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Memory is of the Future: Tradition and Modernity in Contemporary Novels of Africa and the African Diaspora

A memória é do futuro: tradição e modernidade em romances contemporâneos africanos e da diáspora africana

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MEMORY IS OF THE FUTURE: TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN CONTEMPORARY NOVELS OF AFRICA AND THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

Abstract: In "Memory is of the Future: Tradition and Modernity in Contemporary Novels of the African Diaspora" I explore comparative possibilities among examples of the contemporary novel of the African diaspora – Toni Morrison (USA) and Maryse Condé (Guadaloupe); and African novels written in Portuguese by Pepetela (Angola), and Mia Couto (Mozambique). I attempt to understand the way writers position themselves towards the past and the future of their communities and nations. As their common paradigm is colonial, the discussion of tradition versus modernity, as well as the relation between memory and history gain a special relevance. To foster my discussion I shall be using a postcolonial theoretical framework resorting mainly to Enrique Dussel, Édouard Glissant, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos.

Keywords: African literature, literature of the African diaspora, postcolonial theory, tradition and modernity.

A MEMÓRIA É DO FUTURO: TRADIÇÃO E MODERNIDADE EM ROMANCES CONTEMPORÂNEOS AFRICANOS E DA DIÁSPORA AFRICANA

Resumo: Em "Memory is of the Future: Tradition and Modernity in Contemporary Novels of the African Diaspora" analiso comparativamente exemplos de romance contemporâneo de escritoras da diáspora africana – Toni Morrison (EUA) e Maryse Condé (Guadalupe); e dos escritores africanos de língua portuguesa, Pepetela (Angola) e Mia Couto (Moçambique). Tratando-se de casos inscritos num mesmo paradigma colonial, na análise de como se posicionam em relação ao passado e ao futuro das suas nações e comunidades, assumem relevância tópicos específicos, como a tradição e a modernidade ou a memória e a história. Toda a discussão será orientada por uma linha teórica pós-colonial, em que destaco autores como Enrique Dussel, Édouard Glissant e Boaventura de Sousa Santos.

Palavras-chave: literatura africana, literatura da diáspora africana, teoria pós-colonial, tradição e modernidade.

> *Memory discourses are absolutely essential to imagine the future and to regain a strong temporal and spatial grounding of life and the imagination in a media and consumer society that increasingly voids temporality and collapses space.*
>
> Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts* (6)

If we agree with Édouard Glissant, the poet and theoretician from Martinique, that the writer alone can tap the unconscious of a people and apprehend its multiform culture to provide forms of memory capable of transcending "nonhistory" (Glissant, 2010), literature is a privileged source to reveal the writers' ability to read the future of their communities and their nations in a reassessment of the past and tradition.

In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur exalts poetry for preserving memory while the instances of power often silence and obliterate it for political interests:

> [...] only poetry preserves the force of unforgetting [...] Poetry knows that the political rests on forgetting the unforgettable [...] the voice of the unforgetting memory, excluded from the arena of power by the forgetful memory bound to the prosaic refounding of the political. [...] The fortifying use of dissensus, the echo of the unforgetting memory of discord. (2004: 501)

Michael Rothberg, in his 2009 book, *Multidirectional Memory*, attempts to bring together individual and collective memory, memory and identity, leading to an articulation of different histories (such as the Holocaust, New World slavery, colonialism, and racism). This new approach to memory will foster the interaction of different historical memories – what he calls "multidirectional memory" –, against a sense of competitive memory, and generates a productive, intercultural dynamic, for "histories are implicated in each other" (*ibidem*: 313). Rothberg shares the political philosopher's, Nancy Fraser's concern about "reframing justice in a globalizing world" (Fraser, 2005) and speaks for the ethical dimension of multidirectional memory and its potential to build solidarity in our world (Rothberg, 2009).

In this essay I chose to explore comparative possibilities among examples of the contemporary novel of the African diaspora – by African American and Afro-Caribbean writers –, and African novels written in Portuguese (one from Angola, the other from Mozambique), in order to understand the way different writers position themselves towards the future of their communities/nations through their positioning towards the past and tradition.

My choice was inspired by both Glissant's and Ricoeur's valuing of literature for its commitment to history and memory, against the obliteration of the past by official discourses of power. The work of the poetical imagination (poetry taken here in a general sense) is to preserve memory and history (Glissant), raising the voice of resistance and dissent against forgetful power (Ricoeur). As all my examples adjust to a colonial paradigm, the discussion of tradition *versus* modernity, as well as the relation between memory and history gain a special relevance. To foster my discussion I shall be using a postcolonial theoretical framework resorting mainly to Enrique Dussel, Édouard Glissant, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos.

Rothberg's reconfiguring of collective memory and group identity in transnational and transethnic terms is also important in my assessment. Very productive is his highlighting of the role of intellectuals and artists from marginalized and oppositional groups in making visible "shared histories of racism, spatial segregation, genocide, diasporic displacement, cultural destruction, and – perhaps most important – savvy and creative resistance to hegemonic demands" (2009: 23). However, his study, following extensive work on the Holocaust, is mainly focused on the memory of traumatic events. My focus here is not specifically on trauma, although I concede that there is a common trait of violence in the memory of slavery, colonialism and racism. I rather concentrate on the recovery of memory and rehabilitation of traditional knowledges devalued and suppressed by hegemonic cultures in the context of postcolonial systems. Useful for my reflection nevertheless is the dynamics of solidarity which multidirectional memory is able to foster and its opening up of an "optimistic sense of possibilities for the future" (*ibidem*: 309).

