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# The Stop at Casa Branca: Abandonment and Traces of Resistance on a Train Journey to Beja

A Paragem em Casa Branca: Abandono e Vestígios de Resistência Numa Viagem de Comboio Até Beja

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# The Stop at Casa Branca: Abandonment and Traces of Resistance on a Train Journey to Beja

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**Abstract**

Drawing on weekly train journeys between Almada and Beja, this visual essay uses photography as an analytical device to support a sociological reflection on the territorial dimension of biopower's thanatopolitical core in capitalist modernity. The analysis focuses on the languages and materialities of abandonment and resistance manifested in public spaces. The 170 km journey between these cities requires a change of train at Casa Branca, where a caesura in the exercise of power is drawn. Up to this juncture, the journey remains within the scope of biopower as theorised by Michel Foucault; beyond Casa Branca, however, the exercise of power becomes discontinuous, bringing inhabitants of the Alentejo interior one step closer to the threshold where the politics of life transitions into the politics of death. Thus, power partially abandons these individuals' lives, illuminating the unstable relationship between life and death that defines power as oscillating between *bios* and *thanatos*. This partial abandonment restricts life's conditions of possibility, prompting some residents of the Alentejo interior to resist, as evidenced by the graffiti on the train connecting Casa Branca to Beja and on the walls of Beja itself, which display anti-fascist messages opposing the contemporary resurgence of the politics of death promoted by the far right. Amid absences and remnants, this visual essay uncovers a territory characterised by both abandonment and resistance, where memories of past and present struggles are invoked to affirm hope for a good life grounded in the recognition of shared humanity. Methodologically, the essay is anchored in an artisanal, peripatetic research approach, presenting a fragmentary sociological imagination that uses photographs as a foundation for developing lines of reflection, suggestions, and open-ended interpretative possibilities.

**Keywords**
Alentejo, biopower, photography, resistance, thanatopolitics

# A Paragem em Casa Branca: Abandono e Vestígios de Resistência Numa Viagem de Comboio Até Beja

**Resumo**

A partir de viagens ferroviárias realizadas semanalmente entre Almada e Beja, este ensaio visual parte da fotografia enquanto dispositivo analítico, que originou uma reflexão sociológica sobre a dimensão territorial do núcleo tanatopolítico do biopoder na modernidade capitalista, com foco nas linguagens e materialidades de abandono e de resistência reveladas no espaço público. A viagem de 170 km entre as duas cidades implica uma mudança de linha em Casa Branca, local no qual é traçada uma cesura no exercício do poder. Se, até aí, podemos considerar que ainda

estamos sob a alçada do biopoder, teorizado por Michel Foucault; depois de Casa Branca, o exercício do poder torna-se descontínuo, colocando quem habita o interior alentejano um passo mais próximo do ponto no qual a política da vida se converte em política de morte. As vidas destes sujeitos são abandonadas pelo poder, ainda que só em parte, o que permite compreender a relação entre a vida e a morte, que funda o poder como algo instável, oscilando ao longo de um eixo que tem nos seus polos *bios* e *tanatos*. Dado que este abandono parcial contrai as suas condições de possibilidade de vida, há quem resista no interior alentejano, o que se pode observar nos múltiplos graffitis pichados no comboio que liga Casa Branca a Beja e nos graffitis inscritos nas paredes desta última cidade, com mensagens antifascistas, que se opõem ao recrudescimento contemporâneo da política de morte promovida pela extrema-direita. Entre ausências e permanências, este ensaio visual expõe um território marcado por formas de abandono, mas também de resistência, em que a memória do passado e as lutas do presente são evocadas para afirmar a esperança numa vida boa que, necessariamente, tem de assentar no reconhecimento da nossa humanidade comum. Metodologicamente, o texto inscreve-se numa prática artesanal e deambulatória da pesquisa, traduzindo-se numa experiência de imaginação sociológica fragmentária, que parte das fotografias para levantar linhas de reflexão, sugestões e possibilidades interpretativas inacabadas.

