

Mia Couto and the enchantment of rain



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In his preface to *Rain and Other Stories*, Mia Couto refers to the remaking of the world following the Mozambican civil war: 'we soak our faces in this rain of hope, this water of benedreamtion'. Pluvial rain, as Nuttall terms it, can bring huge destruction, as can drought, its absence. Scholars have insisted on the agency of water, including African ecocritics who argue for an 'animist conception of the world' which transposes and transgresses boundaries and identities. Garuba specifically refers to the 'persistent re-enchantment of the world' whereby the 'rational and scientific are appropriated and transformed into the mystical and magical'. This article explores the range of roles, agentic and enchanted, which Couto accords rain in his stories. Although he rejected the label 'magic realist', his translator Chabal argues that in his stories the fantastic 'transmutes the fictitious into the factual' so that 'all boundaries are put into question': between past and present, far and near, material and spiritual. And he seeks to regain the 'brotherhood', the 'relation', the 'link between nature and humanity'. Ashcroft says Couto's vision as a writer is to 'give back to the word its divine power ... the power to enchant things, be these trees, birds, or landscapes'. Samuelson too claims that Couto's stories 'invoke an enlivening ecocritical method' that draws readers into a 'sacred web', an 'indivisible body, an 'interconnected world'. While the notion of enchantment is not unproblematic, the interconnections it entails between human and environment, material and spiritual, generate a receptive matrix in which to understand and recognise the agency of rain.

Contribution: This article engages with ecocritical readings of the stories of Mia Couto by examining his treatment of rain and his approach to the issue of enchantment. It thus contributes to criticism of his work as well as to the growing field of ecocriticism in this country.

Keywords: Mia Couto; Mozambique; ecocriticism; enchantment; pluviality; rain; water.

Introduction

In his preface to the 2019 translation of his collection *Estórias Abensonhadas: Contos*, Mia Couto offers an explanation of its English title, *Rain and Other Stories*. First published in Portuguese in 1994, after the 15-year war that followed Mozambican independence, the stories came to him, he says, 'between the banks of ashes and of hope'. At the time, he thought all that was left was 'ashes, hollow ruins'. Now he knows that is not true: 'Where man remains, a seed, too, survives, a dream to inseminate time'. Hidden all along from violence, from barbarism, 'the earth protected, intact, its voices. When silence was imposed on them, the voices shifted worlds. In the dark, they remained lunar'. Like the voices of the earth and of the moon, his tales 'speak to this land we are remaking and where we soak our faces in this rain of hope, this water of benedreamtion' (Couto 2019a:8). Clearly, the rain the earth sends is real enough to soak one's face – it is also dreamlike, beneficent, and through it the earth 'speaks' hope.

Rain, as Couto knows well, can also be damaging and destructive. This collection was published just a month before Cyclone Idai made landfall near Beira, in March of that year, and 2 months before Cyclone Kenneth hit northern Mozambique. Ranked at the time the second-deadliest cyclone ever recorded in the southern hemisphere, Idai caused devastating flooding in Mozambique and its neighbours, Madagascar, Malawi and Zimbabwe, claiming over a thousand lives, affecting 3 million more and inflicting approximately \$2.2 billion worth of damage. It destroyed almost 90% of Beira, Couto's place of birth. Returning home after the cyclone on March 21, he sent out a 'Call for Solidarity from Mozambique': 'The city has been almost totally destroyed and is isolated, with no roads, no shelter, no energy, no administrative systems and no communications ... Where there were rivers there is now an endless sea. And there is no more ground for the rain that continues to fall' (Couto 2019a).

For such rain, the critic and theorist Nuttall (2019) has coined the term 'pluvial', a term, she says, which denotes specifically:

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intense rainfall, composite flooding, often in sea rivers and estuaries. It is a term I came across when looking for something else in a dictionary, and I was drawn to it as a denotative field, one that has received little sustained conceptual work in the literary humanities. How do we think of rain as a material domain, and how do we imagine it in fictional terms? How do the two work together conceptually? (p. 28)

She follows the suggestion, from Mathur and da Cunha, that we conceive of all water as rain. Rain 'falls everywhere ... [it] does not flow; it overflows after being held where it falls' (Nuttall 2019:28–29). We should think, she says, 'of oceans of rain ... of a rain-terrain that is ocean-like' (Nuttall 2019:29). Her description is apt for the Beira of Couto's call – and, as we shall see, for the rain-terrain that floods Old Jossias's world in the story named for him. In the subsequent article 'Reading for Water', Hofmeyr, Nuttall and Lavery (2022) argue a case for a method that 'follows the sensory, political and agentive power of water across literary texts', a method that:

... follows rivers, rain, streams, tunnels and sewers; connects atmospheric, surface and ground water; describes competing hydrological traditions and hydro-epistemologies. It proposes new literary regions defined less by nation and area than by coastlines, river basins, monsoons, currents, and hydro-cosmologies. Whether thinking along water courses, below the water line, or through the fall of precipitation, reading for water moves laterally, vertically and contrapuntally between different water-worlds and hydro-imaginaries. In so doing, it illuminates literary space as proprioceptive, volumetric and ambient. (p. 304)

