



## The Power of the Story in Postcolonial Fiction

### The Novels of Brian Castro and Mia Couto

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It was a Brazilian novelist, Guimarães Rosa, who, in the early 1960s, introduced the term 'estória' as opposed to 'história' to describe his short fiction. Rosa's 'estória' was designed to be more evocative of two features that in due course absorbed the interest of a later generation of postcolonial literary theorists in the anglophone world – namely orality and the oral origins of literary fiction, and from there the idea of a story being told rather than written down. It is significant that one of the authors discussed in this paper, the Mozambican Mia Couto, has, on occasion, adopted the term 'estória', thus revealing a debt to Guimarães Rosa.

Stories and storytelling as an art and a tradition are etched into postcolonial literary theory, partly because, in pre-literate societies, they are seen as the

bedrock of an authentic national culture in contradistinction to that imposed by the recently departed colonizer. However, the emphasis on oral tradition as defining an emergent literature leads to a type of essentialism that satisfies a largely Western readership in its quest for 'novelty' as much as, if not more than it does cultural nationalists in the former colonies themselves. What is sometimes overlooked are the social and political implications of stories, and in particular conflicting stories, for these suggest very often a challenge to essentialism and generalisation, a resistance to compartmentalisation, and perhaps above all, resistance to a story imposed from above.

For Richard Kearney, stories serve to give shape and meaning to otherwise chaotic and dispersed events, and in what he terms 'our (...) postmodern era of fragmentation and fracture', serve to give both individuals and communities 'one of our most viable forms of *identity*'<sup>1</sup>. Stories, for Kearney, are therefore integral to building a sense of national cohesion. Michael Jackson, for his part, differentiates between stories that somehow become canonical, and therefore tend to reinforce the boundaries of the group to which the story belongs, and storytelling that 'also questions, blurs, transgresses, and even abolishes these boundaries'<sup>2</sup>. Both Kearney and Jackson seem to be

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pinpointing two apparently contradictory aspects of storytelling: it can be a narrative of communal cohesion on the one hand often taking the form of a myth of origin or similar such aetiology, and an expression of individual or personal difference on the other, for example an autobiographical account, or a succession of stories expressing multiple viewpoints. Whether the contradiction is so great is a question that I hope to answer in this article with reference to two fiction writers: the Mozambican Mia Couto and Brian Castro from Australia.

Couto and Castro, for all their undoubted differences, have one common characteristic which may be illustrative of a similar position with regard to the matter of individual or indeed national identity. There is an element of self-invention in both their personae that indicates an attraction to a sense of ambiguity: the Australian, with his quintessential Iberian family name, and equally typical Anglo-Saxon forename was, he has often repeated, born on a ferry between Macao and Hong Kong, thus evoking a type of cultural 'inbetweenness'. He is a man of complex Eurasian origins, being the son of a Shanghai Portuguese father, with obvious links to Macao, but who fled to Hong Kong in 1949, and an Anglo-Chinese mother. Brought up in Hong Kong, he was dispatched to Australia in 1961 for his secondary education, and although he has travelled in Europe, he has spent most of his life in the country to which he was originally sent as a boy, and where he is widely acknowledged as an innovative writer. Like Castro, Mia Couto is a product of Portuguese colonial activity, being a first-generation Mozambican of Portuguese parentage. His sobriquet, Mia, which has led to some potentially embarrassing gender confusion, derives from a childhood nickname given to him because of his attachment to a pet cat. Born and brought up in the port city of Beira, Couto's medical studies were interrupted by Mozambican independence in 1975. His support for the new Marxist Frelimo government saw him become director of the Mozambican State News Agency as well as, in due course, editor of a weekly magazine and newspaper. He now works as an environmental biologist, and is Mozambique's most internationally acclaimed writer.

Both Castro and Couto began to publish at the same time. Castro's first novel, *Birds of Passage*, came out in 1983, precisely the same year that Couto's first

collection of poems, *Raiz do Orvalho* was published in Maputo. Since then, both have continued to publish steadily, Castro producing some seven novels and a book of essays to date, Couto diverse collections of short stories and five novels. Both authors reflect in their work the profound social transitions that their countries have undergone, in Castro's case over the last four decades, in that of Couto over the first quarter of a century of independence. The fact that both, to some extent, write from the margins, Couto as a white Mozambican, Castro as an Asian Australian, explains their commitment to plurality. Mozambique, in common with many African countries whose borders were arbitrarily created by colonial powers in the nineteenth century, is an ethnic and cultural patchwork. However, under the late Portuguese colonialism of Salazar and Caetano, the colony was incorporated into a discourse of identity that tied it to the mother country's 'Lusotropicalist' assimilationist ideal<sup>3</sup>. During the first fifteen years of independence, another centralizing discourse took over based on class-based Marxism. As Couto himself put it in an interview: "Há um Estado que partiu à procura de uma nação cuja maior riqueza é a sua diversidade, que tem várias nações e culturas dentro de si" (There is a State that set out to seek a nation whose greatest wealth is its diversity, and which contains within itself various nations)<sup>4</sup>.