The postcolonial theoretical perspectives offered by Enrique Dussel, Édouard Glissant and Boaventura de Sousa Santos are primarily useful to overcome polarities and dualisms, and envisage more insightful ways to revise the past, inform the present and build the future. Dussel proposes the notion of "transmodernity", in which both modernity and its negated alterity (the victims) co-realize themselves in a process of mutual "creative fertilization" (1993: 76); Glissant advances a "Poetics of Relation" which adopts the rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari, 2007) as an image for the path taken by identity, which "is no longer completely within the root but also in Relation" (Glissant, 2010: 18); Santos proposes a critical and emancipatory thinking, which will take into account ideas and conceptions that were marginalized by hegemonic modernity – a "postmodernism of opposition" (1998, 2010).

Particularly in the colonial and postcolonial[1] contexts I am addressing in this essay, the unbalanced power relations that necessarily interweave the relationships between colonizer and colonized have the strongest influence in the imposition of hierarchical conceptions of culture, as well as in concomitant cultural distortion and obliteration of past events. To include and activate the point of view of the victims of modernity, which was inaugurated by colonialism and capitalism (Quijano and Wallerstein, 1992), intellectuals and artists feel the need to challenge and question modern rationalities that have always left the "Other" aside. The role played by writers of marginalized groups or solidary with them is of utmost importance. They may act as "ethical subjects"[2] in their humanist inquiry into the social injustices, and interpellation of the political contradictions of their societies; they may embody resistance to cultural dispossession; they may choose to revive traditions to give back to communities a sense of belonging and identity.

But to look at tradition and modernity as two polar opposites is certainly a very fallacious way to assess the complex process of social change and transformation, especially when more than one cultural tradition is under analysis. The very concept of modernity must be questioned, since it has implied an immediate association with western models. Following the same logic, tradition has usually been regarded by modern societies as an impediment to change and progress.

The 'project of modernity' and its failures, as Jürgen Habermas puts it, has been subjected to vigorous criticism for its univocal conceptions of universals, its imperatives of historical progress and the placing of the West as the center of civilization and aggrandized system of values. "Modernity" – as Enrique Dussel argues – "appears when Europe affirms itself as the 'center' of a World History that it inaugurates; the 'periphery' that surrounds this center is consequently part of its self-definition" (Dussel, 1993: 65). Conquering, exploring, colonizing territories and cultures, Europe never "'discovered' (*descubierto*), or admitted, as such, but concealed, or 'covered-up' (*encubierto*) as the same what Europe assumed it had always been" (*ibidem*).[3]

Dussel intends to negate and transcend this "myth of modernity", a partial and provincial understanding that involved an "occlusion" of the periphery and developed an "irrational myth", a "sacrificial myth" that justified genocidal violence over the "others" (*ibidem*: 66). Violence was ultimately justified by that emancipatory civilizing path, and its victims, Non-European peoples, were sacrificed on the altar of so-called

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[1] I share with many scholars the discomfort about the term postcolonial. To clarify my own position, I rely on Ramón Saldívar's considerations: "[...] the post of postcolonial, that is, a term designating not a chronological but a conceptual frame, one that refers to the logic of something having been 'shaped as a consequence of' imperialism and racism." ("Historical Fantasy", 575).
[2] Rothberg (2009: 272) relies on Alain Badiou (*Ethics*. London: Verso, 2002) to introduce this concept.
[3] Cf. Santos (1993), "Descobrimentos e encobrimentos".

progress and modernization. Implied in the European conceptualization of modernity as emancipatory is the "fallacy of developmentalism", as Dussel qualifies its unilateral imposition on every other culture: "Development is taken here as an ontological, and not simply a sociological or economic, category" (1993*:* 68). The structures of power have dictated from then onward an unquestioned hierarchy of values – "This sense of superiority obliges it" – "in the form of a categorical imperative, as it were, to 'develop' (civilize, uplift, educate) the more primitive, barbarous, underdeveloped civilizations" (*ibidem:* 75).

As Boaventura de Sousa Santos puts it, the cartography of colonial times established lines of radical division between the Old World and the New World, what he calls "abyssal lines," which persisted in modern western thought and still inform all models of political and cultural exclusion. Everyone and everything that is made invisible "on the other side of the line" by hegemonic power is excluded (Santos, 2007). The same happens at the epistemological level. All other forms of knowledge in the "colonial zone" are made invisible by the hegemony of modern knowledge: "The other side of the line harbors only incomprehensible magical or idolatrous practices." (*ibidem*: 51). It is the persistence of this abyssal thinking and its correspondent practices that have triggered a counter-hegemonic movement, a collective effort to develop an epistemology of the South (*ibidem*: 55).

Creative writers may be among the important agents of this epistemological resistance. Their awareness of the perspective of the other side of the line, of the abandonment of those discardable populations, the lack of recognition of the diversity and richness of the "plurality of knowledges beyond scientific knowledge" (*ibidem*: 67) make the possibility of their intervention a very interesting one.

Toni Morrison is one of these voices. In a text she significantly entitled "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," she conveys her intention to recover the path that could lead artists back to the tribe, "when an artist could be genuinely representative *of* the tribe and *in* it; when an artist could have a tribal or racial sensibility and an individual expression of it." (Morrison, 1984: 339). Her passion to find and convey what she knows is special about black expression in the USA, but has been made invisible, leads her to blend tradition and modernity, the supernatural and the real, superstition and magic with the rational – to reevaluate and rehabilitate "another way of knowing things." An eloquent exemplification of Santos' "ecology of knowledges", Morrison tries to "blend the two worlds together," aware that the job rather than limiting is enhancing. Aware of the consequences of the work of hegemonic epistemologies, she wants to endorse that "discredited knowledge" black people had in the past, "discredited only because black people were discredited therefore what they

knew was 'discredited'. And also because the pressure toward upward social mobility would mean to get as far away from that kind of knowledge as possible" (*ibidem*: 342).

In the same essay Morrison also refers to the violence of appropriation of black music by the market system, another form of cultural dispossession that has reproduced abyssal thinking in modern times. Her agenda is, therefore, to make the novel play the role that music has played vis-à-vis the black community. She thus incorporates black art into her fiction, making it both print and oral literature and reviving the emotional call of the preacher that arises the congregation's response. In her own words, "having at my disposal only the letters of the alphabet and some punctuation, I have to provide the places and the spaces so that the reader can participate" (*ibidem*).

