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Animals, Animism, and Biosemiotics: Reimagining the Species Boundary in the Novels of Mia Couto

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Mia Couto is among the most prominent of contemporary Mozambican writers. Yet he has also enjoyed a career as an environmental biologist and ecologist, having expressed much interest in interrogating the border between what is human and not human through his scientific practice. In this essay I locate the nexus of Couto's literary and ecological careers in his concern with recovering forms of proximity among humans, environments, and other species. Through an analysis of some of Couto's recently translated novels, I argue that his work reconceives of the relations between humans and animals through the concept of biosemiotics, an approach attuned to languages conveyed semiotically through embodied and skillful engagement with the larger-than-human world. Couto's work in turn grounds biosemiotics in segments of African life that find their basis in forms of animism, thus implicating the concept in the postcolonial work of cultural recuperation and decolonization.

Keywords: animals, animism, biosemiotics, ecology, Mia Couto, speciesism

Mia Couto (the pen name for António Emílio Leite Couto), one of Mozambique's most prominent contemporary writers, has lived a somewhat double life. On the one hand, he is an internationally acclaimed author, with several novels, short stories, poetry collections, and literary awards to his name. Born in the port city of Beira in 1955, he published his first collection of poetry, *Raiz de Orvalho*, in 1983, and his first novel, *Terra Sonâmbula* (translated by David Brookshaw as *Sleepwalking Land*), was published just short of a decade after, in 1992. His fiction has since been published in multiple countries and translated into various languages, while criticism of his work has tended to focus on its world literary appeal and relational, animistic style influenced by Latin American writers such as Juan Rulfo and Gabriel García Márquez, as well as traditional Mozambican life. On the other hand, Couto has studied medicine and biology in the past, and presently works as an environmental biologist and ecologist. In this other area of his life, Couto has demonstrated particular interest in the question of biodiversity and its relationship to the destructive effects of Mozambique's twelve-year civil war that erupted

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following the achievement of independence in 1975. This concern is expressed in a 2001 case study coauthored with John Hatton and Judy Oglethorpe, entitled *Biodiversity and War: A Case Study of Mozambique*, wherein the authors describe the decimation of wildlife that occurred during the war period through excessive hunting where troops were stationed and the destruction of infrastructure in protected areas.[1]

It would be difficult, however, to draw a line between Couto's literary and ecological careers. Couto's literary works, especially his novels, demonstrate a broad preoccupation with animals and biodiversity, as revealed by the titles of novels such as *O Último voo do Flamingo* (2000, translated as *The Last Flight of the Flamingo*, 2004) and *A Confissão da Leoa* (2012, translated as *Confession of the Lioness*, 2015). His novels often encompass human–animal encounters that result in cultural and ecological transformation, as is the case with the character of June in *Sleepwalking Land*, whose father's drunken prophesies spark his uncanny metamorphosis into a hen, or Mariamar in *Confession of the Lioness*, whose encounter with a lioness on the bank of a sacred river sparks her metamorphosis into a lioness herself. Couto's interest in human–animal relationships, specifically in what he has described as "the borders between what is human and not human," finds reflection in his scientific practice as well. As he stated in an interview with Gracie Jin just after winning the prestigious 2014 Neustadt International Prize for Literature, responding to the question of how his science influences his art:

> What I search for in my scientific work is a familiarity with other living creatures that have a different logic and language from ours. I want to become part of their universe and to recover a lost proximity. Mozambicans have a different notion of the borders between what is human and not human—what is alive and not alive. The way I perceive science is very close to that form of finding myself as part of a sacred web of relationships.[2]

What Couto describes is an emphatically literary version of science, one preoccupied with recovering "familiarity" and "proximity" to the nonhuman world, rather than with upholding the borders and categories securing the objective viewpoint privileged by more conventional modes of scientific practice. Importantly, for Couto, both science and literature converge at the level of "form" (a "form of finding myself"), and it is indeed this form that facilitates an encounter with the self as part of a wider "web of relationships." By focusing on form, Couto underscores an aesthetic dimension to science that undermines its claims to universal truth.[3] Yet it is also apparent from the aforementioned response that if there is a familiarity between humans and other living creatures to be recovered through such form, then such familiarity cannot be located purely in the faculties of "logic and language." Couto's recognition of the limitations posed by

1 John Hatton *et al.*, *Biodiversity and War: A Case Study of Mozambique* (Washington, DC: Biodiversity Support Program, 2001).

2 Gracie Jin, "Q&A with Mia Couto, The Writer Who Just Won the 'American Nobel Prize,' " *Mic*, November 4, 2013. Accessed June 9, 2018. https://mic.com/articles/71373/q-a-with-mia-couto-the-writer-who-just-won-the-american-nobel-prize#.TxVx1SK8W.

3 In relation to the same interview, Grant Hamilton and David Huddart have argued that Couto's response "is the articulation of a poet-scientist," for whom "science is just one path among many that can help us to understand the world better." See Grant Hamilton and David Huddart, eds., "Introduction," in *A Companion to Mia Couto* (Suffolk, England: James Currey, 2016), 4–5.

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language and translation in fostering a mode of familiarity between species helps account for the ways his literary work privileges processes of physical transformation and sensuous rather than linguistic exchanges between humans and animals. It also foregrounds some of the key questions raised by Couto's literary work: How can we recover a familiarity with other animals outside the faculties of logic and language, and what alternative forms, ecological and literary, can this familiarity take? How does Couto's focus on recovering relationships of proximity between humans and animals challenge species boundaries and the ecologically destructive behaviours they have authorized in both colonial and postcolonial Mozambique? For Couto, these questions are intimately tied to the recuperative work of decolonization in postcolonial contexts where competing definitions of *nature* and *culture* come into play, and where forms of speciesism continue to overlap with issues relating to race, gender, and class.[4] In a context of ecological deterioration and biodiversity loss, they also address the urgency of "making kin" with the other species with which we share the world.[5]

At least two complementary and mutually reinforcing accounts of ecology surface in Couto's work: a scientific revisionism that hinges on the decoupling of conventional scientific practice from its objective viewpoint and its implicit binary understanding of the relationship between (human) self and (nonhuman) environment, and an indigenous cosmopolitics centered on reclaiming relationships of proximity between humans and animals through animistic paradigms reflective of local or indigenous knowledges (what Couto describes as the different notions harbored by Mozambicans).[6] Ecology is thus presented as a site of *ontological* and *epistemological* contestation. In what follows I consider a selection of Couto's recently translated novels in arguing that the two ecological accounts named previously are brought together in his literary work through the framework of biosemiotics, an emergent field in the biological sciences, and more recently in the humanities, concerned with the semiosis underpinning biological life processes. As I suggest, Couto's work recovers a familiarity with other animals through reconceiving of the embodied relations between humans and other embodied creatures in semiotic terms—that is, as a common language that, though not reducible to linguistic forms, nevertheless plays out through our lived and skillful engagement with the world. This embodied language between species in turn finds expression in Couto's relational, animistic style of writing influenced by segments of African life, thus implicating biosemiotics in the postcolonial work of cultural recuperation and decolonization while presenting a decolonial scientific practice embodied in literary form.

