Spaces of Magic
Mia Couto’s Relational Practices

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The window: isn’t that the place where the house dreams of becoming the world? – Mia Couto, E se Obama fosse africano?

What moves me is the divine vocation of the word, which not only names but invents and produces enchantment. – Mia Couto, E se Obama fosse africano?

Mia Couto brings magic and wholeness to a world that is dissected, shattered, divided – a world that suffers from a profound loss of enchantment. This loss of enchantment, brought about in Europe around the sixteenth century imposed on African communities during colonization, upholds and believes first and foremost in the rational scientific paradigm. This paradigm anthropomorphizes the world and presents humans and human reason as capable of attaining objective truth and knowledge about the self, the world and the cosmos. It is a system that thinks itself capable of bringing about the development of the world and the human being, leading to human happiness, realization and overall progress. Within such a hierarchizing (and arrogant and self-indulgent) modus operandi, the object is gazed at by the human mind and incorporated into the self. As Senegalese writer and politician Léopold Senghor puts it when discussing what he terms the European personality vs. the African personality,

He [the European] first distinguishes the object from himself. He keeps it at a distance. He freezes it out of time and, in a way, out of space. He fixes it, he kills it. With his precision instruments he dissects it in a pitiless factual analysis. As a scientist, yet at the same time prompted by practical considerations, the European makes use of the Other that he has killed in this way for his practical ends. He makes a means of it. With a centripetal movement he assimilates it. He destroys it by devouring it. ‘White men are cannibals,’ an old sage from my own country told me a few years ago. ‘They have no respect for life.’ (1965, 29)

Like Senghor, Mia Couto writes against this European worldview by presenting the individual as always yearning to connect with the other (the human) or the otherness (the non-human, the transcendent) in order to exit the individual self – because to be closed in oneself hurts, and in fact prevents the self from fulfilling its ontological relational destiny, a destiny that demands a connection with the non-self, an entrance into a whole that is out there and of which the self is a part. The first quotation from Couto above speaks precisely to that ontological relational destiny (a profound yearning in fact) of the human being: the window is the venue (inside a house) that links the house with the external, with the non-self, allowing it to become connected with all the reality out there, therefore erasing the loneliness of the house or, to put it another way, making the house the world, the cosmos, joining all in one. The window is in fact that part within the individual that demands and yearns for a connection with the non-self, that which wants to exit the prison of the self. The second quotation speaks of another very important aspect of Couto’s writing: the idea that writing, and specifically a certain type of writing (a poetic writing) that allows the creative energies to take over and supersede the rational, stifled and dissecting scientific intelligence that privileges reason, is a powerful and necessary endeavor, which restores enchantment and awe. Language (or creativity in general) becomes a vehicle to connect with the mysteries of the world, mysteries that are impossible to comprehend fully on a rational level but which we can connect with by allowing our creative ways to take over our rational way. In so doing, we are permitted to envisage a truth that cannot be fully named but which we know (or rather sense) exists.

This sensibility is enough for our ontological fulfillment. Through a detailed analysis of the ‘The Three Sisters’, a story from Couto’s collection O fio das miasangas (The Bead Necklace) published in 2004, I reveal this space of magic, these relational practices that permeate most (if not all) of Couto’s writing, whether we are dealing with short stories, novels or poetry. I choose to analyze this specific story to reveal Couto’s relational practices and the story’s accompanying ideas of enchantment and mystical apprehension of the world because it centers on the relational in terms of male/female relationships (the inter-personal) while also allowing the relational to be explored in terms of the trans-human

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(the movement from the human self to the non-human self, or the
grander self). Furthermore, the fact that the story revolves around
the importance of creativity (in various forms) – and presents it as the
mechanism that permits the self to break away from the sociopolitical
restrictions imposed by the status quo and connect with the uncanny
(the grander self) – allows me to emphasize how the relational is deeply
linked to a way of being and seeing that can only be attained when
one allows a poetic insight to come in, when one breaks away from
the chains of the dissecting and restrictive angle of knowledge apprehen-
sion imposed by pure reason. And these are, I argue, paramount
aspects of Couto’s overall writing. Through a close reading of ‘The
Three Sisters’, I also emphasize my argument (and Couto’s argument
of relationality): the part is revealed and focused on in a minute way
to illustrate how it yearns to become part of the whole, how it is in
fact connected with the whole even if it is not consciously aware of
that connection or rejects that connection because of societal impos-
sitions. Everything is connected: we only have to stare at the part for
enough time to see in it the immensity of all reality, to see how it calls
to itself all there is out there. My medium then becomes part of my
main message, part of the author’s ultimate message. Moreover, my
analysis will also point to some similarities that exist between Couto’s
writing, with its close links to what I term African classical ontologies
and epistemologies of holism, as well as some aspects of Zen Buddhist
philosophy and the philosophy of French feminist Luce Irigaray.1