Enrique Dussel, the intellectual from Argentine forced into exile in Mexico wants to affirm the "reason of the Other" (1993: 75). The whole discourse on postcolonialism has made different and sometimes ambivalent contributions to a real rethinking of the knowledge produced by a dominant Western perspective. With such scholars as Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Amílcar Cabral, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, long-accepted notions and systems of thought have been dismantled and new conceptualizations have been put into motion. However, much literature that has been circulating on postcolonialism runs the risk of contributing to new fictionalizations that may blind us to the persistence of real colonialisms and racisms, dependencies and subalternizations.

Among the scholars who have claimed agency for the "wretched of the earth", Paul Gilroy is also important for the reinscription of black people in the narrative of modernity. Along with his pioneering enunciation of the intercultural and transnational formation – "the black Atlantic" –, Gilroy establishes the black people's "sense of embeddedness in the modern world" (1993: ix), both as defenders and critics of the West. The Atlantic of the slave traffic and the Middle Passage become a site of hybridity and intermixture of ideas taking place within complex patterns of movement, transformation, and relocation. Gilroy is also inspiring for rejecting essentialisms and affirming, instead of denying or dismissing, "the instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being remade" (*ibidem*: xi).

While discussing Gilroy's notion of the "black Atlantic" as a counterculture of modernity, Michael Hanchard suggests that Afro-diasporic peoples made a "selective incorporation of technologies, discourses, and institutions of the modern West […] to create a form of relatively autonomous modernity" (Hanchard, 2001: 274). Also recently, the contradictory and contingent nature of this imperial conception of modernity has been queried by the revelation of other models which were made invisible by the dominant powers. The plural – such as in modernitieS – exposes

instances of an ideological dismantling of the dominant matrix.[4] As Saurabh Dube puts it, "such explorations have critically considered the divergent articulations and representations of the modern and modernity that have shaped and sutured empire, nation, and globalization." (2002: 197). Therefore, we can no longer insist on the post--Enlightenment binary conceptions, such as tradition and modernity, that have shaped dominant understandings of cultures. On the other hand, we should be alert to the opposite tendency to romanticize or essentialize representations of otherness, and be ready to question and interrogate paternalizing representations of the colonized that only reveal the need to appease guilty consciences.

As to the concept of tradition, in one of the pioneer studies on the relation of tradition and modernity, Joseph R. Gusfield very clearly states that "it is incorrect to view traditional societies as static, normatively consistent, or structurally homogeneous." (1967: 351). Even in terms of relations between the traditional and the modern, Gusfield affirms that they don't necessarily involve "displacement, conflict, or exclusiveness" (*ibidem*). Traditions can supply sources of legitimation and may be instrumentalized by nationalisms; they may be used as expressions of resistance, but they may also be backward means of oppression. "In this fashion" – claims Gusfield – "tradition becomes an ideology, a program of action in which it functions as a goal or as a justificatory base" (*ibidem*: 358). Tradition, as he also says, may supply support for or against change. Gusfield uses tradition and modernity as "explicit ideologies operating in the context of politics in new nations" (*ibidem*: 351). Simon During also refers to this tendency of new nations that have been victims of colonialism to reevaluate traditional cultures and recover an identity uncontaminated by Eurocentric concepts and images (1993: 458).

This ideological instrumentalization of traditions in the building process of new nations is more important as regards the cases of Caribbean and African post--independence young nations, searching for their identities between a fragmented past and a nebulous future. But I believe that the case of the United States, in spite of obvious differences, must also be taken into account in this context. Given the centuries-long slave past and the drama of its consequences in their permanent struggle for full citizenship, African Americans show a prevailing need for a sense of the past and often cherish traditions in order to retain a sense of community, a community that has somehow faded away, torn by class and gender differences, political orientations, and all the pressures of capitalism and globalization.

Eric Hobsbawm's idea of a construction and invention of traditions is crucial in this respect. For him, the memory of nations is an artifact nurtured by rituals and traditions. We may understand the need to reestablish emotional connections to *a* past (even an

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[4] See, for example, Santos and Ribeiro (2008).

invented past), to retell and rewrite a consistent narrative of history (Lyotard), recuperating a connection with an immemorial past. As Gusfield argues, “Tradition is not something waiting out there, always over one’s shoulder. It is rather plucked, created, and shaped to present needs and aspirations in a given historical situation” (1967: 358). The same works for all diasporic peoples in one way or another, as they are torn from their “homeland,” be it in concrete or imaginary ways.

In his pioneering book, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (1997), Kwame Gyekye addresses a wide range of problems concerning identity in postcolonial African states. The relationship of tradition to modernity is one of them, along with ethnicity and nation-building, nation and community, among others. But he does not take into account Hobsbawm’s thesis concerning the invention or reinvention of traditions. According to Gyekye, the modern distinguishes itself from the traditional by its characteristic of innovation, implying that tradition is static. The author formulates, notwithstanding, an alternative notion of an African modernity through a creative forging “from the furnace of the African cultural experience, an experience that [...] is many-sided, having sprung from the encounters with alien cultures and religions and from problems internal to the practice of the indigenous cultural ideas and values themselves” (*ibidem*: 280).

But we also have to consider the fluid, contingent and multi-layered identities of our contemporary global world (Clifford, 1992, “traveling culture”; Glissant, 2010, “poetics of relation”; Braidotti, 2006, “nomadic identities”). Roots as a predominant metaphor for culture have been replaced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of rhizome (2007 [1980]). Against the imperial notion of universalism and totality, the illusion of monolinguism and cultural superiority, and hegemonic, exclusionary power structures, minor literatures (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983) address, in both a critical and a creative manner, the role of the former ‘center’ in redefining power relations by playing this role on the stage of imagination, the sole form of sovereignty writers can afford (Morrison, 1998a).

