

Writing on Behalf of Those Women ‘Que Não [?] Têm Escrita’

Gendered Boundaries Inside and Outside the Fiction of Mia Couto

Eu vou trabalhando, lutando, tentando dar voz aos que não a têm [...]. Tento desenterrar alguns pontos obscuros, aquelas realidades obscurecidas pela sociedade.

[‘I go on working, fighting, trying to give voice to those who are voiceless [...]. I try to unearth some obscure points, those realities hidden by society.’]

Paulina Chiziane¹

In an interview given in August 2015, Mozambican author Mia Couto describes himself as a hybrid individual whose identity is made up of ‘contradictory worlds’: ‘I’m a white guy and an African; the son of Europeans and Mozambicans; a scientist living in a very religious world; a writer in an oral society’.² Couto describes the plurality of his identity with an image that recurs frequently in his work, the crossing of a boundary — in this case, the road that separated his family’s colonial-style residence in Beira from the black children with whom Couto was encouraged to mix as a child. Boundaries have always been important in Mia Couto’s literary work. In his texts, the crossing of frontiers highlights the arbitrary nature of the boundary traversed, and implies the (potential) collapse of a wall that had previously separated two categories. For example, in ‘Identidade’, the first poem of the 1983 collection of poetry *Raiz de Orvalho*, the ‘need’ to become someone else, ‘um outro’, is evoked in a text where the frontier between the present and the future is blurred, as the poet finds himself simultaneously dying in one world, and being born in a present-future reality:

No mundo que combato
morro

¹ Paulina Chiziane in an interview with Rosália Estelita Gregório Diogo. ‘Paulina Chiziane: As Diversas Possibilidades de Falar Sobre o Feminino’, *Scripta*, vol. 14 (27) (2010), p. 182.

² Maya Jaggi, ‘Mia Couto: “I am white and African: I like to unite contradictory worlds”’, *Guardian*, 15 August 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/aug/15/mia-couto-interview-i-am-white-and-african-i-like-to-unite-contradictory-worlds>, [accessed 2 September 2016].

no mundo por que luto
nasço (RO, 13)

[In the world in which I fight
I die
in the world for which I fight
I am born]³

These lines foreshadow Couto's interest in the liminal spaces along boundaries as areas of artistic creation; zones typically created by either rendering the frontiers between two ordinarily separate categories porous, or by removing the boundary between them entirely. For example, in 'Palavra que desnudo', another poem from *Raiz de Orvalho*, Couto employs the Portuguese word 'fronteira', only to undermine its usual meanings as either a line dividing two or more categories, or one that marks the extremity of a territory:⁴

percorro a imperceptível
fronteira do meu corpo
e sangro
nos teus flancos doloridos (RO, 17)

[I cross over the imperceptible
frontier of my body
and bleed
on your aching flanks]⁵

³ English translations of quotations in Portuguese are my own renderings unless otherwise stated. Lines 11-14 of 'Identidade' (dated September 1977) in *Raiz de Orvalho e Outros Poemas* (Lisboa: Caminho, 1999), p. 13.

⁴ The Porto Editora Online dictionary gives the following five definitions for the entry '*fronteira, nome feminino*':

1. linha que delimita territorialmente um Estado, fixando a sua extensão
2. linha que separa dois países, regiões, territórios, etc.; estrema
3. zona adjacente a essa linha
4. o que separa duas coisas distintas ou contrárias
5. *figurado* limite; termo

- ['1. a line that delimits the territory of a State, marking its extension
2. a line that separates two countries, regions, territories, etc.; boundary line
3. a zona adjacent to this line
4. that which separates two distinct or contrary things
5. *figurative* limit; boundary']

<http://www.infopedia.pt/dicionarios/lingua-portuguesa/fronteira>, [accessed 10 August 2016].

⁵ Lines 9-12 of 'Palavra que desnudo' (dated April 1981) in *Raiz de Orvalho e Outros Poemas* (Lisbon: Caminho, 1999), p. 17.

As the boundary becomes indistinct, so the body of the poet and that of the beloved coalesce into one being — a complete fusion of two entities, male and female, that takes place in the ‘versos [...] tão íntimos’ (RO, 7) [‘very intimate verses’] of Couto’s first collection of poetry.

Following *Raiz do Orvalho*, the implications of Couto’s rupturing of boundaries have moved beyond the merely personal as the author’s concern has become markedly social and political. The image of the boundary, as well as its symbolic dismantling or blurring, appears in many contexts in Couto’s works.⁴ In this article, I examine how boundaries relate specifically to gender in three novels: *Jesusalém* (2009) [‘The Tuner of Silences’], *A Confissão da Leoa* (2012) [‘The Confession of the Lioness’], and *Mulheres de Cinza* (2015) [‘Women of Ash’].⁵ The relationship between boundaries and gender has been studied by Phillip Rothwell in his seminal work *A Postmodern Nationalist: Truth, Orality and Gender in the Work of Mia Couto*, with regard to some of Couto’s earlier collections of short fiction. In the chapter ‘Playing Gam(et)es with Gender: Subverting Orthodoxy Through Sexual Confusion’, Rothwell argues that inside Couto’s fiction, there is frequently a blurring of the boundary between masculinity and femininity, which is dramatized through characters such as the cross-dressing man Zé Paulão from ‘Sapatos de Tação Alto’ [‘High-Heeled Shoes’] and the *machista* Joãotónio, who becomes Joãotónio/Joanatória after his wife becomes more sexually dominant in ‘Joãotónio, No

⁴ For critical studies of boundaries in Mia Couto’s work see, for example, Phillip Rothwell, *A Postmodern Nationalist: Truth, Orality and Gender in the Work of Mia Couto* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004); Bill Ashcroft, ‘The Multiple Worlds of Mia Couto’, in Grant Hamilton and David Huddart, *A Companion to Mia Couto* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2016), pp. 106-24; and Patrick Chabal’s reading of ‘As Baleias de Quissico’ [‘The Whales of Quissico’] in ‘Mia Couto or the Art of Storytelling’, in *A Companion to Mia Couto* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2016), pp. 96-97.

⁵ Throughout the article, I use the following abbreviations in brackets, accompanied by a page reference, after quotations in Portuguese from *Jesusalém* (J), *A Confissão da Leoa* (CL), and *Mulheres de Cinza* (MC). Quotations in Portuguese from *Jesusalém* and *A Confissão da Leoa* are followed by David Brookshaw’s renderings in English, from *The Tuner of Silences* (Windsor, ON: Biblioasis, 2012) and *The Confession of the Lioness* (London: Harvill Secker, 2015) respectively. For Brookshaw’s translations I use the abbreviations in parentheses: *The Tuner of Silences* (TS) and *The Confession of the Lioness* (CoTL). Brookshaw’s translations are also followed by a page number.

Enquanto' ['Joãotônio, For the Time Being']. According to Rothwell, the undermining of a rigid gender binary in these stories 'runs in parallel with his dissolution of other frontiers, most noticeably those of race and class',⁶ as the dismantling of the binary masculinity/femininity leads to a disavowal of 'the innate legitimacy of all boundaries'.⁷ Ultimately, the result of the dissolution of the boundaries between races and social classes, catalyzed by the dismantling of a rigid gender binary, is an 'identity [...] that eschews racial apartheid, rigorous taxonomy, or defined hierarchies'.⁸

Couto's exploratory dismantling of the masculinity/femininity binary takes place within the experimental space of the *conto*. The novels *Jesusalém*, *A Confissão da Leoa*, and *Mulheres de Cinza*, on the other hand, represent lengthy examinations, more appropriate to the novel, of the plight of women who live under absurd and violent patriarchal orders. Gender inside these communities is not rooted in fluidity, as no crossover between masculinity and femininity is permitted.⁹ However, Couto does enact a blurring between masculinity and femininity *outside* these communities, by aligning writing, or at least the sort of writing that Couto champions, to the author's representation of the feminine (fluid, subversive, and plural). The subtle, almost imperceptible dismantling of the masculinity/femininity binary on an extra-diegetic level allows Mia

⁶ Phillip Rothwell, *A Postmodern Nationalist: Truth, Orality and Gender in the Work of Mia Couto* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004), p. 134.