‘The Three Sisters’, the first story in O fio das missangas, is about three
sisters who live with their father, a controlling and annihilating man,
who does not allow them to communicate with other men or exit the
state, stilling code of existence, order and regulation that he imposes.
The oldest sister composes verses (rimar; the middle one is a cook
who follows recipes from old books (receitas); and the youngest is an
embroiderer (bordadeira). All of these are professions that entail, or
should entail, creation, yet the sisters remain uncreative and sterile in
their endeavors. Their artistic product is missing a magic element that
would make it truly marvelous for both the creator and the consumer
of the creation. This is because their verses, their dishes and their
embroideries are not fed by their own creative energy or the energy
that could come from a non-cannibalistic connection to others and
otherwise, but rather by the old codes passed onto them by the many
status quos – which here can mean either or both African/Mozam-
bian patriarchies or the imposing foreign systems that are also associ-
ated with masculinity and finite epistemologies. Couto has noted that
O fio das missangas is the work where he more directly addresses the issue
of women’s oppression in Mozambique, the weight of local patriarchies
– and where he made a clear effort to feel like a woman, to be in her
own skin (‘Mia Couto’, 2012).2 The sisters live according to the code of
the father, for the father, to satisfy only his needs:

The fruit knows itself ripe by the hand that collects it. Raised in this way,
the sisters did not even notice their own growth: they remained virgins,
without love or passions. Their father Rosaldo had planted in them a
destiny: they were his, exclusively and definitely. Trapped like this and
exposed to no one, they would always and forever be his little girls. His
daughters were there each for a need: nostalgia, cold and hunger. Let’s
look at the girls, one by one, have a peek at their silenced and delayed
being. (Couto 2004a, 11)

The self, in this case the female self, finds no avenue to emerge and
merely murmurs under the needle, or the cooking pot or the famed
word that yearns to explode in real meaning, real creation, real being.
It is a contracted, annihilated self that is eaten, taken by the other, the
masculine other, who holds power and is not about to relinquish it.
Gilda, the oldest of the sisters, composes verses that ‘organized the
world like a gardener does’ and ‘gardeners impede the wild nature
from being wild, protecting us from the impure bushes’ writes the
narrator (2004a, 11–12). Her verses are slaves of the dictionary; they
do not invent new words. Instead, they keep bowing to the already
written (the ‘body politic’3 of the status quo), which lacks the energy
for change, one that comes from the life that pulsates in front and
inside of us, a life that demands and calls, a life that changes the past
to allow us to live in the present, to receive novelty, to reimagine and
reinvent our condition on a constant basis. As Martin Heidegger
postulates in Poetry, Language, Thought, Gilda’s verses have ceased to
speak, they are the dead ‘everyday language’ which ‘is a forgotten’ and
‘used-up poem, from which there hardly resounds a call any longer’
(Heidegger 1975, 208). Couto writes mostly and foremost through the

1 See Marques (2011) for an in-depth discussion of the patriarchies of contem-
porary Mozambique.

2 The term ‘body politic’ is here used in a generalized way to refer to all the
sociopolitical mechanisms that make or coerce the human being into something
that it is nor, restraining her/his personhood and freedom. I use the term in a
manner similar to that of Simone de Beauvoir (1947, 1949). The idea that one
is not born a woman or a man but made into one when one enters the realm of
meanings is already prevalent in society.
medium of poetry. For Couto, writing entails entering the terrain of a language imbued with the magic and freedom that poetry can allow — an unstable language that steps away from exact meanings, and has multiple, shifting and unstable signifiers/signifieds that perpetually defer meaning. Moreover, to borrow from Hélène Cixous (Cixous and Clément 1986), Couto’s poetic language drinks from multiple non-rational intelligences: it collects knowledge from the heart, the instinct, the emotions, the spirit, and the unconscious, epistemological tools that fall outside rational one-dimensional ways of apprehending knowledge and allow creation to emerge, unrestrained by the closed systems organized solely by logic and reason. Couto has expressed the following in relation to the link between poetry and writing in \textit{Pensaiempus}:

> Writing always demands poetry. And poetry is another way of thinking beyond the logic that school and the modern world teach us. It is another window that opens so that we can look at things and creatures in a new way. Without the arrogance of wanting to understand them. Only with the illusion attempt to become brothers to the universe. (2005, 45–6)

For Gilda to truly create poetry, pulsating living poetry and life, she needs to exit the written verses/codes and drink from the energy that comes from within her, tap into her non-rational intelligences, which are also symbols here for Mozambican culture — a culture that varies vastly from the ones that have come to colonize the country over the centuries and which is being suppressed in her. Gilda needs to be open to the words that come from her immediate surroundings, open to the orality that is associated with Afrocentric values, and which precedes Western colonization(s). These values tend to follow holistic ontologies and epistemologies that regard the world in a more integrative and animistic manner where the self is considered relational, seen as having strong ties with others and otherness, with the visible and invisible realms. The self is part of the larger cosmos and each part of life or reality plays an important role in the balance and order of the grand universe, as elaborated by Teffo and Roux (2003), Kaphagawani and Malherbe (2003) and Senghor (1965, 2007). Orality carries with it endogenic Mozambican values; it is a reservoir of local wisdoms. In that sense, then, orality is presence, contrary to the written word (the dictionary that Gilda uses to write verses), which denotes absence of local values, powerlessness under the imposition of external traditions.

