of the ways they were exerted and narrated by the Salazarist regime in the 1950s and 1960s. The colonial territories, because of their very features (rooted on social, political organisation and racial subalternities), saw the exacerbation of those dynamics, becoming increasingly contested spaces in the logics of the empire.

Thinking about how the theme of colonial injustices was present in the poetic production of these women, the poem "Moment" by Alda Lara (1952) conveys the suffering of mothers and brides who witness execution of the beloved ones by firing squad, representing both colonial brutality and the absurdity of the abrupt interruption of life:

Nos olhos dos fuzilados,  
 Dos sete corpos tombados  
 De borco, no chão impuro  
 Eis!  
 ...sete mães soluçando...  
 Nas faces dos fuzilados,

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ature in the Portuguese language and has, in my view, etymological and linguistic implications that are reflected, at a conceptual level, in the implicit reiteration of the marginal, incomplete and embryonic role of their artistic production.

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Nas sete faces torcidas  
 De espanto ainda, e receio,  
 sete noivas implorando...  
 E do ventre de além-mundo,  
 Sete crianças gritando  
 Na boca dos fuzilados...  
 Sete crianças gritando  
 Ecos de dor e renúncia  
 Pela vida que não veio...  
 Na boca dos fuzilados  
 Vermelha de baba e sangue,  
 ...sete crianças gritando!  
 (Lara 1984, 27)

In the eyes of the shot,  
 Of the seven bodies fallen  
 On the impure ground  
 Behold!  
 ...Seven sobbing mothers...  
 In the faces of those shot,  
 On the seven twisted faces  
 Of astonishment still, and fear,  
 Seven brides begging...  
 And from the womb beyond the world  
 Seven children screaming  
 In the mouths of those shot...  
 Seven children screaming  
 Echoes of pain and renunciation  
 For the life that didn't come...  
 In the mouths of those shot  
 Red with drool and blood,  
 ...seven children screaming!

The absence of the children who will never be born, alongside the emptiness of the unfertilised wombs, are a witness both to the colonial oppression and to the utopian hope of a fair Angola, present in other productions in which the poet dreamed of being able to address

as crianças da minha terra!...  
 Para as crianças negras,  
 e brancas,  
 e mestiças,  
 sem distinção de cor...  
 comungando o Amor  
 que as unirá...  
 (Lara 1984, 155).

the children of my land!...  
To the black children,  
and white,  
and mestizos,  
without distinction of colour...  
communing the Love  
that will unite them...

From this point of view, women would have the essential role of understanding that “PAZ é LUTA!” (PEACE is to FIGHT!, Lara 1984, 155) and that their liberation would correspond to the liberation of all men, as highlighted in the poem “Deixo-te a paz” (I leave you peace), written in March 1949:

Por isso ela se libertou de si mesma, e saiu para fora...  
Calou a fome e o rio dessa hora,  
e foi-se de mãos nuas,  
peito descoberto,  
e olhar profundo,  
levar a paz, aos seus irmãos de todo o mundo!  
(Lara 1984, 95)

So she broke free from herself and went out...  
Silenced the hunger and the river of that hour  
and went away bare-handed,  
bare breast,  
and profound gaze,  
to bring peace, to her siblings all over the world!

In “Moças das docas” (Girls of the Docks) Noémia de Sousa, opposing what she identified as the romanticisation of prostitution in the homonymous poem written by Duarte Galvão (a heteronym of Virgílio de Lemos), denounced the subordination and sexualisation of the bodies of black women who occupied the lowest rung of the colonial pyramid, while stressing the connection with the idea of maternity and nutrition, of care:

Sob o chicote da esperança,  
Nossos corpos capulanas quentes  
Embrulharam com carinho marítimos nómadas de outros  
portos,  
Saciaram generosamente fomes e sedes violentas...  
Nossos corpos pão e água para toda a gente.  
(Sousa 2016, 79-80)



Under the whip of hope,  
 Our hot capulana<sup>4</sup> bodies  
 Wrapped with affection nomadic seafarers from other ports,  
 Generously quenched violent hungers and thirsts.  
 Our bodies bread and water for everyone.