⁷ Phillip Rothwell, *A Postmodern Nationalist: Truth, Orality and Gender in the Work of Mia Couto* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004), p. 156.

⁸ Phillip Rothwell, *A Postmodern Nationalist: Truth, Orality and Gender in the Work of Mia Couto* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004), p. 135.

⁹ The one instance of gender blurring in the three novels occurs in *Mulheres de Cinza* in an analeptic episode recounting the disappearance of Imani's grandfather, Tsangatelo. Imani recalls how one day Tsangatelo decided to emigrate to the diamond mines in South Africa. A year after his departure, a messenger arrives in Nkokolani with the news that Tsangatelo has deliberately got lost in the system of underground mining tunnels. The messenger also reveals that while in South Africa Tsangatelo married a *tshipa*, 'Um desses homens que, entre os mineiros, fazem serviço de mulher' ['One of those men who, amongst the miners, performs a woman's/wife's duties']. On learning that her husband has married a man, Imani's grandmother denies her husband's existence, refusing to recognize his humanity: 'Tsangatelo já não é uma pessoa! É um morto. Tsangatelo morreu' ['Tsangatelo is no longer a person! He's a dead man. Tsangatelo is dead!']. MC, 127-36.

Couto to position himself, in the words of Phillip Rothwell, as a ‘gender ambiguous writer’.¹⁰ This manoeuvring is problematic for several reasons. First, two fictional Mozambican women writers take centre stage in *A Confissão da Leoa* and *Mulheres de Cinza*, whilst flesh-and-blood non-Mozambican poets guide the reader through *Jesusalém* via chapter epigraphs. Real, non-fictional Mozambican women writers are completely absent from the three novels. As such, female Mozambican voices are restricted to the fictional world, and not permitted into the ranks of those real figures of authority that guide the reader through the text. Secondly, Couto problematically ventriloquizes the voice of Imani, the black woman who narrates half of *Mulheres de Cinza*’s chapters, in order to cast her in the role of a spokesperson for those people who do not have access to the written word:

Agora entendo: aprendi a escrever para melhor relatar o que vivi. E nesse relato vou contando a história dos que não têm escrita. (MC, 404)

[‘Now I understand: I learnt to write in order that I might recount better what I’ve been through. And in this account, I will be telling the story of those that do not have writing.’]

Statements like this are deeply problematic given that Mia Couto has become a literary representative for Mozambique to the outside world, ‘Mozambique’s de facto cultural ambassador’.¹¹ Couto’s critical success in Portugal and internationally¹² has led to the exclusion of other voices, resulting in ‘the reduction of a complex culture to the voice of a single man’.¹³ Thus, in suggesting through the voice of a fictional black woman at the end

¹⁰ Phillip Rothwell, *A Postmodern Nationalist: Truth, Orality and Gender in the Work of Mia Couto* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004), p. 138.

¹¹ Hilary Owen, *Mother Africa, Father Marx: Women’s Writing of Mozambique 1948-2002* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007), p. 221.

¹² Couto’s most recent accolades include the 2013 Camões Prize for Literature and the 2014 Neustadt International Prize for Literature. Couto was also one of ten finalists for the 2015 Man Booker International Prize.

¹³ Phillip Rothwell, *A Postmodern Nationalist: Truth, Orality and Gender in the Work of Mia Couto* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004), p. 17. In his chapter ‘Mia Couto & Translation’, Stefan Helgesson lists the following (twenty-one) languages as ones into which Mia Couto’s works have certainly

of *Mulheres de Cinza* that he writes for those who cannot, Couto threatens to impinge on the space of Mozambique's real female prose writers. I argue that Couto's emphasis on women's writing, accompanied by a subtle positioning of his own writings next to those of his fictional female narrators, results in a paradoxical plurality, as Couto's inclusion of fictional spokeswomen (simultaneously for Couto *and* 'os que não têm escrita', i.e. the illiterate) does not lead the reader toward a real diversity; toward the texts of Mozambican women writers such as Paulina Chiziane¹⁴ and Lília Momplé.¹⁵

Mapping Gendered Cartographies Inside *Jesusalém*, *A Confissão da Leoa*, and *Mulheres de Cinza*

Inside *Jesusalém*, *A Confissão da Leoa*, and *Mulheres de Cinza* the boundary is a dual-purpose thematic tool, the two functions of which work in tandem to evoke the rural patriarchal communities that serve as the novels' settings. Couto alternately presents gendered frontiers at their most limiting and at their most fluid. The boundaries that map the social/cultural spaces from which women are excluded are rigidly enforced, whilst Couto blurs the frontier that separates animality from humanity, as the author describes on the one hand the dehumanising process that the male inhabitants of hyper-masculine worlds undergo in the absence of femininity, and on the other the positive metamorphoses

been translated: 'Bulgarian, Catalan, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Norwegian, Polish, Romanian, Serbian, Slovenian, Spanish, Swedish, and Tamil'. Stefan Helgesson, 'Mia Couto in Translation', in Grant Hamilton and David Huddart, *A Companion to Mia Couto* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2016), p. 141 note 1.

¹⁴ Paulina Chiziane was the first Mozambican woman to publish a novel in Portuguese, in 1990. Despite this, the first English translation of one of her novels, *Niketche: Uma História de Poligamia* (Lisbon: Caminho, 2002), was only published in 2016. Paulina Chiziane, *The First Wife*, trans. David Brookshaw (New York: Archipelago, 2016).

¹⁵ Lília Momplé is the author of *Ninguém Matou Suhura* (Maputo: Associação dos Escritores Moçambicanos, 1988) and *Neighbours* (Porto: Porto Editora, 2012). *Neighbours* has been translated into English by Richard Bartlett and Isaura de Oliveira as part of the African Writers Series as *Neighbours: The Story of a Murder* (Oxford: Heinemann, 2001).

that the women of Kulumani experience in *A Confissão da Leoa*. In *Jesusalém*, femininity, linked to plurality and fluidity, ultimately infiltrates the all-male settlement that gives the novel its name via an outsider, a Portuguese woman, whilst in *A Confissão da Leoa*, a dormant, suppressed femininity violently resurges from within the women of Kulumani.