Ever since the peace accord of 1992, after which the last vestiges of this Marxist ideal were ditched and the Mozambican government adopted free market policies and a commitment to a parliamentary democracy, a type of reductive Mozambican nationalism has emerged along with a new African urban elite, which while not so blatantly drawn along racial lines as Mugabe's variant in neighbouring Zimbabwe, is nevertheless a very real presence. As a writer, Couto is, of course, primarily true to himself, but in interviews as well as through his fiction, he has often evoked a sense of Mozambican national identity in formation, and we must not forget that in 1975 he committed himself to a revolutionary party that delivered his country into independence. But over the years, as the utopian dream has died, political corruption set in while the country has become more and more dependent on foreign aid. In this new context, he has increasingly become the proponent of a non-dirigiste sense of identity, or as one critic has

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termed him, a 'postmodern nationalist'<sup>5</sup>. His Mozambique is based on multiplicity, on a hybridity that, through use of language in particular, but also the treatment of such issues as gender and patriarchy, and traditional rural culture versus urban cultural amnesia, implicitly questions the manipulations of power emanating from the centre. He has become, to some extent, the literary voice of those who have been left behind in the new culture of greed and wealth accumulation. On the other hand, he is a writer who is inextricably linked to the development of Mozambican literature. Indeed, for many in the Portuguese-speaking world, Mia Couto is synonymous with the literary identity of his country.

For his part, Castro's critique of homogeneity and essentialist inscriptions of national or ethnic identity derives from his desire not to be labelled: even though he has lived for most of his life in one country, he takes pride in his cosmopolitan origins, with its roots in East Asia and Europe, or as he puts it in more abstract terms, "... a *moving out* towards a sophistication, a *civitas* – a state of being, distinct from the shallow 'civility' seen as the preserve of homogeneous societies which almost always exhibit high degrees of racism"<sup>6</sup>. At the same time, he is a product of a postcolonial migratory influx into Australia that has witnessed the emergence of a generation of writers who have reflected the growing presence of new diasporas that have called into question traditional assumptions of national identity based on the country's Anglo-Celtic tradition.

On the other hand, the quality and originality of both Couto's and Castro's work derives from the fact that they are writing from a minority position – Castro as the outsider who has become an insider (even though he might well deny it), Couto as the insider who, in a certain way, has become an outsider (in that, like the Nigerians Achebe and Soyinka before him, he has adopted a critically independent perspective within his country's latest political incarnation). Additionally, Couto and Castro are people in between, belonging to two or more cultures, and it is perhaps this, more than anything, that translates into a reluctance to see identity as anything other than provisional, a manifestation of process rather than stasis.

Jackson sees a link between storytelling and journeying through the etymology of the word 'experience' and its Latin association with movement

and experimentation<sup>7</sup>. Inherent in stories is movement, adaptability, and unexpected change, what Iain Chambers defines as the characteristics of migrancy as opposed to travel. Travel, according to Chambers, involves a point of departure and a point of return and suggests a fixed itinerary, while migrancy 'calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are constantly subject to mutation. Always in transit, the promise of a homecoming – completing the story, domesticating the detour – becomes an impossibility'<sup>8</sup>. The idea of moving through space and time relates in turn to the contrast Ann Game draws between spatialized time – that is a linear chronology 'marked by discrete moments' – and temporalized time, in which past, present and future melt into each other in a type of sensuous communion<sup>9</sup>. The breaking down of barriers between space and time is also about breaking down frontiers between binary opposites: past/present, memory/forgetting, which is why, for both Couto and Castro, there is no such thing as a pure authentic past. The past is fictionalized because our memories are selective, imperfect, and inevitably inflected by our loss of memory. Memory and forgetting are therefore inextricably linked, which makes forgetting the mother of invention. Disinheritance is part of what Castro terms a 'creolizing of forgetting and memory'<sup>10</sup>, a source of creativity and imagination, continuous re-invention. For Couto, memories only reach us through a process in which they are re-elaborated: "O sonho é a porta por onde nos chegam as memórias" (Dreams are the door through which memory reaches us)<sup>11</sup>, like Castro, indicating a close link between memory (or its absence) and imagination.

