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Of water and water spirits in southern African literature

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OF WATER AND WATER SPIRITS IN SOUTHERN AFRICAN LITERATURE

by

Confidence Joseph

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Supervisors: Professor Isabel Hofmeyr

Dr Charne Lavery

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Dedication

To my daughter, Tatyana Angela Joseph

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Declaration

I declare that this is my own unaided work. It is in the fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted for any other degree or examination or to any other university.

August 2021

Signed: **C. Joseph**

Abstract

This project contributes to the growing scholarly work that foregrounds water as a critical tool for, and object of analysis. I am interested in how creative writers and filmmakers employ water and water spirits in forms such as novels and films from Southern Africa. While I refer to the beings as water spirits in this thesis, they are also known as water gods or deities. In this project, I explore how water spirits are used as innovative literary devices in different texts as they are re-imagined in line with changing historical contexts and authorial visions. Water is both life-giving and mortally dangerous, and water spirits often manifest similar dualities. To create a conceptual framework for this thesis, I benefitted from several theories that include water mythologies, magical realism, and post-colonial ecocritism. I argue that while the histories of the nation have been intricately tied to the land, a watery turn reveals fresh insights into our understandings of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial conversations. Watery spaces are complex and contested sites like land territories. The complexity of watery spaces invites my exploration of the materiality of water and the representation of water spirits in the selected texts in a decolonial frame. The way the selected texts represent the entanglements between the human and non-human, land, and water, the natural and the supernatural, speaks to the many ways of being in the world.

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CHAPTER ONE

Locating Southern African Water Spirits

Growing up in Zimbabwe's arid city of Bulawayo, my encounters with water bodies were minimal. Despite this absence of tangible water bodies, there was never a shortage of stories pertaining to water spirits believed to reside in different bodies of water like oceans, rivers, dams, and even swamps. My grandmother told us that these marine spirits were both benevolent and malevolent, depending on how one related to them. In response to these strange tales we also shared as children, we shunned a local dam to avoid being taken away by mermaids. By then I believed that there were spirits lurking in all bodies of water. My grandmother also extolled the powers of sea water. It was not uncommon in our house to find bottles of sea water reverently stashed away. We believed that this water, when sprinkled around the house, offered an extra layer of protection for the family. We also knew *sangomas* whose powers reportedly came from the depths of water bodies. There was, therefore, more to water than what our schoolteachers taught us. Water bodies were populated with various mysterious beings and spirits, not vacant spaces of minute molecules.

It is these stories and personal experiences that have over the years fostered my fascination with water spirits. My stays in Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa made me realise that although these aquatic spirits differ in name and form, they share some traits. I probe these water beings in this thesis as I focus on their representations in literary texts from Southern Africa. While I refer to these beings as water spirits, they are also known as water gods or deities. This thesis explores how water spirits are used as innovative literary devices in different texts as they are re-imagined in line with changing historical contexts and authorial visions. In thinking with Sanna Lehtonen (2014), my analysis of the chosen primary texts shows that "myths can be rewritten to entertain, to broadcast religious views, present political satire, explore selfhood, rescue minority voices, re-imagine gender or ethnic politics or just to ensure that old stories are not forgotten" (40).

Water spirit myths have a complicated relationship with water's material properties. Water is both life-giving and dangerous just as water spirits often manifest similar dualities. In the third chapter, I explore an example of this in the film *Otelo Burning* (2011). Otelo is warned by his father about water monsters in order to keep him and his young brother from drowning. A related concern of this thesis is to examine how the materiality of water (physical properties of water) can shape and drive the plots of different texts. In this I draw "…attention to what water does …what kind of water is being depicted. What are its material characteristics and is the narrative potential of these exploited?" (Hofmeyr forthcoming, 17-18). I examine the depiction of different kinds of water, and their relations to both the text and water myths. For instance, is the water on the surface, subterranean or intangible? Is it flowing or stagnant, and of what colour? Through pursuing these questions, water emerges as a significant narrative and metaphorical tool of the texts – even when it appears to be absent.

This thesis contributes to the growing scholarly work that foregrounds water as a critical tool for, and object of, analysis. In his reading of two Zimbabwean novels – Shimmer Chinodya's *Dew in the Morning* (2001) and Charles Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain* (1975) – Maurice Vambe (2013) contends that the dominant trend in African literature has been "… to explore themes related to the liberation struggle, betrayal of independence and despair fomented by bad governance in post-independence Africa" (1). What is problematic about this, and interrelated trends is the privileging of land and the human as sites of contestation. Relatedly, Kerry Bystrom and Isabel Hofmeyr (2017) note, in a different context, the association of "…land with presence [and] water with absence' (4). This thesis complicates these preoccupations through centring water which muddies binaries associated with nation making, race, belonging, gender, human and nonhuman. In their introduction to the *Wasafiri* special issue on water, Charne Lavery and Stephanie Jones (2021) observe that "more rapidly and unsparingly, we are compelled to turn to water by our growing understanding of anthropocentric climate change" (1). Thinking with these scholars, a watery turn might reveal fresh insights into our understandings of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial conversations. For instance, my exploration of the film *Njinga: Queen of Angola* in Chapter Five will demonstrate that water is central to stories of origin of the Angolan nation. In the film, the fixation on land is relativised by maps which foreground the

ocean and routes on water. This subverts exclusively land-based narrations of the nation through emhpasising the indissoluble connection between land and water.