In orality, language finds its dynamism, its poetry, restoring holistic inte-

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Grative tendencies associated with local mores, thus exiting, contesting and resisting exogenic forces linked to inflexible and compartmentalized categories that define human beings in narrow ways, making them prisoners of a body politic that aims at controlling, knowing in absolute terms, and suppressing novelty and human growth. A constant theme in Couto’s writing, orality, is therefore an important tool used to recapture local Mozambican cultures and inject language with the dynamism of poetry. In 2013 Couto voiced the following on the interlink between orality, language adaptation, poetry, and Mozambican traditions:

> It was only when I wanted to tell stories that I was faced with the challenge of allowing life to come in, and the way Portuguese was refashioned in Mozambique, so that the language could gain a greater poetic force. Orality is not something that we resolve by having brigades collecting traditional stories, it is much more than that. We always think that language is the grande dame, that we have to write and speak it well. [But] poetic creation is born out of error, out of disobedience. (Andrade 2013)

And Couto has also stressed the importance and predominance of orality in Mozambique, and its influence on his writing:

> The most important influences on my writing come from those I can't identify, persons that populated my childhood, my hometown in the Indian Ocean, the neighborhood where I was born and where I started to dream about other places and other lives. So, ironically, the main source of inspiration of my writing came from the non-writing world. (Esposito 2013)

Couto’s language disobeys mainstream Portuguese and he often invents words\(^5\) to exit the worldview of the colonizing or neo-colonizing powers and create a fiction where the way of being of Mozambicans, their multiple cultures and understandings of the world, and their oralities are more accurately reflected. His language rewrites the original language of the colonizer in order to better tell the reality/realties of Mozambique. In this regard, his writing is deeply political and has a cultural agenda. As Couto indicates, people ‘are dealing with a language

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5 Though in his later works, such as \textit{A confissão da lera} (2012b) and \textit{Malheres de cinza} (2015b), Couto tends to use a language that is much less populated with these linguistic inventions. Couto has said in an interview that as a writer he likes to surprise himself. And though these linguistic games may have allowed that initially, he continually feels the need to change his writing in order to keep the pleasure of the writing act alive. See ‘Mia Couto’ (2012).
that belongs to another world, with another logic, and they have to break it up so that the language can be theirs' (Thomaz and Chaves 1998, 7). This language that captures the local and the oral contests the written word associated with the knowledge that represents the cultural values of the West, first brought with the colonization of the country by Portugal in the sixteenth century, and which then continued with the paradigms of governance imposed by the postcolonial ruling orders that act and behave very much like the former Portuguese colonizers or espouse and give privilege to Western epistemologies. Formed mostly of assimilados, the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO) government, which took power in 1975 with the independence of Mozambique, undertook explicit and organized measures to create a nation where there were many nations, to make uniform that which was highly multifaceted and complex, attempting to turn otherness into sameness through the institutionalization of the so-called national values. There was great emphasis on imposing Portuguese as the national and official language, the language of unity for a newly formed country. This organized effort to create one country out of many has created problems of accessibility and cultural alienation in many ways. As Lee Skjon has suggested, the Mozambican nation is more of a state nation than a nation state, a nation made up (created) by the ruling political elite but which has difficulty materializing on a real/organic level:

FRELIMO sought to produce a surplus of specific forms of modernist social(lit) values [...] for circulation – namely, rationality, discipline, and moral will. The vanguard's control of the state and attempt to organize productive forces more 'rationally' through socialist modernization was not primarily for the purpose of realizing collective benefit, nor even bureaucratic power or private gain, but rather to realize and circulate ample evidence of the vanguard's superiority in these values relative to the mass citizen. Validation of this superiority – i.e., realization of surplus – necessitated production of a citizenry assimilated to these values. Schooling provided the means par excellence for this production, and Portuguese, adopted as the official language of national identity and scholastic instruction, served as a ready-made, standardized semiotic medium through which the social(lit) values would circulate [...] But since this nationalist

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form of consciousness remained culturally distinct and alienated from the majority of the state's citizens, its expression was syncretic: the identity and values of the assimilado minority stood for national identity, but had not been internalized by the nation's unassimilated majority [...] In this sense it is more appropriate to think in terms of post-colonial state-nations, rather than nation-states. (2002, 3–8)

