

# Whose Square is it Anyway? Black Women and the Imperial Authorities in Lisbon's *Rossio*, 1750-1807

Dr Selina Patel Nascimento

*Minorities, Gender, and Contested Urban Spaces, 1750-1950*

Queen's University Belfast and University of Gothenburg

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## Introduction

On 1 November 1755, an earthquake of magnitude 9 hit the capital city of Lisbon, with seven minutes of violent tremors. But it was the impending tsunami of up to 12 metres high that engulfed the lower half of Lisbon, known as the Baixa. Thousands of candles fell, setting the city alight for five days until it was finally brought under control.<sup>2</sup> Between 32% and 48% of the Portuguese Empire's GDP was lost, and in Lisbon alone, between 20,000 and 30,000 inhabitants perished.<sup>5</sup>

Portugal's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sebastião José de Carvalho e Mello, known to posterity simply as Pombal, quickly rose to virtual dictatorial power as he took command of the apocalyptic situation.<sup>6</sup> He called on Portugal's leading military engineer, Manuel da Maia, to develop a series of plans to rebuild Lisbon, from which he chose a 'clean slate' approach. This involved demolishing what was left of the Baixa and building a new road pattern on top, at a lower urban density and with new earthquake-proof construction standards.<sup>8</sup> Lisbon was reconfigured as a modern, ordered urban space, defined by its grid-iron network of uniform blocks and streets, anchored by its two principal squares north and south of the Baixa.

Architects, urban planners, and geographers have studied the earthquake and Lisbon's regeneration under Pombal from several perspectives.<sup>9</sup> Ironically, what is almost always absent in any treatment of the Lisbon earthquake and its aftermath is the omnipresence of transatlantic slavery. While much ink has been spilled on Pombal's vision of a highly-ordered, modern city imbued with enlightened mercantilist and absolutist values, scholars consistently ignore the central role that

transatlantic slavery played in the rebuilding of the metropolis. While we know that between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, around 10% of Lisbon's population was black, these highly visible bodies, the essential labour of the empire both at home and overseas, have been rendered invisible at this crucial juncture in Portugal's history. Urban anthropologist Daniel Malet Calvo is unique in his persistent acknowledgement of the contribution of black Africans and their descendants to urban processes and space-making in present-day Lisbon. Building on his work, this paper seeks to address the racial and gendered dimensions of Pombaline Lisbon, which remain a conspicuous lacuna across academic disciplines. In short, it is a call for scholars to reorient dominant perspectives of imperial power in urban Lisbon and centre transatlantic slavery and its broader realities in future analyses.

Using micro-historical methods, this paper explores how black enslaved and free(d) women experienced urban spaces that were planned in the wake of the 1755 earthquake. In this new capital city, this paper reveals how black women's simultaneous exclusion and inclusion into urban spaces were consistently challenged and reworked by these very women, who created new symbolic meanings and reintroduced traditional practices and activities in defiance of spatial reconfigurations. Examining Inquisition records, civil criminal cases, and imperial legislation, it demonstrates how the *Rossio* square was a contested urban space for marginalized women of colour. Thus, this paper not only draws black female bodies back onto the Lisbon landscape, but also contributes to the budding research by scholars across various fields by examining how this carefully planned new city and its values were experienced and reconfigured by its most marginalized and obscured inhabitants.

It argues that black enslaved and free(d) women were not only visible social actors, but active agents and participants in the reconstruction of Lisbon after the 1755 earthquake. Black women were integral to processes of space- and place-making through their use and contestation of urban spaces, which ultimately redrew the city's cartographies to reclaim a traditional popular space in symbolic, physical, and material terms. It goes further to argue that in this traditional reclamation of urban space, black women redefined the 'traditional' in ideological terms to force the inclusion of black female bodies into previously white imagined spaces. Finally, it will look at how the symbolic space of this royal square was redrawn as a 'fearscape', further complicated by a

muddling of racial and gender hierarchies that confused and reconfigured the symbolic meaning of this spectacle of death in the Rossio.

