

## Transatlantic Sertões: The Backlands of Ruy Duarte de Carvalho and Mia Couto

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### Abstract

This article develops a transatlantic approach to the colonial and postcolonial uses of the term "sertão" (backlands) in Angola, Brazil, and Mozambique through analyzing the works of Mia Couto and Ruy Duarte de Carvalho, especially in their readings of João Guimarães Rosa. By focusing on their fictional and essayistic work, I analyze how these authors explore social and environmental dimensions of different sertões in order to negotiate the multiplicity of meanings the term has acquired on both continents.

*Keywords:* sertão, lusophone studies, ecocriticism, postcolonial studies.

### Resumen

Este artículo toma un acercamiento transatlántico a los usos coloniales y poscoloniales del término "sertão" (lugar desierto) en Angola, Brasil y Mozambique por medio del análisis de las obras de Mia Couto y Ruy Duarte de Carvalho, particularmente en cuanto a sus lecturas de João Guimarães Rosa. Al abordar sus ensayos y ficción, analizo cómo exploran las dimensiones sociales y ambientales de distintos sertões para negociar la multiplicidad de significados que el término ha adquirido en ambos continentes.

*Palabras clave:* sertão, estudios lusófonos, ecocrítica, estudios poscoloniales.

Among the extensive vocabulary created, adapted, and appropriated by the Portuguese to describe the geographies of the overseas colonies it kept from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, "sertão" is certainly one of the most persistent and challenging terms. In English, it is usually translated as backlands, hinterlands, or wilderness, although these terms can clearly be insufficient in certain contexts. Initially used to name inland areas not yet territorialized by the Portuguese, it came to encompass a wide range of meanings in the Lusophone world. In Brazil, while it is often associated with the arid interior of the country's Northeast, it has also been associated traditionally with rural, forested, and other non-urbanized areas across the country. The integration of these marginal areas at the national level was the goal of numerous developmental projects set by successive governments, albeit with distinctive variations.<sup>1</sup> In Angola and Mozambique, in contrast, the term remained confined to a colonial discourse of territorial control,

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<sup>1</sup> For studies on some of these projects, see Vidal e Souza; Lima; and Dutra e Silva, Miranda de Sá and Romero Sá.

and it has disappeared from the post-independence vocabulary in the two countries.

The sertão's polysemy has found a fruitful space in Brazilian literature, where the multiplicity of landscapes to which the term has been assigned have provided the settings of major works such as Euclides da Cunha's *Os sertões* (*The Backlands*, 1902) and João Guimarães Rosa's *Grande sertão: veredas* (*The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*, 1956). Among their readers are some of the most prominent writers in Mozambique and Angola, who have been developing an increasingly robust literary corpus since these countries' independence in 1975. Angolan Ruy Duarte de Carvalho and Mozambican Mia Couto have both published essayistic pieces and fiction that discuss the sertões of Brazilian geography and literature. Meaningfully, their essays take into consideration not only the multifaceted nature of the term, but also the ecological similarities between the African southern savannahs and the South American savannah known as *cerrado*, with which the term sertão is often associated. At the same time, the term sertão has limited yet meaningful appearances in their fictional works. The challenge, in this case, is to navigate amongst the diverse and sometimes opposing connotations the term may take across continents, biomes, and historical moments. In Carvalho's and Couto's works, I argue, it often leads to the development of narrative devices that put into relief the dialogical nature of the many voices present in these countries before and after 1975.

This article aims to describe ways through which Carvalho and Couto negotiate the differences between the colonial and outdated connotation of sertão in Africa, and its literary uses stemming from their readings of Brazilian literature. More specifically, I investigate how their essayistic works on Guimarães Rosa deal with the uses of the term sertão in the colonial discourse about Lusophone Africa, on the one hand, and how this issue is approached in their fiction on the other.<sup>2</sup>

The primarily geographic sense of sertão carries with it an amalgam of ideologically charged views of social and environmental factors. Besides implying a certain epistemological void, it has been frequently used discursively as the opposite of "civilization."<sup>3</sup> Rural areas are perceived as sertões in contrast to cities, following the colonial practice of designating areas of scarce Portuguese presence sertões in contrast with areas where the Portuguese have stabilized their control. As such, the sertões provide a powerful category that exposes the connections between human and environmental colonizations.<sup>4</sup> By examining contemporary literary responses to projects of social and environmental colonialism, this article

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<sup>2</sup> See Anita Moraes's "Guimarães Rosa lido por africanos" for a study on Couto's and Carvalho's readings of Guimarães Rosa.

<sup>3</sup> In his research on the presence of the sertão in Portuguese colonial cartography, for example, Rex Nielson notes that from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, "and perhaps even up to the present, the sertão has connoted not only geographical location but also wildness, barbarity, and non-European, non-Christian culture" (8-9).

<sup>4</sup> This environmental colonization, as Richard Grove notes, did not necessarily take the form of pure destruction but resulted in a varied range of "interventionist forms of land management" (7).

proposes a transatlantic perspective on ecocritical and postcolonial debates that encompass the South Atlantic and Eastern Africa.<sup>5</sup> As a key category to understand patterns of Portuguese colonial expansion, the sertão may also provide a useful conceptual tool for ecocritical approaches to postcolonial contexts. A brief, non-exhaustive account of the term's origin and development in the two continents will be followed by a discussion of tropes adopted by Couto and Carvalho.