In the patriarchal communities depicted in *Jesusalém*, *A Confissão da Leoa*, and *Mulheres de Cinza*, the roles that women are expected to perform are defined by highly restrictive limits, which set boundaries on where women can and cannot go. As a place where women are forbidden, the settlement of *Jesusalém* provides the most extreme example of enforced boundaries in the three novels. *Jesusalém*'s narrator is Mwanito, and he tells the stories of the titular community's four permanent human residents, plus Tio Aproximado, who lives at the borderline between the settlement and the outside world. *Jesusalém* was established by Silvestre Vitalício, Mwanito's father, following the suicide of Silvestre's wife Dordalma, who had hanged herself following a gang-rape. The settlement serves as a retreat for Silvestre while he mourns Dordalma's death, until a Portuguese woman, Marta, arrives and precipitates the return of *Jesusalém*'s inhabitants to the city from which Silvestre had fled. Silvestre's fear of his past has led to the violent suppression of all that reminds him of his wife, Dordalma. And yet, although Silvestre tries to extinguish Dordalma and his memory of her, his wife's presence haunts the novel's first two sections. Silvestre erects a boundary to separate the exclusively masculine sphere of *Jesusalém* from the outside world, represented by the city — the multiplicity, vibrancy, and progressiveness of which contrast with the arid seclusion of the hunting ground that Vitalício makes into his nation. Silvestre confesses at the novel's end, in a text written by Mwanito, that this frontier was not physical, but psychological: 'A fronteira entre *Jesusalém* e a cidade não foi nunca traçada pela distância. O medo e a culpa foram a única

fronteira' (J, 293) ['The frontier between Jezoosalem and the city wasn't based on distance. Fear and guilt were the only frontier'] (TS, 229).¹⁶ Thus, the boundaries of Silvestre's pseudo-nation are mapped on a cartography of terror and self-loathing, as the shame of his past actions towards his wife is transferred onto a fear of womankind as a whole.

In contrast, Kulumani and Nkokolani, settings of *A Confissão da Leoa* and *Mulheres de Cinza* respectively, have female as well as male inhabitants, although the roles that men and women are made to perform are strictly defined according to the mandates of tradition. *A Confissão da Leoa* is narrated alternately by Mariamar, an inhabitant of the rural village Kulumani and the last surviving daughter of her abusive father Genito Mpepe, and the hunter Arcanjo Baleiro, an outsider contracted by the authorities to hunt a group of lions that are believed responsible for a string of deaths in the local area — including the most recent fatality, Mariamar's sister Silência. Arcanjo initially believes that the lions in Kulumani all have tails and manes, but he soon discovers from various women residents that the feline creatures living in the nearby jungle are not the only lions that hunt and kill in the village. Naftalinda, an outspoken female voice in the community and the wife of Kulumani's Administrator, reveals that another group of lions is in reality the men who rape and kill a cleaning woman called Tandi for accidentally entering an exclusively male zone, the *mvera*. Naftalinda reveals to the outsider Arcanjo that some of Tandi's murderers figure among the local hunters who are competing with Baleiro to track down and kill the lions (CL, 160). Tandi's murder represents the fate that awaits women who transgress the exclusionary, gendered boundaries set by local traditions to keep women away from the sacrosanct zone of masculine initiation.

¹⁶ The name of Silvestre Vitalício's settlement is rendered as 'Jezoosalem' in David Brookshaw's English translation.

Furthermore, that Tandi dies of her injuries because the local nurse, fearing reprisals from the same group of men, refuses to treat her (CL, 161), reveals the murderous efficiency of Kulumani's communal patriarchal system: a mechanism validated by traditional beliefs and in which both men and women are complicit.

The consequences of a woman entering an exclusive, masculine space are also alluded to in *Mulheres de Cinza*, when Chikazi, the mother of the novel's female narrator Imani, explains that when Dubula, one of Imani's brothers, was sent to the jungle at the age of six, where he was circumcised and initiated 'em assuntos de sexo e mulheres' ['in the subjects of sex and women'], that 'desgraça eterna' ['eternal disgrace'] would fall on any woman who dared enter that sacred, masculine space (MC, 59).

Separating the Men from the Beasts

In *Jesusalém, A Confissão da Leoa* and *Mulheres de Cinza*, the violent policing of socially imposed boundaries leads to the blurring of the frontiers between species. In *Jesusalém*, the blurring of the human and animal worlds is implicit in the location of the settlement that gives the novel its name: Jesusalém is an old hunting ground. Hiding out in the arid world of a toxic and wounded masculinity, Silvestre becomes a tyrannical patriarch whose desertion from humanity is consummated through his sexual relationship with a jenny, Jezibela — the animal being a means by which Silvestre may satisfy his sexual urges (J, 106). Silvestre is not the only male character to cross this frontier in the novel. The boundary between the animal and human worlds is also blurred by Couto during Marta's account of the gang-rape of Dordalma in a letter to Mwanito. When Dordalma leaves home to meet her lover Zacaria Kalash, wearing an outfit so stunning that it would 'cegar

um mortal' ['leave mere mortals groping'], the men who stare at her in the streets do so with eyes full of a predatory lust: 'Raiavam nas pupilas dos machos as mesmas dilatadas veias que enchem os olhos dos predadores' ['The males gazed at her, their pupils dilated, their eyes predatory']. This animalistic language returns later in the passage to describe the men who subsequently rape Dordalma: 'Dordalma foi arremessada ao solo, entre babas e grunhidos, apetites de feras e raivas de bicho' (J, 256-57) ['Dordalma was thrown onto the ground amid grunts and salivations, feral appetites and animal frenzy'] (TS, 202).

The local hunters contracted by Kulumani's administrator in *A Confissão da Leoa* undergo a similar metamorphosis in the ceremony that signals the beginning of the hunt for the lions surrounding the village. Arcanjo writes that these men's acts of sexual and physical violence turn them into the very beasts that they hunt:

Durante um tempo os homens dançam e, à medida que rodam e saltam, vão perdendo o tino e, em pouco tempo, desatam a urrar, rosar e sujar os queixos de babas e espumas. Então percebo: aqueles caçadores já não são gente. São leões. Aqueles homens são os próprios animais que pretendem caçar. (CL, 160)

[The men dance for a little longer, and while they are gyrating and jumping they begin to lose their inhibitions, and soon they are screaming, growling, and soiling their chins with froth and spittle. It's then that I understand: Those hunters are no longer humans. They are lions. Those men are the very animals they seek to hunt.] (CotL, 113)

The external threat of the lions, which are believed to be solely responsible for the killings in Kulumani, has created an atmosphere of war in the village. A blind man warns that these lions are by-products of the civil war between the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO, 'Front for the Liberation of Mozambique') and the Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (RENAMO, 'Mozambique Resistance Movement') that ended in Mozambique in 1992.¹⁷ The blind man asserts that the fighting during the civil war has

¹⁷ Initially a military unit funded by the Rhodesian security forces, and later by apartheid South Africa, RENAMO developed into a major opposition force to the ruling party, FRELIMO, during the 1980s. RENAMO is infamous for carrying out massacres and mutilations against rural populations, which included

now been replaced by these lions who terrorize Kulumani's population (*CL*, 119). However, his words will be shown only to be true because the people of Kulumani have transferred their fears onto an external tormentor, the power of which is more imaginary than real.

In *Mulheres de Cinza*, soldiers rather than hunters undergo a process of dehumanization through the activities of their violent profession. *Mulheres de Cinza* is the first novel of a trilogy called *As Areias do Imperador*, which is set in southern Mozambique at the end of the reign of Ngungunyane, the last ruler of the Gaza Empire, the second largest empire ruled by an African.¹⁸ Ngungunyane came to power after the death of Gaza's previous emperor, Muzila, in October 1884, and he immediately began to assert his supremacy over geographical regions that Muzila had begun to lose towards the end of his reign, whilst at the same time negotiating with the Portuguese governor of Lourenço Marques (now Maputo), the seat of the Portuguese colony. These negotiations resulted in an agreement whereby Portugal would recognize Ngungunyane's jurisdiction, in return for several concessions. However, several factors led to a breakdown in the relationship between the Portuguese in Lourenço Marques and Ngungunyane, resulting in a war between the two parties.¹⁹ Ngungunyane was captured by Mouzinho de

the recruitment of child soldiers through an initiation process that involved forcing these children to kill villagers or even members of their own family. The conflict ended with a UN-brokered peace deal in 1992. See Malyn Newitt, *A History of Mozambique* (London: C. Hurst, 1995), pp. 563-77; Malyn Newitt, 'Mozambique', in Patrick Chabal, *A History of Postcolonial Lusophone Africa* (London: C. Hurst, 2002), pp. 209-235.