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As Onyekachi Wambu observes, “[t]oday, African countries are largely multinational, multi-ethnic and multi-religious colonial constructs built on European ideas of the modern state.” (2015). However, a closer look shows us there persists an “abyssal line” dividing those countries into two parts: a “modern”, cosmopolitan, and powerful visible/priviledged part, on the one hand, and a poor, abandoned, illiterate invisible/excluded one, on the other.

Not wanting to dismiss important differences involved in the cases under scrutiny, I do argue that a significant part of the population in the various islands of the Caribbean, as well as in various sectors of the African American minority in the USA suffer quite the same range of problems in terms of exclusion, poverty, and social injustice as the ones that prey on underprivileged groups in such African countries as Angola or Mozambique. Although the contexts are very different, and we cannot apply to the latter the term African diaspora, an identical system of colonial subjection was imposed on those African regions. Furthermore, the cultures in question with the composite nature they owe to the intermingling of colonial and indigenous cultures are all of them submitted to the logic of the "abyssal lines," inherited from colonialism.

In these contexts, it is easy to understand the ideological positioning of many intellectuals and writers acting as "ethical subjects" (Rothberg, 2009) on the side of this invisible/excluded part of their societies against social injustice, political authoritarianism, and corruption. Through my research I have found multiple examples of "writers as citizens," as I have been calling them (cf. Caldeira, 2017),[5] not only generally engaged with their communities or the groups they feel solidary with, and the wide range of concrete problems afflicting them, but particularly prone to reviving and rehabilitating traditional values and practices. I interpret this choice as an act of resistance to the colonial dispossession of these communities' collective identity and memory, an act of reversal of that "sacrificial myth" Dussel talks about. After all, and appropriating Wambu's formulation, they try to build a "bridge to the past", as "they see these 'African' values not as traditional and conservative, but as progressive when contrasted with the imperialist imposed present." (Wambu: 2015). Recognition of traditional ways and ancestral references bring writers and artists closer to the discarded populations with whom they feel solidarity, and closer to an ecological balance they had lost long ago (cf. Santos' "ecology of knowledges"). Aware of the danger of the fragmentation of identities in the contemporary world, their intervention contributes to a sense of coherence often searched for in the past.[6]

Narrative fragmentation is one of the forms of expression often found in these novels. It represents the difficulty to reassemble not only the scattered pieces of a nebulous past but also of a chaotic present. In Toni Morrison's texts, narrative

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[5] Cf. Caldeira, "Toni Morrison and Edwidge Danticat" (2017); and also "Toni Morrison: The Writer-as--Citizen", paper presented to the APEAA 37th Conference, Lisbon, 2016.

[6] Other authors have addressed this question of tradition and modernity in African literatures. See, among others, Patrick Chabal (2008), "Imagined Modernities: Community, Nation and State in Postcolonial Africa", *in* Luís Reis Torgal, Fernando Tavares Pimenta, Julião Soares Sousa (eds.), *Comunidades imaginadas: nação e nacionalismos em África*. Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 41-48; Abiola Irele (2001), *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa And the Diaspora*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Ana Mafalda Leite (2003), *Literaturas africanas e formulações pós-coloniais*. Lisboa: Colibri, and (1998), *Oralidades e escritas nas literaturas africanas*. Lisboa: Colibri; Terence Ranger (1983), "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa", *in* Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (2004), *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 211-262.

fragmentation is the way she chooses to represent a precarious search for identity for African Americans, and African American women in particular, among the chaos of a slavery past, a conflictual racialized society "tethered to a death-dealing ideology" (1998a: 4-5), and an experience of permanent conflict and unfulfilled promises. Morrison speaks of making the "journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply" (Morrison, 1987: 112). Her narratives never follow a linear, chronological orientation. Plots skip apparently haphazardly along various time-lines, according to personal remembrances or experiences; many characters and names people those plots, sometimes inter--connecting, sometimes not; genealogical intricacies confuse readers who have to edge their way through interpretation and analysis without comfort or help. Beginnings are abrupt and ambiguous, but as Morrison has clearly written in one of her essays (1998b), she intends to create a feeling in her readers that may be somewhat similar to the feelings of Africans forced on board slave ships, knowing nothing about their fates and having no one to make it easier for them. Endings offer no closure, only questions, as if the author would like to share with her readers the responsibility for answers, as suggested by one sentence in the opening pages of her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*: "*since* why *is difficult to handle*, *one must take refuge in* how." (1972: 9). As if narration were the only possibility of releasing revolt at such senseless violence towards the most fragile human being one could imagine: a poor, ugly, black girl, not loved by anyone, raped by her own father, and ending insane because she cannot handle so much pain.

There is no point in asking why we find such an intense presence of violence in these writers' fiction. Morrison's texts give voice to "unspeakable things unspoken" and stretch violence to its limits, from incest and madness in *The Bluest Eye* to the depiction of slavery and infanticide in *Beloved*, or eugenicist experiments on a black woman's body in *Home*. Appropriating Morrison's expression in *Beloved*, this may not be a story to pass on, but it *must be* passed on nonetheless, so that we won't forget. These writers combat the "censure of memory" Paul Ricoeur talks about (2004). That is the expression of their commitment to the people, against the power structure and its indifference, the only way they find to preserve the possibility of a dissenting voice. With Ricoeur we are reminded that *dissensus* is "the echo of the unforgetting memory of discord", and that "only poetry preserves the force of unforgetting" (2004: 501).