### **Marcelina and Teresa: Two Women at the Centre of the Portuguese Empire**

In the aftermath of the 1755 earthquake, Pombal also focused his attentions on an empire-wide programme of socio-economic reforms in part to finance the rebuilding of the capital. Discovery of gold mines at the turn of the eighteenth century in Brazil had reignited the waning fortunes of the Portuguese Empire, leading to an exponential rise in demand for African slaves, which saw human and mineral wealth transported across the Atlantic at capacities unmatched in earlier centuries. But by 1750, significant falls in global sugar prices coupled with ever-diminishing shipments of gold exacerbated immediate fiscal concerns. Whilst the fortunes of Brazil relied on hereditary racial slavery through importations of enslaved men, women, and children captured in West Africa and shipped across the Atlantic, Pombal came to consider slavery in Portugal as posing serious obstacles to fiscal rejuvenation. Imperial authorities believed slaves had become a drain on the kingdom, as they consumed increasingly scarce food reserves without making any financial contribution to the state through taxation. Furthermore, increasing imports of slaves over the eighteenth century had the unintended consequence of severely contracting demand for servants. Racialized assumptions of a propensity towards indolence, vagrancy, prostitution, and theft gave credence to these socioeconomic concerns, undergirding an already strictly stratified urban landscape that transposed all social ills onto the very visibly darker-skinned bodies of the poor and enslaved.<sup>14</sup> Despite being well-represented across the kingdom, the majority of black enslaved and freedpersons were concentrated in Lisbon.<sup>15</sup> By 1777, some 15,000 enslaved and free(d) blacks and mulattoes ‘infested’ Lisbon and their presence was considered harmful to the prosperity of the nation.<sup>16</sup>

Marcelina Maria and Teresa de Jesus were only two of thousands of black enslaved and freed women who lived and worked in the seat of the empire. In many ways, they had very different lives, but at certain transtemporal and diasporic junctures, their individual geographies converged. Both were of African descent, in the sense that neither had been born on the African continent, yet they were the daughters of enslaved black parents toiling in the colonies. They were both *crioulas*, Brazilian-born dark-skinned black women, who had spent the earliest years of their lives in

slavery, and both had made the remarkably uncommon journey from Brazil to Portugal. This Atlantic crossing that moved against the grain of slave traffic, of which the vast majority flowed bilaterally between West Africa and Brazil, speaks of an alternate geography for enslaved women traversing the Atlantic Ocean: a ‘countervoyage.’ It is a symbolic space that runs across the physical Atlantic space, counter to the currents of imagined flows of human cargo and adding a new dimension to the slave-ship resistance that black feminist geographer Katherine McKitterick has termed ‘oppositional spatial practices.’<sup>17</sup> Visualize a space within a space that is figuratively reconfigured and reconceptualized by enslaved women who are moving from the American colonies to the European metropolis, or as Nadia Altschul has argued, from the medieval to the (slightly) Enlightened world.<sup>18</sup> It is important to recognize how strongly the imperial powers believed that Europe was ‘free’ from slavery through their numerous legislative interventions over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The title of Sue Peabody’s classic book, *“There Are No Slaves in France,”* encapsulates this paradox and highlights how such beliefs live on into the present-day.<sup>19</sup> Thus, a simple survey of the individual geographies and trajectories of these two women, Marcelina Maria and Teresa de Jesus, should alert us to the deep contradictions of their position in the metropolis and within the Rossio square. As Afro-Brazilian women living in Pombal’s Portugal, they were simultaneously enmeshed in the fabric of the empire and refused recognition of their place within it.

Marcelina Maria was brought before the Holy Office of the Inquisition in Lisbon in 1734 at the age of 26 to be tried for a series of charges including sorcery and demonic pacts.<sup>20</sup> Born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to enslaved black parents Antonio and Luiza, she was the property of a Brazilian captain. As a child, she made the ‘countervoyage’ to Lisbon, where she was sold from one master to the next, suffering a life of sexual abuse from multiple white men and physical and verbal abuse from their wives. Yet she was determined, resilient, and defiant, squaring up to the Inquisitors by baldly stating how she hated being enslaved and how she had resisted her sale to João Eufrásio de Figueiroa, an official at the Casa da Índia because she had wanted to be sold back to the Brazils.<sup>21</sup> The sadistic scenes she described in the Figueiroa household took place ‘in’ the Rossio, or more precisely in a house along one of the edges of the square, only metres away from where her trial took place, also ‘in’ the Rossio at the resplendent Estaus Palace, seat of the Holy Office of the Inquisition. While Marcelina’s entire being was soon inextricable from the Rossio *before* the Lisbon earthquake and subsequent rebuilding programme, her geographies in the 1730s offer an

important counterpoint to Teresa de Jesus's trajectories in the 1770s from which we can reflect on continuity and change within this defined socio-cultural urban space.

