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### Mia Couto and the Antinomies of World-Literature

“History, meanwhile, if it is anything at all, is at one with the dialectic, and can only be the problem of which it claims to be the solution.”

Fredric Jameson. *The Antinomies of Realism*

As the epigraph hopefully makes clear, Fredric Jameson’s work, *The Antinomies of Realism*<sup>1</sup> is in some way behind these brief considerations on Mia Couto and World-Literature. For reading Mia Couto’s works inevitably raises questions both of form and History, given his often highly experimental texts, while also always pulling readers in the direction of considering the very process of representation and its contradictory relation to material reality. In a way Mia Couto and World-Literature already constitute the first antinomy of World Literature, not only because they seem to contradict each other, but because they do not. Or, to anticipate the argument to follow, to reflect on Mia Couto and World-Literature can be a simple selective exercise destined to favor one interpretation or another of what World-Literature signifies; or it can be a completely different act of critique that simultaneously forces one to rethink anew what World-Literature is or can be, while, by necessity, engaging a view of Mia Couto that is neither confined to the straightjacket of the national, nor cast adrift as some sort of exotic cosmopolitan. At the beginning of a recent interview Mia Couto, when asked about his views on World Literature as a concept, and the possibility of exoticization, answered:

*As far as I am concerned, it’s a step sideways rather than a step forward. Literature, like any other art form, has always been of the world. This apparently new category is a way of classifying the literature of the so-called ‘other’. But I believe that there is a process, albeit one without continuity, in which the art from Africa, Asia and South America have been acknowledged. Works from these parts of the world are beginning to gain recognition through their quality, without the need for any other additional criterion of evaluation.*<sup>2</sup>

The interviewers still pursue the issue of World Literature a bit further but what interests me is to note first of all how necessary, and almost natural, it has become to speak of Mia Couto and World Literature together, and, second, how Mia Couto, for all the, perhaps unfounded, optimism such an approach suggests, expresses a skeptical view of the concept of World Literature. If one takes a look at the development it has undergone since its coinage by Goethe, the problem with World Literature is not so much that it would be a new way of designating the 'other', but rather that it is still, as it has been since, a way of privileging and enshrining works deemed to be central and above the others, starting of course with Goethe's own. I have no intention of rehearsing here in the brief space we have the development of the concept of World Literature – something most readers probably are very familiar with.<sup>3</sup> Rather, what I want is to question some of the assumptions we may have concerning World Literature that become very visible when we pair Goethe and Mia Couto. Not that I want to compare the work of both but rather the positions they occupy, one very much central, the other coming more from the margins. One obvious issue will concern language and translation, as these are indeed crucial in discussions of World Literature. And, as is well know, the issue of language is also crucial in many discussions of Mia Couto. Translation inevitably becomes equally a concern as Portuguese – for all its claims of being one of the most spoken languages world-wide, simply cannot draw the readership of English. In the same *Companion to Mia Couto* where the interview I just quoted appears, there are two essays I would like to single out for my discussion. One is by David Brookshaw, "Mia Couto in Context", the other by Stefan Helgesson, on "Mia Couto & Translation".<sup>4</sup> Helgesson's essay goes hand in hand with a previous essay of his on "Postcolonialism and World Literature"<sup>5</sup> and I will refer to both. From David Brookshaw's article I want to take his reflection on how important for Mia Couto the work of Brazilian authors, specifically Guimarães Rosa, is, and how the usual uninformed claims in the press about his magical realism must be set aside. The contextualization of Mia Couto is essential for any understanding of how his work both enhances and alters World-Literature and this is something David Brookshaw already proposes in that essay.

I want to start addressing the issue more directly, by looking at the question of translation. Helgesson's writing is always very clear and well informed and usually lays out a whole sketch of a number of intellectual debates. In "Mia Couto & Translation" his point of departure is the complementary and somewhat opposed views on the role of translation enunciated by David Damrosch and Emily Apter. Very briefly, the opposition between Damrosch's assertion that works of world literature gain in translation and the view that there are some works of literature that simply cannot be translated.<sup>6</sup> Granted, this is a crude oversimplification but could be effective in getting a discussion on Mia Couto and World Literature started. As I have had a chance of arguing elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> I cannot subscribe to that view of Damrosch, neither in its absolute vagueness, nor in what it would imply. Clearly translation is very important and sometimes even essential. Mia Couto's world renown would not be the same were his works not translated into about twenty languages. Yet, had his works remained untranslated, they would not have lost any of their significance and would still be a part of World Literature as a system. Even in terms of circulation, the numbers would have been much reduced but it would still have a global reach. However, this is not quite the point I would like to make. Stefan Helgesson focuses on the variety of translations (this is something he had already sketched out in the other, earlier essay) and even though he does acknowledge the importance of the English translation, for obvious reasons he would like to claim significance for other, less central, languages, including his own Swedish. In principle that is a move that I find appropriate – yet I cannot but disagree with the view he puts forth of a 'normalizing' or even 'domesticating' of Mia Couto's radical language experimentation when he refers to the English translation. Without engaging any further with this argument I would rather draw on the fact that language experimentation although an important feature of the writing of Mia Couto cannot be seen as its defining essence in detriment of all other achievements. More to the point even, language experimentation could have been perceived as an obstacle to the inclusion of Mia Couto within World Literature. One could think that his language games not only pose a linguistic challenge but also are too much of a marker of national and cultural identification. The opposite, I would like to suggest, is true. Obviously

