

Fuzzy Frontiers

Mozambique: False Borders - Mia Couto: False Margins

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There are several ways in which language behaves like a border. The nature of any border is that it both links and separates. It sets limits beyond which there is something else. Language can be seen to operate as a frontier between the individual and his or her society, between speaker and listener, writer and reader. Between different language groups, language serves to separate and demarcate. Within a particular language group, separation between social groups can be marked by language, between the articulate and the illiterate, between young and old, between dominant and subservient. Finally, language can be seen as a connection between reality and reference, between absence and presence. Viewed in this way, language is always something which is in-between.

As Terry Eagleton has pointed out, contemplation of the processes of language has dominated philosophical and critical thought for a large part of the twentieth century.¹ The perception of the way in which boundaries operate in language has shifted from the clear delineation of structuralism to the deliquescent binaries of deconstruction and the interstices of post-colonial theory.² The now largely discredited project of structuralism sought, in the works of some of its exponents, to draw boundaries in order to unify, believing that a universal theory would become apparent through a process of rigorous classifications.³ Deconstructive practice has tended to demonstrate that no boundary within language is ever stable. What we might consider to be clear-cut is always blurred. According to the exponents of deconstruction, the nature of language is such that it can never be fixed, because of the constant play between what is absent and what is present.⁴ Much of Derrida's project is grounded on a rigorous philosophical analysis of the shifting limits of the language system. Meaning is derived from language's tendency to brush constantly against its own limits.

According to Helen Tiffin, post-colonial theory falls into two streams. One owes its heritage to commonwealth studies, and the other is heavily indebted to post-structuralism and deconstructive practice. Both streams have become increasingly concerned with “the exploration of hybridity, creolization, complicity, syncretism and liminality” (Tiffin 162), notions which rely for their definition on the concept of transgressing boundaries. It is not surprising that post-colonial theory should have arrived at such a point. In a colonial order, so much depends on clear boundaries, from linguistic rectitude (privileging those who follow the paradigms of the colonial language, and disadvantaging those who cannot) to the fixing of the colony’s territorial borders. Post-colonial theory has naturally sought to question the very nature of boundaries as a challenge to the colonial order with which it had to deal. It has been most effective when it has sought to establish the duplicitous nature of the boundaries it has tried to undermine.⁵

The notion of borders is key to an understanding of post-colonial Mozambique.⁶ Wherever they occur, they reveal an ambivalent nature. At a geographical level, the country’s territorial frontiers are a testament to the former colonial power’s strength and weakness. They were fixed as the result of an Anglo-Portuguese treaty signed in 1891.⁷ Portugal had been forced to accept the conditions of this treaty by her oldest ally, England, following the famous British ultimatum of the previous year, discarding in the process her pretensions to a larger part of Africa.⁸ Considered in this way, Mozambique’s borders will always be a reminder of Portuguese political weakness at the end of the nineteenth century. Yet the frontier, which makes very little sense in terms of ethnic or cultural unity, is a legacy of the Portuguese colonial presence in the territory. By recognising Mozambique as an entity, recognition is given, at least diachronically, to the previous colonial order.

At a linguistic level, Mozambique is riddled with frontiers. The wide range of languages spoken in the country is the most obvious example of this.⁹ Many of the language groups are not mutually intelligible. Portuguese serves as a means of communication between members of different African language groups, but is not spoken by all the population of Mozambique.¹⁰ Command of Portuguese acts increasingly as another boundary. Employment and educational prospects are severely restricted for those who lack fluency in languages of European origin. It is one of the ironies of contemporary Mozambican history that the post-independence government of the country did much more to propagate the former colonial tongue than Salazar’s Portugal ever did.¹¹

