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A Transnational Canon of African Literatures in Portuguese?: Mia Couto, José Eduardo Agualusa and the Circulation of Lusophone African Literature¹

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Abstract

African literatures in Portuguese were first canonized in the 1970s. During and in the wake of decolonization, the main force driving their internationalization was the solidarity with the struggle for liberation. This trend weakened, however, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. At the same time, the 1990s marked a turn in the process of literary production that also corresponded with a shift in style, themes, and aesthetic inclination by a younger generation of writers. A few of these names became standard reference in the translational canon of these literatures: notably Mia Couto and José Eduardo Agualusa, the two most prominent beneficiaries of this system, alongside Paulina Chiziane, Germano Almeida, Pepetela, and Ondjaki. Offering a comparative mapping of this transnational canon alongside the publication and reception of these literatures in the Portuguese-speaking world will give us a better understanding of their relationship to world literature and of the functioning of the world literary consecration machine.

Keywords: Translation; World literature; Portuguese language; African literatures; Literary canonization

¹ This article stems from my postdoctoral research on the circulation of Lusophone African literatures in translation and from the continuation of this research line in the ongoing collective research project *AfroLab. Building African Literatures: Institutions and Consecration Inside and Outside the Portuguese-Language Space 1960–2020*, hosted by the Centre for Lusophone and European Literatures and Cultures at the University of Lisbon and funded by Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia under the 2020 grant call (PTDC/LLT-OUT/6210/2020).

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Introduction

African Lusophone literatures began to be canonized in the 1970s, building on a corpus dating from the late 1950s. Up until the fall of the Berlin Wall, literary translation from Lusophone Africa followed a clear pattern: on the one hand, state solidarity in the eastern bloc generated a stream of translations, especially in East Germany, while in western Europe, a solidarity with third world's liberation struggle against the Portuguese colonial regime granted them some attention by prominent left-wing intellectuals. A prominent example is Pier Paolo Pasolini in Italy, who prefaced an anthology of African literature that included a substantial selection of Portuguese-language production, with the title *Letteratura negra*, published by Editori Riuniti in 1961.² This trend weakened gradually after the erstwhile Portuguese colonies gained independence around 1975, and state solidarity from the eastern bloc came abruptly to an end with the fall of socialist regimes.

The late 1980s marked a turning point in literary production in Lusophone Africa: a younger generation of authors who had a different relationship with the liberation movements and with the recent history of their countries began publishing expanded the landscape of these literatures with new themes, forms, and aesthetic proposals. Ana Paula Tavares stirred the Angolan poetic milieu with *Ritos de Passagem*, published in 1985, while in the same year João Melo published *Definição*, his first poetry book, and Mia Couto published *Voices Made Night*, his first short-story volume in 1986. Germano Almeida's first and most famous novel *The Last Will and Testament of Senhor da Silva Araújo* appeared in 1989, and in the same year José Eduardo Agualusa also published *A Conjura*, his first novel. Even though at the beginning of the 1980s African literatures in Portuguese were by and large composed of a set of texts mainly focussed on the liberation struggle, with the clear domination of poetry over prose (even if Luandino Vieira's prose work and its prominence in these literatures is a notable exception), with mobilization and political aims and following the influence of Negritude aesthetics, at the end of the decade this landscape was changing dramatically. The 1990s saw the consolidation of these new trends: the novel acquired importance in the genre balance; new themes emerged, such as the disillusionment with the new independent states (*A Geração da Utopia* by Pepetela is a telling example), and the legacy of colonialism was seen in a broader perspective, all of which contributed to the enlargement of African literary possibilities in Portuguese. These authors presented to the Portuguese and the world a somewhat "normalized," renewed, and trendier version of these literatures, in that they managed to intercept the contemporary taste shift of both the European and American public, following the enthusiasm of postcolonial authors' success, which reached its peak in those years. While Derek Walcott, Salman Rushdie, and V. S. Naipaul, for instance, gained an impressive readership

² For some data on this period, see Marco Bucaioni, *Left-Wing Solidarity and Literary Translation from the Portuguese-Writing Africa to Italian and German before the Fall of the Berlin Wall*, 2019 ([https://doi:10.13140/RG.2.2.22239.69283](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.22239.69283)), with an insight on translation before the fall of the Berlin Wall in Germany and Italy, in this way highlighting the two divergent approaches between East and West.

in the global north (not only, but also in translation), and were consecrated at the center of the emerging postcolonial canon, Lusophone Africa aligned with this turn in taste in a marketable fashion.³ The world translation system was also expanding quickly in those years. Portugal and Portuguese-writing Africa benefited from this wave: as a special guest at the Frankfurt book fair in 1997 and at the Turin *Salone del libro* in 2006, Portugal included African authors in its attempt at catching the attention of foreign publishers. And indeed, translation from Lusophone Africa also spiked, in absolute numbers, compared to previous years.