The development of biosemiotics in recent decades has prompted significant shifts in thinking, particularly as this pertains to extending the study of semiotics, or sign relations, from the realm of human culture to more-than-human nature. Biosemiotic accounts can be traced back to the material semiotics of Charles S. Peirce, the biology of

4 By "speciesism," I refer to oppositional and hierarchical framings of the relationship between humans and animals that result in systematic biases against other species. The term can be traced back to Peter Singer's seminal work *Animal Liberation* (originally published in 1975).

5 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

6 It should be stressed that although Couto's work draws on indigenous themes, it would be more problematic to classify him as an indigenous writer considering his position as a White person of Portuguese descent. The complexities presented by this position remain largely unaccounted for in recent scholarship.

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Jakob von Uexküll, and the later semiotic theory of Thomas A. Sebeok. More recently, it has been elaborated by the molecular biologist Jesper Hoffmeyer, who has defined *biosemiotics* as an attempt to understand nature "as essentially driven by, or actually consisting of, semiosis, that is to say, processes of sign relations and their signification—or function—in the biological processes of life."[7] Biosemiotics in this regard has helped scholars in the life sciences to reassess the role played by sign relations in the biological processes of individual organisms, including at the cellular level, in the relationships between species, and in environmental relations more generally. It has informed developments in fields such as psychoneuroimmunology, as described by Paul Martin, and epidemiology, as described by Michael Marmot. In its broadest sense, the concept brings the traditional study of semiotics into conversation with the life sciences in ways that produce semiotic interpretations of the biological world. Although these interpretations are nothing new *per se*—there are few biologists who would deny the presence of communication and semiotic exchange in the biological world—biosemiotics has nevertheless revitalized the nexus of cultural and scientific study in the area of the sciences.

The concept of biosemiotics, however, has remained largely confined to debates in the various disciplines of the life sciences, and it is only more recently that scholars have begun to assess its possible implications and usefulness for disciplines in the humanities. This later development is overdue considering that the origins of semiotics are to be found in branches of linguistics and literary studies, and that biosemiotics has the potential to trigger the reevaluation of a number of core assumptions, notably the separation of nature and culture as problematized by recent theoretical trends. Understood as a discourse equipped to trouble essentializing binary structures such as the nature/culture dichotomy, biosemiotics has significant contributions to make to fields like ecocriticism, which at the very least has grappled with how the distinction between nature and culture has served to authorize ecologically destructive behaviors. As an alternative to such binary ways of thinking, biosemiotics proffers a view of "vibrant matter" that disturbs conventional views of nature as dull, inert, and discrete from the realm of human culture—views perhaps less entrenched in the sciences than in the instrumental vocabularies of neoliberal economics.[8] It also paves the way for a truly "animistic science of the earth," as Stephen Harding has argued. This is because biosemiotics insists on knowing nature as something "redolent with purpose and meaning," and in this sense animate (i.e., semiotic), as compared with conventional technoscientific framings of the earth as an "inert machine."[9]

While biosemiotics is well placed to critique the individual categories of nature and culture, a key question that remains largely unexplored is how the concept can assist with the endeavor to recover or reclaim relationships of proximity among humans, environments, and other species in contexts where such relationships are threatened by instrumental ways of thinking about the nonhuman world. It is in response to this question that I wish to echo the recent work of Wendy Wheeler in suggesting that

7 Jesper Hoffmeyer, *Biosemiotics: An Examination into the Signs of Life and the Life of Signs*, ed. Donald Favareau, trans. Jesper Hoffmeyer and Donald Favareau (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2008), 4.
8 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
9 Stephan Harding, "Towards an Animistic Science of the Earth," in *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, ed. Graham Harvey (London, England: Routledge, 2014), 373.

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biosemiotics is best understood as an attempt to recover a "common *biological language*" shared by all living creatures, one that in turn forms the basis for the development of other varieties of cultural language—including the abstract and conceptual languages found in human culture.[10] The common biological language underscored by biosemiotics does not seek to efface the agency of cultural language by reducing culture to nature, but rather to highlight our "co-arising, co-dependent processual existence among other creatures."[11] Understood as an ecocritical development attuned to the coevolution of human bodies and cultures within wider networks of multi-species relations, biosemiotics provides a useful framework for interpreting Couto's fictional portrayals of the semiotic and physically transformative relations between humans and animals.

In order to conceive of biosemiotics as a common biological language shared by all living creatures, however, our understanding of semiosis has to be significantly broadened. This is because the concept is grounded in an understanding of semiosis as "a feature of *all*, and not only human, biological systems."[12] The association of semiosis with the abstract and conceptual languages of humans, specifically in the various disciplines of the humanities, thus has to be disturbed in the endeavor to recover alternative forms of language present in both human and nonhuman communities. In exploring these alternative forms of language, a key concept Wheeler relies on is what the chemist and social scientist Michael Polanyi described in his seminal work *The Tacit Dimension* as "tacit knowledge," a skillful and inarticulable form of knowledge that is lived out in our daily interactions with the physical world and that is encapsulated by Polanyi's often-quoted phrase "we know more than we can tell."[13] Tacit knowledge is skillful in the sense that it is only acquired through dynamic engagement with the physical world, and inarticulable in the sense that it is an "experiential embodied knowing" that cannot be expressed through articulate language, but rather through the way our bodies impulsively and unconsciously navigate the world on a daily basis.[14] The concept is exemplified by the way one's body impulsively strives to rebalance itself when one trips on a sidewalk or is pushed by another human or animal. Importantly, tacit knowledge introduces new ways of conceiving of animals in familiar terms: the concept both underscores a knowledge that is coproduced with other living creatures and nonhuman environments, and effectively bridges the divide between "the experiential cunning of the animal and the more self-disciplined and attentive cunning of the man."[15] Tacit knowledge, in other words, disturbs the Western Enlightenment myth of the human as something achieved through the repression of instinct and impulse, thus signaling a convergence between the human and the animal on both discursive and biological fronts.