One of the most enduring legacies which any colonial power might seek to impose on its colonies, besides political borders, is its language. If a complete imposition were ever possible, the colonial power could create a dependency which would far outlast any military hegemony. For if language does mediate between society and the self, at some levels it also forms society and the self. For language dictates and expresses the thoughts of the individual. It both serves the individual and masters him. It also determines with whom the individual can communicate and to which community he belongs. Benedict Anderson argues that “nations can now be imagined without linguistic communality” (Anderson 135). He explains this assertion in terms of the dominance of the nation-state in the latter part of the twentieth century. According to him the nation no longer needs a single language as a prerequisite for its definition. While it is feasible to belong to a language community and a larger national community consisting of different groups with no common language, Frelimo ideologues have always encouraged the use of the former colonial tongue as a vehicle for national unity. Anderson’s discussion of Frelimo’s encouragement of Portuguese as “the medium through which Mozambique is imagined” (133), includes the assertion that “language is not an instrument of exclusion: in principle, anyone can learn any language” (133). While this may be true in theory, in practice language often operates as an excluding barrier. Not everyone can learn any language, particularly in the economic and social climate prevalent in Mozambique. Indeed, in many rural areas, not everyone can speak Portuguese. Anderson continues “The only question-mark standing over languages like Portuguese in Mozambique [...] is whether the administrative and educational systems, particularly the latter, can generate a politically sufficient diffusion of bilingualism” (133). The Mozambican case is more complex than Anderson portrays it. According to Sousa Jamba, there is a fear in some quarters that “the Portuguese language might be overwhelmed by the advance of English” (Jamba 29). However, whatever the question marks are over the future of Portuguese in Mozambique, it is the case that Frelimo adopted the colonial language for its own purposes, as Anderson suggests.

The notion that the colonial tongue can become the property of those the coloniser sought to silence is by no means novel. Frantz Fanon, in 1959, pointed out the paradox of French being appropriated by Algerians who were fighting to expel the French from Algeria.¹² In Mozambique, the rigorously pro-Portuguese language policies pursued by the Frelimo government until

recently¹³ can be seen as an attempt by those who were fighting colonialism to redefine the perception of the language, changing it from a tool of oppression into a symbol of unity. In the decade preceding the independence war in Mozambique, the Portuguese language became a favourite battleground for intellectuals who disapproved of the colonial regime. The country produced poets such as Noémia de Sousa, José Craveirinha and Marcelino dos Santos among others who, in their different ways and from their positions of racial hybridity, used their rhetorical skills to oppose colonialism.¹⁴ They took the language of the coloniser and sought to express the anguish of the colonised in it. They tried to reverse the boundaries of the language and give the voiceless a voice through their poetry. Interestingly, Eduardo Mondlane, the first president of Frelimo, was critical of this generation of poets because he felt that the reality which they sought to portray was a fantasy of their own creation.¹⁵ The language which they used actually silenced those on whose behalf they sought to speak, misrepresenting rather than articulating their views.

Despite his misgivings, Mondlane understood the role that such poets had to play in the liberation struggle. At the time they were writing, there was a clear enemy, the colonial regime, and a clear objective, the liberation of Mozambique. Following independence in 1975, such clear boundaries disappeared. A new generation of writers emerged, pre-eminent among whom is Mia Couto. They have to confront the fact that the world in which they live is far from perfect. Unlike their predecessors, however, these writers cannot take comfort in the existence of a clear enemy, located on the other side of a moral boundary. A civil war divided the country for nearly two decades. Although it was facilitated by a series of foreign interventions, it involved Mozambicans fighting other Mozambicans.¹⁶ The country's economy has faced a series of seemingly intractable problems from the mid-1980s. The solutions imposed by the IMF have not benefited a large proportion of the population, many of whom live in conditions of severe poverty. With the end of the civil war, it remains to be seen whether the country can reap a peace dividend. Whatever happens, for most Mozambicans, previous distinctions have become decidedly blurred. The same government which promulgated a Marxist-Leninist state in the 1970s and for most of the 1980s has wholeheartedly endorsed free-market economics in the 1990s. While the reasons for such a change are very complex and are largely related to global politics, the fact remains that the same people who lectured Mozambicans for years on the benefits of socialism now enthusiastically embrace capitalism. It is in

the context of such blurred distinctions that much of Mia Couto's work has been written.