### Early Modern Sertões

One of the possible etymologies of the term sertão was proposed by Gustavo Barroso, based on Bernardo Maria Carnecatim's *Dictionary of the Bunda Language of Angola* (1804), according to whom it would be derived from "mulcetão," which comes from "michitu" or "muchitu," and refers to places away from the coast (53–54). It is significant that among its possible origins there is one coming from a former colony, given the sertão's ties to overseas colonialism.

Portugal's colonial expansion was primarily based on maritime travels, which resulted in extensive Portuguese presence in coastal areas across continents, but little inland penetration. In *Roots of Brazil* (1936), for example, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda describes the Portuguese colonization in Brazil with an allusion to Fray Vicente do Salvador when he notes that, in the sixteenth century, "the colonists, even those in Brazil, crawled along the coast like crabs" (104).<sup>6</sup> Used in opposition to the coast, the sertões encompassed the inland territories about which the Portuguese had little or no knowledge, and where they had rarely or never ventured. As foreign space that was simultaneously the object of surveillance of a colonial "panopticon writ large," as Lauren Benton describes imperial spatial rationalization through mapping, the sertões inspired fear but also curiosity and greed for the many potential sources of wealth hidden there (see Benton 11).

While Gomeas Eanes de Zurara already mentions the "parte do sertão" ("the sertão area") in his 1450 chronicle of the invasion of Ceuta in 1415, Pero Vaz de Caminha, in his travel account of the first Portuguese arrival to America in 1500, speculates about the potential wealth to be found in the sertão beyond the wall of trees of the coastal Atlantic forest.<sup>7</sup> References to the sertão's undefined geography

<sup>5</sup> For recent works that bring ecocriticism and postcolonial studies together, see Huggan and Tiffin, and DeLoughrey and Handley.

<sup>6</sup> "[A]ndavam os colonos portugueses arranhando as praias como caranguejos" (*Raízes do Brasil* 132).

<sup>7</sup> See Eanes de Zurara 186. Caminha's references to the sertão in the letter are marked by mentions of trees covering what the Portuguese would imagine to be a vast land. For example: "Pelo sertão nos pareceu do mar muito grande, porque a estender olhos não podíamos ver senão terra com arvoredos, que nos parecia mui longa" ("From the sea the backlands seemed huge because as far as the eye could see there was only land and woods, so it seemed a very extensive land"; 12) Unless otherwise noted, all further passages in Portuguese were translated into English by Juan Diego Mariátegui.

often led to vague phrasing such as “sumir pelo sertão” (“to disappear into the sertão”) or “sertão dentro” (“deep into the sertão”). These terms often introduce the description of something to be found in inland areas or the initial steps of an exploratory journey, with little or no cartographical specificity. In many instances, they imply the complete disappearance of travelers from areas of colonial influence.<sup>8</sup>

## Brazilian Sertões

After Brazilian independence in 1822, the term sertão remained in use throughout the country, and it kept some of the main connotations already present in Portuguese colonialism: the Brazilian sertões were the vast territories of terra ignota, to use the cartographic expression immortalized by Euclides da Cunha in *Os sertões* (80).<sup>9</sup> It figured in the Imperial and especially Republican imagination as empty areas—albeit often inhabited by indigenous and rural populations—whose exploitation and national integration at the social, political, economic, and military levels was instrumental for national development. The sertão remained then, to use Antonio Moraes’ term, a “geographical other,” the complementary pair in the dichotomy between a civilized coast and a barbaric interior, and the frontier to be constantly expanded (87).

Scientific missions, sanitary campaigns, military bases, and the building of roads, train tracks and telegraphic lines are among the numerous projects and actions undertaken or supported by successive governments with the purpose of “taming” and developing the sertões. Perhaps none has raised as much international attention as the inauguration of Brasília in 1960. The transfer to the “capital in the sertão” from the coastal city of Rio de Janeiro was aimed primarily at promoting the development of the country’s sertões (Lima, “Brasília” 17).

Long before the 1960s, however, the term sertão became increasingly associated with the interior of the Northeastern states. Marked by severe droughts, intense racial mixing, messianic movements, banditry, and an oligarchical patriarchy, the Northeastern sertão came to represent a simultaneous source of concern and authenticity throughout the twentieth century. A landmark in this collective perception was undoubtedly Euclides da Cunha’s *Os sertões*, the famous account of the Canudos War, a conflict driven by the army of the newly declared Brazilian republic against the growing town of Canudos and its messianic leader, Antonio Conselheiro. As Nísia Trindade Lima comments, “the

<sup>8</sup> In a previous study, “Sertão Dentro: The Backlands in Early Modern Portuguese Writings,” I analyze the use of these and related expressions. My conclusion is that travelers to America tended to express less certainty about what can be found in the sertão than travelers to Africa, although both groups use it to convey indeterminacy.

<sup>9</sup> As Luiz Costa Lima explains, it is significant that de Cunha chooses the term “ignota” or incognita instead of “desconhecida” or unknown: “It would be unknown only if it had not yet been questioned and measured by already existing instruments. It is incognita because it need to give form to its own instruments” (123; my translation).

sertão/litoral dualism presents two facets. In one of them, the negative pole is represented by the sertão—identified with a resistance to modern civilization. In the other, the sign is inverted: the litoral is presented as synonymous with inauthenticity, and therefore as antithetical to the nation. In the work of many authors, among whom Euclides da Cunha's position is exemplary, ambivalence is the principal characteristic of the representation they construct of the country and its contrasts" (Lima 60).

