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Racial and Cultural Bridges in Mia Couto's *O Outro Pé da Sereia*

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*Ai, Portugal, Portugal
De que é que tu estás à espera?
Tens um pé numa galera
E outro no fundo do mar
Ai, Portugal, Portugal
Enquanto ficares à espera
Ninguém te pode ajudar*

Jorge Palma

Abstract

In this essay, I propose to show how Mia Couto's novel, *O Outro Pé da Sereia*, makes an important contribution to understanding race relations between Portugal and Mozambique. *O Outro Pé da Sereia* is what may be call a laboratory of personal experiences regarding skin color. In the novel, Couto brings into perspective different personal points of view to make the reader more sensitive to the fact that not everything is either black or white. There is always a grey area that becomes either enabling or disabling for human encounters. This essay further explores the possibility that Couto and other writers from the Lusophone world are the ones who are most responsible for opening a space for the discussion and critique of race relations in Portugal. Ultimately, my argument serves as a practical demonstration of the need for *both* fiction *and* history in order to create a balanced account of the past, one that remains attuned to perspectives of the oppressed and marginalized.

Keywords: Mozambique, Race, Hybridism, Cultural Bridges

In an international conference at the Kellogg Institute in 2008, Paulo Medeiros delivered an essay titled "Race, Violence and Representation: Framing Portugal as a Post-Imperial Polity,"¹ in which he argued that the three main concepts of his title—race, violence, representation—are "diversely complex" and profoundly intertwined insofar as the first one depends unconditionally on the other two. Nevertheless, in my view, the most important contribution of Medeiros's essay occurs as early as the first page, when he rightly points out the lack of interest and the paucity of studies on

race and race relations in Portugal, despite its having been the former center of a multi-continental empire. Medeiros states:

Unlike other societies where a discourse on race can be seen as constitutive of their own national identity from the start, race appears to be more of a silenced subject than an actual point of discussion in Portugal. . . . I think that it is also fair to say that race is practically an absent term either in academic discourse or the public sphere and yet one that is crucial to understand some of the challenges facing Portuguese society in the present and into the future.²

Since the deliverance of this essay, a decade has passed and some progress has occurred in the area of race and race relations in Portugal, both in the academy and throughout the public sphere. In 2017, the Portuguese media brought attention to the country's racism with several stories on the subject. To offer an example, *Público*, a highly regarded newspaper, published an interview, "Portugal é dos países da Europa que mais manifestam racismo" (Henriques). In academia, silence has also been broken by anthropologists such as Miguel Vale de Almeida. His seminal work, *An Earth-Colored Sea: 'Race,' Culture and the Politics of Identity in the Post-Colonial Portuguese-Speaking World*, argues that "the Luso-Tropicalist discourse has long been an everyday theory and an integral part of Portuguese representations of nationality. It is a dense and pervasive discourse because it contains the very promises that progressive politics could subscribe to, namely, the notion of miscegenation and hybridization" (77). This "pervasive discourse" is still ongoing in media "opinion sections" where contributors lash out against opponents' explicit denunciation of racism in Portugal: "É a nossa própria identidade histórico-cultural que se tornou mestiça, sendo por isso absurdo um debate como o que ocorreu em França" (Epifânio).

Historian Francisco Bethencourt has also fostered the discussion in his two books dedicated to the subject. As a consequence of a conference held in King's College London in 2009, Bethencourt and Adriane Pearce published a coedited collection of essays, *Racism and Ethnic Relations in the Portuguese-Speaking World* (2012), in which Bethencourt and other historians review themes linked to racism and ethnic relations in the Portuguese-speaking world from past to present. A question that permeates the volume is the one raised in Bethencourt's introduction: "How did racism evolve in different parts of the Portuguese-speaking world?" (1).

Arguably, the most compelling book on race is Bethencourt's history of racism, *Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century* (2013). Even though Bethencourt's hypothesis is nothing radically new, that is, that racism is triggered by political projects and connected to specific economic

conditions, he traces this development at the macro level of social structure and social systems. More recently, the sociologist Sheila Khan in *Portugal a lápis de cor: A Sul de uma pós-colonialidade* (2015) calls attention to the gulf between academic discourse in Portugal and the invisibility of its African population. According to Khan, it is irrefutable that,

após o processo de descolonização das suas possessões africanas, Portugal acolheu no seu território “outros rostos, outras vidas com outras vivências, outras narrativas e outros modos de estar e ser” e que “estas outras presenças humanas permanecem, ainda, socialmente ignoradas e marginalizadas não obstante a existência de uma profilaxia politicamente correcta de Portugal como país ‘lusotropicalista’ e, como tal, multicultural. (42-43)

Although progressive steps have been taken within the Portuguese Academy and the general public to open up a space of discussion of race and the invisibility of African communities, it is obvious that much more still needs to be done in order to achieve an egalitarian society.