The agenda and writing conditions of the authors also changed. The guerrilla soldier who wrote from the frontline or from prison—the most common image of the African writer of the previous generation—was gradually substituted by authors who traveled the world to take part in literary events and book launches and were listed for prizes in Portugal and abroad. A few names became standard references in what can be seen as a translational/transnational canon of African literatures in Portuguese. Among them, Mia Couto of Mozambique and José Eduardo Agualusa of Angola are without any doubt the two most prominent beneficiaries of this system. Germano Almeida of Cape Verde, the “old generation” Pepetela and the young Ondjaki, both Angolans, and Paulina Chiziane of Mozambique also count among the most translated authors in this period. Together, these five names already constitute the absolute majority of publications in translation, configuring almost an oligarchy of translations from Lusophone Africa. As such, they can be said to represent a *de facto* transnational core canon of these literatures, with Couto and Agualusa as the figureheads.

The emergence of this transnational canon has two characteristics: the first is a relative independence from the received African literary archive in Portuguese as proposed by Portuguese publishers and a relative uniformity in the choice of names and works for translation. We can affirm that this reduced literary archive in translation represents what the world literary system chose to import, and in this way certify as palatable to be read in its core areas.

This archive was built by an incredibly limited number of agents promoting transnational circulation. These were, in turn, the original Portuguese publishers, who not only selected the “domestic” Portuguese African canon but were also capable of influencing its internationalization through their presence at international book fairs and their negotiation of publishing rights; a small number of literary agencies; and the Portuguese governmental agencies responsible for supporting translation.

With this larger picture in mind, it is the aim of this article to present data on translations of African Lusophone literatures into European languages, but eventually including publications outside Europe. My approach will be book historical and sociological, using extratextual data, in order to obtain a mapping of the translational published corpus of these literatures in European languages. From there, I will move on to analyzing the characteristics of the translational

³ See Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), and Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

archive that emerges from these data, underscoring convergences and divergences of translation choices. The special place occupied by Mia Couto and José Eduardo Agualusa, for their high number of translations and their consecration outside the Portuguese-language literary system, will become apparent. In conclusion, I will then reflect on the how this translational canon came to be, allowing me to formulate some hypotheses on the functioning of the world literary system and the possible future of Lusophone African writing.

Theory

The relevant theoretical inroads to this article derive from Casanova's formulation of the "World Republic of Letters."⁴ Although her theorization is not new and has been criticized by various scholars (for example, by Helena Buescu),⁵ it is deeply convincing to me. I believe her approach makes several valuable points, namely the general attempt she made to build a bridge between the French critical tradition and the legacy of postcolonialism. Very relevant to my approach is the fact that her work stems from the Bourdeusian school, in which symbolic capital, attached to literary texts themselves, but also to the material realization in which they circulate, are read. Casanova's formulation of a "World Republic of Letters" (or world literary space, in her terminology), organized hierarchically in nodes and centers, with developmental and force lines emanating from those centers is productive (she is not alone in a systemic view of world literature).⁶ Even if one can raise objections to the absolute importance given by Casanova to Paris as *the* center of world literature for centuries, or dispute the fact that it was supplanted by New York, London, or other places; even if she seems to remain inside a frame of European/Western literatures, actually ignoring preexisting and still existing literary traditions of other regions, for what concerns my line of research, in the analysis of a region of this world literary system, her analysis continues to be valid. It is also evident from my data that Portugal, and especially Lisbon, can be considered the "Greenwich meridian" of African Lusophone literatures, again in Casanova's terminology, or at least could be considered so for most of their history.

Her confrontational tone about literature as a struggle for literary recognition by central and peripheral authors and literary traditions is also in my opinion adequate, especially when seen from a peripheral viewpoint. As Casanova herself points out: it is harder from the more central positions to perceive the architecture of this system and the possibility to see the world literary play as a level playing field is stronger in the center. Seen from our Portuguese-language

⁴ Pascale Casanova, *La république mondiale des lettres* (Paris: Seuil, 1999).

⁵ Helena Buescu, "Pascale Casanova and the Republic of Letters," in *The Routledge Companion of World Literature*, eds. Theo D'haen, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadir (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 126–35.

⁶ See, for example, Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature" *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54–68; Franco Moretti, "More Conjectures" *New Left Review* 20 (2003): 73–81; and WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development. Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).

periphery, the system reveals itself with infinite clarity as an unequal and uneven struggle for “*littérisation*.”

In my opinion, the importance that institutions and agents hold in literary history is paramount.⁷ The Bourdeusian school from which Casanova comes has also given us important theoretical and methodological tools.⁸ This article follows the spirit of this school in the belief that extra-literary data on books, and on translations specifically, are able, if well gathered and interpreted through the use of theory, to tell us the history of the circulation of a segment of the world literary system, arriving to relevant considerations and analyses for literary studies.

The Translation Corpus

According to my research, the sum total of published translations, in the period 1956–2021, of Lusophone African authors is 429. This number refers to monographic publications of one single author that correspond to a book publication in Portuguese, including poetry, but excluding anthologies and not considering poetry translations that appeared in magazines, journals, or other types of periodical publication, even if that is a relevant way of circulating for this literary genre.