In *Os sertões*, such ambivalence is valid both for the archetypal figure of the sertão—the sertanejo—and for its environment. Da Cunha's characterization of the sertanejo as a "Hercules-Quasimodo" (Cunha, *Backlands* 207) can also be applied to the environment that, in its harsh dryness and resilient vegetation, plays an active role in the fight against the republican troops, both by hiding the sertanejos and by resisting the entrance of the republicans: "The fight is unequal. When a military force must lower itself to an inferior type of combat, it has to deal not only with man but also with the earth. And when the backlands broil in the heat of the summer, it is not hard to predict who will be the victor" (Cunha, *Backlands* 203).<sup>10</sup> According to Adriana Campos Johnson, the identification of "the desert, not the jagunço, as the central antagonist" would effectively displace "the problem of constituting new republican subjects into the problem of constituting a new territory," that is, of "turning land into geography" (135-136). A consequence of this process would be the relative geographic stabilization of the sertão in the Northeastern states, thus forging the term's lasting association with dryness, poverty, and rurality.

The ongoing instability of this project was evidenced by the publication in 1956 of João Guimarães Rosa's only novel, *Grande sertão: veredas* (*The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*). Set primarily in the Southeastern sertões of the state of Minas Gerais, this first-person account of farmer and former bandit Riobaldo has a complex treatment of the term sertão, defined by the author himself as the space par excellence of the "metaphysical aspect of language," that is, the space in which "language and life are one and the same thing" (Guimarães Rosa, "Diálogo" 68). Numerous passages of *Grande sertão: veredas* connect this view of literary language to the sertão, such as: "Lugar sertão se divulga: é onde os pastos carecem de fechos, onde um pode torar dez, quinze léguas sem topar com casa de morador, e onde o criminoso vive seu cristo-jesus, arredado do arrocho de autoridade" ("The sertão-place expands/disseminates itself: it is where the grasslands have no borders, where one can ride ten, fifteen leagues without coming across a single house, and where the criminal lives his Christ-Jesus, far from the noose of authority", 5). This widely quoted passage already gives an idea of what is at stake in Guimarães Rosa's sertão: the rural referential space of cattle raising and low demographic density, where political and military powers are limited if not

<sup>10</sup> "A luta é desigual. A força militar decai a um plano interior. Batem-na o homem e a terra. E quando o sertão estua nos bochornos dos estios longos não é difícil prever a quem cabe a vitória" (Cunha, *Os sertões* 361).

inexistent, but also a space of vastness and inscrutability. This is where, to use Antonio Candido's words in one of the first essays devoted to the novel, "o deserto é sobretudo projeção da alma" ("the wilds are, more than anything, a projection of the soul", 114). It is, in short, a space where social, political, metaphysical, religious, and existential sertões meet, in its inexhaustible potential to address a wide range of readings without being limitable to one approach.

*Grande sertão: veredas* is only one example in a vast array of uses the term has received in Brazilian culture. These uses range from a relative proximity to the sea, such as the interior portion of the coastal state of Rio de Janeiro in José de Alencar's *O guarani* (*The Guarani*, 1857), or the interior neighborhoods of the city of Rio de Janeiro in Armando Magalhães Corrêa's *O sertão carioca* (*The Sertão of Rio*, 1936); to the cycle of novels on the droughts of the country's Northeastern states, which gained a decisive momentum in the 1930s with the publication of Rachel de Queiroz's *O quinze* (*The Year Fifteen*, 1930), and Graciliano Ramos' *Vidas Secas* (*Barren Lives*, 1938), and which remained influential in Brazilian literature and film throughout the twentieth century. Together, they attest to the ongoing presence of the sertão in independent Brazil and the role it has had both in defining developmental policies and in configuring cultural imaginaries. A significantly different scenario is to be found in the term's fate in Lusophone Africa.

### Angolan and Mozambican Sertões

The direction taken by the term sertão in Lusophone Africa is clearly different. Recurrently used by the Portuguese to classify territories distant from the coast or from the sites where their presence was established, it continued to be rather a relational term with no geographic and cultural roots in the areas that today are Angola and Mozambique. As Mia Couto notes in one of his comments about Guimarães Rosa, "The Portuguese took the word sertão to Africa to name the savannah landscape. It did not work. The word did not put down roots. Only in the old colonial writings one can find the term 'sertão.' Almost no one today, in Mozambique and Angola, recognizes its meaning" ("Rosa em Moçambique" 66).<sup>11</sup>

Until a few decades before the two countries' independence in 1975, however, the sertões were used to name inland areas of scarce or inexistent Portuguese presence. In *Sertanejos de Angola* (*Sertanejos from Angola*, 1943), for example, a then young Castro Soromenho writes about the "brave sertanejos" or nineteenth-century Portuguese men who explored inland areas of Angola.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "Os portugueses levaram a palavra para África e tentaram nomear assim a paisagem da savana. Não resultou. A palavra não ganhou raiz. Apenas nos escritos coloniais antigos se pode encontrar o termo 'sertão'. Quase ninguém hoje, em Moçambique e Angola, reconhece o seu significado" ("Rosa em Moçambique" 66). In a recent conversation with me, Angolan writer Ondjaki confirmed that the term is not used in contemporary Angola.

<sup>12</sup> Castro Soromenho's views of colonialism would change in the following years, leading to his falling-out with Salazar and consequent exile from Portugal in 1960. In spite of his later criticism of

Published during a context of increased reliance on the African colonies set forth by the Estado Novo under the administration of prime minister Antonio Salazar, the book's first words already evoke Angola's sertões from a typically colonialist perspective: "Over the barbarity of the African sertões, just a few dozen adventurers have raised the flag of their nation as a symbol of occupation...They refer to themselves, proudly, as Sertanejos" (5).<sup>13</sup> The sertão is then immediately associated with barbarism and with the need for foreign, "civilized" occupation. While in Brazil the sertanejos are usually portrayed as the local inhabitants of the arid interior of the country's Northeast, Castro Soromenho's sertanejos are instead the Portuguese explorers seeking to expand the borders of the Portuguese Empire. To a certain extent, they were the historical equivalents of the *bandeirantes* (frontiersmen) in territorializing interior areas of colonial Brazil.