The switch from a Marxist model of governance to a neo-liberal democratic one in the early 1990s did not make Mozambique less plagued with the imposition of foreign agendas of all kinds (economic, political, and cultural). As Couto frequently notes, Mozambique continues to be ruled by other external (neo-colonial) forces, the Upholders of neo-liberal capitalist ideology, and even aid agencies and NGOs that come to 'save' and 'develop' the country. The author is critical and distrustful of all these systems, and considers that they vastly disregard the endogenous cultural values of Mozambique, imposing their own mores, even if in disguised, covert ways, frequently promoting themselves as de facto saviors that will bring true development to the nation, raising it to the status of a first-world country – much like the colonizers did (but never really accomplished). In Couto's novel The Last Flight of the Flamingo (Couto 2004), we see a strong critique of this invasion of foreign entities that continue to colonize the country culturally and economically. It is important to note that Couto is not proposing a return to an idyllic African past or that he in fact believes in the existence of such a past. Rather, what he is defending is a Mozambique that gives value to all the cultures and epistemologies (Afrocentric and Westernized) in a more balanced manner, positing that contemporary Mozambique continues to overly value the exogenous, and discard what is local and associated with African systems of thought. The rural population in Mozambique, estimated at 68% of the total population in 2014 (Trading Economics 2016), constitutes the majority of the country's population and yet the ruling urban elite tends to dictate the culture of the country and promote mostly external value. Mozambique is a highly multicultural country with forty-two Bantoid living languages, apart from Portuguese, which is the official language. According to the 2007 census, only 50% of Mozambicans speak Portuguese and the rate of illiteracy is 48% (Governo de Moçambique. Instituto Nacional de Estatística 2007). There are therefore many 'others' in Mozambique: the urban literate elites are 'others' for most of the country and vice versa, and the many Mozambican ethnic groups are also 'others' for each other. As Couto voices in Pensamentos,

6 'Assimilado' was the term assigned to those African subjects who, according to the presiding colonial power of Portugal, had reached an acceptable level of 'civilization'. As such, they were (theoretically) accorded certain rights as Portuguese citizens. Those who were considered not to have reached this bar of civilization were called não-assimilado or the non-civilized (the non-assimilated). See Heywood (2000).

7 See Sabaratnam (2010).
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For years I taught at the Eduardo Mondlane University in different faculties. My colleagues complained about the continuous lack of preparation among students. But I noticed something that I thought was much graver; I saw how these students were getting more and more distanced from their own country. When they left Maputo to do field work in the countryside, they behaved as if they had emigrated to a strange and hostile universe. They could not speak the languages, had no knowledge of the cultural codes, felt out of place and missed Maputo. Some had in their psyche the invisible monsters: wild beasts, the snakes, the invisible monsters. [...] And even worse; they felt ashamed to be attached to such a nation. (2005, 9–11)

Returning to the story of the three sisters, there are moments when Gilda appears to be visited by orality, with its associated Afrocentric and relational ontologies and epistemologies, and become somewhat receptive to the force of poetic wisdom and non-rational intelligences, which forgo logical reason and standard, everyday language, and its associated reductive cognitive mechanisms. However, she quickly reverts to the dead language of the dictionary — a language (that is to say, also a system) associated with Western paradigms or, more generally, paradigms that reject or control multiplicity of being and knowing, and espouse individualistic ways of relating to the others and otherness:

Her finger did not wiggle as it did not receive any impulse from her. It was a finger without sex, only coherence. Speaking out loud, she tried to make consonants out of tonic syllables: Sun, flat, fishhook. Once in a while, a breeze would disarrange the shrubs and Gilda's heart would get disheveled. But soon she would regain composure, and again, she would write. Yet the rhyming verse did not generate a poem. On the contrary, its function was to gain distance from poetry – the kind that inhabited the place where the heart was. While she embodied verses, the oldest of the knowing, Gilda was committing suicide. If she never got to the end, it was because she was missing the right rhyme. (Couto 2004a, 12)