According to Morrison, in order to rebuild or even radically modify the "racial house" one has to dismantle "the racist constructs in language", echoing Ralph Ellison, who once warned against the word as "the most insidious and least understood form of segregation": "For if the word has the potency to revive and make us free, it has also

the power to blind, imprison and destroy" (1964: 24). Morrison's work on language – her emphasis on orality and the sounds of a Southern black dialect – offers interesting possibilities of comparison with Mia Couto's recreation of standard Portuguese. He is one of the best examples in African literatures written in Portuguese of a re-invention of the language of empire to catch the sounds and the rhythms of its appropriation by Mozambicans, to reproduce creolized forms, and even to create a new lexicon.[7]

Fragmentation is also present in Maryse Condé's narratives, such as *Traversée de la mangrove* (1989; *Crossing the Mangrove*, 1995). Whichever the main plot – a mystery about someone's death or a plot of revenge – readers find out that neither one is the most important issue in the novels. Francis Sancher was an outsider, an intruder in the village, about whom nobody knew enough. His mysterious death and the gathering of the village people at his wake serve as a pre-text for a telling of testimonies which will transit between memory and history, or memory and imagination. Through them, as a third layer of meaning, and certainly the most significant one, each one of the characters, while attempting to give a clue to the mystery or to understand the impact of the departed in his or her own life exposes himself or herself to the reader, finding in the process something about his or her own self-identity.

The mangrove swamp may be read as a metaphor for the society of Riviére au Sel. Mangroves are shrubs that show a high capacity of adaptability to the extreme salinity of their swampy habitat, just like the inhabitants of the island have learnt to cope with the harshness of life in the most creative way. The mangroves' complex rhizomatic root systems are very efficient at protecting the coastal areas from erosion and aggressive storms, but are hidden from sight. When you look at the village of Riviére au Sel, you see the people but the twisted and turning relationships are also hidden, as Rosa Ramsaran so well expresses: "We see the trunk, we see the branches and the leaves. We can't see the roots hidden down deep in the ground" (Condé: 1989, 139).

At the narrative level, Condé's characters are treated with equality, getting their proper quotas of narrative space; left behind are the class, race or sex divisions and inequalities that are so obvious and even dramatic at the plot level, as they reflect the hierarchy of real society. The entangled links woven by the figure of Francis Sancher with so many people tie together the community, just like the intricate roots of the mangrove keep the island safe. This, together with the shared suspicion that Sancher carried with himself the burden of the colonial sin, lends coherence to the fragmented narrative. After all, to outsiders (Francis Sancher and the alien colonizers of his own past) a mangrove swamp may appear dangerous, but it is actually very protective of

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[7] In Angolan literature, we find for instance in Luandino Vieira and Uanhenga Xitu strategies of language appropriation that are excellent examples of a political posture of "Africanized Portuguese".

the lives of the ones who know it well (ecological balance). The way the mangrove developed such an ability to adapt and survive in poor soil and harsh weather makes it an eloquent metaphor for the island people, whose "creative adaptation" (Gilroy) made them strong and resistant.

Fragmentation is certainly a quality of Mia Couto's fiction. Two excellent examples are *Terra sonâmbula,* his debut novel (1992), and *A varanda do Frangipani* (1996). In *A varanda do Frangipani*, a sort of detective novel, the plot also surrounds the death of a man and the mystery of his assassination. Half of the chapters are supposedly confessions by each one of the elderly, who inhabit the shelter installed in the former colonial fortress by the sea, and who claim to have killed Vasto Excelêncio, the *mestiço* who had run the shelter. In the end we realize that every one of the characters had a motive to hate the victim who in life had victimized them all. However, a final revelation tells us that neither of them is the guilty one. The reader realizes that the palimpsestic history of that structure by the sea – originally a colonial fortress, retaining memories of slave traffic, later a site of the war among colonial powers (Portuguese against the Dutch), still later a prison for revolutionaries against the colonial regime, and finally, after the independence, a shelter for the elderly – may be read as a *chronotope* (Bakhtin, 1984) for Mozambican history.

As in Condé's narrative, the reader also realizes that in Mia Couto's novel the protagonist is not an individual, but a fresco of a society. While the revelation in *Crossing the Mangrove* is the intricacy of the heterogeneous rhizomatic identity of contemporary Guadeloupe, still haunted by the memory of a colonial past, the true revelation in *A Varanda do Frangipani* is not the authorship of the crime but the succession of authorships accountable for the chaos of present-day Mozambique, torn by violence and greed, and incapable of recognizing and cherishing its most precious memories and values, represented by these discarded elderly (Couto, 2004b: 13).

Terra sonâmbula is set during the Mozambican civil war, which decimated the country before its 1990 cease-fire. There are two plotlines apparently brought together at the end. In one plotline, an old man, Tuahir, and young Muidinga, whose health the old man helped to recover, fly together from a refugee camp and find shelter in an abandoned semi-burnt bus in the war-torn countryside. Among burnt corpses the boy finds a notebook that tells the lifestory of Kindzu and his anxious search for his son Gaspar. Chapters interpolate the old man's (Tuahir) and the boy's experience of self--exile in the bus by the road. Through the boy's reading aloud of the notebook, the old man slowly recovers a lost identity. At the end, Kindzu sees Muidinga and believes him to be the long-lost Gaspar. As David Brookshaw once noted, and I agree,

> one of the constant themes in Couto's depiction of postindependence Mozambique is that the chaotic process of the country's first fifteen years of independence has produced a nation of orphans in search of some integral wholeness. His Mozambicans look to some sort of utopian ideal that was alive at independence but has been lost under the weight of civil war, of self-interest, and of timeless traditions that never sat easily with the imported European political model. (1997: 320)

Kindzu's narrative finds its way of being passed on to the next generation through the writing of the notebook. It is a most precarious site – a burnt bus, full of dead bodies and sleeping spirits, in a "dead road" "that had been killed by war" and which was only trodden by ravenous hyenas and armed bandits. Through twelve notebooks that tell of Kindzu's dream of joining the Naparamas, traditional warriors blessed by wizards, who fought against the makers of war, fighting with traditional means – bows and spears (they themselves being protected against bullets), Mia Couto clears space and time for a moment of encounter: between the generation of elders (Tuahir) and the young generation (Muidinga); between the past generations (the old Tuahir and Kindzu's father, Taímo); between the present (experience and narrativized experience), and the future (Kindzu's and Muidinga's dreams).