the language games are going to be always culture and language specific but they should not be misunderstood as national. Since Helgesson in both essays mentions one very specific and small example, I would like to refer to it as well here: the question turns on the neologism, 'pertubabado', we find in a statement by Kindzu in *Terra Sonâmbula* (*Sleepwalking Land*)<sup>8</sup>. Helgesson notes: "In the English translation the full sentence reads: 'I went in, perturbed, aflame with intention' (Couto 2006: 96); in Swedish: 'Omtumlad trädde jag in till henne, blygförvirrad och brinnande av hemliga avsikter' (Couto 1995: 109); in Portuguese: 'Entrei, pertubabado, ardendo de intenção' (Couto 2009a: 140)".<sup>9</sup> Helgesson's own understating of the effects of Mia Couto's creation are imaginative even if a bit baffling to me: "The redundant syllable 'ba' \_ which has recurred in all ten Portuguese editions of *Terra* to date, so it is not a typo \_ creates an auditory, stammering effect in Portuguese, as though the first-person narrator had pronounced the word in a perturbed state of mind."<sup>10</sup> I wonder what happened to what I think will be the most obvious meaning to Portuguese speakers, of "drooled" (babado). This sort of misreading – perhaps a happy misreading – is inevitable and already points out to the need for questioning the role of the translator rather than assuming that a recreation of word games is essential.

Very briefly still, as a way of drawing the main point on the issue of translation: precisely because the language of Mia Couto is so full of such word games it could have been an obstacle to his incorporation into World Literature. That the opposite is true indicates that linguistic complexity, or the relative obscurity of a semi-peripheral language such as Portuguese in terms of the global market, are no impediment. This had also been remarked upon by Helgesson who rightly notes that "translation can never be just one thing in relation to Couto's work, but will exhibit a wide repertoire of solutions as well as contradictions. As such, Couto provides an illuminating case study in World Literature ...".<sup>11</sup> I agree, but for somewhat different reasons, as I think that Mia Couto's work not only fits in with World Literature, no matter what definition one would invoke, but questions and exposes some of its inner contradictions and blind spots.

From a brief reflection on the apparent contradiction concerning Mia Couto's highly particular use of language and his entry into World Literature, I would like to move to a consideration of another seemingly discordant contradiction between the national and the global. There can be no doubt that Mia Couto's perspective is a Mozambican one and that he often, if not always, is concerned with Mozambican concerns. This is not to say that he speaks for Mozambique in any way. The wish to reduce a writer to a national identity is common to many readers and critics and Mia Couto is certainly not alone in refuting such facile identifications. Even if one were to go beyond such banalities and consider the polemic claim once argued by Fredric Jameson that all 'third-world' literature is a national allegory, one would have to immediately qualify that.<sup>12</sup> Jameson's formulation was perhaps crude, unnecessarily provocative, and sweeping; yet, with the benefit of time, there is also much in it that cannot be denied. One reason might well be that to a great extent rising literatures in many parts of the world were indeed deeply engaged in creating images of the nation. If one looks to a concrete example, already mentioned, *Sleepwalking Land*, one can see how there is much in Jameson's claim that could be made to fit that novel as its reflection on the devastation of the civil war in many ways is presented in an allegorical mode. That this does not go without some inner contradictions, was already seized upon by Phillip Rothwel, in his discussion of Mia Couto as a "postmodern nationalist".<sup>13</sup> However, and this is what I find more salient, that novel is at the same time a powerful call for a radically different notion of belonging that would transcend the nation. If anything, as most readers would agree, it is the Indian Ocean which is presented as the proper space for identification. As Bill Aschroft notes, "[t]he sea is a fascinating postcolonial space, because it completely transcends the idea of the bounded nation".<sup>14</sup> As such, belonging would always be a transnational category that does not ignore the nation but refuses to grant it any primacy when imagining a possible future free from the devastation brought about by war.