Gilda tries to create, find expansion of self in poetry but is unable to because her poetry is attached to a dead language, a view of the world that follows confined precepts about what is right and wrong, about what one must do and not do, acknowledge and not acknowledge, about what is good knowledge and bad knowledge. She is not guided by passion, only rationality. Her verses are distanced from poetry because her heart is not speaking; it is muted by the coherence, finitude and anthropomorphism of rationality. She forgets how to see the ‘glow’ of the pulsating life in front of her – the trees, the stones, the animals do not become her brothers and sisters, so she remains isolated in her own self. In this isolation, she finds her own death, killing the grand/larger person that she is but which she is unable to birth. Gilda never reaches her potentiality, ‘she never got to the end,’ Couto writes, because she fails to open to other ways of thinking, seeing, feeling, and being. The grand poem that she is (that infinite and boundless being that is connected to all that is there and which cannot be told in regular language and requires the creative energy of the poetic) is impeded from being by the verses she keeps writing. The fact that Couto writes that Gilda tries to make consonants out of tonic syllables: sun (Son), flat (kemul), fishhook (anazul) (Couto 2004a, 12) suggests that she is following the wrong path because she is trying to close off the sounds of the last tonic syllable (´-an´) too quickly, a sound that could go on for a while, had she the patience to stay there long enough to feel it. The sound of this tonic syllable creates an expansion of the word, giving it a musicality even, yet she quickly bypasses it, speeding through the vowel 'o' and moving to the consonant 'f', ending the word abruptly and therefore failing to achieve the poetic effect. Vowels are much gentler than consonants and create an open, prolonged sound that allows language to fly, to run through time, so to speak, and consequently extend our being/being-ness in language. However, in this case, the freedom and power of the vowel ((the 'o')) are curtailed and restrained, stopping short of its potential — and so does the verse maker. Our amateur poet is also mostly concerned with creating rhyming verses, as the noted words suggest, rather than allowing words to flow naturally from within her and generate their own music and their own poetry. She is more concerned with form than content — and it is this very form that restrains her personhood. In addition, it can be suggested that Couto is hinting at the importance of orality when he admonishes Gilda for closing off the tonic syllable too quickly and missing the effect of the vowel: by pointing to the extended lifespan and musicality of the vowel and tonic syllable, he suggests that words and language are meant to be spoken out loud, felt deeply and heard, pointing to the importance of storytelling as a medium of communion, where communities and families gather to enjoy each other, to perform language and to pass on knowledge intergenerationally — and therefore alluding to the importance of orality in Mozambique and its predominance over the written word. Couto has spoken about this orality, this storytelling, and its intrinsic magic, poetry, and performative quality:
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At that moment when they were telling me the story there was something religious, a feeling of fascination, of magic, and suddenly the world ceased to exist and those individuals were transformed into gods. It was impossible for you not to believe, for you not to be completely present and imprisoned in that fantasy that they were creating. It is important to understand how these storytellers functioned. Now they barely exist, there are very few of them, they are old. But they tell stories in the complete sense, they do all the theater they sing, dance [...] And I thought: it would be necessary to transport this magical ambience created by these storytellers to the writing domain [...] And that is only possible through, one, the use of poetry, and two, the use of a language that utilizes this game of dance and theater that they were making. So it was there that I started, in fact, to experiment with the limits of language itself and to transgress with the intent of creating a space of magic. (Laban 1998, 1015–16)

Flornela, the middle sister, is similarly described as a sterile, asexual woman, who uses and follows, to the letter, recipes of old texts. Such recipes prevent her from cooking her own meal, finding her own mixture of condiments that would allow her to be herself, to regain her life and freedom, and cherish her multifaceted self, just like the Mozambican land is unable to because of the over-influence of foreign values. She tries to give birth to a fine, personal, local dish but always reverts to the book, the code, which cuts her creative force and produces only what has already been created by someone else. Innovation is suppressed, arrested by the passivity and death of the logoscentric word, associated with the masculine ruling order, but also ultimately, and in the context of Mozambique, with the adherence to a monocultural framework, unwilling to accept varied epistemologies and ontologies:

The middle one, Flornela, wasted herself in culinary occupations. In the darkness of the kitchen, she copied old recipes, one by one. She would write each word slowly like someone who puts flowers in a coffin. Then, in slow pace, she would raise herself, clean her sweaty hands and adjust the cooking pots and the fire. Bent over the oven, she appeared as a midwife squatting in front of the birthing mystery. Sometimes her breasts would agitation themselves, her eyes in cardiac state, betraying an assualment of dreams. And once in a while, even the trace of a song would come to her. But she would turn off the voice as someone lowering the fire, blocking the little flame that insinuanted itself under the pot. (Couto 2004a, 12–13)

Flornela wants to create but is impeded by the weight of the power of the written recipe, the masculine (and one-dimensional) order that organizes and dictates her life. There is a power within her: she feels

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it sometimes, even if only very faintly, in the movement of her breasts or the trace of an emerging song that comes to her. Yet this power is superseded by the other (dominating and predominating) powers, not finding sufficient strength to emerge clearly and fully at the window of her yearning being. Her very name is symbolic of the power that lies hidden, within her, dormant and suppressed. The name is composed of two words: 'flor' (flower) and 'nela' (within her). This suggests that the flower is within her - she only needs to find a way to bring it out, to make it emerge from the depths of her own self, from the unconscious reservoirs that lie silenced within. But the external conditions are not conducive to such an emergence, for her society lives according to masculine, patriarchal, and rational dictates that do not value the creativity or novelty for which non-rational intelligences allow. So, she 'squeats in front of the birthing mystery' (2004a, 12), as Couto puts it, waiting for the birth, her own birth, but it does not come: she is only a midwife and therefore cannot give birth herself.

‘If one day she dedicated her heart, it would be to a scent, finally fulfilling a fattened recipe’ (2004a, 13) writes Couto, suggesting that if Flornela were to listen to her heart (the non-rational), she would cook a truly savoury meal, one that would smell divinely and fulfill her ultimate desires. Scent becomes here a symbol of liberation given that it can travel, and by so doing, it enters different spaces: it is invisible and yet very powerful; we know it is there but we can’t quite catch it, like the grand reality of the world, of the cosmos to which she is bound somehow, even if she cannot quite rationally comprehend it. It further suggests liberation of soul from body - literally, as the food on the cooking pot melts under the fire and becomes vapors of bodies - and therefore the ability to connect with the spiritual world, the uncanny, to travel between realms, again pointing to the grand self, the grand reality of which we are all a part.