It is now time to turn to two novels that have been chosen because they highlight some of the issues mentioned above. The coincidence of their central symbols of location, a coastal hotel built on the site of an old jail in Castro's *After China*, and an ancient Portuguese fortress overlooking the Indian Ocean, used as a prison in colonial times and thereafter converted into an old people's refuge in Couto's *Under the Frangipani*<sup>12</sup>, suggests a borderland, where the binaries of colonial past and postcolonial present meet and mingle, reflecting the creative possibilities of hybridity and of identity as being fluid and restless, like the ocean which these edifices overlook. Both novels involve romantic relationships between two main outcast

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characters, the culmination of which is to somehow demonstrate some form of reconciliation between past and present.

The award-winning *After China*, Castro's fourth novel, was first published in 1992. You Bok Mun, a Chinese architect, partially educated in France, victim of a failed marriage following the death of his sickly child back in China and then of the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, has been rehabilitated in the new China of Deng Xiao Ping and commissioned to design a seaside hotel in Australia somewhere in the vicinity of Sydney. It is unclear whether You is a political refugee, but perhaps the most crucial point is that he is a type of nomad, whose cosmopolitan educational experience is anathema to the political certainties and enforced conformity of Mao's China of the 1960s and 70s. You is perhaps Castro via another route. The hotel is a symbol of his deracination: it mixes architectural genres, it is described as if it were a ship with its balconies like a deck and its submarine bar, it appears to list during the storm that all but destroys it, and is evacuated as if it were sinking. Indeed, as You struggles down the flooded passages to open the valves that will allow the accumulated sewage to flow out into the ocean, we are faced with a description that recalls a scene from the film of the Titanic. The hotel's labyrinthine structure, built so that it appears to have no centre which one can return to or depart from, metaphorizes You's rootlessness, but also the excitement and imagination of his youth. There is a sense, then, in which the hotel, in its stylistic pastiche and unconsciousness of both space and time, is some sort of homage to cultural disinheritance, an example of Castro's already mentioned 'creolizing of forgetting and memory'. But perhaps too it is a symbol of a new, alternative Australia in construction: significantly, it is built on the site of an old prison, a metaphorical link to the country's deep past as a penal colony.

You's romantic attachment is a writer, a single mother who is terminally ill. Through the interweaving of their dialogue, we learn that she was brought up in the area of the hotel, and that she had a child by an Asian poet who later abandoned her. Her giving birth to a child of mixed descent had shamed her father, who had attempted to conceal the fact by an elaborate tissue of stories. This child, Serena, whose name is the English rendition of that of the architect's own deceased

daughter, will become a vehicle for You's own integration into Australia after her mother's death, while also assuaging his guilt for the neglect of his own family in China. At the same time, it is understood that he will become a type of surrogate father who may, in time, make Serena aware of one side of her ancestral culture.

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The love affair between writer and architect is developed through the medium of storytelling. He recounts his life, mingled with stories from ancient China, while she writes him into her posthumous book. Their stories thus demonstrate the intimate link between writing and orality that is also a hallmark of Couto's work. But perhaps more important is the notion of a story that has no end, a narration that, like You's hotel, is in a permanent process of transience and therefore outside our enslavement to time – that is, the constricting notion spatialized time. As the writer tells You, 'When I listen to your stories, time no longer seems to matter'<sup>13</sup>, while You's inscription into her final book has given him a sense of acceptance, of belonging to a narrative. More to the point, she has helped reconcile him with his past by incorporating it into an ongoing present: "There was no longer a future, no longer a possibility whose unknown had to be understood. So he had quite comfortably turned his back and settled for this self to which he had finally come, from which he would constantly remake himself. No longer alone. This had been her gift to him: the present moment"<sup>14</sup>.