The stereotyped view of the African sertões as places of racial and environmental barbarism presented in *Sertanejos de Angola* was but part of a larger tradition of mystery and uncontrollability associated with the term from the early modern period to the twentieth century. A good example is the 1882 collection *Viagens, explorações e conquistas dos portugueses*, organized and commented on by Portuguese writer and historian Luciano Cordeiro, in which the late nineteenth-century voice of the commentator adds a more dramatic tone to the more pragmatic tone of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century chroniclers. Whereas the latter use sertões in an economic fashion mainly to describe areas away from the coast yet to be invaded, Cordeiro does not hesitate in supplementing such accounts with observations in which racism and fear towards the African backlands go hand in hand. He refers, for example, to the seventeenth-century explorers that,

with all the resources of nearly three centuries of civilization and science, dedicated themselves to one of the most grueling and glorious deeds that a white man can accomplish; when one reflects on the fact that these men could no longer believe in grandiose illusions [of wealth] about the very long road ahead and the terrible savagery to be traversed, and that they themselves [experienced] the treachery of the heathen, the hostility of the climate. (8)<sup>14</sup>

These tropes of backwardness and imminent danger would be evoked by Angolan and Mozambican postcolonial writers such as Couto and Carvalho with critical distance and, frequently, an ironic twist.

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the Portuguese colonial regime, *Sertanejos de Angola* was published as the 98th volume of the *Pelo Império* [Throughout the Empire], a collection published between 1935 and 1961 by the General Colonial Agency. These ideological changes, however, would still be insufficient for him to escape the perspective, in Russel Hamilton's words, of an "enlightened colonialist" (40).

<sup>13</sup> "Sobre a barbárie dos sertões africanos, umas escassas dezenas de aventureiros ergueram a bandeira do seu país como símbolo de ocupação. [...] Eles chamam-se a si mesmos, com orgulho—Sertanejos" (*Sertanejos de Angola* 5).

<sup>14</sup> "[C]om todos os recursos de quasi tres seculos de civilização e de sciencia, [dedicaram-se] a um dos feitos mais asperos e gloriosos que póde realizar o branco; quando se reflecte em que aquelles homens não podiam já crear-se grandes illusões ácerca do extensissimo caminho a percorrer e da terrivel selvageria a atravessar, e que elles proprios [sentiam] a perfidia do gentio, a hostilidade do clima" (Cordeiro 8).

At the same time, Couto and Carvalho take advantage of the startling environmental similarities that the sertões of the three countries often share. After all, the savannah covering most of Mozambique and Angola is equivalent to the biome of the Brazilian *cerrado*, including the areas that serve as the setting for most of Guimarães Rosa's novel. All are formed by "tropical and subtropical grasslands, with scattered bushes and trees" and a relative dryness (Shorrocks 1). According to Bryan Shorrocks, "savannahs on different continents often 'look similar,' but the individual species are quite different" (10). In spite of the different forms of biodiversity in southern Africa and South America, the similar impression caused by these forms was noticed and explored by Couto and Carvalho. The African savannah also resembles somewhat the drier areas of the *caatinga* and the sertão in the Northeastern Brazilian states, which was so crucial for the geographical stabilization of the term in the twentieth century. It is not by chance that Carvalho, in *Desmedida*, brings together the two archetypal Brazilian biomes into a single literary geography whose axis is the São Francisco river, which links one to the other in a South-North direction. This landscape reminds Carvalho of the area where a significant portion of his fictional and anthropological work is set: the Moçâmedes desert in southern Angola, which is dry despite its relative proximity to the sea.

Although the term sertão does not populate the everyday vocabulary used in postcolonial Mozambique and Angola, there is a very specific usage in postcolonial Lusophone African literature, or at least on the bookshelves of its authors, which is the reference to the literary landscape of the Brazilian sertão. The sertão of Couto and Carvalho combines aspects of the Orientalist view of the term developed by the Portuguese in both continents with careful attention to the specificity of the areas formerly called sertões in Mozambique and Angola, but also with an acute perception of the numerous points of contact between the Latin American and the African sertões. The following sections of this essay describe discursive strategies through which these two authors engage with these varied uses in the context of the negotiation of national identities as the two countries recovered from long civil wars following their independence.

### Mia Couto

Mia Couto engages the concept of sertão in two essays about Guimarães Rosa: "O sertão brasileiro na savana moçambicana" ("The Brazilian Sertão in the Mozambican Savannah", 2005), and "Rosa em Moçambique" ("Rosa in Mozambique", 2007), both presented as public lectures in Brazilian institutions before their publication.<sup>15</sup> These two essays could actually be read as variations of a same text, given their similar contents and even the repetition of whole passages.

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<sup>15</sup> The first one was presented in 2004 at the Brazilian Academy of Letters, in Rio de Janeiro, and the second one was presented in 2007 at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, in Belo Horizonte.