Still in the sense of a sisterhood, the poems of Alda Espírito Santo and Manuela Margarido address the female issue and that of work and exploitation, as in the case of the poems “Avó Mariana” by Alda Espírito Santo, in which the São Tomense poet gives voice to a washerwoman, taken to the *sanzala*,<sup>5</sup> who will spend her life working, until she realises the impossibility, in her old age, of revisiting her land, almost without knowing where she came from: “Onde é terra di gente? | Velha vem, não voltar mais...” (Where is this land of ours? | Old woman comes, never to return...) (Espírito Santo 1978, 52). The resignation of grandmother Mariana is opposed to the invocation of sisterhood coming from the voice of the poet, who in “Às mulheres da minha terra” notes the suffering of women forced to live in poverty and to deal with the consequences of hunger, represented through the image of banana being eaten without fish:

O dinheiro não chega  
 Para vencer a nossa fome  
 Dos nossos filhos  
 Sem trabalho  
 Engolindo a banana sem peixe  
 De muitos dias de penúria  
 (Espírito Santo 1978, 51)

Money is not enough  
 To conquer our hunger  
 Our children  
 Without work  
 Swallowing the banana without fish  
 Of many days of penury

In such conditions of deprivation, the strength of black women comes, despite the oppression suffered, from the community, constituting the horizon of liberation so desired. This is the sorority, which makes Alda represent and empower other women:

<sup>4</sup> Translator's note: a type of Mozambican/East African sarong.

<sup>5</sup> Translator's note: *Sanzala* was the housing for workers in the great plantations or farming properties in São Tomé e Príncipe.

Amigas, as nossas mãos juntas,  
As nossas mãos negras  
Prendendo os nossos sonhos estéreis  
Varrendo com fúria  
Com a fúria das nossas “palayés”  
Das nossas feiras,  
As coisas más da nossa vida

Friends, our hands together,  
Our black hands  
Arresting our barren dreams  
Sweeping with fury  
With the fury of our “*palayés*”<sup>6</sup>  
Of our fairs,  
The bad things of our life.

Alda Espírito Santo’s fellow-countrywoman, Manuela Margarido, who, like her, was imprisoned during the dictatorship (in 1962, in Caxias), launched her book of poems *Alto como o silêncio* (Loud as Silence) in 1957, having also collaborated with the C.E.I. (Oliveira De Queiroz 2014, 12):

A manhã sangra ainda: salsas a bananeira  
com um machim de prata; capinas o mato  
com um machim de raiva; abres o coco  
com um machim de esperança; cortas o cacho de andim  
com um machim de certeza.  
E à tarde regressas à sanzala;  
a noite esculpe os seus lábios frios na tua pele.  
E sonhas na distância uma vida mais livre, que o teu gesto há-  
de realizar.  
(Margarido 1963)

The morning still bleeds: you prune the banana tree  
with a machim<sup>7</sup> of silver; you cut the bush  
with a machim of rage; you open the coconut  
with a machim of hope; you cut the bunch of andim<sup>8</sup>  
with a machim of conviction.  
And in the afternoon, you return to the sanzala;  
night carves her cold lips on your skin.

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<sup>6</sup> Translator’s note: informal female traders.

<sup>7</sup> Translator’s note: type of long, wide bladed knife used in agriculture, in Africa.

<sup>8</sup> Translator’s note: a kind of African palm tree and its fruit.

And you dream of a freer life in the distance, one your gesture will bring about.

The *Casa dos Estudantes do Império* (CEI), founded in 1944 as an association that was part of *Moçidade Portuguesa* ended up – despite the initial will of the Portuguese regime to use it as a tool of affirmation of the narration of a unique, pluricontinental nation –, playing an influential role in the consolidation of anti-colonial networks, as well as in the establishment of international networks and circulation of printed material and literary works. Members of CEI such as Amílcar Cabral, Alda Espírito Santo, Deolinda Rodrigues, Marcelino dos Santos, Mário Pinto de Andrade, Viriato da Cruz or Noémia de Sousa gave a crucial contribution to the creation of symbolic and concrete bridges for social equality and cultural dignity: we cannot omit to mention the ties established with the review *Présence Africaine*, as well as the participation in several meetings and conferences in which the collaboration of activists, writers and intellectuals representing the African territories under the Portuguese rule was fundamental.<sup>9</sup>