Our main source was the translations database published by the Portuguese governmental agency DGLAB—Direção-Geral do Livro, dos Arquivos e das Bibliotecas, of the Ministry of Culture, showing data on the translation of Portuguese and African authors abroad. This database has proven to be up-to-date and extremely accurate for recent years’ translations. For older works I researched other sources, such as national public library internet sites of different countries for the main five languages: the Library of Congress (USA) and the British Library (UK) for English, the online catalogue of the French National Library for French, the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek—Katalog for German, Datos Bne Es (online catalogue of the Spanish National Library) for Spanish, and the OPAC SBN (online catalogue of the Italian National Libraries) for Italian. For minor languages, I relied almost exclusively on DGLAB’s database, punctually integrated by some research on authors’ websites for the most translated ones.

The oldest translation in my database is a 1956 French edition of Castro Soromenho’s novel *Terra Morta*, published with the title *Camaxilo* by Présence Africaine in Paris. The first publication in Italian follows in 1963—a poetry

⁷ See Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen, eds., *Institutions of World Literature: Writing, Translation, Markets* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁸ See Pierre Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed,” *Poetics* 12, 4–5 (1983): 311–56; Johan Heilbron, “Structure and Dynamics of the World System of Translation,” *International Symposium Translation and Cultural Mediation*, UNESCO H.Q., February 22–23, 2010; Gisèle Sapiro, “Translation as a Weapon in the Struggle Against Cultural Hegemony in the Era of Globalization,” *Bibliodiversity, Translation and Globalization* (2014): 31–40; Gisèle Sapiro, “Translation and Symbolic Capital in the Era of Globalization: French Literature in the United States,” *Cultural Sociology* 9.3 (2015): 320–46; and Gisèle Sapiro, “How Do Literary Works Cross Borders (or Not)?” *Journal of World Literature* 1.1 (2016).

anthology by Agostinho Neto, with the title *Con occhi asciutti* and published by Il Saggiatore of Milan. One year after that, the first German translation appears: the very same novel by Castro Soromenho, here with the title *Senhor Américo kehrt nicht zurück*, was published by Volk und Welt in Berlin (East Germany). For the first translation into English to be published one must wait until the end of the decade: in 1969, Luís Bernardo Honwana's short stories enter the prestigious Heinemann African Writers' Series with the title *We Killed Mangy-Dog and Other Stories* (number 60 in the series). In the following decade, more languages joined this list: Norwegian in 1976, with a translation of *A Vida Verdadeira de Domingos Xavier* by Luandino Vieira published by Tiden Norsk Forlag, and in the same year a Swedish translation of the same story, with the addition of another one (*O Fato Completo de Lucas Matesso*), appears in Lund, published by Bo Cavefors.

Spanish entered this list only in 1980, after the fall of Franco's regime, with a translation of Agostinho Neto's poetry (*La lucha continua*, published by Laia in Barcelona); the 1980s see also Romanian joining in 1982 (*Chiquinho* by Baltasar Lopes published by the University of Bucharest Press). In the 1990s, a Dutch translation of Mia Couto appears (*Slaapwandelend land* or *Terra Sonâmbula* in 1996), a Basque translation of Pepetela (*As Aventuras de Ngunga*, published by Txalaparta also in 1996), and a Catalan translation of Agualusa (*Nació Criolla*, published in 1999 by Edicions de la Magrana).

Danish joins at the beginning of the new century, with *Søvngænger Land* (*Terra Sonâmbula*) in 2001, Bulgarian in 2002, Greek in 2003, Croatian and Slovenian in 2005, Slovak in 2008, Serbian in 2009, Hungarian and Polish in 2010, and Estonian in 2011. The translation of African literatures in Portuguese is a venture that accelerates in the 1990s and more explicitly in the 2000s, especially for what concerns central and eastern European languages. The number of translations per decade confirm this trend: 1 translation in the 1950s, 7 in the 1960s, 9 in the 1970s, 24 in the 80s, 46 in the 90s, 173 in the 2000s, and 122 in the 2010s.

Of these 429 translations, 322 were published in the five main European languages (and book markets): English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish. The remaining 107 were published in 19 minor languages.

Concerning target languages, publications total ninety-three in Italian, seventy in French, sixty-five in Spanish, fifty in German, and forty-four in English. It is not surprising that English is the least represented among major languages: it is well known among translation scholars that the English-language literary systems have been particularly impermeable to intranslation.⁹ In the case of African Lusophone literature, however, English does not present a disproportionately low number of translations compared to the other major languages. I do not know, however, if this has to do with a relative openness of the English-language literary system to these literatures, or with the generally low figures of these literary archives.

⁹ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility. A History of Translation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995): 14–17, or the ThreePercent project's internet page, where the actual figure of translations number on total publication for the US market is stated to be, in truth, around 0.7 percent.

Among minor European languages, Swedish, with twenty-three translations, dominates the field, in perfect line with the expectations: even if the reference market for the Swedish language comprises just around 10 million potential readers, translations into Swedish are usually believed to be inflated in comparison with the language's dimensions because of the presence of the Nobel Prize for Literature awarded by the Swedish Academy. In our case, however, state-funded aid to Angola and Mozambique in the 1980s and 1990s could have played a bigger role as a form of residual solidarity-based form of translation.¹⁰ Dutch and Croatian come next, with eleven translations each. No other European language reaches the number of ten translations.