**Palavras-chave**
Alentejo, biopoder, fotografia, resistência, tanatopolítica

## Descriptive Memory

This visual essay stems from a sociological reflection developed through weekly train journeys between Almada and Beja over one semester. Constructed around reflection on a personal experience of mobility, the essay presents an investigation in transit guided by methodological principles that come close to what Machado Pais (2013) describes as a "peripatetic and itinerant method", which, in this case, makes it possible to activate the sociological gaze along the route connecting the two cities. In this sense, the reflection was developed through direct observation, taking the form of an immersive, situated experience of travelling. This observation was guided by a spontaneous curiosity that captured the rhythms of everyday life, albeit mostly in a fragmentary manner.

The photographs were taken with a mobile phone during the journey, without prior planning, reflecting the transient and contingent nature of the travel experience itself. Breaking with logocentrism, which subordinates the image to verbal text (Becker, 1995; Campos, 2007; Pais, 2013), the photographs are accorded the epistemological status of autonomous devices for thought and interrogation (Campos, 2007).

More than documenting landscapes or infrastructures, the images seek to capture atmospheres, rhythms, continuities and interruptions, revealing different ways of experiencing mobility and territory. The photographic gesture unfolded alongside the many periods of dead time spent waiting, the moments of transition between railway lines, the details of the carriages, the traces inscribed on walls, and the materialities that emerge along the journey. These photographs are produced in transit, shaped by bodily movement, the instability of the sociological gaze, and the situated nature of the experience.

The Casa Branca station emerges, both methodologically and symbolically, as a central stopping point. Waiting on the station's unsheltered platform, often longer than could reasonably be anticipated, and changing trains reveal an abrupt transition to different ways of managing life, care, precarity, and abandonment. This railway space thus became an empirical laboratory for (re)thinking the connections between mobility, territorial abandonment, and oppression.

In the city of Beja, the essay focuses primarily on graffiti and stencils bearing political and visual messages that emerge on Beja's walls as fragments of resistance. References to anti-fascism, the carnations of the April Revolution, Catarina Eufémia, feminist struggles and Gaza reveal traces of collective memory, but also of renewed political affirmation, inscribed in public space. These expressions are not treated as peripheral elements of the landscape, but as forms of symbolic production that contest meanings associated with territory, the past and the present.

The essay stems from a collaborative process between two sociologists. Rosário Rosa undertook the journeys, produced the photographic records and directly experienced the rhythms, delays, temperatures, waiting spaces and materialities of the railway journey. João Aldeia followed the process through dialogues centred on the images and accounts, bringing an external perspective to the documented experience. The essay was constructed through this oscillating movement between proximity and distance, following the very logic of train journeys: between departures and arrivals, continuities and interruptions, different speeds, train transfers and different ways of reflecting on the same journey.

The writing itself also emerges from this collaborative dynamic. The text developed as a shared exercise in reflection and dialogue, seeking to construct a visual and sociological narrative that makes visible forms of structural and everyday oppression, as well as dispersed practices of resistance and political affirmation. Thus, this essay presents itself as a critical device for observing, exposing and reflecting on mobility, memory, abandonment and resistance in a region of Portugal's interior.

## Essay

The train journey between Almada and Beja covers approximately 170 km, involves a change of train at Casa Branca and takes just over two hours. At first glance, this is a relatively short distance and journey time, bringing two cities south of the Tagus closer together. However, those boarding the Intercities train at Pragal (Almada), bound for Beja, embark on an experience marked by unpredictability and discontinuity (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** *Lisbon–Évora Intercidades train, Pragal station*

*Credits*. Rosário Rosa

To consider what this journey reveals beneath the appearance of normality, this essay adopts a visual approach which, while grounded in sociology, does not overlook the experiential and sensory dimension of the peripatetic experience (Pais, 2013). By informing this discipline, this dimension can help expand conventional modes of producing academic knowledge, opening up analytical possibilities beyond those traditionally established. In dialogue with visual sociology and visual anthropology (Banks, 2001; Becker, 1995; Harper, 2012), the images presented are regarded as polysemic and heuristic artefacts whose meaning is not exhausted by writing. Instead, they offer interpretative clues that we approach as open-ended and suggestive readings, offered for the reader's reflection, much like the diversity of possible experiences within a single journey.