¹⁸ Ngungunyane's name is normally rendered in English as Gungunhana.

¹⁹ These factors include: the internal problems that beset Gazan society in the 1890s, which were exacerbated by the wars with the Chopi people, a result of the movement of Gaza's capital south; Gaza's increasing isolation following the signing of partition treaties between Portugal and Britain, and the conquest of the Ndebele in 1893, which isolated Gaza as the only surviving independent monarchy in Southern Africa; the outbreak of conflict involving Tsonga chiefs, which brought Tsonga forces (who represented a significant part of the Gaza military) outside Lourenço Marques between October 1894 and January 1895; and the appointment of a hawkish Portuguese commissioner in January 1895, who presented an ultimatum to Gaza in August of the same year. For an account of the fall of the Gaza State, see Malyn Newitt's chapter 'Mozambique: The Making of the Colonial State', in Malyn Newitt, *A History of Mozambique* (London: C. Hurst, 1995), pp. 356-85.

Albuquerque in December 1895, sent to Portugal to be paraded before crowds in Lisbon, and thereafter exiled to the Azores, where he remained for eleven years before his death. The defeat of Ngungunyane came at an opportune time for the Portuguese, who had been humiliated by the other colonial powers with the Ultimatum of 1890.²⁰ For Malyn Newitt, Portuguese ‘pacification’ of the Gaza State was fundamental in shaping modern Mozambique: ‘The end of the Gaza monarchy opened the way for the Portuguese colonial state in the south to achieve some level of organisation and to begin the immediate task of economic exploitation and the longer term process of development’.²¹

Like *A Confissão da Leoa*, *Mulheres de Cinza* has two narrators: Imani, a Portuguese-speaking fifteen-year-old girl from the coastal Chopi tribe, and Germano de Melo, a Portuguese sergeant exiled to Mozambique for taking part in a Republican uprising in Porto, to whom Imani is assigned as an interpreter. War rages between the Portuguese colonial forces that Germano de Melo serves (although with dwindling conviction as the novel progresses) and Ngungunyane’s Nguni forces — with Nkoklani, the village where Imani lives, sitting somewhere in between the two sides of the conflict, as a Mozambican community supporting the Portuguese forces against Ngungunyane, and which sees Ngungunyane’s Nguni as invaders in their territory (*MC*, 20-21).

²⁰ In 1885 the Portuguese Foreign Ministry had produced the famous Mapa Cor-de-Rosa (‘Rose-Coloured Map’), which set out Portugal’s claims in Central Africa, showing a band of Portuguese territory stretching from the western coast of the continent (Angola) all the way across to the east (Mozambique). The Berlin Congress of 1884-85 had seemed to establish effective occupation as the sole admissible criterion for international recognition of European claims in Africa. The British had dismissed the notion that the Portuguese would be able to ensure effective occupation of the disputed regions on the Rose-Coloured Map, and were therefore surprised by the successes that the Portuguese military had achieved in those geographical areas by the end of 1889. The British Foreign Office, fearing public humiliation, drew up a memorandum ‘on the misconduct and deviousness of the Portuguese’, and on 8 January 1890 Lord Salisbury issued an ultimatum to the Portuguese to withdraw all forces active in the disputed areas. Portugal’s acquiescence to Britain’s demands was perceived as a national humiliation in Portugal, with the first Republican uprising in Portugal following soon after in 1891, in Porto. Malyn Newitt, *A History of Mozambique* (London: C. Hurst, 1995), pp. 356-85, pp. 341-55; James Anderson, *The History of Portugal* (Westport, Conn.; London: Greenwood, 2000), pp. 138-39; A. H. de Oliveira Marques, *History of Portugal: Vol. II, From Empire to Corporate State* 2nd Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), pp. 72-75; 110-18.

²¹ Malyn Newitt, *A History of Mozambique* (London: C. Hurst, 1995), pp. 356-85, p. 378.

The war between Gaza's forces and the Portuguese is devastating for the land, transforming the novel's setting into an inferno where the inner demons of the Portuguese and Mozambican soldiers teem, as Couto employs hellish and demonic imagery to evoke the dehumanization of combatants on both sides of the conflict. In an episode from Germano de Melo's final chapter, a group of characters including the sergeant and Imani discover a fire that has destroyed a Portuguese camp, setting off explosives and scaring away the Portuguese soldiers' horses (MC, 395). Soon after, the runaway horses appear before the party like a nightmarish apparition: 'como uma assombração vinda das entranhas da noite' ['like an apparition come from the depths of night']. The animals gallop, 'as crinas acesas pelas fagulhas' ['manes coruscating with sparks'], and rush past 'como se fossem aladas criaturas do apocalipse' (MC, 393-94) ['like winged creatures of the Apocalypse']. The Portuguese bring with them explosives and guns and, contrary to the putative Christian aims of the colonial project, have participated in the creation of scenes of a Christian hell-on-earth. As for the Nguni soldiers, Imani's description of the invaders' commanders, who decorate themselves with *simba* pelts 'até perderem a forma humana' ['until they lose all human resemblance'], joins together the dehumanising language of animality with the vocabulary of warfare. For Imani, this is the purpose of a soldier's uniform, to 'afastar o soldado da sua humanidade' (MC, 24) ['distance the soldier from his humanity']. In climates of fear, as the boundaries between (hu)mankind, on the one hand, and the demonic and animal realms on the other, become blurred, so the warriors, hunters, fathers, and husbands of Jesusalém, Kulumani, and Nkokolani distance themselves from their humanity and transform into the very monsters, physical and oneiric, they claim to fight.

Rewriting Patriarchal Symbols Through Multiplication and Feminisation in *A Confissão da Leoa*

In Couto's work, it is not just men that are transformed in extreme environments. Women also undergo metamorphoses in *A Confissão da Leoa*, as Couto provides feminine counter-examples to the male hunters who transmogrify into brutal animals. Thus, the transformations that take place in the dire, rural landscape of Kulumani are gendered, since male characters often, but not always, experience negative mutations into violent monsters, whilst the female protagonists experience, or manage to catalyse in other characters, more positive transformations. As we have seen, the lions in *A Confissão da Leoa* are not all feline animals. Indeed, in the novel the word 'leão' comes to designate any person who acts with animalistic violence. In the case of the beasts that circle Kulumani, this violence is simply a part of their nature as lions. However, the men who turn into lions do so at the expense of their humanity. One such transmutation takes place in the novel's opening pages, when Genito Mpepe rapes Hanifa Assulua:

A minha mãe ocorreu, então, que por cima dela não estava o seu homem, mas um bicho dos matos, sequioso de seu sangue. Durante o ato amoroso, Genito Mpepe se convertera numa fera que literalmente a devorava. Dissolvida na avidez do outro, ela permanecia paralisada, à mercê dos seus felinos apetites. (CL, 24)