Teresa de Jesus was born in Bahia and then transported to Portugal at an unknown age. While living in Portugal, she had gained manumission from slavery and had lived as a freedwoman, selling fruit on the streets. We know that she had been jailed at least twice, once in Olarias, where she met her lover and later accomplice, and once in Limoeira in May 1772, before she was led to the hangman's rope in the Rossio for the murder and robbery of João da Fonseca, a Portuguese merchant who had dealings in Grão-Pará. Her incarceration highlights how experiences of slavery and freedom overlapped, as Teresa's freed black female body was periodically immobilized in stark contrast with her freer movements in the streets of the Baixa and in João's home, where she had assisted his slave Maria in food preparation. Marcelina too experienced repeated cycles of confinement and relative freedom of movement through her quotidian struggles against sexual abuse, exploitative labour, and domination over her being. Strung together, these instances of physical restrictions map out the cyclical nature of (im)mobilization in the lives of black women, offering them no sense of security as they spent each day in the knowledge that their bodies were not their own.

Both Marcelina and Teresa lived and worked in and around the Rossio. Marcelina lived with her sadistic master in the Rossio, while Teresa frequented João da Fonseca's home located on the Poço do Borratem road, along the southern edge of the square. Marcelina was a domestic slave, but by no means would she have been confined indoors. The very nature of her work would have regularly required her to enter the Rossio, where food vendors, artisans, and enslaved women gathered day and night. She would have bought goods from other hawkers, drawn water from the Rossio's fountain, and forged friendships on the steps of the All Saints' Hospital that stood on the eastern edge of the square. Teresa's mobility was also largely enhanced by her job as a fruit seller. She could be seen carrying baskets of seasonal fruits on her hip or her head, selling her goods to the crowds that thronged the streets and docks. It was highly likely that Teresa also spent much of her time in the Rossio and in the adjacent Praça da Figueira.

### **The Rossio: Contesting Urban Space**

For centuries, the Rossio had been a public space open to individuals from all walks of life. Originally located outside the city walls and literally signifying a generally common land or 'land

without an owner... “useless” or “wasted” because it was not suitable for agriculture,’ the Rossio was one of many *rossios*, but none were as socially or culturally important as that of Lisbon.<sup>22</sup> Markets, bull running contests, races, gatherings and popular celebrations, protests, royal marriages, state funerals, and public executions all took place there.<sup>23</sup> But its history is also marked by the Crown’s numerous attempts to alter this location into a centre of power, seizing the land of the dispossessed to build institutions of power and authority. Some headway was made in the fifteenth century as the Estaus Palace was built along the northern edge of the square and the Royal All Saints Hospital was constructed along its eastern face. Crucially, the Estaus palace became the seat of the Inquisition and its power resonated through the square as the Rossio was transformed into a site of religious authority and state-sanctioned violence.

Pombal’s Lisbon not only remapped the city’s streets, but also attempted to control where and how its inhabitants used urban spaces. To wrestle the Rossio from the people, the square was transformed. First to go was the hospital, which was relocated to the east of the city. Upon the ruins of the original hospital, Pombal raised the Praça da Figueira, popularly known as the ‘praça nova da fruta’ a new urban space specifically created to host Lisbon’s open-air market. The sale of fruit and vegetables in the Rossio was immediately prohibited and all vendors were required to sell their goods only from the Figueira. In one swift move, Pombal made an obvious and symbolic claim of this contested urban space that removed its popular elements and installed in its place the bourgeoisie. The sickly, the destitute, and the disenfranchised masses were displaced to the Figueira to make way for the National Theatre, two magnificent new fountains, and a statue of King Pedro IV. It was no longer to be the home of itinerant peddlers, but for refined merchants and shopowners. The royal decree of 22 May 1773 granted hat merchants stores in the Rossio square as their new site for sales, stating that it was space to ‘ennoble, and populate’ the corporation, indicating a shift in ideological and symbolic terms that saw the Rossio move from a ‘popular’ to ‘noble’ space.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, the reality was somewhat different. Regular edicts were issued over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reiterating that beggars and sellers were forbidden from entering the Rossio, seemingly to no avail. Pombal’s vision of the Figueira as a place for popular commerce was not