One of the defining characteristics for Mia Couto's works, and one he has consistently drawn attention to, is hybridity. Within postcolonial studies the notion of hybridity has long been established as a key concept, following on the work of Homi Bhabha.<sup>15</sup> In as much as Mia Couto reflects on the fusion of

cultures and languages in Mozambique, in Africa, and in the world, there is somewhat of a convergence between the two. However, personally, I find the way in which Mia Couto expounds hybridity to be differently grounded, to draw much more from the actual lives of people, instead of being something abstract and for the most part just celebratory. Mia Couto defends the importance of hybridity even to the point of, rightly, asserting that the notion of purity simply does not apply to human beings and that all of our actions are based on exchanges. And this is a point in which perhaps the work of Mia Couto could be invoked as providing a corrective for what sometimes appears as a light-headed intellectual abstraction that ends by reifying that which it would like to praise. The same can be seen, I would like to suggest, with regards to World Literature and I hope to address that directly by focusing on two issues: one, that the current debates on World Literature, indeed, much of its strength as a field of study, comes from the impact that postcolonial studies have had, as well as on their announced death. Second, that the reconceptualization of World Literature effected by the Warwick Collective in their programmatic volume, *Combined and Uneven Development*, with its focus on World-Systems Theory, can offer a materialist perspective attuned to the periphery that would be more consistent with the challenges posed by Mia Couto<sup>16</sup>.

In “Postcolonialism and World Literature” Stefan Helgesson goes straight to the core of the first issue and his choice of authors to help with the theoretical reflections, Mia Couto and Assia Djebar, is telling, especially as Mia Couto really is made to bear much of the argument. There are many points in which I agree with Helgesson, and find his capacity to synthesize debates and his wide reading very helpful. I also want to note that if he stays fairly close to the dominating voices on the World Literature pantheon, Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti, besides the ubiquitous David Damrosch and Emily Apter, when it comes to postcolonial studies he also draws, without necessarily endorsing, on a deliberate left wing of the field, represented by Neil Lazarus and Rob Nixon. His choice of Mia Couto is significant even if the comparison with Djebar remains too superficial and is, arguably, conceptually flawed, given the fact that even if both can be claimed as African, Djebar had long been accepted, even if not always smoothly, into the center of French letters as a member of the Académie

Française. In comparison, Mia Couto, with all of his prizes and world-wide recognition can be said to remain much more of a peripheral figure. And there would be other reasons to wish for a different comparison, with the work of a Coetzee for instance, but that is another discussion altogether. What I want to focus on is the choice of Mia Couto to illustrate the relationship between postcolonial studies and World Literature.

This reflects the malaise expressed by many of the most prolific postcolonial critics, notably in an MLA forum in 2007.<sup>17</sup> A strong dissenting voice, but a fairly isolated one it seems, was that of Robert J C Young in an article published five years later with the title of “Postcolonial Remains”.<sup>18</sup> Without revisiting that debate I want to seize on the way in which it seems, to me at least, as if postcolonial studies, having passed through the rites of entry into the groves of academia and having become a very successful field throughout the majority of English-speaking universities, had then lost its luster and was no longer appealing, with ecocriticism, the posthuman, and, indeed World Literature, beckoning as hot new fields capable of attracting invigorated discussions and, significantly, offer better prospects for employment. Without denying the reality of the academic enterprise and its less scholarly attributes, I still find it cynical to treat a field of studies as if it were no more than a designer label with a limited shelf life. Helgesson is spot on as he makes the link between postcolonial studies, World Literature and Mia Couto. But the article, for all its suggestiveness, lacks a compelling way out of what it does not even posit as a contradiction. Mia Couto, conversely, even if perhaps he had no such intention, when he states that in his view World Literature is but a euphemism for “other” that is, less than central, literature, is pointing to the contradiction. To many, myself included, postcolonial critique was not simply yet another mode of criticism but an important analytical tool to expose the imbalances of power and asymmetries inherent in the modern world as a consequence of imperial and colonial aggression and, as some would also add, the rise of capitalism as a dominant system. The adaptation of postcolonial perspectives from the Anglophone world where they initially developed to other spheres, such as the Francophone and the Lusophone, implied not just an adaptation of concepts to suit different contextual specificities, but actually a reconceptualization of the field itself. Seen



from a World-Systems Theory perspective, Portugal's semi-peripheral position – as Boaventura de Sousa Santos also argued<sup>19</sup> – actually gave rise to a form of invisibility, even a double invisibility, for the postcolonial works written in Portuguese. In a sense, only a handful of writers has been able to breach that. In the case of Portugal José Saramago, with the Nobel, and perhaps Lobo Antunes as well, but more partially. In the case of Lusophone Africa Mia Couto represents a unique case, with perhaps José Eduardo Agualusa coming afterwards.