[Then it occurred to my mother that it wasn't her man who was on top of her, but a creature from the bush, thirsty for her blood. During the act of love, Genito Mpepe had turned into a wild beast that was devouring her. Weakened by his fervour, she was helpless, at the mercy of his feline appetite.] (CotL, 10-11)

This transformation of a male character into a 'bicho dos matos' ['creature from the bush'] during a violent act contrasts with Mariamar's meeting with a lioness in her second chapter, where the animal is described as 'delicada e feminina como uma dançarina, majestosa e sublime como uma deusa' (CL, 62) ['delicate and feminine as a dancer, majestic and sublime as a goddess'] (CotL, 40). Whereas Genito's metamorphosis comes

at the expense of his humanity, Mariamar experiences a feeling of (human) kinship with the lioness she encounters. The lioness's 'inquisitive' gaze leads the narrator to believe that the animal recognizes her, and the creature even greets Mariamar 'com respeito de irmã' (CL, 62). ['with a sisterly respect'] (CotL, 40). The sororal link that connects Mariamar and the lioness, as well as the verbs for which the lioness is the grammatical subject, emphasize the creature's humanness. Thus, the lion is a gendered image: when men undergo the metamorphosis from human into beast it is a process of de(hu)manisation and debasement, whilst the lioness is a symbol of a sublime, awesome and, paradoxically, humanized power.

The meeting between Mariamar and the lioness reveals that the lions are the receptacle of many of the fears harboured by the people of Kulumani, especially the men. For the male inhabitants of Kulumani really fear the women they subjugate and exploit. Couto explains race relations in Mozambique at the end of the colonial period in a similar way in his 1999 novella *Vinte e Zinco*. One of that text's epigraphs, an extract from *Voodoo in Haiti* by Alfred Metraux, points to the way in which the relationship between colonizer and colonized is based on fear:

Quanto maior era a subjugação dos negros, mais eles lhe inspiravam medo. [...] Talvez alguns escravos se tenham realmente vingado sobre os seus tiranos – mas o medo que reinava nas plantações tinha origem em mais profundas camadas da alma – era a feitiçaria e o mistério de África que perturbavam o sono dos senhores da “casa grande”. (*Voodoo in Haiti*, Alfred Metraux (1959), quoted in VZ, 11)

[The greater the subjugation of the blacks, the more they provoked fear in the owners of the sugarcane plantations. [...] Perhaps some slaves really had got their revenge on their tyrants — but the fear that reined in the plantations had its origins in deeper layers of soul — it was the witchcraft and the mystery of Africa that disturbed the sleep of the owners of the “casa grande”.]

In *A Confissão da Leoa*, the lioness Mariamar encounters becomes symbolic of the terror that the women of Kulumani inspire in their male subjugators:

Todos acreditam que são leões machos que ameaçam a aldeia. Não são. É esta leoa [...] que tanto terror tem espalhado em todas as vizinhanças. Homens poderosos, guerreiros munidos de sofisticadas armas: todos se prostraram, escravos de medo, vencidos pela sua própria impotência. (CL, 62)

[‘They are all convinced that it is male lions who are threatening the village. It’s not. It’s this lioness...that has spread such terror through the neighborhood. Powerful men, warriors equipped with sophisticated weapons: All of them have prostrated themselves, enslaved by fear, vanquished by their own impotence.’] (CotL, 40)

As the symbol of the fear of the men of Kulumani, the figure of the *leoa* is linked several times to a legend from the novel’s opening, in which Mariamar powerfully declares: ‘Deus já foi mulher’ [‘God was once a woman’]. In this opening myth Mariamar suggests that Nungu, identified as a masculine deity (‘o actual *Senhor*’, my emphasis), is no more than a name that has been foisted upon a divinity which is *essentially* female: ‘Antes de se exilar para longe da sua criação e quando não se chamava Nungu, o actual Senhor do Universo parecia-se com todas as mães deste mundo’ (CL, 13) [‘Before he exiled himself far from his creation, and while he had still not assumed the name of Nungu, the current Lord of the Universe looked like all the mothers in this world’] (CotL, 3). Later in the novel, Mariamar makes a connection between the fear that the men of Kulumani have of their wives and daughters, epitomized by the lioness, with her own story of female divinity, declaring that the source of the men’s fear are the dormant goddesses that rest inside all women (CL, 197). Mariamar’s and Hanifa’s metamorphoses into the lionesses who are pushed into committing violent acts — such as the murders of Igualita and Uminha, killed by their sister Mariamar so that the twins be spared a life of abuse — reveal mother and daughter’s numinous essence, or what passes for divinity in these terrestrial infernos.

By the end of *A Confissão da Leoa*, Arcanjo’s fear of woman’s divine nature turns to awe. When Mariamar drops her journal in front of Arcanjo at the end of the novel, she reveals the opening line of *A Confissão da Leoa*. The hunter realizes that he is surrounded

by goddesses, and that ‘naquele rasgar de mundos, são mulheres que costuram a minha rasgada história’ (*CL*, 269) [‘in that rupturing of worlds, it’s women who stitch together my own ruptured story’] (*CotL*, 192). Even in the fraught situation that Hanifa and Mariamar find themselves, mother and daughter discover ways of combating the violent, patriarchal system that oppresses them. In an environment of immobilising fear, Hanifa transforms into the last lioness, a metamorphosis that, rather than diminish her humanity, augments it — for she acts out of love for her daughters. Thus, the lioness, which sits at the intersection of animality, humanity, and divinity, is a liminal symbol; unlike the male lion, which is characterized by a dehumanized and animalistic violence. The gendered rewriting of these symbols in Mariamar’s and Arcanjo’s journals entails an inversion and appropriation of patriarchal emblems. By the end of the novel, the idea of ‘Deus’ (the patriarchal, Christian God or the African divinity Nungu) as a single, paternal figure has been undermined, feminized, and multiplied into the ‘deusas’ surrounding Arcanjo. Likewise, the male lion as a symbol of masculine strength, since the hunt for the presumed male lions is perceived by the hunters as a way of outwardly proving their masculinity, is transformed into the majestic and, importantly, humanized image of the lioness.

Contaminating Masculine Unity with Feminine Plurality

In *Jesusalém*, *A Confissão da Leoa*, and *Mulheres de Cinza*, access to the female characters Marta, Mariamar, and Imani, is more direct than in Couto’s previous texts. The author dispenses with masculine mediators, in a new and concerted effort to expose his readers to fictional women writers. We do *hear* women’s voices in Couto’s earlier texts, but those who speak are denied the agency of authorship. Their discourse is relayed to us via masculine intermediaries. For example, the source for the tale of ‘Lenda de Namarói’

(a *conto* from *Estórias Abensonhadas*), an unnamed woman, is relegated to anonymity and refused ownership of her legend, as it is implied that our access to the text has only been made possible because a priest recovered it.²² A chain of potential owners of the tale is established and foregrounded at the beginning of the text by the master-author, Couto. He uses a subversive ‘legend’ — in which women, in their capacity as writers and mothers, reclaim their position as originators and creators — to undermine the creation story in Genesis. In Couto’s version, women precede men *and* they are a necessary condition for man’s existence as, according to the legend, men were originally created in an anthropophagous process. Barren women were swallowed by their fertile counterparts. After three days, these infertile women were reborn as the first men (*EA*, 141). Women are required to end man’s sterility in the same way that the exclusively male world of Jesusalém will be barren until Marta, a Portuguese woman, arrives and catalyses the male characters’ departure and their return to the city. In ‘Lenda de Namarói’, women-as-mothers break the deadlock of infertility through their ability to give birth, entailing a dismantling and reconstruction of the patriarchal chain of the account in Genesis. Whereas in Genesis, God makes man in His own image before *subsequently* fashioning woman from one of Adam’s ribs, God is altogether removed in Couto’s secular and subversive rewriting.