Both discuss the decisive influence that Rosa's work had over the Mozambican author's literary trajectory. Following some of the many intuitions or keys to approaching his own work that Couto identified in Guimarães Rosa, we find that the creative power of Rosa's language and his deviation from a rationalist logic produce a poetic transgression of reality, a foundation of myth as nation and not of nation as a myth that takes place outside an idea of nation based on uniformity and modernity ("Rosa em Moçambique" 66).<sup>16</sup> This is of special importance for a recently independent country that, like the Mozambique of the era in which Couto read Rosa, was still caught between colonial and national realities.

This space takes shape via Guimarães Rosa through a symbolic recontextualization of the sertão's referential spaces in Brazil. Rosa's sertão is converted by Couto into an instrument of political transformation: "The sertão and the veredas of which he speaks are not of a geographical nature. The sertão is a world built in language" (Couto, "Rosa" 66).<sup>17</sup> In the sertão, the narrator becomes a "mediator of worlds"—in this case, of the many worlds found in Brazil (Couto, "Rosa" 68). Curiously, Couto's arguments seek simultaneously an affirmation and a rejection of the geographical referentiality of the Brazilian sertões. With these two coexisting movements, it is as if the Mozambican author wrote, as would Rosa, "na linha de costura" (along the seam) between different realities (Couto, "Rosa" 67). Rosa's sertão for Mia Couto, on the one hand, remains the broad space encompassing the country's plurality of voices in the crucial moment of Brasília's building. On the other hand, it is the linguistic space that transcends geo-historical constraints.

By transposing this mediating power to the space of Mozambique, Couto connects the savannah to the sertão through this symbolic and referential ambivalence: "O sertão é, pois, um mundo em invenção. Tudo isto se pode dizer da savana, o espaço onde se constrói não apenas a paisagem de África, mas onde África se constitui" ("O sertão brasileiro" 109) ("The sertão is therefore a world in the process of being invented. All this can be said about the savannah, the space where the African landscape is not only constructed but also defined" ["Brazilian Sertão" 53]). The savannah refers then to the referential space of the African landscape as much as to "a world built on language" found in Couto's own fictional work. Taking into account the ecological proximity between the African and the South American savannahs in each region, Couto seems to draw upon the central place of the sertões in the Brazilian social and cultural imaginary in order to assign an analogous role to the savannahs of Mozambique and other African countries.

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<sup>16</sup> In Couto's words, "o sertão de Rosa é erguido em mito para contrariar uma certa ideia uniformizante e modernizante de um Brasil em ascensão" ("Rosa's sertão is built as a myth in order to challenge a certain modernizing and uniformizing idea of a developing Brazil" 67, my translation).

<sup>17</sup> "O sertão e as veredas de que ele fala não são da ordem da geografia. O sertão é um mundo construído na linguagem" (66).

A decade later, however, the presence—or rather absence—of the term in Couto’s fiction would shift in the first volume of the *As areias do imperador* (*Sands of the Emperor*) trilogy. This novel, entitled *Mulheres de cinza* (*Women of Ash*), brings the reader back to 1895 when the State of Gaza, “the second largest Empire in Africa led by an African” would face its last moments before the fall of the emperor Ngungunyane (Couto, *Mulheres* 3). The narration alternates between the first person narrator Imani, a Choipe teenager from a family notoriously supportive of the Portuguese, and the letters written by Germano de Melo, an outcast turned sergeant whose mission was to expand the Portuguese control in the area.<sup>18</sup> In this historical novel, marked by an intense dialogism that repeatedly foregrounds the perspective of the Chopes through Imani and challenges environmental racism through Germano, the colonial usage of the term sertão in Africa finds its place in the fictional work of Couto.

*Mulheres de cinza*’s sertões belong exclusively to Germano’s letters, written to a military officer of a higher rank, and they often follow the colonialist trope of vast, empty space: “nesse vasto sertão de Inhabane” (“in this vast sertão of Inhabane”, 20), “na lonjura deste sertão” (“in the remoteness of this sertão”, 205), or in longer passages such as:

All this asphyxia could be compensated by the infinite geography of Africa. But these ample distances produce an inverse effect: everything here is brought closer together. The line of the horizon is at our fingertips. And I imagine the immense route of our letters traversing the African sertão. (151)<sup>19</sup>

The dizzying immensity that reinforces the Romantic tone of this passage is the same that makes possible the distance of the African sertão from the horizons of the colony’s coastal capital, Lourenço Marques (today’s Maputo). In this context, the very courier service available inside the sertão appears as an almost uncanny sign of modernity.

Concomitant with such a sense of remoteness is the racist anguish stemming from Germano’s lack of knowledge and control over the area:

We arrived yesterday at Chicomo after a journey of two weeks on foot, through a sertão that fascinates and frightens me. In every thicket I imagine an ambush. In the dark of every night I see an ambush. Attacked by monstrous insects or by untamable Negros, what is the difference for he who is about to die? (35)<sup>20</sup>

In this series of comparisons, in which the forest is compared to a trap and black men are made equivalent to “monstrous animals,” the foundational fiction that *Mulheres de cinza* might represent does not hide the situation of deep racial and

<sup>18</sup> Regarding the role of letters in Couto’s fiction, see Rothwell 55.

<sup>19</sup> “Toda esta asfixia poderia ser compensada pela infinita geografia de África. Mas esta ampla lonjura produz um efeito inverso: tudo aqui se torna mais próximo. A linha do horizonte fica ao alcance dos nossos dedos. E imagino o imenso percurso destas nossas cartas atravessando o sertão africano” (151).