Mia Couto's style has been widely commented upon. Nelson Saúte has described him as a writer who straddles the border between poetry and prose. His capacity for neologisms has brought about comparisons with the Brazilian Guimarães Rosa.¹⁷ His use of African language morphemes and styles has led to him being described as Mozambique's answer to Angola's Luandino Vieira.¹⁸ Mary L. Daniel has provided a thorough analysis of the technicalities of Couto's language, researching the relative frequencies of Couto's various hallmark tropes (Daniel 12-13). It is generally accepted that Couto is a creative rule-breaker, who draws on and refines the spoken language of his environment.¹⁹ José Ornelas has argued that Couto's complex style is a reflection of the cultural heterogeneity and multifaceted, hybrid reality of contemporary Mozambique.²⁰ It is the purpose of this essay to suggest that Couto's use of the Portuguese language may be read as reflecting the ambivalent borders which permeate Mozambique at so many levels. The literary generation before him conceptualised the world in terms of borders which separated the good from the bad. Categories were well defined. Couto's world is one in which such clarity has been revealed as a source of obfuscation. As the relative simplicity of structuralism's concept of the boundary ceded its authority to the complexities of the limit in deconstruction and the ambiguity of post-colonialism's interstices, so Couto moves Mozambican literature from the binaries of the colonial era to the in-between-ness of the present day.

In any discussion of Mia Couto attention should be drawn to the problem of his intended audience. If his work may be read as identifying with the oppressed of Mozambique as some have suggested,²¹ it should be borne in mind that he excludes those whom he seeks to represent through his intellectual technique. In a sense, in showing how the oppressed have been silenced, he silences them still further, ensuring that they cannot answer him back, for he is *not* speaking their language while technically doing so. He appropriates certain elements of the language of that community in a highly skilful exhibition of virtuosity which most Mozambicans, even those literate in Portuguese, would have difficulty appreciating. If, as is presently being argued, his technique seeks to push language to its limits and call into question its boundaries, he erects another boundary in the process, which excludes those "through whose hands" he claims to write.²²

Mia Couto is very problematic. As Fernando Dacosta points out, he is a contradiction in terms.²³ While he is widely acclaimed as a Mozambican writer, his mother-tongue, his cultural heritage and most of his readership come from Portugal.²⁴ Yet he cannot be considered to be Portuguese. In a sense, he lies on the margin of a margin. At once he belongs by a process of mutual adoption, and does not belong to the formerly colonised community. It may be this paradox which enables him to write as he does, with scant regard for grammatical rules and established paradigms. It is ironic that from this position of double marginality, he has come to occupy a position in the mainstream of contemporary lusophone literature.²⁵

Within Mozambique, he has been criticised for having created a “language unrelated to the people” (Agualusa 69). Yet other critics have argued that much of his style is inspired by the way in which Mozambicans speak Portuguese.²⁶ One is tempted to say that he writes in *linguagem cotidiana*, a unique blend of the day-to-day cadences and speech patterns of those around him mixed with a highly individual intellectual style, which rejoices in enriching the language system through undermining its rules. The altered morphemes so prevalent in his work could be seen to establish a symbiotic relationship between an oral tradition which the colonial order sought but failed to obliterate and a written revolution in which the very language system has its syntactic and semantic boundaries shifted. Couto himself has claimed that anything is possible in a language, especially the disruption of its rules.²⁷

The “folk etymology” (Daniel 12) used by Couto operates as a type of “metonymic gap.” This term introduced to post-colonial theory by Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin describes the effect of alien cultures making both their presence and absence felt through the deployment by an author of words from the alien culture into his or her discourse. Words with an African origin found in Couto’s work (e.g. tchova, xicuembo, xipefo, chibante, nóii) represent both the parallel African cultures and the lusophone reader’s distance from those cultures. Each African morpheme points to the “silence which exists between the language, which is the signifier of power, and the experience it is called upon to represent” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 53). Through Couto’s use of the trope of the metonymic gap, the boundary between African culture and the lusophone reader is breached at the same time as it is highlighted and reinforced. Immediate meaning is denied (the reader is forced to consult a footnote or a glossary), the deferred meaning,

once attained, carries the additional connotation associated with its delay in being reached (i.e. the distance between the reader and African culture).