The agency of water has been argued earlier by, for example, anthropologist Strang (2014), who posits that water has agency because it is material and as such is 'formative of human–non-human relations' (p. 133, our emphasis). In a preface to a 2021 collection, *Hydrohumanities: Water Discourse and Environmental Futures*, water historian Ruth Mostern puts it thus: while '[p]eople make and move water on every scale... Water in turn makes and moves people' (Mukerji 2021:xii). And in a chapter in the same volume on 'The Agency of Water and the Canal du Midi', communication scientist Chandra Mukerji concedes that water's 'physical properties can be made to serve human communities' but also insists on its evasions: it 'flows and floods, evading capture and overcoming boundaries by flowing over and around them; or it can collect in low-lying areas, be tapped with wells, or disappear into the sand'. For this reason, she calls water a 'trickster, defying or eluding human control' (Mukerji 2021:23).

The agency of water can also be viewed in the context of recent developments in African ecocriticism. As early as 2003, Garuba sought, in 'Readings in Animist Materialism', to provide a theoretical and analytical framework [and a sociocultural location] for 'reading the scripts that our societies – and our artists – enact'. This framework emphasised the 'persistent re-enchantment of the world', whereby 'the rational and scientific are appropriated and transformed into the mystical and magical' (Garuba 2003:267). Such an 'animist conception of the world' informs a 'narrative universe in which transpositions and transgressions of boundaries and identities predominate'.

Things 'possess a life of their own' and 'when their souls are awakened their breath is freed and may migrate into other objects'. Although not an object, water is material, and in an animist understanding of the world it can indeed 'acquire social and spiritual meaning ... far in excess of [its] natural properties and use value'. More recently, Iheka's (2018) study *Naturalizing Africa* advocates cognisance of 'the interlinking of human and nonhuman lives [and their complex relations] in African societies represented in literary works', interlinking which he goes on to call 'proximity'. Rather than 'intentionality', his interest is in the 'actions or effects' (intentional and accidental) produced by humans and nonhumans within a 'distributed network of agency'. Human beings are construed as just one among many components in the ecosystem (Iheka 2018:4, 18). And in a 2020 piece entitled *Out of Africa: Ecocriticism Beyond the Boundary of Environmental Justice*, Egya too argues for the agency of other-than-human beings, of natural worlds and their role in shaping thoughts and ways of living. Africans, Egya (2020) says:

... tend to see themselves as part of nature, in that nearly all social life is viewed as starting from the past and culminating in the future. In other words, present life is spiritually and materially a product of past life, and the source of future life through the process of incarnation. Past life is nature, i.e. spiritual materiality, represented by natural life-forms such as waters, trees, stones, anthills, and so on. (p. 69)

And writing specifically on Mia Couto, Joseph argues for a recognition of water spirits in his 1992 *Sleepwalking Land*. It is magic realism, Joseph (2024:8) says, which gives us 'characters who can access different realms as and when needed' and 'foregrounds the improbable, broadening our understanding of the universe as populated and shaped by the other-than-human' Joseph (2024:11). Couto draws on:

an animist belief system ... [on] the idea that death does not mean the end but a continuation of life in another form ... as an ancestor that is meant to provide for, and watch over, the living. (Joseph 2024:13)

In several of Couto's stories, as we will see, it is the ancestors – living in a past life – who are approached to intercede with these natural life-forms to bring rain in the present.

Materially, rain – heavy, prolonged rain – is a fact of life in Mozambique and contributes to the cyclical floods that occur annually (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [IFRC] 2020:1), floods like Idai which elicited Couto's plaintive and resounding 'Call'. Being material, rain is not a mere subject of human agency: following Strang, it is in many ways formative of human–nonhuman relations. And so Couto makes considerable literary space for rain in his stories, as both a presence and an absence. How does he think of it, we might ask, following Nuttall, as a material domain? How does he imagine it in fictional terms? Reading for rain rather than water will not do all that Hofmeyr et al. (2022) outline; it will entail tracing its agency, both its 'visible, everyday' reality and its 'invisible, dreamlike order of existence', as Couto (2015b:87) has put it elsewhere. And it will, as we will show, entail recognising its enchantment. Indeed, Couto accords it a range of roles,

agent and enchanted. At times just part of the background, in most cases it comes after drought, and so its timing either triggers or resolves the action. Both its timing and its intensity couch it as a gift or a punishment. It can be personified as an indifferent or a competitive presence. Because it is believed to be in the hands of the ancestors, it cannot be controlled, yet it often occasions rain-making rituals – which may or may not be successful. It can be encoded as cleansing and healing in the national narrative of the country's violent history. And although he grounds it in the real, Couto (2015b:53) also represents the sacred properties in which, he says, 'ordinary people' believe: the 'magical, poetical dimension' of which they are guardians; their 'silent memory of lost enchantment'.