<sup>20</sup> “Chegámos ontem a Chicomo depois de uma viagem de duas semanas a pé, por um sertão que me fascina e me amedronta. Em tudo o que seja floresta imagino uma emboscada. No escuro de cada noite adivinho uma cilada. Atacado por monstruosos bichos ou por indomáveis negros, qual a diferença para quem vai morrer?” (35).

environmental tensions that underlie the modern history of Mozambique.<sup>21</sup> If Simon Estock defined the ecophobia found in Western societies as “an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism,” this passage brings to light the common ground of ecophobia and racism by conflating them into a same form of fear (Estok 6).

At the same time, Germano’s stay in the town of Nkokolani, in the sertão of Inhambane, leads him to reconsider some of his earlier positions, which allows his love for Imani, as well as passages such as: “Descubro, enfim, meu caro Conselheiro, nestes tristes sertões uma humanidade que em mim mesmo desconhecia. Esta gente, aparentemente tão distante, tem-me dado lições que não aprenderia em nenhum outro lugar” (“I discover, in the end, my dear Conselheiro, in these sad sertões a humanity I did not know in myself. These people, supposedly so distant, have taught me lessons I would not have learned anywhere else”, 120). This discovery of a deeper humanity in what Germano calls the sad sertões, then, puts side by side the sertões and Germano’s subjectivity, in a closer albeit different way from *Grande sertão: veredas*. It also marks the transformation lived by a character increasingly aware of the similarities between the Portuguese’s and Nguhunyane’s fights for territorial control and their “narrativas imperiais (...) que não diferiam umas das outras” (“imperial narratives [...] that did not differ one from another” 118). Germano’s dismay about the Portuguese colonial enterprise, blind to the complex social and psychological dynamics at stake within the backlands of Mozambique, finds expression in one of his final letters which he revokes what he had previously said: “não adoeci em África, como todos os demais. Eu adoeci de Portugal. A minha doença não é senão o declínio e a podridão da minha terra” (“I did not fall sick in Africa, like everyone else. I became sickened of Portugal. My illness is nothing but the decline and rottenness of my country”, 206). Germano inverts the colonial hierarchy in this passage: the Portuguese metropolis becomes the rotting place that may contaminate the African sertões, where a different, perhaps deeper level of humanity exists.

Germano thus embodies the possibility of a colonial discourse on the sertão that could contribute to a postcolonial approach to the term. While his sertão does not erase the social, racial, and linguistic hierarchies that were still to a certain extent present after Mozambique’s independence, it does promote a questioning and nuancing of such hierarchies that would potentially lead to a decolonial view of the savannah. Consequently, the sertão, as the colonial avatar for the landscape of the savannah referred to by Couto in the previous articles, stands as the place where a more prominent balance of powers due to the scarce colonial presence may allow a real, independent Mozambique to emerge. The ambivalence of the sertão as a trope of colonial discourse and as a “mediator of worlds” is thus intensely dramatized in this fictional reflection on how to build a nation.

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<sup>21</sup> I borrow the term from Doris Sommers.

## Ruy Duarte de Carvalho

In Ruy Duarte de Carvalho's *Desmedida* (2006), a mixture of travel diary, essay and historical account, the Angolan author narrates his travels to Brazil. Besides São Paulo, he journeys to the São Francisco river and to the areas where Guimarães Rosa's works are set, then back to Luanda. His objectives concerning geographical displacement are already stated in the opening paragraph:

there is a place, I was saying, there is a point on Brazil's map, there is a corner where the states of Goiás, Minas Gerais and Bahia meet, and the Federal District is also very close. There I would like to go... it is there that most of *Grande sertão: veredas'* action is set... [...] and to the lower São Francisco, I would go too, if I could... because it borders Euclides da Cunha's sertões... (15)<sup>22</sup>

The point where many states meet provides a geographical metaphor for the intensely intersectional character of the sertão for Carvalho, in a similar fashion to Couto's definition of the sertão as a space that mediates worlds. The area encompasses not only the diverse histories and narratives belonging to each of these geographical areas, but transatlantic geopolitical imaginaries, linguistic practices, and socio-environmental frameworks. This vastness of themes, characters, and common histories recall the vastness of Guimarães Rosa's sertão.

The sertões surrounding the São Francisco River occupy several chapters of the book and provide the author with a starting point to introduce other topics. Figures that visited the two continents, such as British writer and explorer Richard Burton and French poet Blaise Cendrars, make an appearance, as does the history of the colonial expansion in Africa and America such as the seventeenth-century Dutch invasion. The very title *Desmedida*, or what cannot be measured, alludes to the ways that the sertões visited by the narrator resisted mapping, regulation, and control, as much as it may allude to the history of contact between the two nations.

In this sustained comparison of the histories of Angola and Brazil, Carvalho proposes a common intercontinental history shared by the two countries: "Todo o mundo, e eu também, parece estar hoje de acordo que tanto Angola como o Brasil, no que diz respeito a passados discerníveis, não dá de facto para entender um sem entender o outro" ("Everybody, including myself, seems to agree today that, in what concerns trackable pasts, it is impossible to understand Angola and Brasil independently from each other", 222).<sup>23</sup> This does not, however, imply a strict similarity between them: both remain separate in their colonial and postcolonial

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<sup>22</sup> "...tem um lugar, dizia eu, tem um ponto no mapa do Brasil, tem um vértice que é onde os estados de Goiás, de Minas Gerais e da Bahia se encontram, e o Distrito Federal é mesmo ao lado. Aí, sim, gostaria de ir... é lá que se passa muita da acção do Grande Sertão; Veredas... [...] e ao baixo São Francisco, podendo, ia também... porque encosta nos Sertões euclidianos..." (15).