Of the 429 publications, some are reprints or re-editions (thirteen in German, three in French, two in English and in Italian, while there are no re-editions in other languages). Not having access to all the books, I assumed a translation to be a re-edition or a reprint when author, title, and translator coincided between two successive translations. The German prominence in re-editions until 1989 can be partly explained by the division of Germany into two states, with independent book markets: some translations appeared for the first time in book form in the former German Democratic Republic, being then republished in another edition in the German Federal Republic. Similarly, the two more recent re-editions in English have to do with parallel or successive publications on the two sides of the Atlantic, reflecting the market split between the United Kingdom and the United States.

Places of publication are overwhelmingly unbalanced in favor of Europe: out of 429 translations, 390 were produced in Europe, 33 in the Americas, and the almost negligible remainder of 6 in Africa. On the one hand, a certain imbalance toward Europe is predictable: provided that we gathered data for translations only in EU languages, the extreme linguistic fragmentation of the continent means that smaller European target fields add weight to the European region. Nevertheless, if one breaks down the data by language, one can see that the European dominance is overwhelming also in the case of transcontinental languages with major book markets in the Americas and with a relevant presence in Africa. In the English-language space, twenty-five translations were published in the United Kingdom, eight in the United States, and eight in Canada, with a clear dominance of the British translation market over the American one. In Spanish and French, the discrepancy is even greater: out of sixty-four translations published in Spanish, forty-seven were produced in Spain, eight in Argentina, seven in Mexico, and two in Colombia, resulting in a ratio of forty-seven European publications versus seventeen non-European ones. In French, sixty-four translations were published in France, two in Belgium, and two in Switzerland, and only one outside of Europe and, most notably, in Africa. It is not surprising, given the centrality and the power of the French book sector, also internally unbalanced toward a notorious Paris-centric situation. Even so, however, and given the importance that French language has in some parts of Africa,

¹⁰ Stefan Helgesson. "Translation and the Circuits of World Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to World Literature*, eds. Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 85–99.

one wonders why no African institution has promoted intra-African translation from Portuguese. The same can be said about English. Translations in German are all published in Europe because there is no country with this official language outside of the continent, with twenty-two translations published in West Germany or unified Germany after 1990, eleven translations published in the former German Democratic Republic, and eleven in Switzerland.

Out of the 429 publications, only 6 were produced on African soil: 1 each in South Africa, Tanzania, Angola, Morocco, Cape Verde, and 1 joint publication by Senegal/Ivory Coast and Togo. The weakness of African, and especially sub-Saharan, book markets is notorious, as is the tendency for intra-African translation to happen in Europe or in the global north. Even so, these numbers are telling in that they reinforce theoretical stances and other experimental studies about African book markets and literary fields already consolidated in the case of other languages. Even if, famously, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o advocated, in his 1986 text *Decolonising the Mind*, for the rise of African book markets, publishing infrastructures and the direct translation on African soil between different literary traditions in African languages, almost forty years later we must admit that even more consolidated African literary traditions in post-imperial languages continue largely to have their institutional centers in the global north. In order for a book to reach even a bordering African country with a different official language, more often than not, its conceptual (and possibly physical) travel involves unequal literary exchanges between two ex-imperial European capitals. In order to appreciate an Angolan or Mozambican author who originally writes in Portuguese, the Nigerian or the Kenyan reader must usually wait for the work to be published in Lisbon and then noticed by an international literary agent, just to be published in English, most likely, in the United Kingdom and then to be re-exported to English-language African book markets.

This situation is in part counterbalanced by some initiatives such as the magazine *Jalada* and website¹¹ a pan-African writers' collective, in their own words, which proposes a significant number of translations between various African languages. Pan-African or inter-African literary networks are not at all absent, as Kate Wallis suggests.¹² Inter-African translation was also not negligible at all in the past, with initiatives such as the Angolan independent state in the first years of independence, which commissioned translations of African literary and essayistic works from other countries into Portuguese with state-based funds, which involved Portuguese imprints such as Edições 70.

The most translated Portuguese-language African author is Mia Couto with ninety-three publications. José Eduardo Agualusa follows suit with eighty-nine. Pepetela is the third name of the list with forty-seven translations, followed by Ondjaki with thirty-one, Luandino Vieira and Agostinho Neto with twenty-two publications. Germano Almeida with twenty and Paulina Chiziane with fourteen complete the list of Portuguese-language authors with more than ten published translations. It is noteworthy that, on the one hand, there is just one female name

¹¹ Jalada Africa (<https://jaladaafrica.org/>).

¹² Kate Wallis, "Exchanges in Nairobi and Lagos: Mapping Literary Networks and World Literary Space," *Research in African Literatures* 49.1 (2018): 163–86.

on this list, giving us the proportion of gender asymmetry in this translational corpus. The imbalance between the number of translations per author is also striking: the first 2 names alone have almost 200 translations, or almost half of the entire corpus. These 7 names put together, on the other hand, amass 338 translations, or more than three-fourths of the total, giving us an image of the scarce diversity of this corpus.