In African cultures the elder (o "mais velho") is a most revered figure for his wisdom and respectability. In both novels, Mia Couto throws into relief the figure of the elder. But while in *Terra sonâmbula* it is the relationship between generations that gains significance – the boy learning from the old man, and vice-versa; in *A varanda do Frangipani* society is criticized for abandoning and exiling its elders, condemning them to famine and maltreatments until they receive the final blessing of death. Since they are also the guardians of traditions and old practices, dismissing them ultimately means rejection of the past and original culture. The only person who cares for the old people is the nurse, a woman represented as someone close to nature and the earth, respectful of the past and its traditions, as expressed in this quotation: "Estes velhos não são apenas pessoas […] São guardiões de um mundo. É todo esse mundo que está sendo morto. […] O verdadeiro crime que está a ser cometido aqui é que estão a matar o antigamente... [...] Mas estes velhos estão morrendo dentro de nós" (Couto 2004b: 59-60). The elders represent the values of the past, they are "the soil of the world" in Couto's expression: "São velhos, estão no fim das suas vidas. Mas são pessoas, são o chão desse mundo que você pisa na cidade" (*ibidem*: 78); the young people represent the urban present, but also war and violence, error and alienation. They tread on that sacred soil but are not aware of it.

Differently from Couto, who has a preference for fragmented novels, short narratives loosely interconnected in a Faulknerian way, or short stories, Pepetela' novels don't give us this sense of fragmentation. Long ones such as *A geração da utopia*, *Mayombe*, *Yaka*, *Luegi*, or *A gloriosa família* are well constructed narratives approaching the pattern of historical novels or family sagas. Shorter ones may resort to fragments of lost memories or chorus-like comments by indigenous artifacts or mythical figures, punctuating the narratives – a *tchoque* mask in *Manana Puó*, or a *yaka* sculpture in *Yaka*, the wisdom of the Lunda empire in *Luegi*, or an old tortoise in *Parábola do Cágado Velho*.

Like *Yaka, Luegi* may be regarded as a historical novel, both partaking of the epic to some extent.[8] *Luegi* re-enacts the epic destiny of Queen Lunda, the representative of one of the most enigmatic African empires – the *Lunda* empire.[9] The novel is at the same time a dialogue between past and present. For Inocência Mata, it is indeed "a vivid synthesis of tradition and modernity" (2001: 19). But it is especially in *Yaka* and *O desejo de Kianda* [*The Return of the Water Spirit*] that we find a search for roots, this search attempting the connection with a sense of national identity.[10]

In other novels, Pepetela hands on the narrative point of view to traditional artifacts, in *Muana Puó* to a *choque* mask, in *Yaka* to a *yaka* sculpture. In another short novel, *Parábola do Cágado Velho*, the presence in the title of the name for a classical narrative form – the parable, – underlines a moral subtext in the punctual encounters of the old man Ulume (in *Kimbundu* "the Man") with the old tortoise up on a mountain and the enigmatic spinx-like communication of the old tortoise with him. In a book for children – *A montanha da água lilás* – Pepetela chooses the old form of the fable to write a moral commentary on power and hegemony. In doing all these experiments, the writer is calling forth to the stage icons of a traditional and cultural matrix that may contribute to a remythologizing of Angolan identity. He often opens possibilities of allegorical interpretations, wrapping up his rewritings of Angolan history and remythologizing of Angolan indigenous cultural matrixes with utopian suggestions based on his conviction that Angola needs a foundational myth. We have, for instance, the rainbow-colored ribbons, suggesting the cohabitation of multiple peoples of different ethnicities, at the end of *Kianda*, or the *yaka* statue as "*cazumbi* antecipado da nacionalidade" (Pepetela, 1988: 6) in the novel *Yaka*. As the author explains in the foreword to the novel, historical truth lies yet to be established (if ever it will be): "Yaka,

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[8] For a study of the epic in African literatures, see Ana Mafalda Leite (1995), *A modalização épica nas literaturas africanas*. Lisboa: Vega.
[9] The Lunda empire (c. 1665-1887) was a pre-colonial African confederation of states in northeastern Angola.
[10] Inocência Mata (2001) calls attention to Pepetela's foundational reinterpretation of the country.

Mbayaka, Jaga, Imbangala? Foram uma mesma formação social? Nação?" (*ibidem*: 6). The author elects the *yaka* as the perfect supporting model for the idea of nation. After all, the Yaka are the warrior people from the North, whose restless journey across the Angolan territory (from North to South) assimilates different cultures, attracts young fighters among other peoples, and removes menaces to its unifying intent. This may well be an instance of Abdul JanMohamed's remark: "[T]he domain of literary and cultural syncretism belongs not to colonialist and neocolonialist writers but increasingly to Third World artists" (1985: 23).

Maryse Condé has also written historical epic novels, such as *Ségou* (2 volumes, 1984, 1985), one of her best-known works of fiction. She assumes the position of the traditional West African storyteller, the *griot*, to tell the story of the kingdom of 18th and 19th century Segu, situated in the northern regions of West Africa, the land of Condé's Bambara ancestors. This journey back returns to Africa what the European colonialists denied it – an ancestral history, but does so in a realistic and critical way. Condé combines myth with demystification, using the highly critical stance of the traditional *griot* to render a realistic representation of the rise and fall of many kingdoms in pre-colonial Africa, their glories as well as their weaknesses. Irreverent and even satirical, the writer refuses to romanticize the past.

Commenting on the difficult position of writers in recently decolonized countries, Glissant speaks of an "irruption into modernity", implying that they have to skip several stages to be able to assert themselves in a highly competitive world. Besides their wish to pay respect to their indigenous cultures, they have to deal with dominant models they need to reinvent: "The main difficulty facing national literatures today [...] is that they must combine mythification and demystification, this primal innocence with learned craftiness" (Glissant, 1989: 100).