Rain functions as both a punishment and a life-preserver in 'The Fire'. Like many, this story opens during drought. The couple who are its two characters are old, weary, weak and destitute, and the husband takes it into his head he must dig a grave for his wife while she is still alive. The rains come after he has laboured for 2 weeks. He curses the clouds. His wife rebukes him, warns him he will be punished, and indeed he collapses in the grave and needs her help to get out. She offers no resistance to his desperate plan to kill her, embracing it as evidence of her good fortune in having had him as the man of her life. Yet her life is separate from his. Her attachment to it is revealed when she asks him not to bury her too deep, so that she will 'almost be able to touch life a little' (Couto 1990:16), and when, in an enchanted dream, the 'times far away from there' return to her, bringing her children and grandchildren alive into the present with 'the crops green and abundant in the field', with her husband the centre of attention, 'with his tie on, telling stories, lies for the most part' (Couto 1990:19). She wakes the next day and her husband is dead. Effectively, it is not her resistance that has prevented him from carrying out his homicidal intentions. Rather, it is the rain, the natural force, that has intervened on her behalf.

Rain's appearance in 'The Birds of God' is deferred until after its main character, the fisherman Ernesto Timba, has died. This story, too, starts with drought which has 'exhausted the earth' such that the seeds are not 'fulfilling their purpose' (Couto 1990:67). Ernesto's family are starving and reproach him when he returns home from the river empty-handed. The drought, he finds, has entered his soul: as he sits 'peeping' into it, his eyes are blinded by pain, by a 'dust which drained the light away' (Couto 1990:67). Out fishing one day, what he does see is a 'huge bird' passing over the sky, which he invites onto his boat (Couto 1990:68). At first, he deems it food, but then he construes it as a sign from God, and himself as chosen as 'host to God's envoys' (Couto 1990:69). When the bird is joined by a mate and they produce three chicks, he diverts his whole catch and the family's scarce resources to feed them, reasoning: if 'men would agree to dispense their kindness to these messengers from heaven, then the drought would end and the season of rains would begin' (Couto 1990:69). Instead, his family leave him, and the villagers burn down his place with the birds inside their cage. Anticipating God's wrath, Ernesto prays for forgiveness, and offers to die instead: 'You

can forget the rain, even. You can leave the dust lying on the ground, but please don't punish the men of this land' (Couto 1990). His prayers are to no avail. The rains that come are punitive:

[T]he clouds clashed, the sky seemed to cough sullenly as if it were sick. In different circumstances, they would have celebrated the coming of the rain. Not now. For the first time, their faiths joined together pleading that it might not rain. (p. 70)

The rain kills Ernesto: drowned in the flood, his body is 'heavy and impossible to separate from the river' (Couto 1990:71), which flows on impassively, carrying him downstream.

Unlike Ernesto, the main character in 'How Old Jossias Was Saved from the Waters' is rescued not once, but three times. Although punitive, here rain enables redemption. The story starts in the present, in August. The winter has been dry, but Jossias 'knows' that rain is bound to come soon. He anticipates it 'playing the marimba', 'reading the ground' and 'licking the wounds of the earth' (Couto 1990:63). Rain to him is musical, literate, healing. He 'measures the clouds' and anticipates 'half the rain', which will 'fit comfortably on the land' (Couto 1990:63), a mutual accommodation that will bring a good harvest and make him a rich and powerful man. The story then cuts back to the 'great famine of 20 years before' (Couto 1990:63), when rain-making rituals carried out in the headman's house sought to invoke 'the dead who control the rain's pleasure' (Couto 1990:64). The elders of the village sacrificed an ox, and the women prepared *ngovo* or corn liquor as a libation. Volunteering to take the *ngovo* to the graves, along the way Jossias succumbs to temptation and drinks it. His attempt to replenish the pots with water from an abandoned well is thwarted when the walls collapse on him. Imagining himself 'burrowing the last dregs of his life away like a mole' and 'drinking sand' (Couto 1990:65), he does not expect to be rescued. Yet he understands and accepts that when he gets out, he will 'have to choose remoteness, to live in the far distance, to grow old without either name or history' (Couto 1990:65).

The story cuts back to the present, to November with the drought broken. So much rain has fallen that the wells 'spit' and the rivers cling strongly to the sky (Couto 1990:66). Jossias consoles himself with the 'bound-to-be', the plentiful crops that are 'bound to' follow (Couto 1990:66). But he is forced to recognise that neither witchcraft nor the sun can prevail. He laments: 'The sun's mouth isn't big enough anymore' to suck up all the water' (Couto 1990:66). And so the third and last section of the story sees the arrival of 'two blacks and a white' who come by boat to save him. This reminds him of another occasion when he came close to death, of the fire in the 'mines of John' (Couto 1990:67). Although rescued, he was not saved 'from life' (Couto 1990:67), which he continued to live, 'up alongside the breadline', 'lifted up' but then 'abandoned' (Couto 1990:68). Rescue from the floods now seems futile to him: 'beyond the water', he believes, 'all there is is water' (Couto 1990:68).