Writers of fiction have also proven crucial in raising a voice and opening a space for this debate in Portugal. My hypothesis is that Couto—undoubtedly the most acclaimed Mozambican writer—has been a key literary figure in promoting a Portuguese national dialogue on questions of race and the invisibility of Africans in Portugal. Phillip Rothwell, one of Couto’s most incisive critics, remarks that “his [Couto’s] books invariably hit the best-seller lists around the lusophone world on publication” (18). This is due in part “to a lucky break early in his literary career, when his first book of short stories was republished by one of Portugal’s leading publishing houses, Caminho” (Rothwell, 18). Nonetheless, the reality is that today Couto commands a popular readership, and his work attracts significant commentary in the Portuguese media.

Couto’s biography is usually considered to have had a determining influence on his career and literary work. Patrick Chabal comments:

Two features of his [Couto’s] early life are particularly important. The first is that his parents were not typically Portuguese settlers in that they did not seek merely to live a “colonial” existence, insulated from the local population. Beira was notoriously a socially and politically conservative city, where race relations were not good, and the Coutos’ ways set them aside from the bulk of the local white community. The second aspect of his childhood that is relevant, therefore, is that right from the beginning he lived and interacted with peers from different racial and social backgrounds, particularly black and *mestiço* children. (107)

This image of a relatively “cosmopolitan” young Couto is heightened by literary critics who discuss Couto’s fiction in terms of global artistic trends and transnational identity, rather than attempt to situate it within the context of Mozambican society. Rothwell views this tendency as particularly unfortunate, since he thinks that it obscures Couto’s interest in articulating a Mozambican national identity.

By pushing a transnational lusophone identity, and claiming that Couto crosses the boundaries of the Portuguese language, in the process enriching that global identity, critics are turning the author into a postmodern, frontier-bashing, commodity, which assures the importance of their own critical discourses and detracts from Couto’s role as a forger of a distinct Mozambican identity. Paradoxically, Couto is the mediator of his nation’s culture “to the outside world.” (Rothwell 19)

Rothwell goes on to suggest that casting Couto in the role of “transnational mediator” leads critics to miss the ways in which Couto’s aesthetic practice, while it appropriates aspects of postmodernism, does so precisely for the purpose of representing Mozambican national reality: “By concentrating on his role as a linguistic renovator, many critics of Couto’s work have hitherto failed to realize how the author diegetically plays with the concepts behind postmodernism, principally the dissolution of binary frontiers, to critique the various political systems that have been grafted onto his nation from the outside” (19).

If Rothwell is correct in that depicting Mozambican identity and reality remains a central concern of Couto’s fiction, then another of his major critics considers that he necessarily fails to communicate his vision of *Moçambicanidade* to fellow Mozambicans. For Maria Manuel Lisboa in her “Colonial Crosswords: (In)voicing the Gap in Mia Couto,” Couto’s language and narrative style reflect his cultural and personal hybridism, thereby rendering his work incapable of affecting Mozambican society. Lisboa holds that Couto’s writings are “eminently readable by that European public, while remaining overall inaccessible to the Mozambican audience he purports to address but whose language he might not after all truly speak” (195). By asking “Who is his [Couto’s] intended audience? Who does he claim to speak for? Speak with? Who should speak? Who will listen?” (210), Lisboa draws attention to a contradiction that can arise when writers from developing nations are subsumed within a global literary circuit dominated by first-world interests and aesthetic norms.

Lisboa’s perspective exemplifies, among other attributes, her ability to direct us toward the question of Couto’s transnational versus Mozambican audience, while Rothwell’s provides us with an indispensable reminder that, successful or not with Mozambican readers, Couto’s texts inarguably

register the imprint of the desire to discover and to construct *Moçambicanidade*. The approach I adopt here is thus indebted to both Lisboa and Rothwell, but it differs in two important ways: I address the question of how Couto's fiction affects his audience, and I analyze the meaning of his work for *Portuguese* readers, not for Mozambican readers. I am also concerned with Couto's articulation of *Moçambicanidade* and African identity, but I analyze the implications that such an articulation has for the construction of African identity *within Portugal* rather than in Mozambique or in the rest of Africa.