Travelling between these two cities has revealed various everyday, almost commonplace expressions of how, in capitalist modernity, power is exercised in ways that make certain lives more arduous than others. Michel Foucault (1997/2006) argued that, from the 17th century onwards, the sovereign power's characteristic "right to kill or let live" (p. 257) became secondary to biopower, a mechanism of power that seeks to "intervene in the way of living and in the 'how' of life" (p. 264). According to Foucault (1976/1994), since the central purpose of this new mechanism of power is to protect and shape life, it relegates death to a peripheral position, no longer conceiving of it as the ultimate punishment for transgression, but making it precisely what it seeks to prevent.

We know, however, that biopower never severs its umbilical relationship with death (Agamben, 1995/1998; Esposito, 2002/2011; Mbembe, 2016/2019). At the heart of biopower has always been a thanatopolitical impulse — or, in Mbembe's (2016/2019) terms, a "necropolitical" one — which reveals that, in capitalist modernity, the politics of death remains the hidden driving force behind the politics of life. Thanatopolitics is expressed through a myriad of exercises of power whereby entire populations are abandoned to the arbitrary possibility of others deciding to kill them or reduce them to mere biological survival, thereby preventing them from experiencing anything resembling a good life (Agamben, 1995/1998). Ultimately, these populations are reduced to the "abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human" (Arendt, 1951/2010, p. 394). In less extreme cases, the conditions of possibility of their lives are curtailed by those who exercise power to the threshold of survival: they are not biologically killed through an act of sovereign power, but neither are they allowed to enjoy the fulfilment and dignity that are the *conditio sine qua non* of a good life.

Travelling by train between Almada and Beja shows that this thanatopolitical core of biopower operates through territorial caesuras which, by demarcating contiguous spaces within the same nation-State, reveal a line beyond which biopower is interrupted, and thanatopolitics magnified. One such line is drawn at Casa Branca (Figure 2 and Figure 3).




**Figure 2.** *Casa Branca station*

*Credits*. Rosário Rosa



**Figure 3.** *Casa Branca station*

*Credits*. Rosário Rosa

What should be merely a change of train is, in fact, a stop, an abrupt interruption not only of the journey but also of an imagined continuity. The station functions as a transit platform, with a waiting interval that is often prolonged. The connecting train is scheduled to depart just a few minutes after the train from Lisbon arrives. However, it is invariably delayed, without any announcement or explanation, as though, from that point onwards, claiming one's rights were no longer permitted. This idle time is no exception. It is part of the recurring experience of this journey. Casa Branca is not merely a railway junction; it is a kind of threshold where time ceases to follow the logic of efficiency and predictability and begins to reveal another temporality, one that is slower, more unstable and more unequal.

Power is not exercised in Almada, close to the Portuguese capital, in the same way as it is in Beja, the district capital of the Alentejo interior. This does not mean that those beyond this line are exposed to the cruel purity of the "right to kill". Rather, once past Casa Branca, the umbilical relationship between biopower and thanatopolitics becomes apparent in everyday details in a much more obvious way. At Casa Branca, passengers leave the train coming from Lisbon, which is fast, modern, clean, well-maintained and air-conditioned, and board the train operating the Évora–Beja–Évora route, which is dirty, poorly maintained, without air conditioning or ventilation, noisy, ageing and slow. This is a train on which a destination that no longer corresponds to its actual route (Caldas da Rainha) remains displayed, and which is covered in various graffiti (Figure 4, Figure

5 and Figure 6) that fill it with colours, letters and rounded shapes — acts of identity affirmation for those who recognise the codes, or of transgression for those who do not, adding layers of time, visibility and expression to rolling stock that is already at the end of its useful life.