His roots are in the floodplain on which he lives: 'The earth under here already has my hands, my life is buried in this ground, all it needs now is my body, that's all' (Couto 1990:68). Overriding his resistance, the men pull him into their boat, cover him with blankets and give him a cup of hot tea. Thus warmed, he begins to feel he has been rescued 'not from death, but from his terrible and solitary waiting' (Couto 1990:69), from the remote, nameless life he lived after drinking the ancestor's *ngovo*. The excessive rain has thus, paradoxically, redeemed and saved him.

Unlike the last two stories, there is neither drought nor flood in 'The Flagpoles of Beyondwards', and rain features only briefly. It does, however, introduce a man whose impact transforms the lives of the main characters: Constante Bene, the widower who works as a guard on the orange estate of Tavares, and his children, whom he tries, unsuccessfully, to teach the 'countless arts of tranquillity' (Couto 1994:147). At the start of the story, the persistent rain is a 'jailer, imprisoning people' (Couto 1994:147). It is also excessive: 'Never before [has] such water been seen' (Couto 1994:147). The 'fat' raindrops are 'pregnant with sky', prefiguring his daughter's subsequent maternity (Couto 1994:147). The rain brings with it a 'mulato' who goes to live on the mountain. Bene is suspicious and distrustful and blames the man, wrongly, for his daughter's pregnancy. He pursues him, fights him and burns his feet on the man's fire but also retrieves a flag from his haversack. Rescued by his son, he learns that the father of his grandchild is his employer, Tavares, whom his daughter seduced. Despite his burnt feet, Bene complies with his orders to patrol the orchard but sends his children to take refuge with the *mulato*. They look down the mountainside and see the orchard is ablaze, and the flag Constante took from the *mulato's* haversack is raised over the administration block. Although rain has initially imprisoned them all, it has also brought into their lives the *mulato* who indirectly triggers Bene's resistance.

Rain occurs on two occasions in 'The Rise of João Bate-Certo'. João is a village boy who is fascinated by the city and its tall buildings (Couto 1994:65). Returning from an excursion to the city, he does nothing, just 'sits there ... as if in a reverie' (Couto 1994:65). His mother waits and worries, 'misting' herself over, while time 'flows' through the days (Couto 1994:66). Mesmerised by the sky, by the 'topmost height he could see' (Couto 1994:65), João is, it transpires, just waiting for the rain to stop. When it does, he builds a ladder. Despite the villagers' scoffing, his 'vision ... [ascends] to the sky ... lost among the clouds and the mists' (Couto 1994:67). He builds the ladder so high that when he returns to the ground 'bits of cloud ... [cling] to his clothes' (Couto 1994:67). His mother hides his tools from him, but they are mysteriously replaced on his next climb. His mother gets ill and goes mad, and the villagers shun her. Despite their requests for material wealth, all he brings back with him are 'clouds, armfuls of clouds in bunches', with which he fills the house (1994:68). On the night of his mother's death, 'so people say, the only place it rained was inside the house of João Bate-Certo'

(Couto 1994:68). Elusive as is the ending of the story, the magical nature of the ladder and of João's 'rise' into the heavens seems to reflect his quest to bring rain to commemorate his mother's death.

Included in the most recent anthology *Rain*, 'The Deaf Father' is one of two first-person narratives we consider. Actual rain occurs only at the end. As a child, the narrator has been labelled 'the rain-child' because he is the son of a white Portuguese father and a mother 'black, black as coal' (Couto 2019b:84). Accepting the label, he deems himself '[l]ike the word of God blotted by the rain'. This is, to him, like a disfigurement or a stain (Couto 2019b:84). Later, as an adult, it is 'in the rain' that he looks back on his life, and recalls the letter bomb that burst his eardrums, his denial of his deafness and the evidently mute girl his father brings him, whose whispers he 'listen[s] to' (Couto 2019b:85). Like his mother, the girl is 'blacker than black' (Couto 2019b:86), and she is sent away because of this. And so he leaves, seeking refuge in a tiny remote parish and passing himself off as a priest. The life he lives then, as 'a man of generosity' (Couto 2019b:86), embodying kindness in everything he does, is arbitrarily interrupted by torrential rain, bringing all the people of the area to shelter in the church, including the 'mute' girl his father found for him (Couto 2019b:87). When he sees her speaking, he strips off his 'fake vestures', confesses his imposture to his flock and leaves the church. The woman follows him, grabs hold of him and speaks. Miraculously:

I heard her voice, indeed, I heard her without reading her lips. I listened to the woman's gentle voice, her words wrapping me in my own alarm.