Noteworthy here is also the racial imbalance of the most published authors: out of these seven names, only Paulina Chiziane and Agostinho Neto are to be identified as Black. Ondjaki, Germano Almeida, and Agualusa are mixed-race, while Mia Couto, Pepetela, and Luandino Vieira are White. The fact that the most translated author of these literary traditions is a White man is telling and can be seen as problematic in some critical circuits. The position of White Africans in general and their legitimacy as African authors in the literary field have been indeed consistently and repeatedly debated since these literatures' inception.¹³ These authors, however, identify themselves and are identified in the literary circuit as African (or, specifically, juridically and culturally nationals of Angola, Mozambique, and so on). This testifies, arguably, to the peculiar history of Lusophone Africa's struggle for independence. Luandino Vieira and Pepetela are two notable examples of how some Portuguese settlers chose to join the fight against the colonial regime, which has made the presence of White Africans more acceptable. Against my rather positive image, thus far, of the transnational dissemination and reception of these writers, a closer look at the publishers involved will provide a different perspective. In general, few of these authors have been received in their translational target fields by mainstream imprints in the dissemination circuit, which is not at all surprising. African literary production in Portuguese is, after all, firmly situated at the intersection of two peripheries: on the one hand, the African literary field, which can be said to be at the extreme periphery of world literature, and, on the other, the language in which these works are written. Portuguese, notwithstanding its sheer demographic dimensions and its diffusion on the planet, continues to be perceived as a peripheral language in many aspects, among which is literary production.¹⁴ The two most relevant successes of these literatures in the international consecration stage have been, so far, the prizes Agualusa and Mia Couto managed to attain in the English-language literary circuit, namely the Independent Foreign Fiction Award (Agualusa) in 2007 for his novel *The Book of Chameleons* and the 2014 Neustadt prize (Mia Couto) for his literary career.

¹³ Among possible examples, see João Melo's short story *O Escritor*, or Luís Kandjimbo's position on Black/White balance in Angolan writers at <https://www.dw.com/pt-002/h%C3%A1-racismo-editorial-no-mundo-liter%C3%A1rio-emi%C3%ADngua-portuguesa/a-58049728>.

¹⁴ Albert Braz, "Chosen Literatures: Core Languages, Peripheral Languages, and the World Literary System," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 47.4 (2014): 119–34; Alexander Beecroft, *An Echology of World Literature From Antiquity to the Present Day* (London and New York: Verso, 2015), and Theo D'haen, "Major/Minor in World Literature," *Journal of World Literature* 1.1 (2016): 29–38.

Remarks and Hypotheses

A look into this translation corpus and its comparison with what is published and read in the Lusosphere and what is studied in those countries will give us a better understanding, on the one hand, of what is happening with these literatures nowadays internationally and, on the other, of the functioning of this extremely powerful consecration machine that the world literary system has come to be. Moving away now from the quantitative analysis of publishing data, I will try to formulate some hypotheses on the circulation of these literatures in the world literary system.

The first obvious point is the significant asymmetry between the African continent, in the name of which these literatures are written, published, marketed, packaged, communicated, and promoted, and the European agencies that actually dominate the very publication in the source language and then the process of selection, translation, and presentation to international audiences.¹⁵ These tendencies verify many world literary theoretical enunciations: the dominance of Portugal is all too clear. As it also happens to English- and French-speaking African authors in relation their ex-metropolitan counterparts, Lusophone writers appear to rely heavily on Portuguese structures to attain national and international recognition. Also before African independence, the role played by Portuguese institutions in the building of African literatures was extremely significant, as shown by the case of the Casa dos Estudantes do Império, a crucial meeting place for young anticolonial African intellectuals in the 1960s.¹⁶ The Sociedade Portuguesa de Escritores' Prize to Luandino Vieira's *Luuanda* (1965) and the subsequent persecution of the very same writer by PIDE, the Portuguese political police, is also telling. After the Carnation Revolution in 1974, many Portuguese agencies proved essential to the building of an African literary canon. Edições 70 and Sá da Costa—especially—invested much in the publishing of African literary and essayistic material immediately after the revolution: both imprints also promoted collaborations with the newborn African states and their cultural agencies, printing in Portugal books intended and paid for by these new countries. Edições Vega, with the book collection *Palavra Africana*, or “African word,” and more notably Editorial Caminho, had a seminal role in building an impressive catalogue of African authors from 1990 onward, undertaking a continuous campaign of literary scouting that mediated among African national spaces, Portugal, and the rest of the world. Caminho, on the one hand, had strong ties with the African book markets, with the presence of subsidiary imprints in Angola (Nzila) and Mozambique (Ndjira), while, on the other, the publishers marked their regular presence with a stand at the Frankfurt book fair, in this being the perfect mediator among Lusophone Africa, Portugal, and the world. Until the beginning of the last decade, Caminho was the main publisher of African literary works in Portuguese, dominating this segment of

¹⁵ See also Marco Bucaioni, “Quem constrói o ‘cânone internacional’ das Literaturas Africanas em português? Tradução, instituições e assimetrias Norte/Sul,” *Mulemba* 12.22 (2020): 28–48.