**Figure 4.** *Train connecting Beja to Casa Branca, bound for Évora*

*Credits*. Rosário Rosa

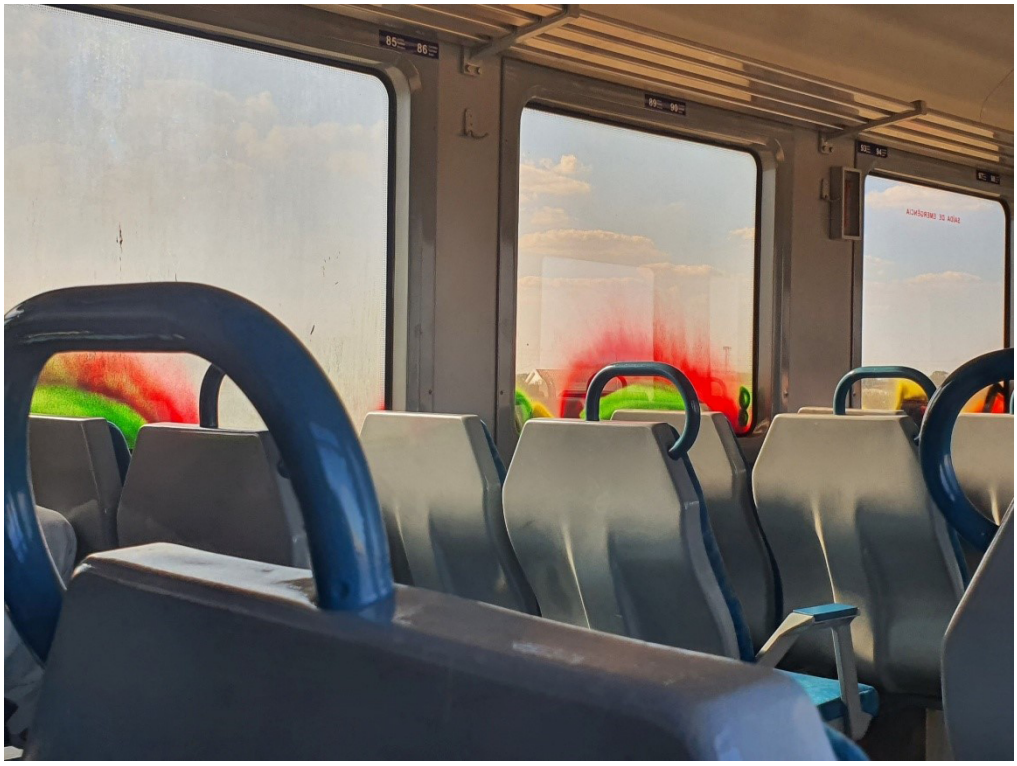


**Figure 5.** *Interior of the Casa Branca–Beja train*

*Credits*. Rosário Rosa

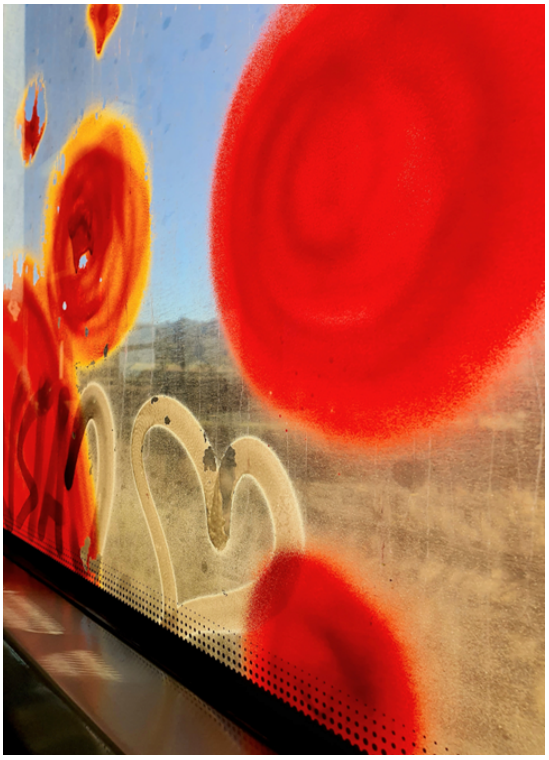


**Figure 6.** *Casa Branca–Beja train carriage*

*Credits*. Rosário Rosa

As the train continues southwards, the landscape changes gradually (Figure 7). The Alentejo does not immediately impose itself; rather, it gradually unfolds across the expanse. The long yellow plains, the scarcity of vertical features and the continuous exposure of the horizon produce an experience of distance that is not merely visual but also material and corporeal. Space seems to stretch out, but this openness does not mean proximity: it means dispersion, remoteness and prolonged intervals. Here, distance ceases to be merely something to be traversed and becomes something gradually absorbed into the rhythm of the old train as it carries us slowly along.



**Figure 7.** *View from the window of the Casa Branca–Beja train*

*Credits*. Rosário Rosa

Beyond Casa Branca, the exercise of power becomes discontinuous. Power does not entirely ignore the populations of the Alentejo interior. Those who exercise power from the national capital sometimes consider how these populations' lives can or cannot unfold. However, these populations are considered far more sporadically than those in coastal cities, and everyday life shows that fostering their lives is not a priority.

Those who live in the interior of the Alentejo do not, therefore, face the end of *zoē*, biological life, which in classical Greece was understood as "the simple fact of living" (Agamben, 1995/1998, p. 11) that brought human beings closer to non-human animals. Nevertheless, when considering these populations, it becomes difficult to deny the thanatopolitical core of capitalist modernity. Day after day, the conditions of possibility of these people's lives are curtailed by a mode of exercising power that allows the body and the species to go on, while inflicting small political, cultural and spiritual deaths on those who merely manage to survive. *Bios* and *thanatos* are not mutually exclusive alternatives; they are the poles of an axis along which the exercise of power can assume different positions and nuances.