– Stay – please stay... dear Father! (Couto 2019b:88)

What has brought about this reunion is the rain, rain so hard that the surrounding huts threaten to collapse, rain so hard that when he preaches, 'only the rain could be heard, tim-tim-ba-tinning on the roof of the tiny church' (Couto 2019b:87), rain so hard that he wonders if 'the heavens threaten a flood' (Couto 2019b:88). What the rain does bring is the young woman he loved, his decision to divest himself of dishonesty and the restoration of his hearing.

The last story we discuss is the titular story of the collection. It is narrated in present tense by one of its two characters. Given its title, rain has the most developed presence here. The narrator sits at the window of his home, watching rain which has been falling for 3 days. Initially he responds with enjoyment and celebration. He asks himself how many years it has been of persistent, destructive drought that has caused the 'progressive decline' of the earth and the 'death' of the heavens (Couto 2019b:32). He has missed the sound and smell of rain, which he calls 'melodic and divine', and he sees how 'the ground [now] blossoms with various beauties' (Couto 2019b:32). Yet he is also sceptical and distrustful. He wonders if, after all this time, it is still possible to 'begin anew', if there is still 'a place for joy' (Couto 2019c:32). And since for him this is a 'meteorological matter', quite soon he begins to ask if 'all this rain is a bit too much' (Couto 2019b:32). The heavens seem to him to be 'giving back the sea they have

sheltered' and in doing so 'intend ... to overrun the entire earth, joining its rivers, shoulder to shoulder' (Couto 2019b:33). In his distrust he confers agency and intention on the rain: he deems it a 'punishing rain' and couches its 'generosity' as 'malignant' (Couto 2019b:33).

His reading of the rain is at direct odds with that of his companion. For 'Aunt Tristereza', rain is 'a message from the spirits', 'an answer to prayers, to ceremonies honouring our ancestors' (Couto 2019b:32). The drought, to her, was a reproach from the gods, such that 'the dead – even those gone for some time – had begun drying up' (Couto 2019b:32). Now that the war is over, 'the rain can fall once again' (Couto 2019b:32). The timing of this blessing is right, because 'the displaced who return to their homes will arrive to find the ground damp, just as the seedlings prefer it' (Couto 2019b:33). She answers the narrator's doubts with metaphors, with 'other meteorological insights that my wisdom cannot reach' (Couto 2019b:33). The 'hefty clouds' host fish and crabs which will 'rain down during a storm' because they are 'animals that always follow the water' (Couto 2019b:33). Like the ordinary people Couto encounters on his travels, she is sure of her reading of the rain, and like Jossias, her faith is vested in natural unities and proportions. She is certain that 'the rain hasn't forgotten how to fall' (Couto 2019b:32), that water 'knows how many grains are to be found in the sand. For each grain, the water forms a drop' (Couto 2019b:33). She believes 'nature has its own ways of working, unfolding in simple ways' (Couto 2019b:33). As she understands it, the land is being 'wiped clean' (Couto 2019b:32) of the blood of war. The rain is 'washing the sand clean' – and the dead 'will be pleased' (Couto 2019b:33). The dead are alive to her as they are to the wife in 'The Fire' and to the villagers who seek their intervention in the story of Jossias.

Tristereza's understanding of the rain is clearly distinguished from the narrator's by a historic and geographic awareness of events in their country. Yet the disjunction between their responses to it is expressed most explicitly in the clothes they wear. Despite Tristereza's disapproval, the narrator habitually dons 'short sleeves and blue jeans' (Couto 2019b:32), refusing the suit she presses on him. Ready to leave, she is 'dressed for home', which to him shows she accepts her 'confinement' and belongs 'more to the world' than him. He, by contrast, is 'always trying to escape', feeling 'the lure to leave', not convinced that the land is 'being washed of its past' (Couto 2019b:34). The rain triggers a change. Looking down at the street he notices 'the plants outside sprouting from the earth' (Couto 2019b:34), and his doubts are suddenly dissolved. He calls her back to grab his suit, and 'as she undresses the hanger, the rain begins to stop' (Couto 2019b:34). Sceptical as is his narrative voice, his concession to her signals an acceptance of her reading of the rain's spiritual significance. Donning the suit is a 'show of respect' that matches 'this celebration of Mozambique' (Couto 2019b:33). The story thus ends on a note of accord and enchantment: 'arm in arm, we both step out into the pools of water, carefree as children who see in the world the joy of a never-ending game' (Couto 2019b:34).

