Antônio José da Silva was a New Christian, who was born in Brazil in 1705 and forced to move to Lisbon two years after his parents were accused of practicing Judaism in 1712. In 1726, when da Silva was twenty-one years old, he also became a victim of the Portuguese Inquisition. After participating in the *auto-da-fé* that took place in Lisbon on October 13, 1726, he was released from the Inquisition jail. Upon his release from the cells of the Holy Office he embraced literature and around 1733 created a special theater that used puppets to represent the different characters. These first incursions into the world of theater, the realm in which A.J. da Silva would accrue a substantial reputation, perhaps derived from economic need that he and his family experienced as a result of the Inquisition’s appropriation of their assets. On October 12, 1737, on the eve of Yom Kippur, the New Christian from Brazil was again arrested by the Inquisition. During his second imprisonment, the inquisitors made extensive use of torture techniques to obtain information from the *cristão-novo* from Rio de Janeiro. They also used Inquisition guards and spies to observe the prisoner. In a manner that resembles the panopticon described by Foucault in *Madness and Civilization*, Antônio José was constantly being observed through secret holes made in the walls of his cell. In contrast to the cases of Luis de Carvajal and Bento Teixeira, who used the cracks in the walls of the Inquisition jail to communicate with other crypto-Jews and to resist the inquisitors, in da Silva’s case the holes in the wall functioned as a mechanism of control rather than subversion.\(^1\)

\(^1\) Unlike some of the previous individuals studied in this book, who are still relatively unknown among Latin American and Iberian literary critics and historians, Antônio José da Silva’s life and literary work have received serious attention by scholars such as José Pereira Tavares, Claude Henri-Frèches, José de Oliveira Barata, and Alberto Dines, among others. Yet the work of this New Christian playwright continues to be practically unknown outside the Luso-Brazilian and Lusophone African worlds. Additionally, in a situation analogous to the cases of Luis de Carvajal, Bento Teixeira, and Manuel Beckman, the critics who have studied Antônio José’s inquisitorial trials and theater have failed to
This chapter frames Antônio José da Silva’s inquisitorial trials and plays in a broad imperial context involving Portugal, England, Spain and other Western European nations. The pages that follow serve as an appropriate close to the analysis of the discourse of *letrados* of Jewish origin, especially given that Antônio José da Silva was the last New Christian from Brazil executed by the Portuguese Inquisition. The study of his trial proceedings and plays offers insights into the motives that led the modern Inquisition to persecute New Christians. As Francisco Bethencourt observes in *Histórias das Inquisições*, despite the fact that the Holy Office aimed to punish all kinds of heresies, individuals of Jewish origin became “o alvo maior da actividade inquisitorial ibérica” (297) [the major target of the Iberian inquisitorial activity]. As we will see in the following pages this was particularly accurate in the case of the Brazilian-born playwright.

I. Framing Antônio José da Silva’s Case

To best evaluate the trial proceedings that register the experience of Antônio José da Silva, we must first confront a key question. Why did the Portuguese Inquisition, which until then had shown a certain restraint and tolerance toward New Christians from Brazil, initiate a much fiercer persecution of this group during the first half of the eighteenth century? To answer, it is useful to keep in mind that gold was found in Brazil only at the end of the seventeenth century, and that the mining of the mineral reached its peak in the second decade of the eighteenth century. Until that time, Brazil, unlike the Spanish colonies, had not attracted the ambition and enterprise of large sectors of traditional Old Christians from Portugal. In the previous centuries, because members of the Portuguese elite preferred to colonize Africa and Asia, the monarchs lacked the human and financial resources to secure and colonize their possessions in the New World. However, to prevent other European empires, such as those of the French, the English, and the Dutch, from occupying Brazil, the Portuguese leaders entered into contracts with New Christians that allowed them to explore and commercialize some of the natural products, as well as to settle in Portuguese America. Right after Pedro Álvares Cabral “dis-