Crossing the Casa Branca line means travelling back in time — and in Beja, as elsewhere, if we go far enough back, we return to fascism. Marx (1852/2008) was right: history happens twice, first as tragedy, then as farce. Or perhaps, as Bauman (2007) specifies, history does indeed happen twice, but the real tragedy lies in its repetition. In this case, we return to a fascism that persists as a memory — of pain and struggle — within a present that insists on denying remembrance, causing it to fade, yet failing to erase it completely.

In the Alentejo interior that unfolds beyond Casa Branca, it becomes clear that not all the structural transformations of Portuguese society over the past 50 years have succeeded in completely severing its ties with the historical experience of fascism. In Beja, the memory remains of the absolute abandonment by the Estado Novo, under which power manifested itself only sporadically and arbitrarily, at moments when the ruling classes decided to kill or chose not to do so. The continuities between past and present mean that, today, in places such as Beja, power is present, but in ways that reveal its fissures (Figure 8). Trains pass through the area, but the conventional railway line between Casa Branca and Beja, despite successive promises of modernisation, "has not been electrified, making it necessary to use obsolete rolling stock, consisting of old diesel trains that are slower, more polluting and less comfortable" (Câmara Municipal de Beja, 2024, p. 27). The stations at which these trains stop were planned by the central government, but were soon left to their own fate, without the necessary maintenance or the comfort required by those who have to wait there for a train that may or may not arrive on time.




**Figure 8.** *Stencil graffiti on a wall in the city of Beja*

*Credits*. Rosário Rosa

In Beja, the district capital, we find a small, old station reduced to the bare essentials (Figure 9 and Figure 10): a ticket office, a few tiled panels depicting the lives of peasants in times gone by, old trains covered in colourful graffiti, and little else. There is no bar, no electric vehicle charging point, not even a vending machine where one can buy water to cope with the long, hot journeys, in a place where temperatures easily exceed 40 °C. The existing toilets are out of service — temporarily or permanently; only time will tell (Figure 11).