Couto's stories are very brief, and their meaning is elusive. His treatment of rain, as our readings have shown, is evocative rather than explicit. In a formal critique, 'Mia Couto or the Art of Storytelling', his translator Chabal (2003) describes the *crónicas* or *contos* the writer has chosen for his work: they are

brief prose pieces ... based on his interest in the life histories, fantasies or rumours that he uncovered as a working journalist, and influenced by memories of storytelling harking back to his childhood. (p. 89)

They are marked by 'the choice of character, the way in which the story is recounted, and the highly unexpected, unreal or discordant development of events' (Chabal 2003:89). Although characters appear 'normal', 'ordinary', 'logical', they 'challenge, or interrogate, the reader's assumptions and expectations' because they are involved in 'plausibly fantastic situations' (Chabal 2003:90). The stories' brevity, their 'standard size', brings out 'a conciseness of expression [that] ... sharpens inventiveness and heightens imagination' (Chabal 2003:90). And their unexpected 'finales' – around which they are constructed – are often 'without obvious resolution, without simple closure' because, for Couto, a story is 'not a fable', not 'edifying', but rather 'symbolic' (Chabal 2003:91). The failure to conclude, particularly, 'allows us to feel, rather than comprehend, what is taking place': because the fantastic 'transmutes the fictitious into the factual' (Chabal 2003:93). For Couto, he says, it is 'quite simply, objectively the case that ... life is an unexplainable combination of fact and fantasy' (Chabal 2003:95). And he insists on the realities that Couto seeks to represent: 'how people in Mozambique might experience the life they lead but which they fail fully to grasp' (Chabal 2003:125), the 'sheer humanity of people whose lives he has shared since he was a child' (Chabal 2003:126). Indeed, Chabal ascribes the vividness of the stories to 'the way in which they draw the reader into a world, as real as any, where all boundaries are put into question' (Chabal 2003:116) – boundaries between past and present, far and near, material and spiritual.

In a 2015 interview with Maya Jaggi for *The Guardian*, Couto has rejected the label often given him of 'magic realism'. He explains: 'in Columbia, Mexico, Nigeria, Mozambique, it's the real thing, not magic, and the only way to tell these stories' (Couto 2015a). Commenting on the writer Guimarães Rosa, he says: 'one needs to abandon reason in order to look at this Brazil which [he] shows us, as if in order to touch reality, a certain hallucinatory gift were necessary, a madness capable of redeeming the invisible' (Couto 2015b:55). The 'real' thus encompasses qualities of madness and invisibility which can be 'redeemed' through a certain 'hallucinatory gift'. And, after all, what a writer gives us is not books:

What he gives us through his writing is a world. We were unaware of that world, and yet it existed within us as a silent memory of some lost enchantment. The light and shadow of the page already lay dormant within us. In a sense, reading reawakens that enchantment for us. (Couto 2015b:56)

The roles given to rain in his stories bear this out: as agent of disruption or resolution, of punishment or redemption, of deprivation or of healing, of beneficence, hope, enchantment.

Indeed, the notion of enchantment is one that absorbs Couto. As a biologist, he travels through the savannah of his country and meets people who are formally uneducated. In his Neustadt Prize Lecture of 2015, he gives credit to them, to:

those who give meaning to my writing, the anonymous people of my country. Some of those Mozambicans – who are, together with me, author of my books – do not know how to write. Many don't even speak Portuguese. But they are guardians, in their everyday lives, of a magical, poetical dimension to the world that illuminates my writing and gives delight to my existence. (Couto 2015b:53)

Such people, Couto (2015c) says elsewhere:

know how to read their world. In such a universe where other wisdoms prevail, I am the one who is illiterate. I don't know how to read signs in the soil, the trees, the animals. I can't read clouds and the likelihood of rain. (p. 81)

In her interview with him, Jaggi remarks on the reverence that infuses his sense of the environment, his 'feeling part of something bigger', the importance, for him, of regaining the 'brotherhood', the 'relation', the 'link between nature and humanity' (Couto 2015a). For Couto, it is his work as a writer to express this. Unlike the 'reductive and utilitarian perception that converts languages into the business of linguists and their technical skills', he says elsewhere, for him 'the divine vocation of the word not only names but also invents and produces enchantment' (Couto 2015c:81).

Like Chabal, postcolonial critic Bill Ashcroft comments on the kind of realism that imbues Couto's writing and the ways in which it disrupts boundaries. In *The Multiple Worlds of Mia Couto*, he focuses on the 'variety and complexity of Mozambican life' (Ashcroft 2016:107); its dense layering and multiplicity (Ashcroft 2016:106); the diversity, open-endedness and proliferation of African ways of seeing and of being. He cites Couto's comment on the ability of oral culture 'to translate reality into stories', emphasising the term 'translation' because, he says, Couto's language 'give[s] access to the underground world, the world of dream, of vision' (Ashcroft 2016:107). This includes 'the realm of the spirit world' and its 'presence ... in this world' (Ashcroft 2016:113, 110). Much of Ashcroft's analysis explores how Couto's writing disrupts 'the linear apprehension of the world', how it 'disrupts common-sense notions of time and space with a vision of possible worlds' (Ashcroft 2016:108). 'History', says Ashcroft, 'indeed temporality itself, is a construction of language and of culture', and the modern concept of 'chronological "empty time", dislocated from place or human life' is the opposite of 'presence, of life lived fully in the moment ... accessible to the intersection of past, present and future' and 'inhabited by memory, by the past' (Ashcroft 2016:116–117). Time is one of several boundaries that are radically blurred. So too are those 'between dream and reality, between death and life, between truth and