World-Literature as traditionally conceived as a canon or a Republic of Letters, or even a mode of reading, cannot escape the contradiction between its avowed universality and its much more limited focus on a concentration of writers from a handful of countries, with English clearly dominating as global language. Sticking to such a view of World Literature would in the end actually serve to reinforce a Western norm with newer works being admitted to the select group but having to prove themselves and, perhaps, perpetually remaining on a different footing. That is one way in which I would understand Mia Couto's view of World Literature as a step sideways, a detour that might eventually take us forward, but remains a detour. However, if one takes a view of World Literature based on Wallerstein's notion as an interaction between center and periphery – with a significant role played by the semi-periphery as a hybrid place that is both center and periphery depending on whether it interacts with its own periphery or its own center – then one could see that what Mia Couto does, and represents, is very much part of a peripheral or semi-peripheral move to contest the notion of a hegemonic center.

In other words, in such a perspective it is precisely writing such as that of Mia Couto's that can best expose the antinomies of World Literature and call for its renewal from the margins. In the conclusion of "What Africa Does the African Writer Write About", his speech at the award ceremony for the Prize for the Twelve Best African Novels, in Cape Town in 2012, Mia Couto calls for a future in which "We want and dream of a nation and a continent that no longer needs heroes".<sup>20</sup> While these words have a specific context and a clear historical referent, they also could be taken as a way of calling for an understanding of literature, Mozambican, African, World Literature, that would break through the hegemonic controls – the printing, distribution and reception networks including

prizes, festivals and awards – that still work in favor of the erstwhile imperialists.

Obviously one could say that the propulsion of Mia Couto to the status of cultural hero is yet another way of exoticizing him and attempting to co-opt his transgressive potential. Perhaps, but in many ways Mia Couto's work is but the opening onto a different conception of World Literature, one that does not merely embellish an institutionalized postcolonial critique with the promise of the global, but rather one in which its evolving contradictions can continue to be problematized and developed. When Jameson claims that, "History, meanwhile, if it is anything at all, is at one with the dialectic, and can only be the problem of which it claims to be the solution,"<sup>21</sup> one way of understanding it is to look at antinomies as part and parcel of discourse. At the same time it is also a way of avoiding allowing ourselves to be blinded by the promise of solutions which might, in turn, merely be themselves the problem they would resolve. World-Literature if taken on the rarefied abstract level that has characterized much of the debate risks being nothing more than an aesthetic game for a minority that dreams itself cosmopolitan, free from the still sticky demands of a postcolonial critique that was, in the lesson of Edward Said, always of the world and that sought to redress gross systemic inequality. The promise, to me, of Mia Couto as World-Literature, then, is not so much his conveniently being received by the literary and critical center, but rather his unabated speaking for the profound humanity of the dispossessed.

A consideration of Mia Couto in a World-Literature paradigm must contemplate two issues: on the one hand, the troubled relationship between Africa and World-Literature, and the dangers involved in too close an identification between Mia Couto and the idea of the Nation, on the other, as I already suggested. Or, to put it in a slightly different way, how does perceiving the work of Mia Couto contribute to a problematization, and possibly even a change, in the still prevalent dismissal of most African literatures from World-Literature; and, especially given Mia Couto's often expressed distrust of the Nation as a concept, but also given the never ceasing questioning of his appropriateness as an "African" writer, given that, born to Portuguese parents,

he is white, the tendency to read him as standing in for Mozambique is as myopic as it is tempting.

Although a full consideration of the relationship between African literatures and World-Literature is clearly outside the scope of any single article, it is perhaps the very first point that needs to be addressed, albeit in concise form. First of all, there is the issue of the still large neglect of African literatures in most discussions of world literature. There are exceptions of course, think of a Chinua Achebe, a J. M. Coetzee, or a Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. But even if some, almost exclusively English language, occasionally French, works by African authors have become established within the canon of great authors, then usually still always as representative of one or another form of alterity, always already inscribed in the very designation of "African" as traditionally conceived by western critics. In that sense, Mia Couto's suspicion of the designation World Literature is clearly warranted. There are a few attempts that try to break out of this, even if tentatively. For instance, a recent issue of the *Journal of World Literature*, guest-edited by Francesca Orsini and Laetitia Zecchini specifically tries to start addressing the problem of exclusion by focusing on *The Locations of (World) Literature: Perspectives from Africa and South Asia*.<sup>22</sup> As a beginning, it is laudable, even if necessarily limited and prone to mix categories and issues as well as continents. Surely, there are aspects in common to the literatures of Asia and Africa in relation to the canonical, western, view, of World Literature, but then much the same could be said about South America, the incorporation and co-optation of the writers of the so-called boom notwithstanding, and this is simply left out altogether. Thus, even though I would agree with the principle behind moving towards a more concerted consideration of both African and Asian literatures in the sphere of World Literature, I would expect that some attention might have been paid to Lusophone writers, given that more often than not they suffer from redoubled forms of invisibility.