Wheeler's framing of tacit knowledge as a language of the body that operates across species boundaries provides an important point of contact between biosemiotics and the way Couto grounds the concept in African social practices that find their basis in forms

10 Wendy Wheeler, *The Whole Creature: Complexity, Biosemiotics and the Evolution of Culture* (London, England: Lawrence & Wishart, 2006), 34.
11 Wheeler, *The Whole Creature*, 98.
12 Wheeler, *The Whole Creature*, 48.
13 Wheeler, *The Whole Creature*, 47.
14 Wheeler, *The Whole Creature*, 47.
15 Wheeler, *The Whole Creature*, 49.

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of animism. It is noteworthy in this regard how biosemiotics is inflected in traditional African practices that underscore embodied forms of human–animal connection. This is notably the case with animal hunting, a theme explored most fully in *Confession of the Lioness*. Although animal hunting is first and foremost a predatory exercise, it is well known that many traditional African hunters are able to "talk" to animals, though this communication is often embodied in the form of ritual and remains rooted to the idea of a common biological language in which the intention is to "connect" with the animal before killing it. In *Confession of the Lioness*, animal hunting is grounded in forms of embodied human–animal connection through the character of Archangel Bullseye, a hunter who finds that he cannot shoot at the lions he is tasked to eliminate until he has recovered his roots in traditional Mozambican life. The language of embodiment underscored by biosemiotics also underlies the metamorphic practices that find reflection in both Couto's fiction and traditional African life. In this regard Couto's work ties together the concept of biosemiotics and the relational, animistic ontology of the African world that Wole Soyinka describes in *Myth, Literature and the African World* as grounded in "an acceptance of the elastic nature of knowledge as its only reality, as signifying no more than a reflection of the original coming-into-being of a manifestly complex reality."[16] It is out of this sense of immanent changeability, as signaled by words and phrases such as "elastic," "coming-into-being" and "complex," that many of Couto's human characters are able to not only connect with animals but to metamorphose into them.

The concept of animism, generally understood as a "relational epistemology" in terms of which "real" and "symbolic" realities are intertwined, has undergone a scholarly revival in recent decades.[17] In particular, much recent scholarship has endeavored to reclaim the concept from its roots in colonial anthropological discourse, which viewed it as symptomatic of primitive culture, in turn positing animism as an alternative epistemological basis from which to see and know the world.[18] Exemplary in this regard is Harry Garuba's often-cited essay "Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society," in which he frames animism explicitly against what the sociologist Max Weber famously described as the disenchantment of the modern world. For Garuba, animism can be understood as "a manifestation of an animist unconscious, which operates through a process that involves … a *continual re-enchantment of the world*."[19] What he calls the animist unconscious works against the disenchanting effects of the modern nature/culture binary through its " 'locking' of spirit within matter or the merger of the material and the metaphorical."[20] Although the connections among animism, ecology, and biosemiotic interdependencies are not clear-cut, it is evident that animism's investment in the reenchantment of the material through

16 Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 53.
17 Nurit Bird-David, " 'Animism' Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology," *Current Anthropology* 40.S1 (1999): S67–91.
18 For examples of such colonial anthropology, see Edward Burnett Tylor's *Primitive Culture: Research into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (originally published in 1871), and James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (originally published in 1890).
19 Harry Garuba, "Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society," *Public Culture* 15.2 (2003): 265; italics in the original.
20 Garuba, "Explorations in Animist Materialism," 267.

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the metaphorical at the very least paves the way for the same kinds of semiotic interpretations of the biological world invited by the concept of biosemiotics. Although Garuba does not explicitly mention how animism can be used to illuminate the embodied relations among humans, environments, and other species, animism has important contributions to make to the field of ecology. Although recent scholarship has been slow to recognize such contributions, they have nevertheless been acknowledged by scholars such as Graham Harvey, who has pointed to the ways animism has allowed people to "re-imagine and redirect human participation in the larger-than-human, multi-species community."[21]

Of particular relevance to Couto's literary work is Garuba's concept of "animist realism," a representational technique rooted to the animist unconscious that displaces conventional realisms by privileging processes of reenchantment.[22] Couto's literary representations remain committed to the alternative epistemological basis provided by animism, and this comes out most saliently in his portrayals of the biosemiotic interactions between humans and animals. Indeed, the world constructed by Couto in his fiction emerges from the embodied and highly semiotic interactions between human and nonhuman worlds. By relying on such representational techniques, Couto turns animist realism into a mode of environmental criticism equipped to assist with the task of reconceiving of the self as part of Harvey's "larger-than-human, multi-species community." Couto's ability to relate culturally specific animist forms to global ecological imperatives also affirms his value to debates in world literature, which have tended to focus more on how his work thematises issues of language, translation, and opaqueness.[23] Locating Couto's world literary appeal in his vision of ecology rather than in his African aesthetics might remain truer to his criticism of world literature's tendency to perpetuate forms of exoticism.[24] In a similar light, animist realism offers a much-needed alternative to Couto's explicit rejection of the term *magical realism* on the basis that "it fails to acknowledge the 'magic' that is ubiquitous in the quotidian."[25]

Couto's animistic representations are widely accounted for in the emergent body of Couto scholarship, with many critics giving impetus to Garuba's idea of animism as a form of "continual reenchantment." Irene Marques, for instance, has assessed how such reenchantment responds specifically to a "rational scientific paradigm" that "anthropomorphises the world and presents human reason as capable of attaining objective

21 Graham Harvey, ed., "Introduction," in *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism* (London, England: Routledge, 2014), 2.

22 Garuba, "Explorations in Animist Materialism," 275.

23 See Bill Ashcroft's brief overview of the emergent body of Couto scholarship in "The Multiple Worlds of Mia Couto," in *A Companion to Mia Couto*, eds. Grant Hamilton and David Huddart (Suffolk, England: James Currey, 2016), 106.

24 When asked by Hamilton and Huddart whether his work captures or reflects the idea of the exotic in a world literature frame, Couto responded: "The 'Mozambican' components of my narratives are not motivated by any desire for exotic display or appeal." See Grant Hamilton and David Huddart eds., "An Interview with Mia Couto," in *A Companion to Mia Couto* (Suffolk, England: James Currey, 2016), 14.