My interpretive framework, therefore, is not one of language, but rather one of the overall impact of Couto's work since 1983 (the year of his first published book). Being one of the most widely read Mozambican writers in Portugal, as well as the first one to achieve best-seller status³, Couto's literary work has served as a vehicle for Portugal's confrontation with its colonial past. In major novels like *O Outro Pé da Sereia* (2006), Couto has facilitated a discussion on race relations. In my view, Couto has slowly helped to turn silence into a broader discussion of the neocolonial tendencies Portugal displays in its relations with its ex-colonies, particularly as reflected in the creation in 1996 of the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP) with its insistence on a Lusophone community.⁴

Following in Couto's path, we have seen over the last decades a gradual build-up in fiction of Portugal's awareness of its colonial past. As a counterweight to a group of novelists mired in nostalgia and bent on reviving imperial desire (Manuel Arouca, the author of *Deixei o Meu Coração em África* [2005], is a good example), writers like Lídia Jorge, António Lobo Antunes, Helder Macedo, Teolinda Gersão, Isabel Barreno are paradigmatic canonical writers who have offered us eloquent images of the other, darker side of a supposedly innocent colonialism. More recently, new authors are appearing. Isabela Figueiredo, with her *Caderno de Memórias Coloniais* (2009), became a sensation by creating controversy, especially on the subject of race relations in colonial Mozambique. In 2011, two other fascinating novels were published, Dulce Maria Cardoso's *O Retorno* and Aida Gomes's *Os Pretos de Pousaflores*, also generating acclaim and public reflection on issues of colonialism and its arguably most direct corollary, racism. In 2015, Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida published *Esse Cabelo*, a book that enables a dialog among questions of gender, sexuality, class, race, and ethnicity in post-colonial Portugal. Kalaf Epalanga's *Também os Brancos Sabem Dançar* (2017) is probably the most recent example of a writer (also a musician) who brings to the public a discussion that is centered on the economic, cultural, and intellectual survival of members of the Afro-communities in Portugal.

Couto's novels are thus pioneers in presenting us with intersections of Portugal's past pitfalls and its current relations—political, cultural, and racial—with its former colonies. This perspective is also derived from Luís Madureira's insights on Lusophone postcolonialism in "Nation, Identity and Loss of Footing: Mia Couto's *O Outro Pé da Sereia* and the Question of Lusophone Postcolonialism."⁵ In Madureira's perspective, the former colonies have gone through a process of collective recollection of the past: ". . . the strategic recollection of these incompatible appropriations of the past paves the way for a collective (and therapeutic) anamnesis, for the necessary forgetting of the brutality and deeds of violence at the origin of every political formation. . . ." (221). In contrast, this process in the former metropolis has been one of amnesia and silence until recently when, I believe, due to the major influence of African writers, there has been an increasing book production Portuguese and diaspora writers.

In *O Outro Pé da Sereia*, the concepts of memory, the past, remembering and forgetting come intertwined with race and constitute the main subject of the book. Almost all of the novel's epigraphs suggest interrogating historical representation. The following are examples:

*Eis a nossa sina: esquecer para ter passado,
mentir para ter destino. (75)*

*Não há pior cegueira que a de não ver o tempo. E nós já não temos
lembrança senão daquilo que os outros nos fazem recordar.
Quem hoje passeia a nossa memória pela mão são exactamente
aqueles que, ontem, nos conduziram à cegueira. (95)*

*O serviço dos dias é apenas este:
trazer dias, levar dias.
O Tempo existe para apagar o Tempo. (159)*

These epigraphs are entangled with two separate temporal times: "the history of Portuguese incursions into the interior of Mozambique in the second half of the sixteenth century" (Madureira 212) and a more recent past (2002). Such an entanglement is one of the most recurrent facets of Couto's deconstruction of dichotomies and, according to Rothwell, explains why the resulting dissolution of frontiers in most of Couto's work is so far-reaching. As Rothwell states:

In reality, Couto is much more radical than many critics have hitherto realized. He undoubtedly contributes to the creation of a Mozambican national imaginary,

particularly for consumption outside Mozambique. But as a white with Portuguese heritage, he chooses to subvert and exploit European paradigms in order to fashion a complexity analogous to that of his nation. His texts challenge the monism of the early years of the Frelimo regime as much as they rebuke colonialism. The resulting identity is one that floats, defying fixation and allowing for a multiplicity of reinterpretations and reinscriptions. (25)

Couto is able to achieve this effect of simultaneously censuring a monistic national identity and an abominable colonialism by writing history as a blend of documented and fabricated past. In so doing, the question of how Africa is perceived from the outside becomes fundamental, since Africa has been the object of continuous mystifications and idealizations that fail to correspond to the truth. Moreover, by portraying a community that manufactures its own lies/fictions about the past, Couto shows how Africans themselves are unknowingly reproducing the colonial model of representing Africa. As Niyi Afolabi explains: “For Mia Couto, the process of preserving collective memory and history does not permit a clear demarcation between fiction and history. Rather he reinvents and re-interprets through narrative construction as if to challenge that same collective memory and history. In the process, myth blends with history and fantasy with reality” (118). This annulment of clear-cut divisions holds true also for race and race relations. *O Outro Pé da Sereia* is what might be called a laboratory of personal experiences regarding skin color. If not all, at least an appreciable number of racial variants can be found in the book’s almost four hundred pages.

Regarding Couto’s *Cada homem é uma raça*, Afolabi writes, “Mia Couto insists that every Mozambican is made up of a potpourri of cultures and ‘Mozambicanness’ must not be defined in terms of the ‘past’ nor the ‘tradition’ alone but should include even people without such ‘raízes históricas’ but who happen to be born Mozambicans” (137). Afolabi’s insight also applies to *O Outro Pé da Sereia*. The narrative’s two main characters, which dates back to the mid-sixteenth century, precisely illustrate Afolabi’s understanding of *Moçambicanidade* as a “potpourri of cultures.” In a parallel vein, these characters also exemplify what Boaventura de Sousa Santos defines as the “Portuguese transit between Prospero and Caliban.” In Santos’s words, “the Portuguese, ever in transit between Prospero and Caliban (hence, frozen in such transit), were both racist – often violent and corrupt, more prone to pillage than to development—and born miscegenators, literally the forefathers of racial democracy, of what it reveals and conceals. . . .” (24).

Along these lines, the missionary Gonçalo da Silveira is portrayed as arrogant, violent, insensible, corrupt, and racist . For him, slaves are no more than commodities and Africa, a

poisoned continent. He shows no mercy for hungry or thirsty slaves: “No cais de Goa ficara água, entrara algodão. Ficara a água destinada aos escravos, entrara a riqueza destinada aos comerciantes. Muitos dos viajantes do porão não chegariam ao destino, mortos de sede e de fome” (188). Silveira sees slavery as “um meio dos gentios se disciplinarem” (188) and blacks as savages, lascivious, inhuman and devoid of a soul:

A algazarra do porão tornara-se mais intensa como se brotasse não do ventre do navio, mas das profundezas do oceano. Era algo que, desde sempre, alvoraçara Gonçalo da Silveira: o modo como os negros gargalhavam, a facilidade da felicidade, a disponibilidade para a lascívia. Faltava aos selvagens não apenas um credo. Faltava-lhes moderação na alegria, tento no riso, parcimónia na paixão. A gargalhada é mulher, o riso é masculino. A primeira é própria dos bichos, a segunda é humana. Havia que humanizar os escravos. Afinal, para corrigir a gargalhada bem podia servir a gargalheira, essa coleira de ferro que prendia os escravos pelo pescoço. (235)

Silveira’s mission, therefore, presupposes a whitening (*branqueamento*) of the black soul: “Em Goa nunca fizera amizade com um africano. A pele escura não ajudava a ver neles uma alma. E no entanto, era essa mesma alma opaca que era o destino da sua viagem. A brancura daqueles espíritos...esse era o propósito da sua travessia” (235).