It is not so much that any journal issue per force will be restricted, or that any start is already an advance, or even that the editors might be entitled to make their own choices of whom they would like to put forward for admittance at the high table of World Literature. Methodologically too, there is a shunning of systemacity in favour of the aleatory, that I find troubling. This can be seen for

instance in the light way in which the editors briefly and summarily dismiss World Literature perspectives based on a world-systems theory in their Introduction. They start by asserting, while citing David Damrosch, the importance of considering that every perspective is based on a specific positioning and then proceed to offer their own opinion, though without in any way grounding it: "Yet in world-system or field theories, and in approaches that focus on "global" circulation, this important insight gets sidelined or forgotten. Applied to literature, world-system and field theories produce a limited range of possible and alternative positions, as if dealing the players a very small pack of cards: subjection or revolt, emulation or appropriation, marginality or cosmopolitanism, indigeneity or foreignness".<sup>23</sup> The problem is not with recognizing that any and all perspectives always are grounded somewhere in space and time – I will leave aside the issue of what appears to be a misreading of World-Systems Theory<sup>24</sup> – nor with the fact that perspectives often are multiple, complex, and even contradictory. The problem, as I see it, lies more with the inability to see that, though methodologically and ideologically radically different from each other, there is a mutual goal to both camps, the desire to break up a more traditional and conventional notion of World Literature.

Thinking about Mia Couto in particular, that is particularly distressing, even if perhaps not totally unexpected. There can be no doubt that Mozambique, as the ground for Mia Couto's narrative is indispensable and irreplaceable. At the same time, attempts to bring that in conjunction with traditional, static, notions of the nation, territory, language, and identity can only backfire. At this point one really should question not only what is the relationship of Africa to World Literature but also what is the positioning of an African writer in that constellation. If Africa still tends to be elided from discussions of World Literature, the solution is not to try to make this or that great writer into such an exclusionary and exclusivist view of World Literature. Rather, one should be asking how African writers per force change such a view. As a Mozambican writer Mia Couto could be labeled a peripheral writer, from a continent that many still would prefer to ignore or wrongly perceive as not having fully embraced modernity. Yet, in reality, neither is Africa the assemblage of clichés many in the West would like to uphold, nor is Mia Couto an ignored writer. If

anything, the danger here is for us once more to start wanting to identify him too closely with the nation, holding him up, as it were, to serve as representing Mozambique. Clearly, his international acclaim can be said to inadvertently create some of that. Nonetheless, one should bear in mind always, that contemporary Mozambican literature is rich and other writers, with markedly different writing strategies and aims, such as Paulina Chiziane, Ungulani Ba Ka Khosa, or João Paulo Borges Coelho, to name a few, also have a very significant literary career and it would not make sense to speak of Mozambican literature without considering their varied contributions.

Mia Couto has often reflected on the relationships between literature and society and specifically between literature and the nation and has, I would argue, always tried to find ways for resisting the exoticizing that still seems to go hand in hand with any form of recognition by a western, centered, and dominated, literary system. Of course none of this is individually specific to Mia Couto. Perhaps one should remember here how J. M. Coetzee succeeds in exposing many of the antinomies I have been exploring so far in his chapter of the novel *Elizabeth Costello*, under the title of “The Novel in Africa”.<sup>25</sup> In that fictional account of two writers turned entertainers aboard a luxury liner, one Australian, the other South African, one a white woman, the other a black man, Coetzee provides a mordant critique of the very process by which writers so easily become co-opted by the triple mirage of nation, race, and, language. In many ways, throughout his oeuvre, Mia Couto also has never ceased to critique received notions of what Mozambique is and what his role as a Mozambican writer might be in terms of not just aesthetic, but socio-political responsibilities as well. It is in this sense, and not on the old terms of a conventional World Literature thirsty for prizes and best-seller figures, I would argue, that one should read Mia Couto as part of World-Literature.

The view of World-Literature “as the literature of the world-system – of the modern capitalist world-system, that is” put forward by the Warwick Research Collective is unabashedly materialist and does dispense with the category of “genius” altogether, besides many other would-be existentialist or pseudo-phenomenological flirtations with the concept. It does not, however, privilege the West as the defining cradle of modernity. Indeed, at the very core

of a conceptualization of World-Literature in terms of combined and uneven development, is the notion that capitalism, in its inexorable conquest of new markets and search for more resources to explore will always cut across national and other “geographical” divides. Furthermore, such a view of World-Literature rejects notions of belatedness or alternate modernities. Key to this line of thought is the work of Fredric Jameson, especially in his *A Singular Modernity*. As the Warwick Research puts it,

Jameson speaks then of the singularity of modernity, of modernity as a globally dispersed general ‘situation’. ‘Modernity’ does not mark the relationship between some formations (that are ‘modern’) and others (that are not ‘modern’, or not yet so). So it is not a matter of pitting France against Mali, say, or New York City against Elk City, Oklahoma. Uneven development is not a characteristic of ‘backward’ formations only. Middlesbrough and North East Lincolnshire are in the United Kingdom as well as London and the Home Counties – and London itself, of course, is among the more radically unevenly developed cities in the world.<sup>26</sup>