If Castro's hotel is, in some sense, a microcosm for an emerging multicultural Australia, Couto's fortress, which is the location for his 1997 novel, *Under the Frangipani*, symbolizes Mozambique during the

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peace process, between the end of the civil war and the establishment of a parliamentary democracy. As in Castro's novel, there is a romance, although this is tangential to the main action, which revolves around an investigation into the murder of the director of the old people's home situated in the fort, Vastsome Excellency. Leading the investigation is Izidine Naíta, a young detective from the city, who is charged with taking statements from the inmates of the home, a motley collection of elderly outcasts. Rather like You, in Castro's novel, Izidine is an outsider, but in a very different way. Belonging to the generation of Mozambicans who emerged in the wake of independence, he was educated abroad, no doubt in a country that the Marxist revolutionaries of the 1970s and early 80s considered an ally. He has lost his African roots, and is unequipped to deal with the ambiguities and riddles that form the basis of the old folks' statements. The intermediary between him and the inmates is the nurse, Marta who, like Izidine, has been educated in Portuguese, and to some extent is also an outcast, except that, rather like You, she suffered the excesses of the Marxist government's revolutionary zeal in the late 1970s when she was sent off to a re-education camp as part of Operation Production, a punishment for her supposedly loose morals. It is Marta who encourages Izidine to listen not just to the linear accounts of the old people in the fort but to the messages that lie buried beneath, the internal logic that is contradicted by the raving and rambling quality of their statements in the rigid, bureaucratic perception of the young detective: "Her advice to the policeman was quite simply that he should sit and wait quietly. This was not his world, he had to respect it. He should leave everything as it was, including silences and absences"<sup>15</sup>.

Couto's novel, like Castro's, seems to work on two levels. There are the witness accounts of the old folk, each of whom claims to have had good reason to kill the director of the home given his mistreatment of them as individuals. Yet these stories are in many ways red herrings, fantasies that suggest a wider moral truth rather than help the detective in his investigation. Nor are we sure that the traditions that the old people claim to defend are authentic. When they insist that Izidine put on a woman's dress to be integrated into their community through some arcane ritual, it is clear that they are seeking to make fun of him. Couto seems to

suggest that there is no authentic oral culture: there are certain rituals by which stories may be told, but the substance is an adaptation to a present moment. No story will therefore ever be told in the same way twice. A story may have a cathartic intention akin to psychoanalysis in that it may help to discharge a conscience which is inevitably rooted in some past misdemeanour, but it is nevertheless of the present moment: one of the residents of the home is a witch who no longer believes, if indeed she ever did, in the powers attributed to her. But her guilt derives from her having agreed, as a young girl, to become her father's mistress, a factor that led to his suicide. Her consolation now is to transform herself at night into water before resuming her human shape in the morning, for as she explains: "I'm spared the trouble of dreaming. For water has no past. As far as a river is concerned, all that matters is today, like a wave on a permanent crest"<sup>16</sup>.

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It now remains for us to establish what Couto is trying to achieve at the macro level of the novel. Like Castro in Australia, and many postcolonial writers, Couto has set out to explore and exorcise the ghosts of the past which still haunt Mozambique, and therefore to effect some sort of reconciliation with that past. In *Under the Frangipani*, there is, of course, a 'real' ghost, the spirit of Ermelindo Mucanga, which descends into the body of Izidine. Mucanga was a carpenter during colonial times and had helped construct the wooden quay at which political prisoners were unloaded by the Portuguese. When he died, he was buried under the

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frangipani tree that overlooks the ocean on one of the fort's grassy ramparts. It is significant, then, that Mucanga, a colonial collaborator, should redeem himself by helping to save Izidine from those dispatched from the city to kill him for having found out the truth about the director's murder: namely that he was killed by order from above in order to cover up his activities as an illegal arms dealer, who was siphoning off arms from the state to sell to the highest bidder.

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Diametrically opposed to Mucanga, the African who, like so many had to, collaborated with the Portuguese, is another ghost from the colonial past in the form of the colonizer who stayed behind, as so few did. Domingos Mourão is the only white inmate. Having chosen not to join the exodus of settlers in 1975, Domingos has become Africanized by his Mozambican companions as Xidimingo. He is a character with whom Couto could in many ways identify as a man between two worlds or without a world, and in this sense his predicament is that of Castro's Chinese migrant<sup>17</sup>. His favourite pastime is to sit under the frangipani gazing out to sea, dreaming of the possibility of returning to his native land, while acknowledging that if he did return, he would no longer recognise the Portugal he once knew. At the same time, he also acknowledges that he has put down roots in Mozambique, even though the Africa he migrated to as a colonial no longer exists. When he disappears into the African earth at the end of the novel along with the other elderly inmates, it seems to synthesise his belonging to the land he chose to stay in as well as the passing of an age and a new beginning.

Both *After China* and *Under the Frangipani* end with an apocalyptic storm. In both novels, this storm has been portended in one of the stories narrated during the course of the novel: the foundational myth of Macao resulting from the calming of a storm by the Chinese goddess, A-Ma, in the Australian novel, and the *wamulambo*, or storm snake in the African narrative. But both storms also portend a new beginning: You, in Castro's novel, is inspired by his lover's posthumous book to return and rebuild the hotel, while for Couto, two victims of the extremes of independence come together when past and present are fused and a future of hope hinted at.