In a thematic *continuum* with Alda Espírito Santo, the forced labour in the plantations – as well as the labour of black women – is represented by ideas of anger, while sorority and love return as alternatives and comfort before the awareness of an oppressive present. Manuela Margarido also poetically represented an anti-colonial and nationalising vocation, although, as evidenced by Inocência Mata, her corpus is, additionally, typified by a markedly universalising aspect. The latter is evident, above all, in *Loud as Silence*, published in Lisbon as part of the neo-realist collection *Cancioneiro Geral* and very much marked by lyricism, “by intimacy and cultural affectivity” (Mata 2010, 177). According to Mata, Margarido’s poetry is representative of the confluences and divergences that characterised African literature in the 1950s: influenced by neo-realism, but also by existentialism, it is

<sup>9</sup> The manifesto of the MAC – *Movimento Anti-colonial* was originally written in Dos Santo’s room in Rue Sorbonne (Paris), one year after the realisation of the *Premier Congrès des écrivains et artistes noirs* (1956). Publications such as the collective text “Les étudiants noirs parlent” (*Présence Africaine*, 1953) and of the *Caderno de Poesia Negra de Expressão Portuguesa* (this edited by Francisco José Tenreiro e Mário Pinto de Andrade in April 1953), led to harsh debates and contributed to the internationalisation of the anti-colonial movements. Founded in 1947 by Alioune Diop, the review *Présence Africaine*, based on 16, Rue Henri-Barbusse, Paris, was printed in both Paris and Dakar, willing to question the imperialists ambitions of western culture (Mudimbe 1992). The connections with other capitals than Lisbon and Paris (beside Rome, London, Dakar and Algiers, the latter headquarter of the CEA – *Centro de Estudos Africanos* since 1964) was strengthened through the participation of members of CEI in conferences such as the *Afro-Asian Conference* (Bandung 1955), the *I Afro-Asian Writers’ Conference* (Tashkent 1958), the *Conference of the Women of Africa and African Descent* (CWAAD, Accra, 1960), or the *Afro-Asian Women’s Conference* (Cairo 1961).

marked by the tension between the subject and the collective, in an ambivalence of identity whose consequences are manifested overall in the production and literary polemics of the early 1960s.

Although the social strata and the professional and personal trajectories of these women were distinct, it can undoubtedly be stated that the writing of all of them reflects in some way the fight against oppression, not only on the part of women, but of the population in general. This also happened to men who acted in the literary field while giving a relevant contribution to the political liberation both of their countries and to the liberation of Portugal from the regime of Salazar: Amílcar Cabral, Agostinho Neto, Mário Pinto de Andrade, Luandino Vieira, Tomás Medeiros, just to mention a few. These are personalities who, whilst differing perhaps in short-term objectives and communication methods, made the anti-colonial message accessible to different types of public, contributing to the diffusion of the values and the founding concepts of the struggle. One of the elements which, alongside the latent dissemination of potentially communist propaganda, worried the regime and its political police (PIDE) was the inevitable coexistence, in colonial societies, of different degrees of sensitivity, schooling, gender, social and economic strata, as well as its literary representation allied to the idea of a critic racial consciousness.

There were cases, such as that of the young Angolan Deolinda Rodrigues (MPLA guerrilla in exile, member of the Steering Committee of OMA - Organisation of Angolan Women and of the Kamy squad), in which political engagement resulted in the unnegotiable choice of armed struggle and exile. Deolinda's reflections on colonialism and armed struggle, and furthermore on the dynamics of gender and religious oppression, animate the notes of her posthumous work *Diário de um exílio sem regresso* (Diary of an Exile Without Return), which, despite having been written between the 1950s and 1960s, is relevant to our reflection because it calls into question the internal contradictions of the idea of unification of struggles which, even in a context of anti-colonial and anti-fascist resistance, ended up silencing female voices and reproducing, in some cases, the attribution of stereotyped roles which characterised the regime itself. In her *Diary*, the young Angolan is portrayed, for example, as having suffered peer pressure for not being a good cook or not loving domestic chores, or having felt pushed towards marriage with comrades or having felt out of place on account of her active participation in conversations that were dominated almost exclusively by the male members of the Committee. Far from representing a lack of conviction on the part of the young woman regarding the value of the cause, all these reflections and internal criticisms were, for Rodrigues, functional to the construction of a truly free Angola, as demonstrated by her idea of religiosity. Even before the outbreak of armed struggle, Deolinda conceived religion as instrumental to politics, just as education

was instrumental to the people's liberation, as evidenced by her reflection in May 1960:

A Dona Dina disse-me pra não fazer política (não sei como ela desconfiou ou descobriu as reuniões passadas) pra não arranjar encrenca aos missionários, à igreja e ao instituto. Nem lhe respondi. Onde for, vou sempre falar das condições na terra. Lixem-se lá as missões e o resto. A minha família, o meu Povo vale mais do que todo o resto. (Rodrigues 2003, 35)

Dona Dina told me not to do politics (I don't know how she suspected or discovered the past meetings) so as not to get in trouble with the missionaries, the church and the institute. I didn't even answer her. Wherever I go, I will always talk about conditions. Screw the missions and the rest. My family, my People are worth more than anything else.

The differences between Deolinda Rodrigues and Alda Lara, far from being merely conceptual, were related to different forces and forms of incidence of the categories of oppression, with the consequences of these dynamics having a reflection on the authors' ideological, intellectual and poetic elaboration. If one thinks, for example, of Alda Lara's literary nationalism and her conception of Angolan literature, it is worth underlining how, at one point, she declared in interviews that for her Angolan literature was nothing more than a regional variant of Portuguese literature.<sup>10</sup> In her texts, the young writer did recognise the specificities of Angolan and Cape Verdean literatures, stressing, however, how the "Luso" component of these literatures was essential for its very existence (Lara in Topa 2020, 22).<sup>11</sup> The author even went so far as to declare that Cape Verdean poetry was, *de*

**10** These considerations about the national vs regional were relevant, at the time, considering the Portuguese regime insisted on colonial propaganda that represented Portugal as a unique, multiracial, and transcontinental nation. This was mainly related, especially since the 1950's, to the pressure exerted by the United Nations towards colonial powers, reiterating the right of self-determination of people without autonomous governments. For this reason, Portugal made formal modifications to its constitution, introducing the concept of *Territórios Ultramarinos* (Overseas Provinces). Angola, such as the other territories in Africa, would be, therefore, just a region of the Portuguese trans-continental nation, comparable, for example, to the Portuguese regions of Trás os Montes or Alentejo. As the renowned propaganda sentence stated: "Portugal do Minho até Timor" (Portugal from Minho to Timor). The literary debates reproduced, necessarily, those tensions in the cultural ambient, leading to journal articles, prefaces, TV debates, disputes, and arguments on the possible existence of a *literatura ultramarina*, *literatura angolana*, *literatura moçambicana*, etc. with thematic, esthetic, and linguistic features that were distinct from Portuguese literature.

**11** Reference to Alda Lara's article, "Acerca de Poesia angolana". *Jornal de Benguela*, 10 April 1950, 1 and 8; 10 July 1950, 7.

*facto*, Portuguese poetry. Furthermore, Alda Lara rejects, in an interview given in 1952 and published in the same newspaper, the distinction between art for art and social art:

A Arte é só uma. Não pode haver razões de ordem social que limitem a vastidão do universo poético, que lhe cortem as suas possibilidades. Necessário é dar-lhe todas as possibilidades criadoras. Além de que a liberdade é condição essencial de qualquer obra de arte para que ela seja viva. Portanto, o que se exige é que a arte seja autêntica. (Lara in Topa 2020, 19)

Art is just one. There can be no social reasons that limit the vastness of the poetic universe, that cut off its possibilities. It is necessary to give it all the creative possibilities. Besides that, freedom is an essential condition of any work of art for it to be alive. Therefore, what is required is that the art be authentic.

In reality Lara, despite trying to escape the subject by invoking a supposed need for authenticity of art and, therefore, its universal conception, was probably exercising a form of self-censorship, as she clarifies later in the interview that in Angola, just as had already happened in Cape Verde and should come to happen in Mozambique, the poetic production focused less on the “deeds of the colonisers” and more on the “problems of the Land that surround Angolan poets every day”. At the same time, the author stated that this change did not imply that this poetry was not Portuguese at all: it was “conditioned, however, by a different climate and race”.