delusion' (Ashcroft 2016:110) and, critically, 'between nature and culture' (Ashcroft 2016:107). Ashcroft sees Couto's language as enabling, his vision as a writer to 'give back to the word its divine power; its power to create rather than merely nominate things, the power to enchant things, be these trees, birds, or landscapes' (cited from Hammar 2011:126). As the Old Gaffer put it in *Under the Frangipani*: 'We're all brothers, trees and animals, animals and men, men and stones. We're all related, created out of the same matter' (Couto 2001:64). In the worlds in his stories, rain too is given divine power, creativity, enchantment.

Informed by a similar environmental awareness, Samuelson's (2021) '*Re-enchanting the World from Mozambique*' acknowledges both 'Mozambique's geohistory' and its rural 'cosmovisions' and Couto's training as a biologist. She sees his 'practice of writing as "re-enchantment"' as presenting 'modes of narration capable of drawing together questions of ecology and economic inequality, the geological and the geopolitical and literature and science' (Samuelson 2021:64–65). In doing so, she stresses the significance of the local. Invoking Morris Berman's proposal that re-enchantment is 'the only hope' for a world in which the 'disenchantment' forecast by Max Weber has 'very nearly wrecked the planet', she finds in Couto's work 'a more located sense of ruination as well as of the possibilities for regeneration' (Samuelson 2021:63). Both 'his literary and ecological practice', she says, derive 'a poetics of the planet from the particularities of place' (Samuelson 2021:64). Like Chabal and like Ashcroft, she confronts the issue of boundaries, citing Couto's claim that Mozambicans have a different notion of 'the borders between what is human and not human – what is alive and not alive' (Samuelson 2021:65). Rather than conceiving the environment as 'externality', the 'cosmovisions' Couto encountered among rural people recognise that 'things don't revolve around us, but we, along with them, form one world; people and things dwell within one "indivisible body", one "interconnected world"' (Samuelson 2021:65). And so his fictions are invariably situated on these 'tremulous and permeable' borders, traversing what Ashcroft (2016) calls the 'visible and invisible worlds' (p. 116, *inter alia*) that comprise African realities.

The 'poetics of the planet' Couto derives from insights such as these that 'flourish in the most impoverished part of the world' are informed by animism, Samuelson says, citing Patrick Curry, in terms of which 'any object can turn out to be a subject'. The animism that informs the actions of Couto's characters means his oeuvre 'redistributes agency among humans ... composing an "all" who might "dream other dreams"'. This does not, however, assume that 'we' are 'similarly located in the planetary condition' (Samuelson 2021:74). Like Chabal, who says Couto's 'finales' induce us to 'feel' rather than 'comprehend', Samuelson argues that Couto 'draws readers into [a] "sacred web" while denying [us] the "arrogance" of grasping its meanings'. His 'planetary poetics of re-enchanting the world ... ultimately invoke an enlivening ecocritical method: denying modes of reading-as-extraction and inviting instead reading-as-relation' (Samuelson 2021:74). Even while demystifying the 'local and global machinations

driving human immiseration and environmental degradation' (Samuelson 2021:74), he maintains 'wonder'. Without repudiating old ways or trying to arrest time, Couto's re-enchanting fiction thus 'seeks to convey past potentialities into the present and future, thereby recomposing a regenerative temporality' (Samuelson 2021:68).

Given the indebtedness Couto acknowledges to the 'anonymous people of my country', whom he sees as the 'guardians, in their everyday lives, of the magical, poetical dimension to the world', we should be circumspect in accepting Samuelson's insistence that it is his writing, his fiction, which does the re-enchanting. And we should recognise that the notion of 're-enchantment' is itself not a straightforward or unproblematic one. The term Max Weber borrowed from Friedrich Schiller was *Entzauberung*, which translates literally as 'demagication' or 'the breaking of a magic spell'. Its widespread rendition as 'disenchantment' prompts various questions. In an article in *The Hedgehog Review*, humanities scholar McCarraher (2015) rebuts its 'melancholy shorthand for the modern condition of secularity' by asserting, 'We Have Never Been Disenchanted' (p. 1). Neither the 'sacramental character of the world [nor] our consciousness of that quality' can ever be extinguished, McCarraher (2015) insists, only 'assaulted, damaged, and left in ruins' (p. 3). In his view, the world does not need re-enchantment: rather we need to recognise – and to revere – its 'enduring and ineradicable enchantment'. McCarraher is one among several critics of Weber's pervasive perspective on modernity. Most recently, early modern literature scholar Jason Crawford gives the current critical preoccupation with re-enchantment an adroit and amusing drubbing. His 2020 opinion piece in *The Los Angeles Review of Books* begins, resoundingly, 'Have you heard the good news? The re-enchantment of the world is at hand' and proceeds with the wry dig that 'much of this recent literature seems ... to want something like re-enchantment without the enchantment'. Conceding that 'the metaphor matters', he traces it back to English writings of the middle and late 17th century, while also highlighting the 'ancient apprehensions ... the other vocabularies and paradigms to which our current projects might [instead] turn'. Two he specifies are the 'virtue of faith' which operates in a 'tension between presence and absence', between 'what is now and what is not yet', and the 'virtue of love' which 'hopes all things and believes all things'. Such negotiations, as he calls them, have been underway since 'long before the era we call modernity'. And so, Crawford (2020) concludes with questions:

What if the path to re-enchantment lies in the many terms and forms of life – participation, incarnation, creation, apocalypse, community, contemplation, hope – that these long negotiations have yielded? What if these terms bear within themselves alternatives to the narratives of linear progress that always come riding in on our language of enchantment? (n.p.)

Couto's own grasp of re-enchantment seems, in many ways, to embrace just such 'terms and forms of life'. In an anecdote in his 2014 Neustadt Prize Lecture about the bedtime stories told to him as a child, he describes how his parents were able,

using words, to travel and visit the Portuguese homeland they were forced by fascism to abandon. The stories they told 'could erase time and distance' (Couto 2015b:50). In that very familiar and domestic moment, Couto (2015b) says:

the very essence of what is literature was present: a chance to migrate from ourselves, a chance to become others inside ourselves, a chance to re-enchant the world. Literature is not only a way to affirm our existence. It is a permission to disappear and to allow the presence of those who seem to be absent. (p. 50)

His choice of the word 'seem' is telling: the story has drawn the child, and his parents, into 'a world, as real as any' where boundaries of time and of space are erased, where, as Chabal put it, the fiction has transmuted the fantastic into the factual. In the Jaggi interview, Couto cites another anecdote that, artlessly and accessibly, makes the same point. Aged seven, Couto (2015a) saw his father cry for the first time:

He'd received a letter from Portugal saying his father was dead. I tried to comfort him, saying, 'How can grandfather be dead? He died there but here, he's still alive'. Relatives were alive in our house because of my parents telling stories about what they would left behind. (n.p.)

Being material, *pace* Strang, Mostern and Mukerji, rain, as a presence or as an absence, has agency. Through what he terms the 'divine power of the word', Couto seeks to reveal or reflect or express this agency in his stories, as both a material and a spiritual force. While demurring with Samuelson's insistence that Couto's re-enchanting the world is a conscious, deliberate effect, we find in her emphasis on the interconnections of human and environment, of the material and the spiritual, a receptive matrix in which to understand and recognise the agency of rain. In our analysis of the stories, we found it was rain that ensured the old woman in 'The Fire' survives her husband's plan to kill her; that punished the villagers for their failure to recognise the 'Birds of God'; that redeemed Old Jossias from the death-in-life he endures after drinking the *ngovo*; that brought the *mulato* into the lives of Constante Bene and his children and triggered his resistance to an oppressive employer; that inspired the 'rise' of João Bate-Certo to collect clouds to commemorate his mother's death; that named the 'Deaf Father' 'rain-child' and ultimately brought him the woman who restores his hearing; that induced the narrator in 'Rain' to don the formal clothes that Tristereza presses on him and to step outside with her in 'celebration of Mozambique'.

Conclusion

Rain by its nature is an active form of water. Once it has fallen it is held where it falls, or it overflows, 'evading capture and overcoming boundaries', as Mukerji put it, imbuing the world to make it 'rain-terrain', to recur to Samuelson. Western science conceives of rain in a hydrological cycle that treats it as 'meteorological matter'. Of course, there is a significant difference between causation and correlation, and of course it is a distinction of which Couto is well aware, being a botanist and an environmentalist. Yet, like the narrator who concedes Tristereza's simple trust and faith in

the rain's spiritual force, we need to be open also to recognising the enchantment of its agency. In a piece called 'Languages We Don't Know We Know', Couto (2015b) argues for a type of bilingualism that involves:

[A] language with an organized set of norms, capable of dealing with visible, everyday matters, but [also] another language to express that which belongs to the invisible, dreamlike order of existence' (pp. 86–87)

The 'ordinary people' whom he says are, together with him, author of his books have access to this order: they are 'guardians, in their everyday lives, of a magical, poetical dimension to the world' that illuminates and brings delight (Couto 2015b:53). The rain in Couto's stories speaks a language that 'gives us our sense of humanity'. It can also 'elevate us to the divine' (Couto 2015b:87). To hear it requires us to read-as-relation, as Samuelson exhorts us, to take up, in the impassioned terms of Crawford, the 'ancient apprehensions' of faith and of love. It speaks to us of hope if we will listen to it, this rain, this 'water of benedreamtion'.

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