On a larger level, and in this context of cooking, I would even suggest that the scent symbolizes the merging of all the elements (flame, food/earth element, water and air) becoming the ultimate embrace of all and everything - a nothingness that is an every-thingness in the Zen Buddhist sense, the holism of African epistemologies that regards all things connected and part of a greater 'I'.
the scent suggest that if Flornela ever gets to cook the meal she desires, she will have consummated her longing to connect with others and otherness, exiting her small self and finding expansion in all things around her, finally fulfilling her ‘fattened recipe’ – that is, realizing her call to a larger existential experience: a being finally in (extended) beingness. The flower within her (as her name suggests) will have blossomed to maturity to exude perfume – she will become perfume herself traveling between realms, erasing boundaries between self and others/otherness. She will be what she was meant to be: Florbela (a beautiful flower), instead of Flornela, a name made up by the author to denote a certain unnaturalness of being, or a being that has a potential waiting and wanting to be realized.

Evelina, the youngest sister, also appears as a dead, lifeless being, unable to love or allow love, unable to create or relate to something outside of herself:

She laughed once and her laugh was so delayed that she corrected herself right away as if a foreign soul had emerged at her mouth [...] It would hurt her if people said she was pretty. But no one said it. Because apart from her father, there were only the sisters there and they were forbidden from speaking about beauty [...] People said she embroidered birds, as if she transferred to the cloth her repressed flight. Yet, curved down, Evelina never looked at the sky. But that was not the worst. The gravest was that she had never been looked at by the sky. Sometimes, intentionally, she would prick herself. She would look at the bloody tear become pregnant on her finger [...] That blood, outside of her body, was her madness, the summoning of her loving stain. On other occasions, crystal and beautiful sorrow fell on the embroidering cloth. Was she mourning the death of her own mother? No. Evelina was mourning her own death. (Couto 2004a, 13)

This extract reveals in a beautiful and nostalgic way that Evelina has moments of insight, when she feels that her life could be more than what it is. The blood that she sees dripping out of her finger is a substance that walks, as it were, out of her to meet the other selves, to sustain/nourish and find junction with another being – a man, a tree, an entity of any kind – thus symbolizing that she yearns to merge with others and otherness. Her blood is the non-self, the liquidity of being (her ability to move beyond herself). And the tears she lets out on the embroidering cloth are similar in their symbolism: they are ‘crystal and beautiful sorrows’ (Couto 2004a, 13) as if reminding her of the potentiality of her own life, a life that wants to be more than what it is at present. The fact that Evelina ‘never looked at the sky’ (Couto 2004a,
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other that is different from the self, as long as each does not try to incorporate the other into self. “Touching can,” Irigaray writes, “place a limit on the reabsorption of the other in the same. Giving the other her contours, calling her to them, amounts to inviting her to live where she is without becoming other, without appropriating herself” (2001, 134).

This story of the three sisters ends with the arrival of a young man who has come from another place. The sisters feel, with his arrival, a stirring of their emotions, a need to connect with him, to find, expand and reaffirm themselves in him. Their minds and bodies open up, their creative energies start to emerge:

The sisters were no longer able to find a mirror on the cloth, the text or the pot. The house was taken by a somersault and the heart by a commotion. The young women bathed, combed and perfumed themselves. Water, comb and perfume: vengeances against all that they had not lived. Gilda rhymed ‘life’ with ‘nakedness’, Florina seasoned her food with aphrodisiacs, Evelina made her dress transparent, for ardors want to be assuaged and loves want to find a bed. And so the end of the delayed destiny was approaching (Couto 2004a, 14).

However, the encounter between the sisters and the masculine other never really materializes because their own father, jealous of the arrival of this other man, who threatens to take away his daughters, reaches for him:

And in front of the terrified daughters, the harsh arm of the father pushed the young man’s body. And then the world collapses in front of their eyes. The two men kiss tenderly and eternally. Stars of amazement shone in the eyes of the three sisters, in the hands that gripped each other in secret multiplied vengeance. (Couto 2004a, 14–15)

The two men join one another leaving the sisters alone, once again reinforcing and reinstating the idea of the isolated self, the self that does not find isolation, enlargement, self-discovery and reaffirmation in the body/self of the different other. There is no place for others or otherness and thus the self remains isolated, contracted, trapped in the smallness of isolated ego, and ultimately unfulfilled. The arrival of the young man signaled, for a brief moment, the possibility of the extension of the self, the self-hugging/caressing the other, but the isolated ego/self refuses to let the other enter, it refuses to be broken, to find ground and fulfillment outside of itself, even if unconsciously that is what it yearns for. Note that the father keeps his daughters under his tight grip because he needs them, he needs their otherness to remind

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him of himself even if he refuses to acknowledge them or is unaware that ‘Its daughters were there each for a need: nostalgia, cold and hunger’ (Couto 2004a, 11). The problem is that his relationship with them is not healthy or respectful of their differences, given that they cannot be themselves and fulfill their desires. They live for the father, under the law of the father, unable to really create, to be real poets, real cooks, real embroiderers. Their artistic deep desires (their yearning to fully be) never materialize.