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<sup>1</sup> Collecção da legislativa portuguesa desde a ultima compilação das ordenações redegida pelo desembargador Antonio Delgado da Silva. Legislação de 1763 a 1774. (Lisboa: Typographia Maignense, 1829), pp. 667-671.

shared by Lisbon's popular classes. In 1792, for example, another decree was issued prohibiting people from selling fruit and vegetables in the Rossio square or from within the meat stores located around it, suggesting that the practice was still strong.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the authorities had contested black women's right to sell foodstuffs in the Rossio long before Pombal's interventions. As early as the sixteenth century, black women, enslaved or freed, were banned from working as *regateiras* or foodsellers, a decree that met with no success. The intervening centuries saw a rise in black women working in the public squares and streets of Lisbon, lending a greater racialized dimension to public work that fed directly into discourses that drew connections between black women, slavery, sexual availability, and hypersexuality. In 1709, a group of black enslaved and freedwomen entered a petition to the King complaining of the violence and abuse they received at the hands of local authorities for selling corn, rice, and fish on the steps of the royal hospital in the Rossio. They recounted how they were forced to pay a fee of one cruzado a year to the Senate, and all remaining monies went to their owners in exchange for food and board, to maintain their own families, and help finance the black brotherhoods and manumissions.<sup>3</sup> Their plight demonstrates how for black female street vendors, the dimensions of abuse were physical, financial, psychological, and spatial.

Things clearly came to a head in the 1760s, when further royal decrees were published in response to deep unrest in the city. The Crown recognized that street vendors were overwhelmingly women, consistently using the terms *regateiras* and *vendedeiras* as specifically feminine plurals, and furthermore acknowledged that they were 'poor, and destitute,' and so abolished all taxes to be paid to various Crown officials and the Treasury in 1765. Particularly interesting is a decree issued nine days earlier that abolished all monies collected by the *Juizo das Bravas*, which targeted washerwomen and female street-vendors for shouting loudly in public and disturbing the peace. Unsurprisingly, the practice did not appear to have disappeared, and Lisbon's impoverished women continued to complain of the Juizo's extortions. The Crown issued a further decree in 1769 reinforcing the earlier law 'extinguishing the income from sentences imposed on women shouting (*useiras de bradar*).'<sup>4</sup> The largesse shown by the Crown masks how the authorities deepened women's poverty and social exclusion. Various decrees in the late eighteenth century consistently

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<sup>2</sup> Collecção da legislativa portugueza desde a ultima compilação das ordenações redegida pelo desembargador Antonio Delgado da Silva. Legislação de 1791 a 1801. (Lisboa: Typographia Maignense, 1828), pp. 67-72.

<sup>3</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 438.

restricted women's freedom of movement to sell their goods, ultimately reducing income-generating opportunities and worsening their financial and living conditions.

Little wonder that women kept returning to sell food in the Rossio, a space that had been *the* area of the city for people to buy, sell, and congregate for centuries. Customers continued to frequent the Rossio and poor black women continued to offer their services there, despite greater police controls that sought to stamp out public unrest and violence. Interestingly, one of the 'hotspots' of urban violence in 1820 was the area stretching from the Praça da Figueira to Mouraria, which today is still considered to be among the poorest parts of Lisbon.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the stubborn presence of foodsellers in the Rossio, in large part impoverished women of colour, demonstrated their resistance to the new spatial order, reaffirming not only their right to sell their wares, but to sell them on their own terms. They were taking back popular spaces and reinscribing them with the spirit of bygone generations, but in doing so, they reinvented these spaces by creating a place for themselves, a place for black women in a space that had originally been one for principally white men and women. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, much had changed in the Portuguese Empire, due primarily to the increasing flows of African enslaved labour, and the Rossio's transformation was emblematic of the evolving socio-economic and racial landscape that had black women at its core.