25 Hamilton and Huddart, "Introduction," 5.

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truth and knowledge about the self, the world and cosmos."[26] This setting up of reenchantment as a response to conventional scientific practices that emphasize objective values finds support in Couto's remarks in the interview with Gracie Jin, where he reconceives of science as implicated in a form of "finding myself as part of a sacred web of relationships." As Marques has noted, Couto has also described his writing as a form that "not only names but invents and produces enchantment."[27] Likewise, in the interview with Jin, Couto remarked that "[literature] has today the same role as always: re-enchanting the word and sustaining the desire for dreams and dreaming."[28] This vision of literature as a mode of reenchantment is widely reflected in Couto's work, with the connections between literature and animism explicitly taken up in his novel *Um Rio Chamado Tempo, uma Casa Chamada Terra* (2002, translated as *A River Called Time*, 2008). In the novel the protagonist-narrator, Mariano, begins to receive mysterious letters written to him from his dead grandfather, Dito Mariano; the enchantment of these letters from the dead surfaces through the dizziness Mariano feels. As he narrates upon receiving his first letter:

> Who had written this? When I tried to reread it, I was overcome with dizziness: it was my handwriting, right down to every crossed 't'. Who had it been, then? Someone with the same handwriting as mine. Could it have been any of my relatives? For isn't handwriting hereditary like blood?[29]

As Mariano suggests, the letters are written by his own hand, and as the novel progresses, his dead grandfather comes to write through him. Hence at one point when Mariano sits down under a mango tree to jot down his thoughts on a notepad, "the unbelievable happened: my handwriting began to disobey the hand that engendered it. What I was writing was transformed into something else."[30] In *A River Called Time*, writing performs a mediatory role by connecting the worlds of the living and the dead. The result is not so much a detached view of writing as something that represents, but rather something that performs and enchants as it connects us to the larger-than-human world in ways that "disobey" the separation of signifier from signified, the result being truly "something else." In this view, sign relations are suffused with the "blood" of living flesh as constituted through the relations between bodies ("hereditary"). The embodied aspects of writing are negotiated through the liminal status of Dito Mariano's body, which is not altogether dead, but can nevertheless not be buried as "the earth had perished. Just as a body may be reduced to a skeleton, the earth had been reduced to its bare bones."[31] Although the earth refuses to open up to allow for Dito Mariano's burial, it is the significatory function of the letters that enable his grandson to learn of the sacred offenses committed and so placate the material wrath of "the earth's vengeance."[32]

26 Irene Marques, "Spaces of Magic: Mia Couto's Relational Practices," in *A Companion to Mia Couto*, eds. Grant Hamilton and David Huddart (Suffolk, England: James Currey, 2016), 64.
27 Marques, "Spaces of Magic."
28 Jin, "Q&A with Mia Couto, The Writer Who Just Won the 'American Nobel Prize.' "
29 Mia Couto, *A River Called Time*, trans. by David Brookshaw (London, England: Serpent's Tail, 2008), 40.
30 Couto, *A River Called Time*, 153.
31 Couto, *A River Called Time*, 162–63.
32 Couto, *A River Called Time*, 163.

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Of course, there is a danger in privileging writing as the medium that "produces enchantment," for to do this is to risk collapsing into familiar hierarchies that privilege the human over other animals that are perhaps less capable of the same significatory functions, but for whom embodied modes of semiotic communication are nevertheless a central aspect of existence. Indeed, focusing exclusively on writing might be antithetical to the goal of extending the agency of enchantment to Harvey's "larger-than-human, multi-species community." At the same time, placing too much emphasis on writing as an embodied mode of identification with the material world risks overlooking the ideological dimensions of language—something of central concern to Couto. This problem is alluded to in *Confession of the Lioness* by the character Adjiru Kapitamoro, who warns his granddaughter, Mariamar: "*Careful, my granddaughter. Writing is a dangerous form of vanity.*"[33] Kapitamoro goes on to explain this vanity, drawing attention to the ideological dimensions of language that mediate us away from direct and unmediated access to the material world:

> In a hunter's tale, there's no such thing as "once upon a time." Everything is born right there, as his voice speaks. To tell a story is to cast shadows over the flame. All that the word reveals is, in that very instant, consumed by silence. Only those who pray, surrendering their soul completely, are familiar with the way a word ascends and then plummets into the abyss.[34]

Although Couto embraces writing as a form of enchantment that connects us to worlds-otherwise, Kapitamoro's philosophical insight reaches out to the ways in which this connection is nevertheless always constrained by the purely symbolic realm constructed by language, a world defined by its ability to shadow and silence other, less-mediated worlds. Writing therefore performs a double function in Couto's work, at once reaching out to and participating in the material world and distancing us from it through its purely textual dimensions. This double function is reconciled through an animist unconscious, whereby real and symbolic realities are able to exist in a dynamic and complex relationship without the one being reduced to the other.

Writing, however, does not exhaust the possibilities of language in Couto's work. It is only by turning from the "soul" to the body, after all, as Kapitamoro suggests, that we can apprehend the limitations of the "abyss" introduced by the "word." There are indeed other ways in which questions of language, enchantment, and embodiment come to the fore in Couto's writing, and these are explored most poignantly through the human–animal relationship. Even though in Mariano's correspondence with his dead grandfather we see an animistic view of language as connected to embodied forms, it is in Couto's representations of human–animal encounters that these forms are grounded specifically in the concept of biosemiotics. This grounding finds expression in *Confession of the Lioness* when one of the characters remarks: "Throughout my life, fables taught me to distinguish right from wrong, to unravel the good from the bad. In a word, it was the animals who began to make me human."[35] Notice the semiotic aspect

33 Mia Couto, *Confession of the Lioness*, trans. David Brookshaw (London, England: Harvill Secker, 2015), 66; italics in the original.

34 Couto, *Confession of the Lioness*, 67–68.

35 Couto, *Confession of the Lioness*, 65.

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captured in Couto's ambiguous "in a word" that initiates the human–animal encounter in this passage, a process that culminates in Mariamar's highly physicalized and embodied metamorphosis into a lioness. The literary form ("fables") through which this biological-semiotic intermingling takes place simultaneously underscores the implication of literary production in the materialist relations between human and nonhuman species within an animist worldview.