The fact that the young man comes from outside and then joins the father, causing a collapse of the world, also denotes the idea that Mozambique overly relies on things foreign and forgets to look at itself, to learn and value the riches of its own land. Here, the women become symbols of the country at large and the men are the external forces plundering the country economically and culturally. The (Mozambican) world collapses because of this over-allegiance to external forces.

Understood like this, the nostalgia, cold, and hunger that the father feels is in fact caused by his detachment from the land, from its cultural values, from the traditions of Mozambique, which follow a more holistic, animistic and relational conception of the universe and life, characterized by communal inter-aid, mystical apprehensions of reality and affiliations with the dead ancestors and other non-human entities, such as trees, stones or stars. The father feels hungry and cold because he follows none of these values, thus remaining alone and isolated. He feels ‘sandade’ (deep nostalgia/sadness) within him because some part of him knows that life, his life, is more than what he is allowing it to be – life ‘yearns’ to reach its potential, it calls for more. The father feels a void, an incompleteness, which he tries to fill by controlling his daughters. Yet the proper remedy would be to regain access to a holistic view of the universe, to connect with others and otherness instead of incorporating them into self, thus annihilating both self and others/otherness – committing cannibalism, and even self-cannibalism if we recall Senghor’s sense of things. As Senghor posits when referring to the African personality,

[the African] does not begin by distinguishing himself from the object, the tree or stone, the man or animal or social event. He does not keep it at a distance. He does not analyze it. Once he has come under its influence, he takes it as a blind man, still living, into his hands. He does not fix or kill it. He turns it over and over in his supple hands, he feels it […] Our subject abandons his I to sympathize and identify himself with the THOU. He dies to himself to be reborn in the Other. He does not assimilate, he is assimilated. He does not kill the other life, he strengthens his own life
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through it. He lives with the *Other* in a communal life, lives in *symbiosis*: he is born-with and thereby knows the *Other*. Subject and object are dialectically confronted in the very act of knowing one another. It is a long caress in the night, an intimacy of mingled bodies, the act of love, from which the fruit of knowledge is born. (1963, 29–32)

Given this, Couto’s use of the word ‘*sandade*’ is highly significant, for it talks of a yearning of which we do not really know the genesis. In this context, this word implies that the father’s unconscious is mourning the loss of wonder and holistic integration that comes when we allow ourselves to be guided by our multiple intelligences and attempt to converse or connect with the otherness of the universe – a way of being highly valued in traditional African societies. This ‘*sandade*’ is thus a yearning for the greater, which is to say the integrated self, the ‘grand self’, which is not permitted to be. The father feels cold and hunger because he is stopping himself from being in the highest sense. It is also important to note that Couto uses the word ‘*swarne*’ when referring to the role that the sisters play in the father’s life – ‘his daughters were there each for a need [*swarne*]: nostalgia, cold and hunger’ (Couto 2004a, 11). The word ‘*swarne*’ implies help, rescue, aid, assistance: it is a temporary action that will disappear only when the person offering the assistance dies or goes away. It is not the ultimate salvation of someone, given that we are always alone in one sense and it is up to us to find ways of being with others and otherness, even when they do not appear to be there. As Couto writes, ‘They were the daughters of the widower Rosalda, who, since his wife had passed, had isolated himself so much that his daughters had forgotten even the accent of other thoughts’ (Couto 2004a, 11), implying that the father lost himself when he lost his wife (i.e. the land and its values), and could no longer find the assurance, happiness and enlarged selfhood he had when the wife (land) was alive. He was removed from the Mozambican ways of being, a widower without a wife, mourning a great loss.

In line with Irigaray’s and Senghor’s thinking, then, the father is practicing an ontology of otherness as he does now allow otherness to remain otherness: he ate his daughters’ life, so to speak, rather than allowing them to be themselves, and consequently he could not find himself in them given that they were basically like him, his own mirror – masculinized entities whose femininity could not emerge and remind him of himself. He had kept them with him for selfish reasons. He did not think of their own needs, their own desires and therefore he remained alone and they remained alone. The arrival of the other male and the father’s attraction for him only signals that the former was still

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in himself, had always been in himself, isolated in his male ego. This other male is just another mirror of himself, like his daughters had been. He was alone, he had always been alone and he remained alone.