Among other advantages, as I see it, this approach can be said to reject any facile dichotomies between core and periphery, or between the “West and the Rest”. To avoid any possible confusion: I am in no way advocating any conflation of either historical or cultural specificities. Far from it, what this view proposes is a radical refusal of any notion, vague or otherwise, of western primacy or superiority. If anything, by focusing on the importance of the periphery to understand the advancement of World-Literature, this view could be said to effectively promote a different way to include African literature, not so much as an addition, belated or otherwise, to the universe of World-Literature, but rather one of its driving forces. So, even if one should respect Mia Couto’s suspicion that attempts to subsume African literatures, including his own work, under the label of World Literature, one should also recognize that what the conceptualization of World-Literature in the terms of the Warwick Research Collective, does is call precisely for a recognition of the transformative potential of African Literatures, and certainly of the work of Mia Couto.

Before concluding, I would like still to refer to one issue that seems to me to be crucial and that would require much more consideration. At the same time that we should be comparing Mia Couto to other writers such as Assia Djébar, or

J. M. Coetzee, we should also not forget to read him in comparison to other writers who work in Portuguese, from João Guimarães Rosa, whom Mia Couto acknowledges as having been personally of great influence, to many others. Obviously, as two former Portuguese colonies, both Brazil and Mozambique will have a certain number of affinities that are rooted not only in a common history of oppression but also on shared cultural norms as Brazil's economic success for centuries had been dependent on the importation of African slaves. And this obviously, is not limited to Brazil and Mozambique but would involve all of the countries once dominated by Portugal and which, after independence, continue using, and developing the Portuguese language. Again, to avoid any possible confusion: I am not advocating any form of exalted relationship between these various nations and their literatures as often is the case whenever the vague notion of "Lusophony" is invoked; far from it.<sup>27</sup> However, I think that one of the ways in which the work of Mia Couto, among other writers who use Portuguese, can serve to change a more conventional view of World Literature, lies precisely in the fact that these countries already constitute a system among themselves; and their literatures then, already interact in ways that, even if for all appearances are individual and random, nonetheless are part of a system that calls for more study.

Mia Couto – even if not alone of course – occupies a pivotal role in the process of reshaping World-Literature from the periphery as he embodies a borderland consciousness that, I think, is key for the kind of World-Literature I have in mind.<sup>28</sup> He himself is very much aware of always having occupied a series of liminal spaces, as he candidly notes:

My country contains within it various countries, profoundly divided among a wide variety of social and cultural universes. I am Mozambican, the son of Portuguese immigrants, I lived under the colonial system, I fought for independence, I lived through radical social change from socialism to capitalism, from the revolution to civil war. I was born in a pivotal period, between a world that was being born and another that was dying: between a country that never was and another that is still being born. This situation of living on a frontier left its mark on me.<sup>29</sup>

How far we are from purely celebratory versions of hybridity for easy consumption in the West as Mia Couto grounds his liminal experience on the

violence of major socio-political upheavals. To conclude, I would like to refer back to the epigraph taken from Fredric Jameson and suggest that Mia Couto's works, as well as his life, do present us with continuous series of apparently contradictory situations; that History, the History of Mozambique as he has lived it, is one that does appear indeed to be both problem and solution, be the problem for which it seems to proffer a solution. What Jameson refers to as a dialectical relationship, and which Mia Couto, judging from comments like the one just cited, might refer to as being on the frontier, are, I would suggest, similar inasmuch as they reflect the very conditions of society that the literary text both registers and seeks to shape. And although some might find my reading of Mia Couto to be lopsided in its insistence on a political significance for World-Literature, I would maintain that Mia Couto, even if rightly rejecting any reductive instrumentalisation or co-opting of literature by the political, never ceases to reflect on, and expose, the political nature of culture and a writer's duty to bear witness and to imagine a different, better, world. Talking about the way in which language becomes perverted so as to hide reality while pretending it has been changed, Mia Couto came very close actually to Jameson's terms, when he said that "Many institutions that ought to be producing ideas are now producing reports (...). Instead of solutions, problems are found".<sup>30</sup> As much as Mia Couto is a writer deeply concerned with the past, with memory (and forgetting), he also is keenly aware of the way in which the past often is not really past. As he notes in another of his essays, "Colonialism didn't die when countries became independent. There was a change of shift and of crew. Present-day colonialism has dispensed with colonials and has become indigenized within our territories."<sup>31</sup> Just as Mia Couto alerts us to the insidiousness inherent in the perpetuation of structures of colonial oppression – closely linked obviously to capitalism as made evident several times in what was a speech given to the Association of Mozambican Economists, in Maputo on August 2003 – so we could also pay attention to the insidiousness through which older forms of privileging certain kinds of literature adapt by incorporating, usually with great fanfare, newer elements. If one is serious about a renewed form of understanding World-Literature, one that does not simply condescend to accept writers like Mia Couto into its fold so as to better preserve its forms of privilege, then one should



rather think of Mia Couto and other writers like him, as heralding the future of World-Literature, not in spite of, but precisely because of their peripheral, liminal, and ever shifting positions.