At other levels in Couto's work, African culture makes its presence felt. Couto's use of African mythology (e.g. the Ndlati) is a prime example. More interesting, for the purposes of this essay, is Couto's recourse to a mundane presentation of the fantastic, which at times verges on the style of "magic realism"²⁸ (e.g. the dual nature of the narrator in *A Varanda do Frangipani* or the behaviour of the soldier's coat in *A Mancha*). Kumkum Sangari describes the concept of "magic realism" as a "mode of perception grounded in the political and historical formation" of a space (Sangari 217). He argues that for it to occur in the literature of a culture, a certain level of cultural heterogeneity different from and determined by the linear history of the West must be present in that culture. Any author who uses techniques similar to those of "magic realism" in texts directed at Western audiences challenges the readers of those texts to cross their frontier of reality, to leave behind the scientific constraints of their empirical culture and to enter a realm where things really are perceived differently. If we accept Sangari's arguments, one consequence of this style of writing is that it makes epistemology within the text an essentially historical issue. The reader is forced to look outside the text as well as within it to locate meaning. There is an obligation to observe precisely those processes which have fashioned this style of writing. By challenging reality, the text invites the reader to consider reality. At this point, the question arises of whose reality is being challenged. Generally, it is Western perceptions of reality that are called into question not by African cultures but by the *interaction* of Western and African cultures in a way that distorts the integrity and delineation of both.

Sousa Jamba asserts that Couto "often invokes the horrors of the war which gripped his country from 1975 to 1992" but that "he ignores the complex reasons behind such atrocities" (Jamba 29). Other critics have argued that Couto is less concerned with a socio-political content to his texts, and more interested in its aesthetic quality.²⁹ If we accept Sangari's argument, Couto's style, at its most fantastic and innovative, is an invitation to his readers to contemplate the political reality. The mode of contemplation might be different from the one to which the reader is accustomed. It is one in which syntax plays the key role, not as a means by which semantic content is expressed, but rather as an attempt to free meaning from the constraints of the language system. By appearing to challenge the boundaries of

language, Couto merely renders the true nature of all boundaries visible. The reality of Mozambique's boundaries is one of definitive ambiguity. It takes a writer from the limits of language to reveal a state of affairs which is always in-between.

Works By Mia Couto:

(Published by Caminho, Lisbon):

Vozes Anoitecidas.

Cada Homem É Uma Raça.

Cronicando.

Terra Sonâmbula.

Estórias Abensonhadas.

A Varanda do Frangipani.

Contos do Nascer da Terra.

Notes

¹ See introduction in Eagleton.

² According to Homi Bhabha, "the possibility of assuming the moderate minority position depends upon establishing an interstitial space of identification" (Bhabha, 434). He is acknowledging that the post-colonial condition is one which is increasingly viewed as "in-

³ Kurzweil defines Parisian structuralism as "the systematic attempt to uncover deep universal mental structures as these manifest themselves in kinship and larger social structures, in literature, philosophy and mathematics, and in the unconscious psychological patterns that motivate human behavior" (Kurzweil 1).

⁴ The play in language between what is considered to be present and what is absent is a recurrent theme in the works of Derrida. Consider his assertion in *Of Grammatology* that speech, the supposed embodiment of presence in language, behaves in many ways like writing, or his explanation of *différance* in *Margins of Philosophy*.

⁵ Benita Parry has been critical of the tendency among some post-colonial theorists (particularly Spivak) to assign to the subaltern the role of a passive mute, effectively consolidating the binaries of colonialism. She argues that post-colonial theory is more effective when the nature of the boundary between the colonising self and the colonised other is revealed for the ambiguous entity that it is.

⁶ Post-colonial here is taken to mean after European colonial contact, which in the case of Mozambique means after the fifteenth century.

⁷ "The country came into existence in its present form as a result of an Anglo-Portuguese treaty of May 1891" (Newitt v).

⁸ The ultimatum of 11th January 1890, ostensibly over the Portuguese occupation of Chire, was Britain's way of halting Portugal's intention to link her colonies of Mozambique and Angola (Saraiva 464-7).

⁹ There are ten language groups in Mozambique and dozens of sub-groups. For detail, see Stephan 60.

¹⁰ According to a joint UNICEF/Government of Mozambique report published in March 1993 "Teaching literacy in Portuguese has been another obstacle, especially in rural areas, as the language is spoken mostly in cities by just thirty per cent of the population (although this is up from fifteen per cent at independence)" (UNICEF 105-106).