The trajectory of priest Manuel Antunes, however, runs in an opposite direction. His journey is one of compassion for the slaves who undertake the *travessia* chained in the ship’s hold, deprived of basic living conditions, and pushed to the extreme of having to eat maps in order to avoid dying of hunger (182). During the crossing of the Indian ocean, heading to Mozambique, Manuel Antunes begins to question the purpose of their religious mission: “Tem sentido irmos evangelizar um império de que não conhecemos nada?” (186).. Antunes also manifests his opposition to the corruption, the debauchery witnessed in Goa and the “abusos e imoralidades vividos na nau Nossa Senhora da Ajuda” (187). He embodies a more egalitarian and humanizing view of the world: “Aquele vento, pensou ele, iria varrer a terra por inteiro, atingir por igual os fracos e os poderosos. E os grandes aprenderiam que há um poder bem maior que o deles. O vento os ensinaria a saberem ser pequenos” (189).

Additionally, Antunes’s journey is not only to cross an ocean, but also a personal experience of identification with the other, to the point that he himself becomes that other: “Estou transitando de raça, D. Gonçalo. E o pior é que estou gostando mais dessa travessia do que de toda a restante viagem” (190). Through Manuel Antunes’s character, a priest,, Couto thus shows the potential

reader that race is not confined to skin color. It is also bound up with a way of life, with morals and principles, and with culture and values (301). As Couto poetically explains, race is the “cor da alma” (236). Haunted by cruel memories—that of a desperately hungry slave who cut and ate his tongue—Antunes decides, as a symbol of his transformation, to adopt the name of a slave, Nimi Nsundi, who died in the ship. He then chooses the condition of the black man, “exilada do passado, impedida de falar senão na língua dos outros, obrigada a escolher entre a sobrevivência imediata e a morte anunciada” (302). In a final passage, we see him as a “feiticeiro” mixing pagan and Christian rituals harmoniously.

Two more comments should be made with regard to the chapters depicting the past in which the story is set. Both try to prompt the reader to think about other possibilities, that is, to resist seeing everything as dual and separated. First, it is worth recalling an excerpt from the novel that describes D. Gonçalo’s initial impressions of the Portuguese upon his arrival on the island of Mozambique. One reads:

A estadia na ilha não fora benéfica para D. Gonçalo. Vezes sem conta ele se tinha confrontado com as autoridades portuguesas e as acusara de serem cúmplices da devassidão moral que reinava naquelas paragens. Toda a sua vida imaginara que os demónios moravam no outro lado do mundo: em outra raça, em outra geografia. Durante anos ele se preparara para levar a palavra redentora a essa gente tão diversa. Nos últimos dias Silveira confirmara que o Diabo fazia ninho entre os seus, os da sua origem, raça e condição. (297)

This description exemplifies what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls “colonial self-government,” meaning that “since colonialism was nonexistent as an institutional relation, there was a wide gap between the settler, on the one side, and the colonial state and the Empire, on the other” (26). Consequently, “the Portuguese would caerealize themselves, that is to say, on the hybrid way in which they mingled with the cultures and practices they had to live with” (26). This cohabitation can be looked at from different perspectives depending on who is observing, that is, whether D. Silveira or the local inhabitants.

Second, there is the reexamination of slavery through Xilundo, a black slave who became acquainted with Manuel Antunes on the ship to Mozambique. Through Xilundo’s experiences, we discover that slavery was not practiced exclusively by white Europeans. Xilundo asserts:

ele era escravo, mas a sua família era proprietária de escravos. Viviam disso: da captura e da venda de escravos. O pai enviara-o para Goa, na condição de servo,

como punição de graves desobediências. O projecto do pai era simples: preparar o filho para herdar o negócio da venda de pessoas. No processo de ser escravo ele aprenderia a escravizar os outros. (300)

Actually, in *Pensatempos*, Couto explains that he does not see slavery as exclusively the responsibility of Europeans. He comments:

Quando os navegadores europeus começaram a encher de escravos os seus navios, eles não estavam estreado o comércio de criaturas humanas. A escravatura já tinha sido inventada em todos os continentes. Praticavam-na os americanos, os europeus, os asiáticos e os próprios africanos. A escravatura foi uma invenção da espécie humana. O que sucedeu foi que o tráfico de escravos se converteu num sistema global e esse sistema passou a ser desenvolvido de forma a enriquecer o seu centro: a Europa e, depois, a América do Norte. (12)