Several problems are manifest, in my view, in these considerations of the poet. Keeping in mind that the interview dates from 1952, the idea of “conditioning” of Angolan poetry by “climate” and “race” ends up, albeit implicitly, denying that poetry in Angola can be autonomous for its own and specific characteristics, establishing a cultural subordination of its existence to the molds and aesthetics of Portuguese poetry or, more generally, of European style. One can easily understand Alda Lara’s position if one considers her cultural origins and her position in colonial society, as well as her fears - clearly present in the colonial elites of the time, especially in their white and socially better positioned component - that the liberation of the colonial ‘game’ might have repercussions that could jeopardise the permanence of white Angolan citizens in the territory. Furthermore, the poet’s work shows how she clearly felt she belonged to two worlds, and at the same time she did not see herself as part of official propaganda about Africa that was very distant both from her experience and from the Catholic vision by which Alda was strongly influenced.

On the one hand, one finds in Lara’s poems an Angola and its black

people who, indeed, are present in her work without being dehumanised, as often happened in the literary production of the time, and whose suffering and struggle the poet sees and recognises. This Angola, however, ends up being poetically represented as an Eden to which, as the poem "Regresso" (Return) says "Eu hei-de voltar, | tenho de voltar" (I shall return | I must return) (Lara 1984, 73). The ruby acacias, the casuarinas that will bloom only for the poet, in an extensive "song to the Creator" that the poet writes with Angola at its centre, seem to reproduce a utopian space that falls in the *continuum* of the Western literary tradition. In this perspective, Alda Lara's Angola appears to be a fortunate island, an "África de oiro e de sonho" (Africa of gold and dreams, Lara 1984, 97) which is both a place of departure and a place of arrival (and return).

Side by side with this Angola, which is clearly the one in the poet's mind, we find another Angola: the one she sees, represents and describes, the country of the everyday life of the *musseques* (shanty dwellings) and of the absurdities of colonial propaganda. That is the country we find in one of the author's most famous poems, "Presença Africana", written in 1953 in Benguela:

Sim! Ainda sou a mesma  
 A do amor transbordando  
 pelos carregadores do cais  
 suados e confusos,  
 pelos bairros imundos e dormentes  
 (Rua 11!... Rua 11!)  
 pelos meninos de barriga inchada e olhos fundos...  
 Sem dores nem alegrias,  
 de tronco nu  
 e corpo musculoso,  
 a raça escreve a prumo  
 a força destes dias...  
 E eu revendo ainda, e sempre, nela,  
 aquela  
 longa história inconsequente...  
 (Lara 1984, 57)

Yes! I am still the same.  
 She of the overflowing love  
 for the loaders of the port  
 sweaty and chaotic,  
 for the filthy and dormant neighbourhoods  
 (Street 11!... Street 11!... )  
 for the children with inflated bellies and sunken eyes...  
 Without pains or joys,  
 of naked torso

and muscular body,  
the race writes exactly,  
the force of these days...  
And I still see in it, and always will,  
that  
long inconsequential history...

This is perhaps the text in which, in a more decisive way, the poet denounces the myth of race and the “long inconsequential history” linked to it, whose echoes were visible in education and official propaganda. Among all the writers mentioned, Alda Lara is the only one in whom it seems possible to identify a certain Catholic humanism or, to clarify, the denunciation accompanied by an attempt to soften and reconcile the colonial contrasts, due to a certain idyllic or timeless vision of her country of origin.

### 3 Conclusions

Many of the writers mentioned attended and were active members of the CEI, participating actively both in the cultural struggle against Portuguese colonialism and the Salazarist regime and in the constitution of the foundations of the future independent territories. If the CEI and its connections with the *Présence Africaine* and other African literary movements was fundamental, let us remember that the well-known *Casa da tia Andreza* (Aunt Andreza's House), at Rua Actor Vale 37, in Lisbon, was also a crucial place of assemblage. It was the address of the headquarters of the Centre of African Studies, whose secretariat was held by Noémia de Sousa (Mata 2015, 33): Aunt Andreza was the aunt of Alda Espírito Santo.