<sup>23</sup> As Chaves notes, "sua incursão [ao Brasil] seria um modo de ver Angola de outro prisma, corroborando a legitimidade da aproximação já encetada por tantas outras vias" ("His travels to Brazil would be a way of seeing Angola from another angle, reinforcing the approximation already launched by so many other paths" 289, my translation).

histories. In his words, “Tivemos independências diferentes, tivemos histórias também diferentes tanto antes das nossas independências como depois delas, mas fazemos também todos parte, embora sem dúvida cada um à sua maneira, da mesma substância que burbulha no caldeirão dos nossos futuros comuns ou diferenciados” (“Our independences were different, our histories both before and after independence were different, but we also all belong, doubtlessly in our own unique ways, to that same substance that bubbles in the cauldron of our futures, whether they be common or differentiated”, 201). With all the differences recognized, what is at stake here are rather the numerous points of contact that may shed light onto new historiographic and environmental perspectives. Among the latter are the similarities he notices between the Brazilian sertões visited by Carvalho and some landscapes of Angola:

And in the landscapes that Guimarães Rosa described to me, I recognized those already familiar to me. Be it because the nature is the same as in many of Angola’s landscapes—and in some of Angola’s landscapes I would recognize those I was reading about—be it because the people he described, people from woods and caves, from farms and bush, these too were the people with whom I dealt in Angola in my work and my life. (86) <sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, this comparison does not gain the symbolic meaning Couto establishes between the roles of the sertão and the savannah in nation building. Instead, they strengthen the ties between the literary imaginaries active in the two countries, of which *Desmedida* is a significant example.<sup>25</sup>

In other works by Carvalho, occasional mentions of the African colonial sertões make use of quotation marks or of a discursive refraction that eschews his own voice even when there are no clear marks of a shift in enunciation. An example is *Vou lá visitar pastores* (1999), a blend of anthropological, historical, autobiographical, and literary account of the Kuvale shepherds in the region of Moçâmedes, to which most of Carvalho’s attention is devoted. The author starts an explanation of why indigenous people did not want to work for Portuguese settlers when he describes the “indígenas Mondombe, rebeldes a qualquer trabalho, à sujeição, à escravidão, permanentemente refractários ao seu emprego [...]” (“the indigenous Mondombe rebel against any work, subjection, slavery, permanently resistant to their employment”, 46). This is all written in free indirect speech, as explained by the author: “Estou a utilizar os termos em que são referidos na bibliografia disponível” (“I am using the terms referred to in the available sources”, 46) The irony, already present in the indirect speech per se through the neutrality with which the possibility of enslavement is posed, receives an explanation that

<sup>24</sup> “E nas paisagens que Guimarães Rosa me descrevia, eu estava a reconhecer aquelas que tinha por familiares. Já porque de natureza a mesma que muitas das paisagens de Angola—e em algumas paisagens de Angola eu reconhecia aquelas, enquanto lia—já porque a gente que ele tratava, gente de matos e de grotas, de roças e capinzais, era também em Angola aquela com quem durante muitos anos andei a lidar pela via do ofício e do viver” (86).

<sup>25</sup> In this sense, the sertões of *Desmedida* could compose something like a South Atlantic cartogram, to use Laura Padilha’s metaphor to understand “spatio-fictional images” in contemporary Angolan literature (140).

prevents any doubt as to the author's position. Besides explaining the previous free indirect speech, this last passage configures what comes next: "Até um naturalista suíço, de nome Lang, que o governo faz vir àqueles sertões depois da fundação do presídio de Mossâmedes, em 1840, para informar do potencial dos recursos da região, se revela pessimista perante a indolência das gentes daquelas terras" ("Even a Swiss naturalist, named Lang, that the government sent to those sertões following the founding of the Mossâmedes fortress in 1840 to inform on the region's potential resources, shows himself to be pessimistic before the indolence of the inhabitants of this land", 46–47). Even though the "terms used in the bibliography available" refer primarily to indigenous "indolence," the very use of sertões here becomes part of a general colonial discourse, despite not being explicitly recognized as such by Carvalho.

Other devices employed by Carvalho to refer to sertões and other tropes of colonial discourse include simple indirect speech or clear direct speech. The former can be found also in *Vou lá visitar pastores*: "Ao chefe do Concelho de Campangombe chegou a ser enviado, pelo governador anterior a Ferreira de Almeida, um ofício que o instruía no sentido de não se opor à passagem de uma dessas 'guerras,' que havia de vir do sertão de Benguela para guerrear os 'cubaes'" ("The governor before Ferreira de Almeida sent the chief of the district of Campangombe a missive that instructed him to not oppose to one of those 'wars' that would inevitably come from the sertão of Benguela to war against the 'Cubaes'", 50). Although the whole content of what the former governor says would belong to an indirect speech, only the words "guerra" and "Cubaes" appear between quotation marks. This leaves the sertão of Benguela in an unstable position regarding its inclusion in the character's vocabulary, since it is not explicitly attached to the governor's speech through the quotation marks, but remains close enough to his discourse to be associated with it. In a less ambiguous fashion, Carvalho also uses it in an uncomplicated direct speech when, in the novel *Os papéis do inglês* (*The Englishman's Papers*), the character named Grego is described by Galvão, without quotation marks, as "grosseiro, conflituoso, destrambelhado e rude" ("crude, conflictive, crazed, and uncouth") before the narrator explicitly quotes Galvão: "e isso adaptava-se ao que ele próprio [Galvão] [...] dizia sobre o juízo que nessa altura recaía sobre cagadores de elefantes perdidos pelos matos: era 'um dos muitos cafres brancos que a vida sertaneja de África cria'" ("And that was in keeping with what he himself [Gavão] said about the punishment that at that point fell on the attendants of the elephants lost in the bush: he was 'one of those white barbarians that life on the African sertão creates'", 64). In this case, although the term "sertanejo life" refers to a person uncannily close to the Brazilian sertanejos described by da Cunha in the roughness of their character, it still belongs to the figure of the Portuguese explorer as Castro Soromenho describes it. Most importantly, it appears within direct discourse whose authority cannot be questioned, thereby constituting another example of the discursive variations Carvalho has explored throughout his works.