On the other hand, Couto's representations of such moments of inter-species becoming are disturbed by the "dissected, shattered, divided" world of colonialism, revealing the decolonial impetus behind much of his work.[36] In this regard, his animistic practices are best understood through the lens of what the decolonial scholar Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has described as a "synoptic concept of *multinaturalism*" that embraces shifting epistemological viewpoints, rejecting the colonial idea of nature as singular and knowable in its entirety—an idea realized in *Confession of the Lioness* through the map relied on by the lion hunters.[37] It is for this reason that many of Couto's "rational" protagonists—many of whom come from urban or Western geographical and cultural spaces—are challenged when confronted by the animate, semiotic landscapes of vernacular worlds that defy the singularity of logic and reason. This is precisely the case with the Italian UN delegate Massimo Risi in *The Last Flight of the Flamingo*, who arrives in the fictional Mozambican village of Tizangara in order to investigate a series of mysterious explosions that have been plaguing the villagers. Risi is assigned a local translator (the novel's unnamed first-person narrator) to help him navigate the vernacular world of Tizangara. It soon becomes apparent, however, that the language barrier is not the only obstacle preventing Risi from unlocking the mystery of the explosions. As he remarks at one point, "*I can speak and understand. The problem isn't the language. What I don't understand is this world here.*"[38] Translation in the novel, as Stefan Helgesson has argued, is related to "the radical incommensurability of worldviews in Tizangara."[39] It is this clash of worldviews in the context of Mozambique's absorption into globalist structures following the end of the civil war that implicates the novel in a framework of what Huddart has called "resistance to a globalist demand for 'transparency.' "[40] The issues of globalization and resistance are exemplified by Couto's allusion to the UN intervention that guided Mozambican politics in the post-civil-war period. The translation performed by the unnamed translator is thus more cosmological than linguistic, and his role as "cosmopolitical diplomat" entails the negotiation of Risi's rational scientific worldview with the relational, animistic world of Tizangara.[41] Importantly, this cosmopolitical diplomacy plays out through modes of attending to and disattending from human–animal relations. Symbolic in this regard is the knocking over and killing

36 Marques, "Spaces of Magic," 64.

37 Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-Structural Anthropology*, ed. and trans. Peter Skafish (Minneapolis, MN: Univocal Publishing, 2014), 49; italics in the original.

38 Mia Couto, *The Last Flight of the Flamingo*, trans. David Brookshaw (London, England: Serpent's Tail, 2004), 26; italics in the original.

39 Stefan Helgesson, "Mia Couto & Translation," in *A Companion to Mia Couto*, eds. Grant Hamilton and David Huddart (Suffolk, England: James Currey, 2016), 140.

40 David Huddart, " 'Ask Life': Animism & the Metaphysical Detective," in *A Companion to Mia Couto*, eds. Grant Hamilton and David Huddart (Suffolk, England: James Currey, 2016), 125.

41 de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, 151.

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of a goat by the speeding UN delegation vehicle when it first arrives in Tizangara. The figure of Estavão Jonas, the corrupt village administrator, is exemplary of a hostile disregard for animals when, bothered by the goat's persistent bleating, he calls on his aids to "*Go and kill that son-of-a-bitch of a goat for me.*"[42] By contrast, the novel gestures toward making kin with other species by at times recasting animals in an animistic light, bestowing them with voice and agency. This is the case with the sacred praying mantis—an "ancestor visiting the living"—who visits Risi's room in Tizingara and who is customarily treated with veneration and respect.[43]

There is, however, another side to Couto's animals that reflects the imbrications of speciesism with forms of racism and sexism in many postcolonial contexts. As Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin have argued in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, the renewed and replenished relationship between humans and animals celebrated in contemporary animal studies encompasses its own set of challenges in postcolonial societies. The ways in which Western forms of racism often coincide with forms of speciesism, as revealed through the deployment of the animal "as a basis for human social division" and as a derogatory term in the marginalizing of people perceived as foreign, "make it difficult even to discuss animals without generating a profound unease" in many postcolonial contexts.[44] Many feminist-oriented scholars will point out how the same can be said of the relationship between speciesism and sexism in both Western and postcolonial contexts.[45] These challenges are implicit across Couto's novels, which are as concerned with oppressive deployments of the animal along racist and sexist lines as they are with human–animal reconnection. This is evident in the frequent deployment of animal metaphors across Couto's oeuvre, notably in *Sleepwalking Land*, a novel concerned with the dehumanizing effects of the Mozambican civil war—a war that, as one character remarks toward the end of the novel, "has made animals out of us."[46] In the novel, the dichotomization of humans and animals in the war landscape materializes through the terms of life and death, whereby the animal occupies a precariously liminal state in which, as it is narrated, "death and life become the exchangeable sides of the same line."[47] In *The last Flight of the Flamingo*, animal metaphors reveal explicitly racist and sexist attitudes, as is the case with the translator (a non-White man) who narrates about Risi (a White European) at one point: "I obeyed orders and followed him like a dog."[48] The village prostitute, Anna Godwilling, is likewise repeatedly denigrated through the use of animal metaphors that reveal forms of village patriarchy. For Godwilling, as it is narrated at one point, "there wasn't even a word for such a creature."[49]

42 Couto, *The Last Flight of the Flamingo*, 10; italics in the original.
43 Couto, *The Last Flight of the Flamingo*, 43.
44 Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, 2nd ed. (London, England: Routledge, 2015), 152.
45 See, for instance, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (London, England: Zed Books, 2014), 178. Mies and Shiva argue that racism, sexism, and speciesism were/are bound up with "the colonial expansion of Europe and the rise of modern science."
46 Mia Couto, *Sleepwalking Land*, trans. David Brookshaw (London, England: Serpent's Tail, 2006), 211.
47 Couto, *Sleepwalking Land*, 80.
48 Couto, *The Last Flight of the Flamingo*, 20.
49 Couto, *The Last Flight of the Flamingo*, 14.

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Couto is therefore equally attuned to a discourse on animality that has been central to the authenticating of violence against both humans and nonhumans, and much of his literary work performs and navigates the tensions presented by what Huggan and Tiffin have called the Western "species boundary" and its racist and sexist permutations.[50] What is important in this regard is that Couto's animals are always depicted as both metonymic and metaphorical, as actual animals, such as the wounded goat in *The Last Flight of the Flamingo*, and as metaphorical indicators of colonial, racist, and sexist attitudes—in short, as metaphors for processes of dehumanization. On the other hand, Couto intervenes in the species boundary by reimagining human–animal relations through the concept of biosemiotics, grounding this specifically in animist practices that signal the recuperation of African cultural life. It is in the light of this biosemiotic revisioning that we can make sense of a novel like *Confession of the Lioness*, which gives form to the possibility of recovering relations between species through the metamorphosis of the novel's female protagonist, Mariamar, into a lioness.