Even in relatively niche anti-colonial literary productions,<sup>12</sup> such as *Mensagem* (Message) and *Colecção de Autores Ultramarinos*, (Overseas Authors Collection) the published work of these women is a numerical minority when compared to men's, confirming the general trends of the time. Of the 152 poems, short narratives and essays that Ana Maria Martinho listed as belonging to the issues of the CEI, published between 1948 and 1964, only 10 texts, mostly poems, were authored by women: Alda Lara, Alda Espírito Santo, Manuela Margarido and Noémia de Sousa (Martinho 1994). In *Novos pactos*,

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<sup>12</sup> By this expression I mean to stress that such printed material, despite its fundamental role in the cultural environment of the time, was not part of the official publishing circuits. While this element ensured that the periodical *Mensagem* was not subject to prior censorship as an association publication, it also meant that its preparation, printing and distribution depended on the action of its members, as the very releases of the bulletin declare and turn explicit.



*outras ficções: ensaios sobre literaturas afro-luso-brasileiras*, Laura Cavalcante Padilha pointed out that, in a work of reference such as *No Reino de Caliban* by Manuel Ferreira:

a poesia angolana feminina começa a surgir na década de 50, fato este confirmado também com respeito a Cabo Verde onde, em 36 poetas, só há uma mulher. No caso de Angola, há 6, para 53, enquanto em São Tomé e Príncipe, para sete há duas e nenhuma na Guiné-Bissau, onde, aliás, só se regista o nome de um poeta. (Cavalcante Padilha 2002, 165)

Angolan female poetry began to appear in the 1950s, a fact also confirmed with respect to Cape Verde where, amongst 36 poets, there is only one woman. In the case of Angola, there are 6 to 53, while in São Tomé and Príncipe, for seven [men] there are two [women] and none in Guinea-Bissau, where, incidentally, only the name of one poet is recorded.

The most recent debates on intersections, multiple oppressions and mechanisms of historical silencing and reproduction of subalternity(ies) have questioned both the obfuscation of the racial factor as a source of oppression, and further developments considered as bourgeois drifts of some white feminism that would privilege a focus solely toward the question of women's subalternity in relation to men, almost totally ignoring questions of race and class: on this matter, the reflections of Françoise Vergés, Angela Davis and Bell Hooks should be noted.<sup>13</sup> Far from being divisive, the recognition of multiple subalternities that theorists of intersectional feminism and decolonial feminism have insisted on is a useful tool to recognise the various layers of permeability of colonial, capitalist and patriarchal narratives. The struggle against the obfuscation of non-white, black, or Global South women is thus, for theorists such as Grada Kilomba, Djamila Ribeiro, or Françoise Vergés - as it has been for Bell Hooks and Angela Davis - the representation of the total struggle. This is because the combination of issues of race, gender and class is what contributes most to unmasking the discursive narrative and the oppression generated by colonial continuities (or coloniality) and by the capitalist logic in a scale of multiple oppressions and subalternities that culminates in the violence experienced by black women. In this perspective, thinking about how the colonial condition, the unbalances related to distinct levels of economic advantage or disadvantage, to the belonging to one or other social class, influenced peo-

<sup>13</sup> I am thinking, specifically, of Angela Davis' observations in *Women, Race and Class* and Bell Hooks' in *Ain't I a woman*.

ple's and the writers' life and cultural production in the 1950s is to make a critical effort in the understanding of distinct levels of privilege that affect our communities. While recognising the consequences of patriarchal structures, as well as the violence and chauvinism they originate, is urgent, this struggle cannot eclipse a reflection on racial inequalities. We must acknowledge, in other words, that the oppression Alda Lara experienced in Angolan colonial society was not the same as that experienced by Deolinda Rodrigues, but neither was the latter experiencing the same benefits in colonial society as the Santomean writer Alda Espírito Santo. This is relevant not because we wish to establish hierarchies of privilege, but because all those variables had an influence on the intellectual and poetic creation of the writers we have been considering, and they still exert influence in contemporary cultural and literal productions.

Such aspects are crucial in understanding the disparities that characterise modern societies. In this sense, thinking about and understanding oppressions and subalternities generated by the colonial system is fundamental for a reflection on the colonial continuities in our societies. If the works this article has dealt with constitute a valuable source of information about the daily life of women in the colonised territories and their living conditions, they help demonstrating how their production was under-represented at the time and continues to be so. These women writers, who - it must be stressed - were often part of the elite, in fact enjoying privileges that were not common to most of the population of the colonial territories in Africa, contributed to the cultural struggle for fairer societies and for the representation of the oppressed in their societies.

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