### **Death and Punishment in the Rossio**

Marcelina and Teresa, two black women who used the Rossio to live, work, and socialize, also experienced its darker side: one of death and punishment. Marcelina's trial in the Estaus Palace culminated in her solemn swearing to renounce her beliefs, her instruction in Roman Catholicism, and spiritual penitence. Teresa was conducted through the streets of Lisbon to the Rossio to be hanged, procession-like, to maximise the drama and fear of the occasion.<sup>6</sup> Her body charged physical and ideological spaces with new meanings of power in Lisbon, constituting a direct challenge to the Pombaline vision of a destroyed metropolis being reconstructed as a modern bourgeois city poised to take its rightful place on the global stage. The Rossio, and the adjacent Poço do Borratem road where Teresa's alleged crime was committed, were situated at the centre of this struggle in 1772.

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<sup>5</sup> Lousada, p. 225.

<sup>6</sup> Diane Brand, p. 4.

Through Teresa's execution, the Rossio continued its tradition as a space for public entertainment. As Diane Brand has noted, 'closure of the space was important to firstly create a functioning amphitheatre and secondly to seal the place off spatially from the real world beyond, thereby creating a royally sanctioned entertainment zone of suspended consciousness, behaviour and voyeuristic pleasure outside the norm.'<sup>7</sup> Climbing onto the wooden gallows, Teresa was immobilized once again and hung. Her noose was removed and she was decapitated. We do not know what happened to her corpse; most probably she was buried in an unmarked grave. But her head and her hands were mounted on tall spokes and were installed on the Poço do Borratem road, unavoidable as the masses bustled in and out of the Rossio. This ultimate act of violence delineates how the full force of the Portuguese empire immobilized Teresa for eternity, sketching out clearly the dimensions of power of the new modern metropolis in the geographical space of the Rossio and onto the corporal landscape of a freed black woman.

Alongside her mutilated head were those of other criminals. Now the Rossio had become a place of fear, a space through which fear was coursing. Beggars, peddlers, and black female vendors lived in fear of being abused, extorted, or jailed by the authorities, as police presence intensified under Pombal's rule. The message of fear would have been hammered home by the rows of decaying skulls surrounding the Rossio, the futility of resistance to the authorities clear to see. Taken together with growing violence concentrated in the Figueira square right next to the Rossio, these overlapping elements likely intersected to create something of a 'fearscape.' As Simone Tulumello has rightly noted, 'urban fear is at once a spatial/discursive practice, the result of hegemonic representations and policies, and a trigger for less civic urban lives.'<sup>8</sup> Tulumello emphasises that people experience urban spaces of fear not because of the actual dangers that they hold, but rather due to quite different factors that work in concert to produce such fears. Officially taking control of the Rossio was not enough; part of the geopolitical takeover needed to deter the marginalized from entering the Rossio of their own volition. As we saw above, this did not quite go according to plan.

Ironically, Teresa may have played a small part in that. Teresa's black female face was mounted alongside the decaying skulls of wealthy, white officials who had extorted Lisbonians in the 1760s

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Simone Tulumello, 'From "Spaces of Fear" to "Fearscape": Mapping for Reframing Theories About the Spatialization of Fear in Urban Space,' *Space and Culture* 18, no.3 (2015): 268.

to such a degree that they were hanged and a royal decree banning tax collection was issued, as we saw earlier. The irony that a freed black woman circulating the streets and squares that such men sought to control, regulate, and profit from should be placed together with them surely would not have gone unnoticed. While the Rossio was contested between the Crown representatives, the fiscal authorities, and the female vendors in a material sense, Teresa's remains symbolically challenged social hierarchies that correlated gender and race with wealth and influence, redefining the balance of power that the square was to maintain. Although officially removed by Pombal for the bourgeoisie, for the wealthy and those ascending the social ladder (read white), the Rossio was retaken in death by a freed black fruit seller. Gruesome though it may be, Teresa was staking her claim and that of millions of disenfranchised Africans and their descendants for generations to come to a space that was always for the people, regardless of attempts to wrestle it from them.