Although women are (re)cast in their role as creators in ‘Lenda de Namarói’, this is only achieved in a text that dismantles the account from the Book of Genesis. This brings us back to the crucial paradox that women are placed in the primary role of origination in a text where the source, the unnamed woman, is so far removed from what we come to read. Ultimately, the effect of this distancing is subversive, as the legend is mediated through a

²² For two readings of ‘Lenda de Namarói’, see Phillip Rothwell, *A Postmodern Nationalist: Truth, Orality and Gender in the Work of Mia Couto* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004), pp. 136-41; Elena Brugioni, *Mia Couto: representação, história(s) e pós-colonialidade* (Famalicão: Húmus, 2012), pp. 157-70.

member of the very patriarchal structure that the text undermines. Furthermore, ‘Lenda de Namarói’ subverts Couto’s own introductory note to *Estórias Abensonhadas*, in which the author’s poetic interpretation of the post-war situation in Mozambique is evoked through imagery that links the Coutian theme of the power of dreaming to create new realities, to the language of the male biological role in reproduction: ‘Onde restou o *homem* sobreviveu *semente*, sonho a *engravidar* o tempo’ (EA, 7, my emphasis) [‘Where *man* remained, his *seed* survived, a dream to *impregnate* time’].²³ In the ‘Lenda de Namarói’, the ‘semente’ is the symbol of the inability of the infertile women, who become the first men, to give birth (EA, 141). Conversely, in Couto’s introductory text the word ‘semente’ takes on a meaning much closer to its etymology: dreams are the ‘semen(te)’ that will impregnate time. As such, I agree with Elena Brugioni’s assertion that ‘no conto “Lenda de Namarói” o aparato crítico-conceitual da re-escrita [...] permite encarar a representação literária como uma prática de questionamento das chamadas *grandes narrativas*’ [‘in the *conto* “Lenda de Namarói” the critical-conceptual apparatus of rewriting [...] allows [Couto] to approach literary representation as a way of questioning so-called *grand narratives*’],²⁴ although I would go further and argue that in this subversive text Couto self-reflexively calls into question any attempts to inscribe a unified account of History. Couto’s *estória* is, we ought to remember, only one of many that constitute the collection called *Estórias Abensonhadas*. As one tale amongst many, ‘Lenda de Namarói’ not only questions the status of grand narratives, it casts doubts over any text that aims toward unity or authority, parodying its own status as legend. As such, Couto’s introductory note

²³ The importance of dreaming, and the dire consequences of its denial, are a principal theme of Mia Couto’s first novel *Terra Sonâmbula* (Lisbon: Caminho, 1992), translated into English as *Sleepwalking Land* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2006) by David Brookshaw. For an analysis of the importance of dreams and their relationship to water imagery in Couto’s writings, see Phillip Rothwell ‘Sealing into the Unconscious: The Role of Water in Mia Couto’, in *A Postmodern Nationalist: Truth, Orality and Gender in the Work of Mia Couto* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004), pp. 91-132; Patrick Chabal, ‘Mia Couto or the Art of Storytelling’, in Hamilton and Huddart, pp. 86-105.

²⁴ Elena Brugioni, *Mia Couto: representação, história(s) e pós-colonialidade* (Famalicão: Húmus, 2012), p. 161.

is not entirely subverted as, even if the language of male fertility will be later undermined, the underlying message is the same: we should not be content with the one reality that is foisted upon us by the cultural or religious apparatus of the society in which we live. Rather, we should be open to new realities and not be afraid to create alternatives of our own.

Couto's rewriting of the creation myth from Genesis points to two of the signature features of feminine discourse in his work: texts written by his fictional women are marked by a creative subversion and the production of new realities. However, these new realities are not created as simple counterpoints. Rather, texts like 'Lenda de Namarói' allow a creative multiplicity to seep into a repressive singleness and, once this frontier has been breached, unity becomes necessarily contaminated by plurality. In Couto's fiction, this movement towards multiple and concurrent realities is normally played out by a male protagonist who comes to listen to a variety of voices, some of which belong to women. As soon as characters such as the Italian Massimo Risi in *O Último Voo do Flamingo* (2005) ['The Last Flight of the Flamingo'], or the westernized Mozambican student Mariano in *Um Rio Chamado Tempo, Uma Casa Chamada Terra* ['A River Called Time'] are introduced to a multiplicity of voices, there is no returning to their former way of looking at the world.²⁵ This journey from unity to plurality is also played out in *A Confissão da Leoa* by the male hunter Arcanjo Baleiro, whose character arc recalls that of Izidine from *A Varanda do Frangipani* ['Under the Frangipani Tree'], since both characters play the role of investigators in anti-detective stories.²⁶ As I shall demonstrate

²⁵ *O Último Voo do Flamingo* (Lisbon: Caminho, 2000) and *Um Rio Chamado Tempo, Uma Casa Chamada Terra* (Lisbon: Caminho, 2002) have been translated into English by David Brookshaw respectively as *The Last Flight of the Flamingo* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2004) and *A River Called Time* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2008).

²⁶ *A Varanda do Frangipani* (Lisbon: Caminho, 1996) has also been translated by Brookshaw into English, as *Under the Frangipani Tree* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2001).

later, that a man is the agent of this transition from a repressive unity, aligned to hyper-masculinity, to a plurality associated with femininity, is significant.

Writing on the Cusp of Non-Existence

The texts written by the female narrators of *Jesusalém*, *A Confissão da Leoa*, and *Mulheres de Cinza* perform a similar, subversive function to the tale of the ‘Lenda de Namarói’, with one key difference: the novels are partly narrated by women who have direct access to the (Portuguese) written word. That the Mozambican women Mariamar in *A Confissão da Leoa* and Imani in *Mulheres de Cinza* write in Portuguese is significant, as it highlights the two conditions excluding Mozambican women from the writing of national literature: literacy, and the ability to speak and write in Portuguese specifically. According to World Bank statistics, there is a stark gender imbalance in literacy rates in Mozambique, with only 45.5% of women able to read and write in 2015, compared to 73.4% of men.²⁷ In 1975, when Mozambique officially gained independence from Portugal, the proportion of women who were literate was far smaller, with a rate of around 10%.²⁸ Immediately following independence, the Mozambican revolutionary party, FRELIMO, elected Portuguese as the national language.²⁹ As a result, as Benedict Anderson points out, Portuguese ‘is the medium through which Mozambique is imagined’. The Portuguese language was the one chosen for national unification by ‘radical

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<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?end=2015&locations=MZ&start=1980&view=chart> [accessed 8 January 2016].

²⁸ Benedita da Silva, *Beyond Inequalities 2005: Women in Mozambique* (Maputo, Mozambique: Harare Zimbabwe: Fórum Mulher; Southern African Research and Documentation Centre, Women in Development Southern Africa Awareness, 2006), p. 11.

²⁹ Malyn Newitt, *A History of Mozambique* (London: C. Hurst, 1995), p. 547.