¹⁶ As in Pires Laranjeira, *Literaturas Africanas de Expressão Portuguesa* (Lisboa: Universidade Aberta, 1995).

the market with dozens of authors on its list. The only great African authors published outside Caminho's catalogue are José Eduardo Agualusa, who began with Dom Quixote and then moved on to Quetzal in more recent years, and Pepetela, again published in Dom Quixote's catalogue. Caminho's book list included a dedicated series with the suggestive name of *Outras Margens*, or "other shores," almost exclusively dedicated to African authors. This book series can be considered to amount to the almost complete archive of African literatures in Portuguese as they were photographed in the 1990s and 2000s, or the extended canon thereof. In the last few years, this imprint has continued to publish new works by already established African authors, but mainly failed to maintain its practice of enriching its book list with new authors.¹⁷

For the internationalization of these literatures, being published in Portugal (but not necessarily in Brazil) seemed to be almost a precondition: as my data show, out of 429 published translations, the number of books originally published in Africa is negligible.¹⁸ At the same time, Portuguese state institutions are also involved in this process: Direccção-Geral do Livro, dos Arquivos e das Bibliotecas (of the Ministry of Culture), and Camões I. P. (of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) support the translation of Portuguese authors worldwide, but have always included also African authors. This stance has a clear institutional meaning: given that the publishers involved in the source publications are Portuguese, these books can be considered a Portuguese product and the revenues of this inclusion in terms of symbolic and financial capital largely benefit Portuguese enterprises. In this way, the circuit of institutionalization and consecration of Lusophone African literatures has firmly remained in the hands of northern global players. Portugal has retained such a role for itself for many reasons: first of all, until recently, Brazilian publishers never had any African branches. Indeed, somehow, the very presence of Porto Editora and Leya in the Angolan and Mozambican markets automatically excluded Brazilian publishers from any direct contact with the African literary milieus. On the other hand, Brazil showed little interest in such direct contact: it was only after the effects of a 2003 law that instituted African and Afro-Brazilian literatures as compulsory at high school and university level that some Brazilian publishers found it financially attractive to publish new African literary material because this law opened up a new market and a new demand for such a venture.

The fact that Portuguese state institutions such as Camões I. P. and DGLAB traditionally cover African authors in their funding of translations abroad also

¹⁷ This is possibly due to logistical reasons: the recurrent "scouting" journey to Angola and Mozambique of the imprint's chief editor, Zeferino Coelho, came to a halt around 2011, after the financial crisis hit southern Europe, as Coelho himself stated in a conference hosted by our research project at the University of Lisbon on May 25, 2021, available for consultation at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCEvLaVzpuM>.

¹⁸ Some African state institutions, such as União dos Escritores Angolanos or Associação de Escritores Moçambicanos, played a very important role in the publishing of some new authors, especially in the last decades of the twentieth century. Mia Couto, for example, began to be published by his national writers' association, only to move on to the Portuguese commercial publisher as soon as he had the possibility to do so.

reinforced this dominance, working in tandem with those Portuguese imprints that, in the first place, made the original Portuguese editions and in this way retained the original translation rights of these works.

The first consecration agents of these literatures are in this way the Portuguese publishers, who are responsible for publishing African authors in the domestic market. As it is typical with African authors, more often than not, the first domestic market and country of publication is Portugal and not the African country in which and eventually about which they write. Publication in Portugal means also visibility for a possible internationalization beyond the boundaries of the Portuguese language and, until very recently, visibility and the possibility of being published in the larger Brazilian market. The center of these literatures has been Portugal, and more specifically Lisbon, over the last almost five decades, validating center/periphery theoretical formulations.¹⁹

We can also note that, both in terms of “domestic” consecration in the Portuguese-speaking world and in terms of internationalization, the Americas counted little for these literatures: the dominance of European publishers and translators on their American counterpart is overwhelming. From an institutional viewpoint, while, in the dominion of the Portuguese language, Lusophone African literatures are a Portuguese matter, their internationalization in translation has largely been a European affair.

At any rate, a comparison between reception within and reception beyond the domain of the Portuguese-language highlights a few interesting discrepancies. While, on the one hand, Mia Couto and Agualusa are celebrities in both Portugal and Brazil, there are some names who have received less attention abroad in comparison with the domestic literary field, and some who have received more. Among major African authors of the last decades, the almost complete absence of two names in translation strikes me as unexpected: the Angolan João Melo and the Mozambican João Paulo Borges Coelho have received minimal attention abroad, while in Portugal they have been the object of massive investment by their publisher and have been well received by critics.

João Melo, with twenty-three published books in Portugal, the consecration of appearing in the anthology *Antologia da Nova Poesia Angolana (1985–2000)*, edited by the state-owned prestigious imprint Imprensa Nacional–Casa da Moeda, was the object of only three translations into Italian, and a translation into English is finally underway this year (*Angola Is Wherever I Plant My Field*, to be published in the United States, the translation of his 2006 short stories volume). João Paulo Borges Coelho, who received the Leya Prize in 2009 for his novel *O Olho de Hertzog*, with thirteen titles published in Portugal—many of which are novels—and a steadily growing reputation among readers and scholars, has also received only three translations into Italian and one in Spanish, yet he is completely absent in other European languages. Both of them are published by the prestigious imprint

¹⁹ For a general picture of the Portuguese and Brazilian bookmarkets and their internationalization strategies, see Gustavo Sorá, “Cosmologies du capitalisme éditorial: le Brésil et le Portugal à la foire de Francfort,” in *Le Commerce Transatlantique De Librairie, Un Des Fondements De La Mondialisation Culturelle (France, Portugal, Brésil, XVIII–XX siècle)*, eds. Diana Cooper-Richet and Jean-Yves Mollier (Campinas: Publiel, 2012), 75–102.