Confession of the Lioness is set in the fictional Mozambican village of Kulumani and centers on a group of mysterious and untraceable wild lions that have been terrorizing the villagers and disturbing the seismic prospecting activities of a transnational oil company. The company, failing to eradicate the lions itself, recruits a skilled local lion hunter from a neighboring town, and much of the novel comprises segments of the hunter's diary entries as he confronts the peculiar knowledge landscape of the village and rediscovers his vernacular roots. The hunter's diary entries are in turn alternated with those of Mariamar, a young girl who suffers the abuse of her father in a patriarchal society in which, as it is narrated, "We women will remain in the shadows. We wash, sweep, cook, but none of us will sit down at the table."[51] Mariamar becomes enchanted by a lioness she one day discovers on the banks of the river, and gradually succumbs to a process of animalization as her life becomes "a slow process of metamorphosis: my leg becoming a paw, my nails claws, my hair a mane, my chin a jaw."[52] Her metamorphosis into a lioness stages a critique of the forms of capitalism and patriarchy that reduce both women and animals to disposable beasts that roam the outskirts of capitalist, patriarchal society. In an equally significant light, however, Mariamar's metamorphosis gives form to an animist unconscious through which it is possible to apprehend Wheeler's common biological language.

The way in which Couto grounds Mariamar's metamorphosis into a lioness in biosemiotic processes is anticipated during her first encounter with one of the untraceable animals on the banks of the River Lideia. As Mariamar narrates, taken by surprise:

> And suddenly, there it is: a lioness! She's come down to drink from the calm water on that part of the riverbank. She contemplates me without fear or excitement. As if she had been waiting for me for a long time, she raises her head and pierces me with her inquisitive gaze. There is no tension in her behaviour. It might be said that she recognises me. More than this: The lioness greets me with a sisterly respect. We linger in this mutual contemplation and, gradually, a sense of spiritual harmony takes hold of me.[53]

50 Huggan and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, 156; I refer to Huggan and Tiffin's definition of the "species boundary" as "the *discursive construction* of a strict dividing line between 'human' and 'animal.' "
51 Couto, *Confession of the Lioness*, 60.
52 Couto, *Confession of the Lioness*, 181.
53 Couto, *Confession of the Lioness*, 40.

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Mariamar's encounter with the lioness is portrayed in ways that emphasize sight and vision as indicated by the way the lioness "raises her head" and "pierces" Mariamar with her "inquisitive gaze," while this sight in turn informs the recognition that ties the passage together: "It might be said that she recognises me." What is significant is how sight is not portrayed as a disembodied mode of apprehension, but rather something that grounds the inter-species encounter in a common biological language as expressed in sensuous and embodied ways. The word "pierce," for instance, is a strikingly corporeal one, evoking images of physical intimacy and even violence—the destruction or puncture of species boundaries. Similarly, emphasis is placed on bodily behavior. First, considering that Mariamar and the lioness do not communicate with each other linguistically, we can assume that the states described by words like "calm," "fear," "excitement," "inquisitive," and even "contemplation" can only be ascertained through forms of bodily communication—a language of the body expressed intuitively and experientially. Second, the emphasis on behavior again returns us to the body even as the passage attempts to articulate the communication that takes place. As we learn of the lioness in this regard, "There is no tension in her behaviour." It is interesting how it is this emphasis on bodily behavior that leads us into the next sentence: "It might be said that she recognises me." This transition between sentences anticipates a causal relationship between bodily behavior ("tension in her behaviour") and the sign relations and forms of communication they gesture toward ("recognition").

Yet it is also significant that the passage refuses to articulate this recognition. Such recognition is even qualified by the inclusion of "It might be said." In other words, the recognition remains inarticulate and unreliable in its form as a common biological language. As readers, we are offered only glimpses of the recognition through references to responses conveyed by the body: "without fear," "as if she had been waiting for me," "no tension in her behaviour." It is out of this position of uncertainty and inarticulateness that alternative forms of communicative exchange emerge, the "More than this" again signaling the inadequacy of the previous sentence to articulate the communication taking place. The lioness "greets" Mariamar, and the gendered dimension of the "sisterly respect" alludes to their mutual vulnerability at the hands of capitalist, patriarchal society. Again, the state of lingering at the end of the passage, the "mutual contemplation," and the "sense of spiritual harmony" remain vague and inarticulate, yet essentially semiotic in form, while the way this sense of spiritual harmony "takes hold" of Mariamar returns us once again to the body. We can conclude that the question of what is recognized, what is contemplated, is answered through both an excess of communication and a lack of articulation that attests to the way the sign relations that play out in the passage are confined to modes of experience and embodiment. What is crucial is how such modes play out across the species boundary and gesture toward forms of inter-species kinship—notably the "sisterly respect." Other words that signal embodied communicative exchanges across species boundaries include "mutual" and "harmony."

These exchanges continue into Mariamar's subsequent metamorphosis into a lioness herself, where her animalization takes the form of an encounter with the larger-than-human, multi-species community. Mariamar's metamorphosis replicates the terms of Wheeler's common biological language, navigating her toward a world shared with other living creatures. On the other hand, the oil company in *Confession of the Lioness*, which sees the lions as nothing but a nuisance to its seismic prospecting

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activities in the village, is representative of what Wheeler describes as a destructive form of rationalism—one tied to neoliberal capitalist relations—that tries to "denude itself of the world of experiential knowledge and the body."[54] In *Confession of the Lioness*, the tacit knowledge realized through the relations between Mariamar and the lioness sits in tension with the "fiction of monadic individualism" that both occludes forms of relationality and subscribes to the disposability of other lifeworlds through processes of commodification and capitalist extraction.[55] Biosemiotics, and the embodied and experiential forms of knowledge it underscores, is deployed as a means of challenging the borders between what is human and not human in the face of ruthless capitalist pursuits of profit.