The story ends with the words: ‘There are many suns. But there is only one day, for Rosalda and the visitor that was the day – the last one’ (Couto 2004a, 15). The possibility of the existence of multiple selves (symbolized here via men and women) is shattered and we end up with many suns, many masculine selves who impose upon the other selves (the feminine selves), erasing and annihilating them. But the irony is that by annihilating the feminine self, the masculine self is also annihilated and thus this is the last day for Rosalda and the visitor; the last day of their existence because they ate one another in each other, like perpetually hungry cannibals, consuming their selfhood in their sameness, rather than allowing the otherness of the women to come into them and remind themselves of themselves, to paraphrase Irigaray. That day of the encounter offered a chance for expansion of the self: it was a day of light, of possibilities, of potential real births, but it was eaten up by the suns. The suns symbolize the male, rational, one-dimensional ontology and epistemology, often associated with the traditional Western world and modernity, which refuses plurality of cognition and values, and imposes itself as the way to be, and know, and live. The day symbolizes the feminine, the creative and the multidimensional – a symbol that is also present in Couto’s collection of short stories, *Contos do nascor da terra* (Stories of Earthrise) (1997), where Couto includes the following message in the introduction:

> It is not the light of the sun that we lack. For millennia a great star has lit the earth but despite that we have not really learned how to see. The world needs to be seen in another light: the light of the moon, which shines with respect and tenderness. Only moonlight reveals the feminine side of things. Only the moon reveals the intimacy of our earthly abode. We need not sunset. We lack Earthrise. (1997, 7)

Moreover, the very structure of the story reinforces the idea of the self wanting to lose itself into others/otherness but failing to do so. The first part of ‘The Three Sisters’ focuses on the sisters’ inability to be themselves and the imposition of the father’s way on them: they were like the father, a mirror of his ways, forbidden from giving birth to their own unique and respected self, equal before the other. The second, third and fourth parts have the following subtitles: ‘Gilda: The Rhyme Maker’; ‘Florina: The Recipe Follower’; and ‘Evelina: The Embroiderer’. In these sections, the sisters’ occupations are described
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we are alone, we forget we are two separate individuals or entities, we become one, that is, when everything is, as this poem tells us. This act of merging is an act of forgetting the self, an entrance into the grand self. Furthermore, what permits this relational magic and merging is a language that is poetic, restless and creative, always deferring meaning, always searching for new ways of saying and seeing for it is aware of its own insufficiency. Such language is a code of sorts that conjures up a ‘third eye’ that can allow us to peek into, and momentarily inhabit, the grandness of ourselves and the universe. This language, then, is magic, it has a divine vocation, it is capable of (almost) naming that which may be unnameable in (real) human terms, and in so doing has the capacity to produce enchantment. This language is the window that we can ourselves open in our own isolated and lonely house (self) to allow an expanded view: the miraculous guiding candle that enables us to experience cosmic citizenship, travel through the vast spaces and mysteries of a wider reality, if only for a moment, if only in imagination. It is a virtual reality of sorts, shown through the diaphanous and porous metaphors that our (human) language can summon up, but it may be all we need: to be.

Works cited


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in detail and we are told how, though they have moments of true creative insight, their personal product (creation) is always suppressed by their own isolation and the stiff codes they follow and thus they cannot truly create. The fact that our narrator devotes a section to each of the sisters confirms a willingness to give them a voice, a unique one, to make them persons, different from the father, the masculine other. The last part of the story, subtitled ‘All for Each Other and All for No One’, much like the first one, reinforces again the idea of isolation: the sisters are for each other and likewise the men, and therefore no relational identity can be forged. The genders cannot find (or reaffirm) in the other their own different selfhood, and both end up incomplete, unfulfilled and unexpanded: they fail to attain fecundity through the act of the (relational) caressing of the other, to use Irigaray’s imagery once again. They fail to abandon their ‘I to sympathize and identify themselves’ with the THOU’, in the words of Senghor (1965). Along the same vein, the epistemologies and ontologies of the (Mozambican) land are also suppressed by the masculinized and Westernized orders (and others) that impose sameness through over-adherence to monocultural and rational paradigms.

Couto calls to our attention the importance of finding wholeness in the other and the otherness that is both around us – in the men and women we deal with every day or the dog or the tree or the stone that we can see, feel, and touch – and also far away from us, in the stars above us, or the moon or the immensity of the sky. Our isolated body and soul are the vehicles that can allow us to transcend ourselves and, in so doing, become closer to our truer existential predicament that aches to leave the prison of the isolated self, exit solitude and connect with all the brothers and sisters of the universe. This act of becoming closer to the self while at the same time becoming closer to the other/otherness is the ultimate act of love, love for the self, for the other, for all there is. Couto beautifully articulates this relational love, this magic, in the poem ‘Da saudade e da urgência’ (Of Yearning and Urgency) from the collection Vagas e lumes:

Love me / now / before the word arrives. // Touch me, / before there is world. // Kiss me, / before the kiss starts. // Undress me, / so that I can forget that I have a body. // Give me back, / the kingdom where I was god. // Love me, / until we are no longer two. // Love me. // And everything will be afterwards. (2014, 86)

The magic resides in allowing the other and the otherness to come onto us to such an extent, even if only momentarily, that we forget
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