Caminho in Portugal; their work is celebrated and widely read and could possibly be a success in foreign markets, given the praise both authors have received and the characteristics of their work. In contrast, Paulina Chiziane, an established but relatively less widely known author in Portugal—until the 2021 Camões prize, at least—has received steady attention by some international publishers in translation abroad.²⁰ In the German and Italian target systems, she received a warm recognition since the turn of the millennium, with three translations in German by the same publisher between 1997 and 2003, and four translations into Italian, first by La Nuova Frontiera of Rome between 2003 and 2012, and the last by Urogallo of Perugia in 2017.

On the one hand, this testifies to the existence of “oblique,” or “lateral” lines of contact in translation among different literatures, skipping the mediation of the hyper-central language of English. This demonstrates the vitality of many different literary systems independently from center-periphery relations. On the other hand, there seems to remain one unanswered question: Why do authors who start from similar positions in the domestic literary field fare so differently in the field of translation? Possible answers may pass through an attentive analysis of styles and themes of the various literary works, but also the availability of the author to travel to and take part in literary events can be relevant here.

Another interesting point that emerges from my dataset is that many institutions and agents involved in the translation of these literatures belong to the circuit of Portuguese studies and not to the environment of African literatures. Most translators of African Lusophone literature are also active in the translation of Portuguese or Brazilian authors. This is the case with Daniel Hahn and Michael Kegler in Germany; Vincenzo Barca, Daniele Petruccioli, and Marco Bucaioni in Italy; and Marianne Sandels in Sweden—all of them active in a wider literary environment that transcends the specificity of African literatures. A distinction is also to be made here between more general publishers and those who specialize in Portuguese. Among the latter are, for example, Urogallo of Perugia in Italy or Almqvist & Wiksell of Uppsala in Sweden. Nonspecialized publishers may still, however, represent various Lusophone authors. Examples are Métailié and Chandeigne in France, Unionsverlag in Switzerland, and La Nuova Frontiera in Italy.

Some of the rare instances in which Lusophone African authors have been received in a publishing context especially dedicated to Africa are the few titles published in the Heinemann African Writers series (two titles by Pepetela and Mia Couto, one by Lília Momplé, one each by Luís Bernardo Honwana and Luandino Vieira), published between 1969 and 2002, as well as one translation of Luandino Vieira’s *A Verdadeira Vida de Domingos Xavier*, published by Présence Africaine in France. These ventures are marginal in number and quite distant in time, showing how the thrust for internationalization of these literatures came

²⁰ Marco Bucaioni, “Uma escritora em trânsito das margens da periferia subalterna para o centro do sistema literário mundial: em torno do caso de Paulina Chiziane,” in *Mulheres Africanas em Trânsito. Homenagem a Alda Lara*, eds. Ana Paula Tavares, Rosa Maria Fina and Fabio Mario (V. N. Famalicão: Húmus, 2022).

essentially through the institutional enthusiasm after 1990 led by world literary trends in private publishing and postcolonial exoticism, and how the bulk of these translations stemmed from an interest in Lusophone literatures, more than specifically African literary material. This can be interpreted as a signal of how these literatures in translation are seen and circulate as an “expansion,” or a “branch” of Portuguese and Brazilian literatures, or inside the academic field of Portuguese studies. The connection between academia and translation is particularly strong, for example, in the Italian literary field, where many long-time translators from Portuguese have been active as scholars as well. This is somewhat inevitable in many locations: marginal literatures such as these have a chance only when they pass through the circuit of academic interest, relatively free from market constraints, and have a free hand to give a possibility to these works of art. The risk, however, is that this situation might confine these literatures to a niche from which it is difficult to escape and, ultimately, it delinks them from their Africanness—or de-realizes it, in Ashleigh Harris’s terms.²¹ The fact that Mia Couto or Pepetela, for example, appear alongside Portuguese or Brazilian authors in foreign publishers’ catalogues, and are not inserted in book series that present translations from other parts of Africa, may influence their reception, marketing, and disseminating these works of art as “Lusophone” rather than “African” in the first place.

This situation is rather complex: on the one hand, African authors benefit from Portuguese structures (publishers, state entities supporting translation, for example) that have enabled numerous translations that otherwise would possibly have never appeared. On the other hand, however, this can mean that they do not reach the audience of other African literatures, in this way reproducing a subdivision of the continent based on former imperial languages. A balance is difficult to strike: to present an African author alongside non-African authors can be seen as a neutralization of their Africanness as a relevant motif or reason to be read: some authors should desire such a publishing position in order to be “naturalized” on the world stage. On the other hand, the fact that these literatures are sometimes presented as an appendix, or an expansion of Portuguese-language literatures in general, in a necessarily subaltern position vis-à-vis the Portuguese and Brazilian ones, can give the impression of an eternal dependence on the literature of the previous metropolis, which is not at all desirable.