In *A River Called Time*, the inarticulateness of tacit knowledge is brought into conversation with notions of the sacred as found in both Western and African religions, although it is simultaneously deployed as an intervention into forms of transcendental humanism that place emphasis on what Cary Wolfe has described in his work on Western humanist ideology as "transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment."[56] This is most evident in the scene where we learn of the donkey that inhabits Father Nunes's church. In the novel, Mariano's grandmother, Dona Dulcineusa, leads them both to the local church on the fictional island of Luar-do-Chão, following Dulcineusa's desire to have her husband (Dito Mariano) die with the "blessing of the Catholic religion."[57] A similar emphasis on recognition as connected to embodied and experiential forms of knowing is revealed in the scene in which Mariano discovers a donkey in the church, a "sacred refuge of souls," upon leaving. As Mariano narrates:

> We were leaving when I suddenly came face to face with a donkey. I jumped with fright at such an unexpected vision. What was an animal doing in the sacred refuge of souls? This explained the source of the smell which I had noticed a short time before.[58]

Much like Mariamar's encounter with the lioness, the emphasis of the previous passage is on sight and vision as signaled by the "face-to-face" encounter. Unlike Mariamar, however, the words "fright" and "unexpected" foreground the disembodied, culturally mediated aspects of Mariano's vision, one that is framed explicitly in relation to the normal and expected. What is interesting is how this allusion to anticipated norms and unanticipated diversions prompts the question posed in the passage: "What was an animal doing in the sacred refuge of souls?" The question reveals much about what Mariano perceives as the expected, namely that the church is a "sacred refuge" of *human* souls in which *nonhuman* animals do not belong. This evocation of the sacred serves to underscore a discourse on species boundaries embedded in Judeo-Christian religious beliefs, as well as ideas of transcendence—importantly, transcendence *from* embodied forms. Yet it is also interesting that, although Mariano's encounter with the donkey

54 Wheeler, *The Whole Creature*, 96.
55 Wheeler, *The Whole Creature*, 99.
56 Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, Posthumanities (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xv.
57 Couto, *A River Called Time*, 71.
58 Couto, *A River Called Time*, 74.

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serves to underscore speciesist modes of thought, it also serves to trouble them. This is evidenced by the distraction presented in the next sentence: the "source of smell" Mariano is reminded of. From the transcendence of the idea of a "sacred refuge of souls," we are therefore redirected to the body, a source of smell. It is significant how, as we learn, Mariano "had noticed" the smell before, an observation that serves to ground the entire encounter in sensuous modes of experience that disturb the "sacred refuge of souls." In this regard such disturbance is indicated by Mariano's "fright."

In subsequent parts of Mariano's narration, we see a further challenging of species boundaries and a rearticulation of the "sacred refuge" described previously in terms that accommodate forms of inter-species kinship. What we see is a reclaiming of sacred experience as a way of recovering proximity with more-than-human life. For instance, as Mariano narrates:

> The donkey contemplated me with its eyes like water in a deep well. There was such tranquillity in that look that I began to wonder whether the church wasn't its natural abode.[59]

In this passage we are again returned to an emphasis on sight ("its eyes"). Yet there is a marked transition that has taken place from the earlier focus on vision—understood as cultural mediation—to a more explicit reference to the body: the eyes. Like the inarticulate modes of communication that take place between Mariamar and the lioness, the "contemplation" that Mariano picks up in the donkey is connected not to linguistic forms but rather to embodied ones. The donkey's contemplation in this regard is connected to the physical form and expressiveness of its eyes, which Mariano compares to "water in a deep well." This comparison is significant, for although it hints at an element of mystery and inarticulacy (the water at the bottom of a well is typically hidden from view), it also underscores the morphology of water, its movement and fluidity, perhaps also the sounds of its lapping against the walls of the well, all of which give shape to the experience unfolding in the passage—one grounded in the transmutability of borders. The emphasis on experience ("tranquillity") in the subsequent sentence further gestures away from abstract and conceptual forms of communication, and by implication away from the kind of bodily transcendence stressed in the previous passage. It is significant how this grounding of the encounter between Mariano and the donkey in embodied modes of experience does not lead us to a clear and articulate outcome, but rather to a form of "wondering" and "questioning" that disturbs the forms of speciesism revealed in the previous passage. The passage at hand in turn gestures toward a rearticulation of the sacred (as symbolised by the "church") as embedded in animal relations: "I began to wonder whether the church wasn't its natural abode." In many ways the embodied experience is itself the outcome, and in this regard the choice of the word "tranquillity" is significant insofar as it gestures toward a state of being beyond disturbance, in particular being beyond the disturbance presented by the forms of capitalist thinking that play out in the novel in destructive ways. Biosemiotics, reframed in this sense as a form of resistance to speciesist and commodifying modes of thought, quite literally takes the form of a "refuge."

59 Couto, *A River Called Time*, 74.

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The significance and recuperative value of the donkey's gaze as a vehicle for rearticulating forms of human–animal kinship is further elaborated in a subsequent passage. Here the animal gaze not only challenges the borders between what is human and not human, but also the borders between dreams and reality. As Mariano narrates:

> The presence of the animal had left me intrigued. So much so that at night, the creature had briefly peeped in on my dreams. And it wasn't a nightmare. A donkey's gaze is always cushioned in soft and gentle velvet. But those eyes conveyed more than that. They possessed a most human expression and invited me to embark on journeys and crossings that I found disturbing, well beyond the last bend in the river.[60]

There are various aspects of this passage worth considering in relation to its portrayal of inter-species relations. First, Mariano's response takes the form of "intrigue," a word connected to the "wondering" and "questioning" presented in the previous passage. The significance of this response lies in how it redirects attention and participation toward the object of curiosity in a relationship of proximity. Yet, once again, it is crucial that intrigue is more impulsive than rational and in turn confined to modes of experience and embodiment rather than articulable forms of linguistic expression. In this regard the intrigue and the proximity it fosters—through experience and embodiment—between Mariano and the donkey takes on a sacred dimension replicated in the symbolism of the church. The second evocation worth considering in the previous passage is Mariano's blurring of dreams, nightmares, and reality; for the blurring of these different realms of experience, one of them "real" and the others "symbolic," is central to the animist unconscious and the literary forms it foregrounds. What is important here is that it is the human–animal encounter that prompts Mariano's dreams and by implication initiates the blurring of these different realms. Such blurring mimics the forms of biosemiosis—itself a blurring of semiotic and biological realms—that give shape to Mariano's inter-species encounter. There is then the switch of registers from the visual to the tactile, which grounds the donkey's gaze in sensuous and embodied modes of experience. The words "soft," "gentle," and "velvet" are central to the sensory comfort underpinning Couto's inter-species encounters. The "always" ("A donkey's gaze is always cushioned in soft and gentle velvet") also performs an interesting function here because it grounds the animal gaze in a tactility and comfort presented as ineradicable. The animal gaze in this regard takes the form of an invitation that cannot simply be ushered away: it its *always* there.