## Approximations

Focusing both on the civil wars in the decades following the countries' independences, such as Couto's *Terra sonâmbula* (*Sleepwalking Land*, 1992), or dealing with a broader temporal span in the Moçâmedes region of Carvalho's *Os papéis do inglês*, Couto and Carvalho have been carrying out a delicate negotiation between discursive tropes of colonialism, an analytic approach to literature's founding role in nationalistic discourses, and the influence of Brazilian writers, especially Guimarães Rosa, upon the first generations of postcolonial writers, who nevertheless usually took a critical distance from the Brazilian author.

Crossing all these factors, the figure of the sertão remains a challenging one. The imaginative geography, to use Edward Said's term, of the African sertões is fundamentally tied to a Portuguese colonial discourse in which racism goes hand in hand with an environmental view marked by an ecophobic fear of the unknown and the obsession for territorial control.<sup>26</sup> It is exclusively in discourse referring to Portuguese colonization that the term sertão appears; otherwise, it is absent from today's Angola and Mozambique. On the other hand, the Brazilian sertão is also geographically tied to one of the poorest and most marginalized regions of the country, the Northeastern sertões, ambivalently perceived also as one of the most authentic parts of Brazilian culture. This assumed authenticity, together with the wide presence of the term in Brazil's literary tradition, shapes a view of the sertão as a space of social mediation where an individual, as much as a nation, can find themselves. This is how, to a certain extent, both Couto and Carvalho understand the place of the sertão in Brazilian culture.

Dealing with contradictory connotations, Carvalho and Couto take advantage of their own positionality to put into perspective the colonial discourses on the African sertões and the potentially productive result of an approximation between the Angolan, the Brazilian, and the Mozambican sertões. This approximation can belong to a referential order when events and peoples crossing from one coast to another provide the elements for the writing of a common transatlantic history, in which the presence of the sertão is to be taken as the index of a similar attitude towards the colonial other that, nevertheless, is permanently subject to a strategic semantic reformulation. For this purpose, Carvalho may evoke their role in a literary tradition such as the Brazilian one, or talk about the sertão in an Angolan context through a refracted voice that does not need quotation marks to come across as the discourse of a colonialist locus of enunciation. Moreover, the physical similarities between the sertão of Guimarães Rosa and the savannah for Couto provide a space for symbolic mediation among the diverse and divergent groups facing the task of imagining a community. The

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<sup>26</sup> I refer here, in Said's words, to the ways one finds of "dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away" (55).

sertão of Inhambane belonging to the pen of the Portuguese sergeant is the same space where the different actors that negotiate both forms of communality and power are the close ancestors of an independent Mozambique.

Instead of denying or ignoring the sertões of colonial discourse on Africa, then, these authors perform this discourse by attributing it, directly or not, to the mouth or pen of their characters. This dialogic device allows them to play and to expose what Homi Bhabha calls the ambivalence of colonial mimicry within the colonial contexts in which the narrations are set.<sup>27</sup> In doing so, they make evident the historicity of the sertão as a social and environmental category that establishes a specific imaginary, frequently stereotypical, over a certain territory. It is in this sense that, as Byron Caminero-Santangelo defends this textual strategy, an African ecocriticism may take shape: not through a de-historicized view of a nature devoid of human presence, but rather through a close debate with postcolonialism and a focus on regional and local modalities of environmentalism. In his words, “postcolonial ecocritics attempt to historicize nature (while putting nature back into history) in order to disrupt the naturalization of geographical identities and conditions that have been shaped by imperialism” (10).

To conclude this article, I want to propose that Mia Couto’s and Ruy Duarte de Carvalho’s works can be read as an intervention, more than in Brazilian literature itself, in the Brazilian collective perception of its own sertões.<sup>28</sup> The relatively smooth transition the term has enjoyed after Brazilian independence, as shown by the lasting presence it has had in the country’s intellectual history and internal geopolitics may easily ignore the array of usages it has received beyond Brazil’s geographical borders and modern history. When Carvalho and Couto put into critical perspective these sertões with different levels of familiarity for Brazilian readers, then, they also affect the perception of the term in Brazil. As a result, and almost in an ironic fashion, they contribute to sustaining the term as environmentally diverse and as geographically unstable as it has indeed always been.

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<sup>27</sup> Colonial mimicry refers to the double articulation of colonial projects that constitutes, in Bhabha’s words, “a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same, but not quite) does not merely ‘rupture’ the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a ‘partial’ presence” (123).

<sup>28</sup> In fact, *Mulheres de cinza* is the first non-Brazilian novel in contention as a finalist for the prestigious São Paulo Literary Prize in 2016, which is awarded only to works first published in Brazil. The fact that the novel was chosen shows how close Couto is to Brazilian publishers and readers. At the same time, as Nara Rubia Ribeiro explains, it is curious that the author himself chose to pluralize the Brazilian edition’s title to *Mulheres de cinzas*, because, according to him, in Brazilian Portuguese the original title could be understood as “women wearing ash grey,” which would not be the case in Mozambique and Portugal.

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