¹¹ This was principally through a huge expansion, after independence, of the education sector, which had been severely neglected by the colonial administration. José Ornelas comments that "a língua que colonizou a terra e o povo moçambicanos, também é, depois de tudo e de forma bastante irónica, a língua da emancipação, da libertação" (Ornelas 44).

¹² "Paradoxically as it may appear, it is the Algerian Revolution, it is the struggle of the Algerian people, that is facilitating the spreading of the French language in the nation" (Fanon 89).

¹³ The Mozambican government insisted that all formal education in the country was conducted in Portuguese, until the 1990s, when projects were allowed which conducted education in African languages.

¹⁴ For more detail on this period, see Ferreira. The three poets mentioned are of mixed ethnic origin.

¹⁵ "The very way in which such poems are conceived, in a style of eloquent self-pity, is alien to the African reaction [...] It is clear that despite the efforts of their authors to be 'African', the former have taken more from European tradition than from the African. This indicates the lack of contact existing between these intellectuals and the rest of the country" (Mondlane 111).

¹⁶ Vines argues that RENAMO cannot simply be dismissed as a foreign dominated destabilizing force. Despite many of the atrocities the rebel movement perpetrated, its impressive showing in the elections of 1994 revealed a considerable base of support within the country, particularly in the more densely populated provinces.

¹⁷ “The short fiction of Mia Couto, especially the brief narratives of *Cronicando*, evokes strongly Guimarães Rosa’s linguistic innovation...” (Daniel 1).

¹⁸ See Brookshaw. Also, according to Manuel Ferreira, “Não é possível ler as dez estórias de *Vozes Anotizadas* do moçambicano Mia Couto sem nos vir à memória o nome de Luandino Vieira” (Ferreira 132, in *Colóquio*).

¹⁹ “...o escritor parece regular-se pelas “regras” que se detectam nos fenómenos de variação do Português para conduzir o seu próprio processo criativo. As propriedades do uso “desviantes” - desde as inovações lexicais até à adopção de mecanismos sintácticos do discurso não normativo - são assim retomadas como base para a produção da escrita literária” (Gonçalves 92). Daniel argues that Couto’s neologisms act as “facilitators, adding new dimensions to standard words and phrases and ‘egging the reader on’ in the good-humored manner of an oral storyteller” (Daniel 12).

²⁰ “A meu ver, Mia Couto espelha e representa através do remanejamento da língua, ou seja, a inovação e recriação linguística, e a exploração de certos núcleos temáticos a heterogeneidade cultural e a realidade polifacetada e híbrida de Moçambique” (Ornelas 51).

²¹ His work, according to Daniel can be seen as radiating “emphatic identification with his subjects and collective hopes in the face of widespread misfortune...” (Daniel 16).

²² In an interview with Nelson Saúte, Couto claimed “No meu caso existem vozes que escuto e que me guiam na invenção da escrita. Escrevo por mãos de outros, sou um ventrígrafo” (Saute 11).

²³ Dacosta describes Couto as “um jovem apesar de ter nome feminino... um branco apesar de ser africano” (Dacosta 7).

²⁴ He has a large following in Brazil, too.

²⁵ It is worth noting that Couto’s publisher is the prestigious Lisbon-based Caminho, and that his earlier works have proved so popular that several print runs have been necessary.

²⁶ See Brookshaw.

²⁷ “Eu acho que não tem que haver um polícia de trânsito, a regulamentar a língua, dizendo: ‘Por aqui não se pode transitar.’ Pode tudo!” (Chabal 291).

²⁸ I am indebted to Fernanda Anjius for the discussions we have had on this topic.

²⁹ Mia “assume uma atitude mais ambígua perante a função socio-política do texto literário que alguns dos seus conterrâneos. Acima de tudo, ele opina que o texto literário deve ser uma produção estética desprovida de uma função utilitária específica sobre o meio em que se insere e desligada do contexto extra-literário, excepto no que diz respeito ao aproveitamento desse contexto para a construção poética da linguagem e da realidade textual” (Ornelas 42).

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