The importance of storytelling in these two novels, and indeed in others by the same writers, lies embedded in their more general interest in and evocation of postcolonial hybridity, and their interpretation of what hybridity really involves. One such manifestation of hybridity, for example, is the inter-relationship between the spoken and the written word. Izidine writes down the testimonies of the different protagonists in Couto's novel. In Castro's novel, the writer reproduces in her final book the stories told her by her architect lover. Yet we are told that he too keeps a notebook with him. For Ann Game, in her reading of Bachelard's 'phenomenology of space', the act of reading combines both writing and listening, or as Bachelard puts it, 'resonance and reverberation'<sup>18</sup>. In applying this idea to the centrality of storytelling in Couto and Castro, there is a breaking down of binaries and a blurring of borders between storyteller and listener, author and reader. Indeed, in the act of reading out loud, the reader re-vocalizes the written word, demonstrating not only the dependency of the written word on a foundation of orality, but its opposite. The democratic overcoming of binary oppositions upon which societies are structured suggests a particular type of hybridity being voiced by these two authors. If we accept Jan Nederveen Pieterse's notion of a *continuum of hybridities*, beginning at the 'top' with an assimilationist variant that is controlled and manipulated by the centre and which 'adopts the canon and mimics the hegemony' (Lusotropicalism belongs to this variant), and at the other extreme, a 'destabilizing hybridity that blurs the canon, reverses the current, subverts the centre'<sup>19</sup>, then it is clear that both Brian Castro and Mia Couto belong to the latter. **RC**

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## NOTES

- 1 Richard Kearney, *On Stories*, p. 4.
- 2 Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling*, p. 25.
- 3 Lusotropicalism was a term first coined by the Brazilian social historian Gilberto Freyre to explain the apparent facility with which the Portuguese had succeeded in integrating in tropical environments and assimilating local populations into a broadly lusophone cultural structure. The basis of this was race mixture (the facility with which Portuguese males had mixed with females from other ethnic groups), and the assumption of cultural practices by native populations, including Roman Catholicism. Freyre's ideas were appropriated by the Salazar regime in Portugal as it sought to justify the continuing Portuguese presence in Africa in the 1950s and 60s.
- 4 From an interview given to the Lisbon daily *Público* ([www.publico.pt/cm/escritores/62-MiaCouto/Mocambique.htm](http://www.publico.pt/cm/escritores/62-MiaCouto/Mocambique.htm)).
- 5 See Phillip Rothwell, *A Postmodern Nationalist: Truth, Orality, and Gender in the Work of Mia Couto*.
- 6 Brian Castro, *Looking for Estrellita*, p. 220.
- 7 Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling*, p. 31.
- 8 Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*, p. 5.
- 9 Ann Game, 'Time, Space, Memory, with reference to Bachelard', in Featherstone, Lash & Robertson (eds.), *Global Modernities*, p. 194.
- 10 Castro, *Looking for Estrellita*, p. 226.
- 11 Interview with *Público* (see note 4).
- 12 The title of the original Portuguese is *Na Varanda do Frangipani* (Lisboa, Editorial Caminho, 1997). All references and quotes are from the English translation.
- 13 *After China*, p. 82.
- 14 *After China*, p. 143.
- 15 *Under the Frangipani*, p. 37.
- 16 *Under the Frangipani*, p. 80.
- 17 In a statement made to Patrick Chabal, Couto described the drama faced by his own parents after 1975: "Os meus pais, depois da independência, foram por quarto vezes para Portugal, para voltar definitivamente e só à quinta é que ficaram definitivamente em Portugal. Eu creio que eles pertencem àquela gente que já não tem mundo, porque entretanto Portugal já não é aquele Portugal que eles deixaram, e Moçambique também não é aquilo que eles tinham encontrado e onde sabiam viver, portanto eles pertencem a uma terra de ninguém" (After independence, my parents went back to Portugal four times with the intention of staying for good, and only on the fifth occasion did they really stay in Portugal. I think they belong to those people who no longer have a world, because Portugal is no longer the Portugal they left, and Mozambique is also not the place they found and the place they learned to live in, so they belong to a no-man's land), *Vozes Moçambicanas*, p. 284.
- 18 'Time, Space, Memory, with reference to Bachelard', p. 199.
- 19 Jan Nederveen Pieterse, 'Globalization as Hybridization', p. 56.

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