Mia Couto and Agualusa, however, belong in a category of their own. They tend to be the first authors to be translated even in peripheral European literary fields. Countries and languages that missed the third world solidarity phase skipped over to the new phase of translation driven by the world literary circuit and receive primarily and firstly (and in some cases only) Agualusa and Mia Couto’s works in translation. This is the case of Estonian, Finnish, Hungarian, and Slovak, for example, with just one translation of Agualusa each, or of Greek, Macedonian, and Slovenian, with just one translation of Mia Couto’s. This shows how Agualusa and Mia Couto enjoy a different status from all the other authors in

²¹ Ashleigh Harris, *Afropolitanism and the Novel: De-Realizing Africa* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020).

this list, no doubt enthroning them as the dual center of a posited transnational canon of Lusophone African literatures. In a certain way, they are the only two real cases of “worlding” in these literatures.

At the level of single works, Germano Almeida’s *The Last Will and Testament of Senhor da Silva Araújo* seems to have a unique status as a contemporary classic: some systems try to receive other works of the same author, others just limit themselves to that single one, which appears in so many languages.

Luandino Vieira’s translations into English are old and erratic, even though he is positioned possibly at the very core of the scholarly canon of Lusophone African literatures. Pepetela’s work, although quite frequently translated, has been dispersed across various imprints in the different target systems. His representation in Italian, for example, a language into which several of his books have been translated, has been spread out among many different translators and small publishers, with hardly any national visibility. Pepetela was nonetheless the initiator or the precursor of the interest in these literatures in various literary fields—his *Mayombe* was translated into English and published by Heinemann in 1983, while a translation (*La rivolta della casa degli idoli* by Pepetela) of his broke twenty years of silence in Italy about the translation of these literatures in 1989. In Germany, Pepetela gained four publications in translation in the 1980s, with the country still divided.

What made Agualusa and Mia Couto the center of this canon? Certainly, their availability and the time span of their literary career must have helped—they began publishing when the northern global public and book industry developed a taste for the postcolonial exotic and they showed a constant availability for the promotional circuit, traveling around the world and being present in relevant markets. The effort by institutions that sustained these authors’ literary works must also have been important: publishers in Portugal and their translators elsewhere, for example. The two authors are mutual friends and have coauthored more than one literary work (the dramatic text *Chovem amores na Rua do Matador* in 2007 and the short-story book *O Terrorista Elegante e Outras Histórias* in 2019). They clearly work in tandem to help internationalize these literatures.

However, the literary production and dissemination circuit that consecrated these two names at the top of a transnational canon of African literatures in Portuguese, together with five other outstanding names, appears to have reached its natural end. While inside the Portuguese-language sphere the publication of new African authors in the frame of a traditional consecration circuit seems to have come to a halt around 2010, the international public and market also seems to have undergone a shift in taste and demand. The novelty represented by postcolonial champions back in the 1990s and 2000s for the international market has exhausted its strength, superseded by a new generation of Afropolitan authors writing from a global perspective (and oftentimes from a northern global location), as is the case, for example, in English, of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chinelo Okparanta, Bernardine Evaristo, among others. Regardless of the writer’s location, a new generation of Afrodescendants, global Africans, Africans on the move, Black-European and Black-American writers is emerging, also accompanying shifts in theory and epistemic changes in academia. Black Lives Matter, Rhodes Must Fall, and similar grass roots movements

opened up the space for a new generation of cultural and identitarian claims, with important repercussions in Brazil (where some international Black authors are attaining a superstar status: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is widely read and the Black Portuguese essayist and artist Grada Kilomba's events sell out) and in Portugal itself. A new Black-Portuguese literature emerged, whose main names include Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, Yara Monteiro, Kalaf Epalanga, Raquel Lima, to name just a few, who, in the last decade or so, have conquered a new space both among the public and in academia. The production and dissemination circuit of these new authors is somewhat different from the traditional one: other imprints are involved and the public of these authors is possibly looking for something that is at the antipodes of the "postcolonial exotic" that drove previous decades' literary consecration. Identity politics is perceived to be at the center of these new literary waves, often with an intersectional aspect that also involves gender issues.

The main conceptual shift is from "African" to "Black." Inside the "traditional" African literary canon in Portuguese, White authors have a role of prominence together with Black ones: what the publishers and the readers sought in these literatures were voices from Africa. In some cases, identity/cultural issues were very important: racism, the concept of race and its treatment both in African and in Portuguese society, was at stake, as was the memory and legacy of colonialism, and of the colonial/liberation war. At the same time, Afrodescendant literature is focused mostly on the identity/cultural problem of Black Europeans minorities: it is defined by a reductionism that celebrates the emergence of a Black literature in Portugal, giving it a new voice and relevant space that aims at combating systemic racism in Portuguese society. Readers and scholars interested exclusively in proclaiming the existence and the relevance both of a Black Portuguese or Black Brazilian literature and the rights of the Afrodescendant community can only dismiss White African authors and African literature in general as not relevant to their ends.

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