In Toni Morrison's novels, especially in her production of the 1970s-80s – *Sula* (1977), *Song of Solomon* (1978) and *Tar Baby* (1981) – there is also a strong emphasis on the role and value of traditional knowledge, African residual cultures and African American ways, resistant to European acculturation. Trying to explain and understand a certain singularity that characterizes black culture in the USA, Morrison does not dismiss the marks of orality in black speech, or the vestiges of magic in old people's beliefs. In a counter-hegemonic strategy, Morrison is well aware that knowledge is power and so it can and should be counteracted by alternative forms of knowledge – marginal, discredited, traditional forms. As Morrison once said, "we should try to perceive by all the senses, explore other ways of knowing […] we have a lot to unlearn, as well as to learn" (LeClair, 1983: 160).

In a novel like *Song of Solomon*, there is a clear opposition between a Western modern capitalist model (ironically represented by a black man, Macon Dead) and a pre-modern style of life, Pilate's anti-capitalist and anti-hegemonic style of life and traditional values. The protagonist, young Milkman Dead or Macon Dead, Jr. has to find his way to maturity, self-consciousness, and identity through the difficult unbalance between two role-models, his aunt Pilate, and his father Macon Dead: Pilate, the outcast self-made woman, as bravely as she edged her way out of her mother's womb without help (the reason why she has no navel), she was capable of conquering a space for herself, her daughter and granddaughter, according to a scheme of life that no longer is recognized by a (pre)dominant capitalist consumerist society; Macon Dead, the black bourgeois capitalist who "forgot his origins," reproduces white exploitation among his own community. Pilate teaches Milkman nature's ecological values, tradition's values and emotional values. Although she hasn't any money or property, she walks dignifiedly with her empty hands, while her brother Macon is like a peacock who cannot fly because his tail is full of jewelry. Milkman changes throughout his life experience but his metamorphosis (literal and symbolic, physical and animical) demands his immersion into the cultural traditions and rituals of a black community close to the Southern origins and indigenous roots of his family. And because he doesn't have the memory, he has to learn, and by learning he will be able to understand and to love. In the end he can even fly, because he was capable to get rid of all the jewelry which kept him close to the ground.

Milkman Dead's apprenticeship of his past and community traditions is made through the decoding of Pilate's song, while Son, in *Tar Baby,* learns from the old Thérèse about his "ancient properties". In *Tar Baby,* Morrison lends her narrative voice to the "poor insulted nature" of a Caribbean island chosen for vacation and the tourist whimsies of wealthy Americans. American landowners, reproducing a colonial way, take possession of the islands, build mansions and chalets, depersonalize the local environment, and exploit the local population, whose reality, culture, or even names they utterly ignore. Morrison offers nature the capacity of moral judgment, which humans have long forgotten, thus endowing *her* with the authority *she* has lost. The text implies an inversion of human control over nature, a retrieval of ecological balance in nature's complicity with chaos as opposed to the colonialist order. It also contains Morrison's judgment on modern society and its irresponsible actions against *the other*, be it nature or human beings objectified. A critical analysis of modernity such as Santos's will stress this distinction between subject and object and the consequent dehumanization of every object of knowledge, be it humankind, society or nature.

Morrison attributes a great importance to the figures of the ancestors in black fiction, those "timeless people whose relationship to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (Morrison, 1984: 339, 340, 343). Eva in *Sula*, Pilate in *Song of Solomon*, Thérèse in *Tar Baby* compose a gallery of strong female figures. But it is specially Pilate and Thérèse who are invested with the guardianship of tradition and the role of transmitters of knowledge to the younger generations.

In the Morrison's novels I selected, the endings are ambiguous. In *Song of Solomon*, Pilate, the woman who had so much to give and to teach, finally dies, and so does Milkman "in the killing arms of his brother" (1978: 337). There is no future promise besides the symbolic possibility of flying and even that is hypothetical or lies in the capacity to dream: "If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it". In *Tar Baby*, Son follows the track of the blind men galloping horses "like angels all over the hills where the rain forest is, where the champion daisy trees still grow", leaving us with the suggestion of a movement outside history or a receding future.

Pepetela's novella, *O desejo de Kianda* (*The Return of the Water Spirit*) brings to mind these two narratives by Morrison. As Milkman decodes the deep meanings in Pilate's own song which he again hears when sung by a group of children in Shalimar, Cassandra, in Pepetela's narrative (Western mythology in conversation with African myths, as we also find in Morrison) listens attentively to Kianda's chant and translates it for old Kalumbo. *O desejo de Kianda* is set in Luanda, Angola's capital city, in the late 1980s, when Angola was still immersed in the civil war that followed the war for independence. The author makes a scathing critique of Angola's ruling elite for abandoning their former liberation ideals, which moved them through a brave war against colonialism, and for betraying socialist principles in favor of rampant capitalism. In the center of the city of Luanda buildings are collapsing one by one, obeying some enigmatic pattern that urban people seem unable to decipher, and baffling the country's engineers. Many describe this mysterious process as "Luanda Syndrome", God's punishment of a degenerate society. They will collapse one after the other until Kianda, the spirit who once inhabited the waters in the place where Luanda was built, finally smashes her prison of bricks and concrete and flows free rejoining the ocean. Luanda, or the place where the city was once built, becomes again the island it originally was. Pepetela's mythmaking leaves in its wake a sense of prophecy. The return of the Water Spirit, Kianda, vanquishing all the tropes of modern capitalism, may be read as a commentary on contemporary Angolan society, torn between past and present, the urban and the rural, the rich and the poor, the powerful and the dispossessed, tradition and modernity.