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<sup>1</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), 24.

<sup>2</sup> Mia Couto, Grant Hamilton, and David Huddart. "An Interview with Mia Couto," in *A Companion to Mia Couto*, eds. Grant Hamilton and David Huddart (Rochester, NY: James Currey, 2016), 14.

<sup>3</sup> In the last ten years many new "Introductions", "Companions" and "Readers" on World Literature have been published, some with more, others with less merit. One of the more recent, which includes a fairly broad and differentiated spectrum of perspectives, is the *Cambridge Companion to World Literature*, eds. Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). The use of 'World-Literature' with a hyphen, reflects the practice of the Warwick Research Collective, following upon Immanuel Wallerstein's World-Systems Theory as will be discussed further on in the text.

<sup>4</sup> David Brookshaw, "Mia Couto in Context", in *A Companion to Mia Couto*, eds. Grant Hamilton and David Huddart (Rochester, NY: James Currey, 2016), 17-24. Stefan Helgesson, "Mia Couto & Translation", in *A Companion to Mia Couto*, eds. Grant Hamilton and David Huddart (Rochester, NY: James Currey, 2016), 140-156.

<sup>5</sup> Stefan Helgesson, "Postcolonialism and World Literature: Rethinking the Boundaries", *Interventions: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 16.4 (2014): 483-500.

<sup>6</sup> David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatibility* (London: Verso, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Paulo de Medeiros, "Translation and Cosmopolitanism", in *Translation and World Literature*, ed. Susan Bassnett (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 60-74.

<sup>8</sup> Mia Couto, *Terra Sonâmbula* (Lisboa: Caminho, 1992). *Sleepwalking Land*, trans. David Brookshaw (London: Serpent's Tail, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Stefan Helgesson, "Postcolonialism and World Literature", 490.

<sup>10</sup> Stefan Helgesson, "Postcolonialism and World Literature", 490.

<sup>11</sup> Stefan Helgesson, "Mia Couto & Translation", 141.

<sup>12</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism", *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65-88. The most extensive, and lucid

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discussion of the controversy generated by this essay and its pitfalls that dispels the many misreadings that accrued around it, was published by Neil Lazarus as the second chapter to his *The Political Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 85-113. However, see also Fredric Jameson's own recent take on the controversy, in which he goes much further than arguing in the defense of his initial position, instead offering a new reflection on the meaning, and (political) use, of the notion of allegory: Fredric Jameson, "Political: National Allegory: Commentary", in *Allegory and Ideology* (London: Verso, 2019), 187-216.

<sup>13</sup> Phillip Rothwell, *A Postmodern Nationalist: Truth, Orality, and Gender in the Work of Mia Couto* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Bill Aschroft, "The Multiple Worlds of Mia Couto", in *A Companion to Mia Couto*, eds. Grant Hamilton and David Huddart (Rochester, NY: James Currey, 2016), 106-124, 112.

<sup>15</sup> The most relevant reference here is Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, initially published in 1994 and reissued in 2004, London: Routledge. See especially chapter 6, "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of ambivalence and authority under a tree outside Delhi, May 1817", 145-174; and chapter 8, "DissemiNation: Time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation", 199-244. As influential as Bhabha's notion of hybridity has been in postcolonial studies, it remains problematic, as I see it, for even as it attempts to provide a way of counteracting the ills of colonialism, it still can be seen as too simply engaging in complex abstractions at a remove of social and historical reality. In this sense, the most lucid critique has been provided, arguably, by Neil Lazarus in *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001. Lazarus, rightly, in my view, takes mainstream postcolonial discourse to task, for its evading of social and political specificities in its often blind assumptions: "Among these assumptions and investments, I would list in particular the following: a constitutive anti-Marxism; an undifferentiating disavowal of all forms of nationalism and a corresponding exaltation of migrancy, liminality, hybridity, and multiculturalism; an hostility towards 'holistic forms of social explanation' (towards totality and systemic analysis); an aversion to dialectics; and a refusal of an antagonistic or struggle-based model of politics", p. 21. With specific respect to the Lusophone situation and its specific issues concerning racial policies during the Salazar regime and the thorny questions of "Lusotropicalism" and "Lusophony", see Ana Paula Ferreira's "Contesting Miscegenation and Lusotropicalism: Women and the Portuguese Colonial Order" in *Itinerâncias: Percursos e representações da Pós-colonialidade*, eds. Elena Brugioni et al., Braga: Húmus, 2012, 101-120.