What is perhaps most important about this passage, however, is how it portrays the donkey's gaze as possessing "a most human expression" and how it is in turn this most human expression that invites Mariano to embark on "journeys and crossings." Indeed, the way the passage locates the human in the gaze of the animal already performs such journeys and crossings in its presentation of inter-species relations that challenge the borders between what is human and not human. Although the "human expression" is evidently an inarticulate one, the question of what such expression conveys is left unanswered; it is also significant how the journeys and crossings such expression invites gesture toward the movements signaled by words such as "intrigue," and indeed the

60 Couto, *A River Called Time*, 74.

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sensory comfort presented by the donkey's eyes. By privileging embodied experience over abstraction and connecting these to semiotic forms of "expression," Couto's portrayal of the inter-species encounter between Mariano and the donkey gestures toward the concept of biosemiotics as grounded in the animist unconscious and its literary permutations.

Much like the enigmatic lions in *Confession of the Lioness*, and the untraceable explosions in *The Last Flight of the Flamingo*, *A River Called Time* is centered on the mystery surrounding the death of Dito Mariano. The novel's fragmented storytelling, in which multiple accounts are given by various characters, offers a medium for Couto to stage a set of relational practices characterized by the slippage of meaning and the intermingling of the material and the metaphorical in ways that redirect human participation in Harvey's "larger-than-human, multi-species community." On the other hand, the role played by the oil company in *Confession of the Lioness* is filled in *A River Called Time* by the narrator's uncle, Ultímio. Although much of Mariano's narrative attends to the reenchantment of the island of Luar-do-Chão as new connections to place are forged from the recollection of sacred memories and the unfolding (and subsequent refolding) of stories, Ultimío insists on absorbing the island into the logics of extractive capitalism through his plans for establishing a mining concern and carrying out "tests on its heavy sand deposits."[61] It is these logics that both disturb and are in turn disturbed by Couto's deployment of biosemiotics and inter-species encounters. In particular, Mariano's animated journeys and crossings on the island are disturbed by his discovery that, as he narrates, "There were rich folk, full of pocket, who coveted our island."[62] In both *Confession of the Lioness* and *A River Called Time*, the work of disenchantment is carried out by extractive paradigms that externalize and instrumentalize the nonhuman world. On the other hand, the animal is reimagined through the animistic framework of biosemiotics as a place of refuge (much like the rearticulation of the church as a "sacred refuge of souls" in *A River Called Time*) for the recovering of forms of proximity and familiarity between species.

As I have shown in this essay, Couto's literary work performs a critical intervention into the theoretical field of biosemiotics by reclaiming the concept as a means of challenging the borders between what is human and not human and in turn grounding it in African cultural paradigms in ways that implicate biosemiotics in the postcolonial work of cultural recuperation and decolonization. Although Couto employs the relational paradigms of animism in exploring the language of our embodied, processual existence among other animals, I have also drawn attention to the limitations in his fiction posed by representation, in particular the Western/colonial rhetoric of a hierarchical divide between humans and animals, and the imbrications of the Western species boundary in discourses of racism and sexism. A central problematic that plays out in Couto's fiction is therefore the relationship between our embodied and representational realities, although it is clear from Couto's scientific achievements as a biologist that in a contemporary framework of ecological deterioration and biodiversity loss this relationship cannot be separated from ethical questions concerning our treatment of the more-than-human world. For Couto, there is no strict divide between language and embodiment. Language, in other words, is both enchanting and disenchanting: although it may mediate us to worlds beyond our own, as is the case with Dito Mariano's dead grandfather who writes through him in

61 Couto, *A River Called Time*, 49.
62 Couto, *A River Called Time*, 49.

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A River Called Time, we must simultaneously always be cautious of writing as a "*dangerous form of vanity*" that proceeds to "cast shadows over the flame" as Mariamar's uncle warns us in *Confession of the Lioness*.[63] Couto's reliance on animism and biosemiotics as forms of reenchantment therefore shouldn't be understood as a move away from the disenchanting effects of writing and discourse and toward a more authentic, embodied relationship with the objective world. Indeed, this totalizing aspiration would be antithetical to his multinaturalism, in which nature is just as fluid, dynamic, and coevolving as culture.

In a similar vein, this multinaturalism might also contribute to a larger planetary consciousness in which investment in intimate "relational localisms" is mobilized to facilitate a broader understanding of what Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru have described as a "complex planetary network including nested but non-hierarchical cultural and material ecosystems."[64] Ecology in the contemporary risk environment is one arena that necessitates a theoretical and imaginative incorporation of larger, arguably planetary, spatial, and temporal dimensions that are simultaneously equipped to complicate the homogenizing forces of economic and technological globalization—forces that, as I have shown, constitute a central concern for Couto. Animism, conceived as a field of relations, offers one answer to the question of what such a planetary imagination might look like. It might also help us to think about the kindred relationships between humans and animals in Couto's fiction as nested not only in place, but simultaneously as unfolding across space, as both concretized and life-enhancing, and spread across larger planetary geographies and temporalities. Pertinent to this discussion are the mysterious lions in *Confession of the Lioness*, which, as Hedley Twidle has observed in his review of the novel, persistently "shuttle between allegorical and literal," featuring at times as literal animals nested in the specificity of place and at other times as the embodiments of much larger global histories: as the reverberating memories of colonial legacies and the Mozambican civil war, as symbols of indigenous patriarchy, "preying on those who have been victims of rape and so ostracised by the community," and as symbols of what global capital renders disposable through its pursuits of profit.[65]

In conclusion, Couto is therefore less concerned with capturing the absolute truth of our embodied existence in the world than with cultivating a new kind of environmental imagination to compensate for what Lesley Green has described as "the limits of a modernist vision of the world," specifically as this relates to the limits imposed by the Western species boundary.[66] The ethical imperative behind Couto's literary achievements lies in the possibilities they open up for reimagining the relationships between humans and animals, and for the flourishing of more-than-human life in the aftermath of colonialism and in the currents of its continuing material, cultural, and epistemological legacies.

63 Couto, *Confession of the Lioness*, 66–67; italics in the original.

64 Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru, eds., "Introduction," in *The Planetary Turn: Relationality and Geoaesthetics in the Twenty-First Century* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015), xii, xxiv.

65 Hedley Twidle, " 'Confession of the Lioness,' by Mia Couto," 2015. Accessed June 10, 2018. https://www.ft.com/content/ebf26232-31f6-11e5-91ac-a5e17d9b4cff.

66 Lesley Green, ed., "Contested Ecologies: Nature and Knowledge," in *Contested Ecologies: Dialogues in the South on Nature and Knowledge* (Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press, 2013), 2.

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