Mozambique’.³⁰ One of the consequences, as explored by Kathleen Sheldon, is that ‘non-Portuguese-speaking women in Mozambique are excluded from the “imagining” of a new Mozambique’. For illiterate women, the exclusion from this imagining is even greater: ‘If print language was more of a marker, illiterate women were even further dismissed’.³¹ For Hilary Owen, the double barrier to the Portuguese language and the written word ‘were relevant factors in delimiting women’s self-identification through nationhood as a narrated process’. Citing Cynthia Ward’s article ‘Bound to Matter: The Father’s Pen and Mother Tongues’, Owen concludes that this double exclusion of Mozambican women illiterate in Portuguese from the written narration of the nation ‘outlines a specific gender politics at work behind the opposition of literate and oral culture in the national imaginary’, where ‘men step forth as nationhood’s “natural” narrators while women, bound to the primary nostalgia of the oral sphere, become, once again, the fantasized, ahistorical, and excessively embodied “other” through which male projections of the national utopia come to be narrated’.³²

In *Jesusalém*, *A Confissão da Leoa*, and *Mulheres de Cinza*, Couto displays an unwavering faith in the power of *escrita* (‘writing’), which he strongly aligns to the feminine. The close association of the feminine to writing is signalled by Marta’s first words in *Jesusalém*: ‘Sou mulher, sou Marta e só posso escrever’ (*J*, 139) [‘I am a woman, I am Marta and all I can do is write’] (*TS*, 110). Silvestre, who forbids women and books from entering *Jesusalém*, makes the same link between femininity and writing, whilst in *A Confissão da Leoa*, Mariamar explains that the written word is a woman’s only ‘weapon’

³⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* Rev. ed. (London; New York: Verso, 2006), p. 134.

³¹ Kathleen Sheldon, *Pounders of Grain: A History of Women, Work, and Politics in Mozambique* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002), p. 130.

³² Hilary Owen, *Mother Africa, Father Marx: Women’s Writing of Mozambique 1948-2002* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007), pp. 21-22.

in a masculine world (CL, 97). Writing serves various functions in the texts. For Mariamar in *A Confissão da Leoa*, the confessional mode allows the simultaneous unloading of her own guilt and the guilt of patriarchy in her confessions of the crimes of Kulumani's corrupt patriarchal practices. Unlike the Catholic confessional, in which the individual confesses their personal sins to a priest, Mariamar's various confessions expose the fundamental problems of a patriarchal-society-gone-wrong. Germano de Melo's letters in *Mulheres de Cinza* perform a similar function, for his confessions are both those of his personal life and those of Portuguese colonialism as practiced in Mozambique at the end of the nineteenth century.

According to Rothwell, for Marta in *Jesusalém* writing is a way of coming to terms with the loss of her lover Marcelo, whilst for Mwanito, the written word grants him access to worlds beyond his father's stifling community.³³ For both Mwanito and Marta, writing is a way of countering silence and absence, which are linked to death in *Jesusalém*. The life-giving potential of writing is placed in opposition, as Rothwell has noted, to naming, the prerogative of patriarchal authority: 'Whereas writing predominantly becomes the preserve of the feminine in *The Tuner of Silences*, naming appears, at first, to be the patriarchal preserve of men, the function of the empty father'.³⁴ The empty father Silvestre, formerly Mateus Ventura, renames the five inhabitants of his hamlet in an attempt to take control of language. This control is consummated through the act of inscription in the 'censo populacional' ['population census'], but Silvestre's servant

³³ Phillip Rothwell, 'Jesusalém: Empty Fathers and Women's Texts', in Grant Hamilton and David Huddart, *A Companion to Mia Couto* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2016), pp. 163-68. See Grant Hamilton's chapter, 'Trauma: Repetition & Pure Repetition in *The Tuner of Silences*', for an analysis of the workings of trauma in *Jesusalém*. Grant Hamilton and David Huddart, *A Companion to Mia Couto* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2016), pp. 170-87.

³⁴ Phillip Rothwell, 'Jesusalém: Empty Fathers and Women's Texts', in Grant Hamilton and David Huddart, *A Companion to Mia Couto* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2016), p. 164. For an analysis of the trope of the empty father in Portuguese literature see Phillip Rothwell, *A Canon of Empty Fathers: Paternity in Portuguese Narrative* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007).

Zacaria Kalash, who is appointed scribe, highlights the difference between the acts of writing and inscription: ‘Descuple, Vitalício. É escrever ou inscrever?’ (J, 43) [‘Sorry, Vitalício. Is it write or inscribe?’] (TS, 35 — translation modified). Couto suggests that to inscribe is to attempt to crystallize the named individual and thereby control them, whilst writing is characterized by its potentially creative fluidity.

In *A Confissão da Leoa*, the liquid nature of Couto’s feminine discourse contaminates the act of naming in Mariamar’s sixth chapter, ‘Um rio sem mar’ [‘A River Without Sea’], through the image of Mariamar’s impossible daughter: ‘Espuma’. Mariamar imagines naming the child that she will never have, and therefore never name, after the foamy waves of which she has always dreamed. This impossible dream is only made possible in a textual landscape where Mariamar can counter the infertility imposed upon her by her abusive father in the physical world.

The same theme of writing against absence, silence, and therefore death is prevalent in *Mulheres de Cinza*. For Imani, writing is chiefly a way of ensuring that the oral narratives of her family are not lost. Imani’s writing of these untold stories is a development of her father’s practice of scratching the names of the casualties of the war with Ngungyane into the ground with a sharpened stake (MC, 48). Imani makes the link between her father’s activities and her own project at the end of *Mulheres de Cinza*:

Agora entendo: aprendi a escrever para melhor relatar o que vivi. E nesse relato vou contando a história dos que não têm escrita. Faço como o meu pai: na poeira e na cinza escrevo os nomes dos que morreram. Para que voltem a nascer das pegadas que deixamos. (MC, 404)

[‘Now I understand: I learnt to write in order that I might recount better what I’ve been through. And in this account, I will be telling the story of those that do not have writing. Like my father, I write the names of the dead in the dust and the ash. In order that they may be reborn out of the footsteps that we leave behind.’]

As the scribe who narrates the story of those who cannot write, Imani becomes a literal embodiment of Mozambican orature; of the names written in the earth by her father Katini and the oral narratives of her grandfather Tsangatelo (MC, 130-31; 141-42) that risk being forgotten because they have not been written down. Hilary Owen has argued that one of the challenges for Mozambican woman writers is the construction of a narrative subject 'at the intersection of written Portuguese and oral African vernaculars': 'The figure of "woman as writer" effectively finds itself reified as oral matrix in a way that militates against conscious female agency using linguistic hybridization to women's own political ends'.³⁵ In ventriloquizing his fictional female scribe as the teller of the lost stories of Mozambique's history, Couto effectively makes Imani into the vehicle through which an oral matrix may be filtered. Thus, in *Imani*, Couto attempts to combine the traditionally masculine enterprise of narrating the Mozambican nation, through a critical revision of a key moment in Mozambique's history,³⁶ with the oral sphere to which Mozambican women have often been relegated.

Within the narrative of *Mulheres de Cinza*, Couto underlines the urgency of having Imani narrate the stories of her family by making her the last surviving daughter of her father and mother. In *A Confissão da Leoa*, Mariamar is also the only survivor out of her sisters, meaning that she too bears the burden of responsibility for telling both her mother's and her dead sister's stories. The silencing and forgetting that constantly threaten to engulf the women, of *A Confissão da Leoa* and *Mulheres de Cinza*, serve as another, subtle, justification for the author to tell women's stories. However, even though for Couto

³⁵ Hilary Owen, 'Third World/Third Sex: Gender, Orality and a Tale of Two Marias in Mia Couto and Paulina Chiziane', *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, Vol. 84 (4) (2007), p. 480.