If we turn now to the characters situated in the novel's 2002 present, the same anti-Manichaeian approach is employed. Tio Casuarino, the African-American historian's Mozambican host and the manager of the project of fabricating a past for the country's visitors, offers a strong example of a corrupt African elite. His goal is to take advantage of the foreigner's naïveté regarding Africa. As the barber Arcanjo reminds him, the land belongs to people like Casuarino (149), who treat those of a lower socio-economic status as inferiors. Casuarino employs European misconception about Africa to "sell" his country to the guests: "A palavra de ordem era: *Tudo selvagem, nada de modernices*. E as instruções do empresário desciam ao detalhe: - *O telemóvel, por exemplo, ele que o esconda. Rádio a pilhas, a mesma coisa. Quero tudo arcaico, tudo bem rústico*" (314-15). Casuarino obviously sees himself as a white foreigner. He identifies with all that is positive and good in the West, and substitutes the foreign exploiter with an "elite exploradora por outra, mesmo sendo de uma outra raça" (Couto, *Pensatempos* 25). Furthermore, he is a nationalist in appearance only, "Porque estão prontos a serem moleques de outros, estrangeiros. Desde que esses outros lhes agitem com suficientes atractivos acabarão vendendo o pouco que nos resta" (25). In Casuarino's case, what remains is their past, their memory and their dignity as human beings.

Another key character is Benjamin Southman, an African-American historian who travels to Mozambique to find ancestral roots and to "collect data that will confirm the hypothesis that 'the stigma' of slavery and the colonial past lies at 'the origin' of (or 'explains') the continent's current misery" (Madureira 216). Brought up as an American, and notwithstanding his African ancestry, he views Mozambique, its poverty, through lenses of superiority. Though black, he exhibits racist

attitudes as when he questions the ability of black Africans to perform certain tasks. When his plane is about to land in Mozambique, he thinks thus: “Os solavancos do avião na velha pista de aterragem fizeram emergir, também nele, a inconfessável pergunta: de que raça seria o piloto? Seria negro aquele que conduzia o seu destino? Sem dar conta, Benjamin fez o sinal da cruz” (162). As Luís Madureira emphasizes, Southman, “like many anti-colonialist historians, endeavors to summon the agents of the empire to be judged and sentenced in absentia before the tribunal of History” (216), but the answers to his inquiries result in slippery interpretations—which once again blur an unambiguously anti-colonial perspective on History.

Zeca Matambira is yet another revealing character, one who views his frizzy hair as “sujidade na alma” (249). He was brought up to believe that white forms of beauty and white culture were the only worthy models, those of perfection. Matambira tried all he could to whiten himself: “E recordou o creme para aclarar a pele, os produtos para desencrespar o cabelo, a ocultação da sua origem humilde” (343). Symptomatically, as a professional boxer, Zeca was never able to fight against a white or a mulatto: “ele só era capaz de bater num negro, num homem de igual raça. A sua cabeça tinha sido ensinada a não se defender de um branco. Nem de um mulato. Matambira, o promissor pugilista de Tete, tinha sido derrotado no palco da vida antes de subir para o ringue do boxe” (255).

The barber Arcanjo Mistura, the last character to merit discussion in this context, plays the devil’s advocate in the narrative. He refuses to dupe foreigners, arguing that his compatriots were not respecting the “dignidade nacional” by so doing (166). Mestre Mistura, in fact, does not believe that it is skin color alone that makes for possible alliances among men. He is able to see and recognize the contradictions in the discourses emanating from the African-American historian, just as he does from those emanating from his compatriots who once fought for independence and now employ the same colonial methods of governance/exploitation. In a conversation with Casuarino, who tries to convince him to talk with the American visitors, Mestre Mistura affirms: “Quero lá saber que sejam pretos. Que pretos são estes que até têm medo da palavra ‘preto?’” (215).

When Arcanjo finally agrees to speak with Southman, he tells him that “você não saíram de África quando vos levaram nos barcos como escravos. Você saíram quando entraram na igreja e se ajoelharam perante Jesus” (218). This particular discourse establishes Africanness, not as a question of color or race, but rather in terms of culture—and its respective practices. Moreover, Arcanjo opposes the discourse of black affirmation because he sees it as a form of racism and as an excuse for Africans complacency about themselves. Arcanjo’s message here is what the novel most

energetically asserts. It succinctly communicates Couto's humanistic project of problematizing questions of race, culture, and identity: "Nós temos de lutar para deixarmos de ser pretos, para sermos simplesmente pessoas" (219).