<sup>16</sup> Warwick Research Collective. *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> "Editor's Column: The End of Postcolonial Theory? A Roundtable with Sunil Agnani, Fernando Coronil, Gaurav Desai, Mamadou Diouf, Simon Gikandi, Susie Tharu, and Jennifer Wenzel," *PMLA* 122, no. 3 (2007): 633-51.

<sup>18</sup> Robert J. C. Young. "Postcolonial Remains," *New Literary History*, 2012, 43: 19-42.

<sup>19</sup> See for instance, his seminal, even if by now in many ways superseded, essay: Boaventura de Sousa Santos. "Between Prospero and Caliban: Colonialism,

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Postcolonialism, and Inter-Identity." *Luso-Brazilian Review* 39, no. 2 (2002): 9-43.

<sup>20</sup> Mia Couto. "What Africa Does the African Writer Write About?" *Pensativities: Essays & Provocations*. Translated by David Brookshaw (Windsor, Ontario: Biblioasis, 2015), 23-27. 27.

<sup>21</sup> Fredric Jameson. *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Journal of World Literature* 4 (2019).

<sup>23</sup> Francesca Orsini and Laetitia Zecchini. "The Locations of (World) Literature: Perspectives from Africa and South Asia." *Journal of World Literature* 4 (2019): 1-12, 1-2. The lack of any grounding or reference might appear puzzling. However, readers might remember that in an earlier piece, "Significant Geographies: In lieu of World Literature", Francesca Orsini, with Karima Laachir, and Sara Marzagora, had already taken more systematic approaches to World Literature to task, and especially the work of the Warwick Research Collective, for being somehow reductive. There is a clear ideological rift between such a position and the materialist one advocated by the Warwick Research Collective that cannot be breached. In this earlier piece, there was at least an attempt at naming the fissure and provide a reference so readers could go and inform themselves. The latter article somehow, dispenses with all of that and as such lacks even the honesty evident in the earlier article. The subtitle of that one, "in lieu of World Literature, clearly conveyed the notion of replacing World Literature altogether with something else ("Significant Geographies"), whereas the more recent one, by aligning itself with David Damrosch's pronouncements on World Literature, creates the appearance of still wanting to have something to say about the field.

<sup>24</sup> The misreading of the work done by the Warwick Research Collective in *Combined and Uneven Development* seems especially puzzling, considering that two full chapters are devoted to African writers, Tayeb Salih from Sudan, and Ivan Vladislavic from South Africa, besides the general discussion of the importance of the periphery.

<sup>25</sup> J. M. Coetzee. "The Novel in Africa" in *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Vintage, 1999), 35-58,

<sup>26</sup> Warwick Research Collective. *Combined and Uneven Development*, 12.

<sup>27</sup> The polemics surrounding "Lusophony" seem to be always rekindled and it is not my intention to engage with them at all; especially as I have had occasion to argue my views (on its pitfalls) at some length. See Paulo de Medeiros.

"Lusophony of the Haunted Logic of Postempire" *Lusotopie* 17 (2018): 227-247.

<sup>28</sup> This too would need more reflection than I can do in the present context. A place to start might be the comments on Tayeb Salih's, *Season of Migration to the North* (London: Heinemann, 1969) by the Warwick Research Collective: "On the assumption that the novel's cognitive and aesthetic dimensions are inseparable, we will attempt to retrieve its historically located substance and social and political registers from both 'story' and stylistics. But it seems to us that any attempt at a realist reading will be frustrated by a narrative that openly accommodates transgressions of credibility and is hospitable to the phantasmagoric". *Combined and Uneven Development*, 83. This discussion immediately then refers to the work of Michael Löwy and his notion of 'irrealism', a concept that would be much more fruitful to apply to the work of

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Mia Couto than the misleading (and misnamed) “magical realism”. See Michael Löwy. “L’Irréalisme Critique” *Actuel Marx* 45 (2009): 52-65.

<sup>29</sup> Mia Couto. “The Brazilian Sertão in the Mozambican Savannah”. *Pensativities: Essays and Provocations*. Transl. David Brookshaw (Windsor, Ontario: Biblioasis, 2015), 47-56, 50.

<sup>30</sup> Mia Couto. “The Seven Dirty Shoes”. *Pensativities: Essays and Provocations*. Transl. David Brookshaw (Windsor, Ontario: Biblioasis, 2015), 92-109, 103.

<sup>31</sup> Mia Couto. “The Frontier of Culture”. *Pensativities: Essays and Provocations*. Transl. David Brookshaw (Windsor, Ontario: Biblioasis, 2015), 1-13, 3.