This revenge of nature against human intrusion has an ironic turn in *Sula,* Toni Morrison's second novel. Here we witness the destruction of the old black neighborhood, called “Bottom”, to give place to a golf course for wealthy whites, attracted by the splendid view from up there on the hillside where black people have lived for ages, struggling to build a life where “the soil slid down and ... the wind lingered”. The lack of logic of having a name such as the “Bottom” for a black community up on the hills became known as “nigger joke” and is one of the innumerable instances of whites taking advantage of black people's ignorance. The story takes us back to a white slave owner who promised his old slave his freedom and a piece of fertile “bottom” land. However, at the last minute, he deceived the old slave into believing that the land on the hillside was rich and fertile, closer to God, the bottom of heaven! The irony that is made evident is that the powerful invent the narrative that serves them better, fill it with their logic, and so command the lives of the dispossessed. But the abyssal line remains invisible.

Concluding Thoughts

Several questions persist in my mind: as I have asked somewhere else, echoing Stuart Hall (1994: 393), does the role of these writers mean the unearthing of buried identities, or rather the *production* of new identities out of a past re-told? In searching for ways of re-membering a dis-membered past, are these authors capable of rebuilding the consistency that the present lacks, thus offering a promise of a future to the younger generations?

I find that these writers, all related to Africa, deal with ethnic traditions in complex and sometimes even ambivalent ways. Morrison, Pepetela and Couto believe in the importance of traditional practices and values: “essential values”, for Pepetela, “discredited values”, in Morrison’s articulation, and “the last roots” for Couto. Their approaches seem to suggest that modern societies would benefit from their re--evaluation, and should bend their arrogant superiority and humbly learn from them. Individualistic and consumerist societies seem too far away from those values, tending to regard traditional ethnic traits either as backward or exotic. In Angolan society, traditional practices and beliefs may still be cherished and preserved by peasants “who”, as Pepetela says, “contain Angola’s soul and the future,” but even younger generations are gradually alienated from them.[11] In urban areas, especially the privileged classes live in neocolonial constructs above and far away from the invisible reality “on the other side of the line”.

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[11] Cf. Preface to *Yaka*, 9-10, and interview of Pepetela by António Loja Neves, “Angola precisa dum mito criador”, *Expresso*, 12.07.1997, 64-69.

But traditions may also tend toward crystallization slowing down the desired transformation. In Pepetela I sometimes find remarks about the obscurantism of traditional customs and rituals, and the need of young characters to escape the ways of the old folks. His is a search for a re-invention and a new synthesis, closer to Morrison's "to blend the two worlds together" (1984: 342). Mia Couto is more liable to romanticize indigenous traditions and wisdoms. For him, the values of the past are, as I mentioned above, "the soil of the world". His close contact with rural populations on account of his profession as biologist reinforces his knowledge of their indigenous epistemologies, which he incorporates in his narratives with respect and sensitivity. From what I read in his novels and interviews, I think that the expression of the nurse in *A varanda do Frangipani* could be his own: "Há que guardar este passado. Senão o país fica sem chão." In comparison with the other writers under scrutiny in this essay, Condé is the only one who seems more distanced from this concern with the loss of traditions. She prefers to look at tradition not as static but as alive and changing. Elaborating on this notion, she says in an interview: "I wonder whether this conflict between modernity and tradition is not a cliché or a false issue. As Africa 'modernizes' itself, it alters and integrates traditions according to its own balance" (Condé and Pfaff, 1996: 36). Concerning the gap between modernity and tradition in African societies, Onyekachi Wambu comments: "Those who occupy the traditional space find it difficult coming to terms with the fluid identities and fragmented authority in the modern African state. This contrasts with the eternal culture and values that they see themselves as the custodians of." (2015). Appropriating Wambu's words, I ask: may the literature of those writers who see African values not as traditional and conservative but as progressive, when contrasted with the imperialist-imposed present, intervene in the future by establishing a "bridge to the past"? As Santos proposes, and I quote again, "it is in the nature of the ecology of knowledges to establish itself through constant questioning and incomplete answers" (Santos, 2007: 79). Literature that is capable of transforming the world and transforming us manages to recuperate an immense wealth of cognitive experiences that have been wasted and lead us to learn what we have unlearned.

Glissant claims for a "planetary consciousness" (2010: 164) and proposes an "ecological vision of Relation", also using the concept of ecology as mankind's "driving force for the relational interdependence of all lands of the whole Earth" (*ibidem*: 146). A change that is an exchange, "in which each is changed by and changes the other" (*ibidem*: 154-55), which reminds me of Santos' "intercultural translation" (Santos, 2007: 74). Glissant seems to have in mind the need to recuperate mankind's concern beyond and above territorial thought, international standardization of consumption, or the

economic demands of the market. "[P]utting forward the prospect – or at least the possibility – of this revived aesthetic connection with the earth" (*ibidem*: 150) may certainly sound utopian or naïve. But this may also be "an aesthetics of disruption and intrusion", "an aesthetics of rupture and connection" (*ibidem*: 151) coming from the margins to question the center: "If the imaginary carries us from thinking about this world to thinking about the universe, we can conceive that aesthetics [...] always brings us back from the infinities of the universe to the definable poetics of our world" (*ibidem*: 203).

I conclude that the postcolonial writers I have tackled "preserve the force of unforgetting" (Ricoeur, 2004) as they recur to the collective memory of communities to build a "bridge to the past" (Wambu, 2015). When they choose to reclaim and revivify traditions or indigenous knowledges, they may run the risk of being conservative and regressive in relation to the contemporary reality of their societies, characterized above by Onyekachi Wambu as modern and cosmopolitan, sharing a globalized world. However, the recognition of the deep "abyssal lines" (Santos) that divide those societies, along with all the signs of the failure of capitalism and democracy in our contemporary world to respond to the needs of the underpriviledged and mitigate inequalities and social injustices may justify the persistence of that choice. Torn between the past and the future, they seem to envisage a memory of the future, acting as "ethical subjects" (Rothberg, 2009), or conscientious writers-as-citizens. Remembering the fragments of dismembered cultures (Morrison) to rebuild a sense of wholeness and coherence, theirs is "an aesthetics of rupture and connection" (Glissant, 2010) and a form of dissent and resistance to hegemonic hierarchical conceptions of culture inherited from colonial systems.

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