In *O Outro Pé da Sereia*, Couto creates a character system that sensitizes readers to the view that, where personal and national identities are concerned, not everyone and not everything can be framed in binary terms of black or white. The novel presents emblematic characters whose consciousness and social status enact various permutations that compound the African and European, the Portuguese and Mozambican, the *preto* and the *branco*, the foreign colonizer and the native exploiter. In *O Outro Pé da Sereia*, there exists a grey area that makes human encounters either possible or not.

Evidence from circulation and readership, moreover, shows that Couto's fiction reaches a sizeable audience in Portugal. By engaging with Portuguese readers, Couto provides "a bridge between tradition and modernity, Portugal and Mozambique, orality and the written word, fantasy and reality . . . [transforming] his heritage of both cultures, the Portuguese and the Mozambican into a hybrid cultural space" (Alofabi 160). Couto's articulation of heritages not only problematizes the concept of "Mozambican identity" for Mozambicans—revealing it to be a "potpourri" of cultures and races—, but also calls the attention of Portuguese natives to the metropolis's cultural misunderstanding "Africa" and its imposition of invisibility on African communities within Portugal.

Even though Couto regards literature itself as "a transformative agent," he does not view the transformative power of his fiction as residing in the literary text alone. Rather, he recognizes "that it is the reader who acts upon her conversation with the text and so holds the potential to bring about change" (Hamilton and Huddart 2). Ultimately, therefore, Couto's writing performs a political act by inviting Portuguese readers to interrogate exclusive racial identities: "the literary text has always been a pointedly political phenomenon for Couto, or, more precisely, the literary text has always been a means of exploring the complex weave of ethics that lies behind the façade of the political" (Hamilton and Huddart 3).

The lyrics of Jorge Palma's song about Portuguese colonization assert that no one can help Portugal if it remains paralyzed by an imperialistic mindset (see epigraph) and silences the subject of race (see Paulo Medeiros). I believe that, through the work of writers like Mia Couto, Portugal and Mozambique can mutually help each other by building cultural and personal bonds that construct bridges that enable human beings to meet in the middle and look at each other as in a mirror.

Novels such as *O Outro Pé da Sereia* pose a challenge to the Portuguese: “Falta-nos, muitas vezes, a coragem para procurar os nossos demónios dentro de casa” (Couto, *Pensatempos* 95).

Notes

¹ This essay is no longer available at the Kellogg Institute Webpage, but the author has given me consent to quote him.

² Medeiros then mentions two main Portuguese writers, António Lobo Antunes and Lídia Jorge, as being two exceptions within the Portuguese cultural/academic field who problematize the question of race in their fictional works. Given the fact that after the colonial wars there was a massive return to the former metropolis not only of its “legitimate” children but also of Africans, it seems more than plausible that the questioning of race relations and intermingling, along with past, present and future ways of dealing with black discrimination, would become a conscious topic to be discussed in an increasingly heterogeneous society. According to Paulo de Medeiros these two writers “...attempt ... a direct confrontation with the present that ... would force the Portuguese to embark anew on a discovery of themselves by questioning their identity as it were from the outside, keeping in mind their past as well as their possible future.” (n.p.)

³ This was underlined yet again in an article on Couto in an edition of *Jornal de Letras* where one can read: “Centros comerciais, bibliotecas, auditórios, museus, pousadas, fundações e livrarias. O cenário muda, mas o guião é sempre o mesmo: salas cheias para receber Mia Couto...” (8).

⁴ An example is his novel *O Último Voo do Flamingo* (2000) in which “the principal agents of ‘Empire’ in Mozambique today, namely the United Nations and the plethora of NGO’s who have created a culture of dependency and assured the neocolonization of the young nation” (Rothwell 20).

⁵ Here Madureira unveils what he believes to be the weaknesses of Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s underlying argument for Lusophone postcolonial studies, which in Madureira’s view is mainly underpinned by a rhetoric of Portuguese colonial difference that follows very closely the lines of *Lusotropicalism*, though proposing an alternative orientation. Madureira sees no fundamental difference between Portuguese colonialism and those of other empires. This being said, he argues in direct opposition to Boaventura de Sousa Santos that the political transformations in Portugal that led to the independence of its colonies might have gone in a different direction—meaning that revolutionary developments in Africa [may] have affected the future of Portugal itself. In other words, the movement [may be] in the opposite direction – instead of movements from Europe stimulating revolutionary developments in Africa, liberation struggles in Africa [may] have unleashed movements of tremendous importance in Europe itself (202-04).

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