**Figure 9.** *Train connecting to Casa Branca, Beja railway station*

*Credits*. Rosário Rosa




**Figure 10.** *Train connecting to Casa Branca, Beja railway station*

*Credits*. Rosário Rosa




**Figure 11.** *Toilet, Beja railway station*

*Credits*. Rosário Rosa

Those who live in the Alentejo interior are not fully taken into account by those who exercise power from the national capital. They are considered at times, but never with the longitudinal consistency biopower requires. Since 1974, there was, of course, an initial intention to bring this territory within the logic of biopower, subordinating the space and its people to the same mechanisms of power that were being constructed in the coastal cities. And, generally in a timid manner or, occasionally, with great fanfare, such intentions have manifested on several occasions. But they always occur piecemeal, in fits and starts, as isolated expressions of a desire to exercise power and shape lives that are interrupted as quickly as they are initiated. A large company moves its headquarters to the Alentejo, a minister inaugurates a public works project accompanied by a retinue of

journalists, an international investor discovers that their money can be better invested in a monoculture of olive or almond trees than in government bonds.

In this process, the territory is transformed — the station remains, and, despite the setbacks, trains still run. The lives of those who live there have been altered by the need to travel, by waiting times, by the discomfort of a train that has not yet arrived or has not yet departed. The fissures in power gradually widen; those who exercised it no longer pay attention to the place, and its people, those who remain, are left with nothing but the remnants of a governmental act that gradually fades away.

In recent decades, Beja's population has aged[1], the social protest that marked earlier times has gradually faded, and, in recent years, as in many places around the world, fascism has once again gained strength. Yet resistance endures on the city's walls, marked by the memories of those who, for a moment, thought they had before them tomorrows that would sing. Across the city, numerous graffiti inscriptions and stencils can be found, bearing references to past anti-fascist struggles, such as red carna-tions (Figure 12) and the image of Catarina Eufémia, as well as contemporary allusions to feminism and the massacre in Gaza (Figure 13).




**Figure 12.** *Stencil graffiti on a wall in Beja*

*Credits*. Rosário Rosa

[1] The ageing index in Beja rose from 138.1 in 2000 to 162.4 in 2025 (PORDATA, n.d.).




**Figure 13.** *Graffiti on a wall in Beja*

*Credits*. Rosário Rosa

Socially perceived as somewhere between art and vandalism, these inscriptions express attempts at the symbolic appropriation of the city through which their creators claim "an existence that, despite being crushed by urban anonymity and by the powers that regulate urban space, manages to make itself heard (or seen)" (Campos, 2009, p. 155). Although they result from loosely organised transgressive practices, these graffiti inscriptions and stencils allow their anonymous creators to participate in the political contest over the meanings and uses of public space. Even though, once inscribed in the materiality of the city's walls, they may be appropriated by other actors who, just as anonymous as those who came before them, seek to destroy the original order of discourse, as can be seen in the various anti-fascist stencils found in Beja, in which the word "anti" has been deliberately crossed out.

On these walls, the memory of pain and struggle endures, but resistance is also renewed and expanded, bearing witness not only to local discontent but also to the extreme brutality unfolding elsewhere (Figure 14). Beja is not Gaza, where the relationship between *bios* and *thanatos*, which lies at the heart of modern capitalist politics, is thrown utterly out of balance, abandoning those who live there to the ever-present possibility of being killed. In the Alentejo interior, as we cross the Casa Branca line, we move one step closer to *thanatos*, but power does not become the pure "right to kill". Nevertheless, amid a partial but deeply felt abandonment, there are people in Beja who stand with Gaza, recognising that any hope that remains in the face of a fascism that stubbornly seeks to return can only be grounded in our shared humanity.




**Figure 14.** *Urban mural in central Beja, by Cristina Matos (2025)*

*Credits*. Rosário Rosa

## Machine Translation Post-Editing: Anabela Delgado

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