³⁶ For an analysis of Couto's first attempt at a critical revision of history, the novel *O Outro Pé da Sereia* ('The Mermaid's Other Foot'), see Carmen Lucia Tindó Secco, 'The Other Feet of History: A Reading of *Choriro* by Ungulani Ba Ka Khosa and *O Outro Pé da Sereia* by Mia Couto', in Ana Mafalda Leite, Hilary Owen, Rita Chaves, Livia Apa, *Narrating the Postcolonial Nation: Mapping Angola and Mozambique* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013), pp. 45-65.

the pen is the only way out of enforced silence, he unfortunately does not seem to recognize the pens of real Mozambican women. This failure to recognize the writings of Mozambique's female authors becomes apparent when we consider the identity of the writers who sign the epigraphs in *Jesusalém*. Except for the Herman Hesse extract that precedes the novel, and the Jean Baudrillard text that introduces the novel's second section, all the epigraphs that preface the chapters of *Jesusalém* are authored by women, including the Portuguese poet Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, the Brazilian poets Hilda Hilst and Adélia Prado, and the Argentinian writer Alejandra Pizarnik.³⁷ Mozambican women writers are conspicuous in their absence, and indeed Marta, the only female scribe in *Jesusalém*, is a white Portuguese woman.³⁸ The lack of Mozambican women writers will be filled by Mia himself in the two novels that follow *Jesusalém*, as we see a determined effort in *A Confissão da Leoa* and *Mulheres de Cinza* to expose writings authored by fictional Mozambican women, and unadulterated by editors — such as the Catholic priest Elia Ciscato in 'Lenda de Namarói' — to his readership. And yet, Couto himself seems to fulfil the same role as Elia Ciscato in 'Lenda de Namarói'. In his reading of the *conto*, Phillip Rothwell argues that Elia Ciscato inhabits a 'third-gendered-space': 'the de-sexed celibate who dons a frock to celebrate the Eucharist and who is simultaneously the guardian of Christian orthodoxy'. Rothwell argues that a 'network of perspectives is established' in the text, with Mia Couto, 'the gender-ambiguous writer'

³⁷ For an analysis of the significance of *Jesusalém*'s epigraphs see Phillip Rothwell, 'Jesusalém: Empty Fathers and Women's Texts', in Grant Hamilton and David Huddart, *A Companion to Mia Couto* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2016), pp. 161-63.

³⁸ This problem persists in *A Espada e a Azagaia* ['The Sword and the Assegai'], the sequel to *Mulheres de Cinza*. The epigraphs in *A Espada e a Azagaia* are taken from a variety of sources, many of which are non-literary. The only epigraph written by a non-fictional woman writer is the tercet penned by Portuguese poet Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, which precedes Chapter 38. Otherwise, there are several epigraphs attributed to fictional(ized) female characters from the novel, such as Queen Impibekezane, Germano de Melo's Italian friend Bianca Vanzini, and Imani's mother Chikazi. *A Espada e a Azagaia* (Lisbon, Caminho, 2016).

sitting at the top of the authorial chain.³⁹ Although, in *Mulheres de Cinza*, the first — fictional — intermediary (Ciscato) has been removed, the second mediator, the master-narrator Couto, has not. Feminine discourse is still distilled through a male storyteller, a cis-man who takes a linguistically feminized name, Mia,⁴⁰ and manoeuvres himself into a position as a writer who shares many of the traits of his own fictional women writers. As such, Imani's assertion that she writes for those who do not have access to the written word is a justification for Couto's own enterprise, as a writer of novels (such as *A Confissão da Leoa*) in which a fictional woman narrator exposes the brutal reality of a rural patriarchy. Imani is not an autonomous agent: she is a fiction created by Mia Couto. Thus, Imani's justification for writing on behalf of the pen-less is by extension Couto's too. I would argue that this boundary, the one between narrator and author, is one that Couto does not and cannot successfully dismantle — if nothing else because it is a frontier that lies outside the textual worlds he creates. It is one thing to create textual spaces in which one may dream of a world where gender is not a barrier, but it is another to suggest that the reader should forget the author's background in a world where gender clearly is important. Couto's stated aim is to give life to the silenced voices of orature through the written word. To reach that Coutian plurality, it is important to remember that Mia's women are fictions written by a man, and not adequate replacements for the writings of Mozambique's flesh-and-blood women.

However, the boundary between masculinity and femininity is not the only frontier that threatens to dissolve outside the novels. As Rothwell argues, the blurring of the sacrosanct frontier between masculinity and femininity is often accompanied by a

³⁹ Phillip Rothwell, *A Postmodern Nationalist: Truth, Orality and Gender in the Work of Mia Couto* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004), pp. 137-38.

⁴⁰ Couto explains that he owes his sobriquet to a love of cats. Phillip Rothwell, *A Postmodern Nationalist: Truth, Orality and Gender in the Work of Mia Couto* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004), p. 133.

dismantling of other boundaries, such as those that separate racial and social categories.⁴¹

In the case of racial boundaries, Couto has subtly, normally via the voices of his characters, invited us to rethink what the word ‘race’ means in several of his works. In the collection of short stories *Cada Homem É uma Raça* (1990) [‘Every Man is A Race’], Couto appropriates the term ‘raça’ and redefines it in a manoeuvring that encourages the reader to ignore, at least while the book is open, that the author is white. In the book’s epigraph, attributed to the seller of birds from ‘O embondeiro que sonhava pássaros’ [‘The Bird-dreaming Baobab’],⁴² Couto proposes an alternative definition for race, which suggests that it is often a cultural label rather than a useful biological classification: ‘Minha raça sou eu mesmo. A pessoa é uma humanidade individual. Cada homem é uma raça’ (*CHR*, 9) [‘My race is me myself. A person is an individual humanity. Every man is a race’]. This new definition, which encourages us to ignore the author’s white skin, is put forward by the voice of a black man problematically ventriloquized by Couto. Similarly, in *O Outro Pé da Sereira* (2006) [‘The Mermaid’s Other Foot’] the black businessman Casuarino points to the arbitrary nature of racial purity by asserting that globalisation has meant that we live in an ‘era da mulatização global’ [‘era of worldwide mulattozation’] and, as such, ‘desde Caim somos todos mulatos’ (*OPS*, 311) [‘since Cain, we are all mulattos’]. This is not to say that Couto believes that race as a cultural/social category is unimportant in Mozambican society: his works clearly attest to the contrary. Couto creates textual spaces in which race and gender can be shown to be no more than cultural constructs. Couto’s ‘disavowal of the innate legitimacy of all boundaries’⁴³ may occur

⁴¹ Phillip Rothwell, ‘Playing Gam(et)es with Gender: Subverting Orthodoxy Through Sexual Confusion’, in *A Postmodern Nationalist: Truth, Orality and Gender in the Work of Mia Couto* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004), pp. 133-57.

⁴² The English translation of this *conto* appears in *Every Man is a Race*, trans. David Brookshaw (Cambridge, Eng.: Proquest LLC, 2008), pp. 31-37.

⁴³ Phillip Rothwell, *A Postmodern Nationalist: Truth, Orality and Gender in the Work of Mia Couto* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004), p. 156.

inside the textual universes that he creates. The problems arise when the blurring of the political frontiers between masculinity and femininity, and different races, threatens to occur outside the text. The third-gendered-space that appears in several experimental short stories from Couto's earlier collections, as well as the speculative achromatic space of *Cada Homem É uma Raça*, cannot be inhabited by Mia Couto himself, who writes in a world that is still governed by boundaries.