I ask what happens when we de-centre land and turn towards watery spaces in the selected narratives? As recent scholarship on the ocean makes clear, the call is not to abandon borders for fluidity. While it is tempting to follow William Boelhower's formulation of the sea as a space that refuses possession because it "leaves no traces, and has no place names, towns or dwelling places" (Boelhower qtd in Blum 2010, 670), one needs to be alive to the fact that oceanic bodies fall into clearly demarcated nationally prescribed zones identified by terms such as 'internal waters' and 'territorial seas'. Far from being unoccupied waters, Bystrom and Hofmeyr (2017) note the "the vainglorious imperial ambitions of labelling oceans" (1). In their essay on oceanic routes, the two literary scholars cite the imperial activities of The North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] as an example of:

> …how oceans can be closed off and conscripted towards territorial ends, consolidating and upholding military, legal, economic, or political orders. This creates a situation in which the sea operates in different moments and for different actors as non-national, national, or post-national space, both aqueous and territorial, with travel through it movement through an unevenly viscous fluid. (2017, 2)

Watery spaces are as contested as land territories. Thinking within a watery decolonial frame, I explore the materiality of water and the representation of water spirits in the selected texts. The study contributes to the relatively under-researched area of water in Southern African literature. By centering water and water spirits, this study responds to Stacy Alaimo's (2013) invitation to "…descend, rather than transcend, to unmoor ourselves from terrestrial and humanist presumptions as we recognise the multitude of aquatic modes of being and knowing…" (235). The way the selected texts represent the entanglements between the human and non-human, land, and water, the natural and the supernatural, speaks to the many ways of being in the world. As the thesis shows, water spirits in the texts take on diverse roles and assume varied forms. It is therefore important to consider the specific context from which narration occurs (Drewal 2008). This turn, among other possibilities, calls for a re-reading of old texts in new ways,

foregrounding the improbable and broadening our understanding of the universe as also populated and shaped by the other-than-human.

Although there is a body of literature on African water spirits in the arts, much of this scholarship has focused on the West African Mami Wata (see Peterson 2011, Drewal 2008, Stokes 2010, Stipriaan 2003 and Carwile 2009). There is therefore a gap in related scholarship from other regions, especially southern and east African countries. My analysis of the representation of Southern African water spirits (*MaMlambo, Kianda, Injuzi*/*Njuzu*, *Nzuzu*) in literary works expands the scholarly archive on the mythical and the sacred in African literature. In this thesis, I consider if the water spirits in the texts offer alternative indigenous knowledges from the Global South. My use of the term Global South follows Magali Armillas-Tiysera's (2019) understanding that while it is used in "referring to a territory roughly equivalent to what was once called the Third World… [it also speaks to] …the resistant political imaginary arising from the mutual recognition of shared or analogous circumstances by marginalized or dispossessed groups throughout the world" (609). While the project is focused on southern Africa, it can also speak to global souths in other contexts.

I draw on the work of several scholars to conceptualise the thesis. For instance, Hofmeyr's concept of hydrocolonialism which speaks to the "colonisation of water," "colonisation through water" and "colonisation of the idea of water" (2019,13). Her formulation makes an important contribution to scholarhip on decolonization and water. This is useful for my study which considers precolonial, colonial and post-colonial understandings of water and water spirits. Analysing Koleka Putuma's poem 'Water', Hofmeyr places the poet within a group of post-apartheid black feminists who have sought to balance the land and sea dynamic by "reclaiming the ocean from a decolonizing perspective, foregrounding the histories of slavery that it brought, but also examining how one might unseat and reimagine these genealogies" (2019, 12). This watery decolonial frame allows me to center other ways of knowing water such as the privileging of water spirit beliefs and the link between water and ancestors.

I also take a cue from John and Jean Comaroffs's (2012) call to "invert the order of things" through recognizing African indigenous knowledges as other forms of modernities that offer alternative "insights into the workings of the world at large" (114). Through underscoring African water myths, the thesis contributes to the growing recognition of non-western ways of comprehending the world thus problematising the binary thinking that apprehends modernity and traditionalism as oppositions. John Mbiti (1969) stresses that beliefs connected with magic, witchcraft, the spirits and the 'living dead' are areas of traditional African religions that continue to recur in contemporary arts. Colonial modernity has failed to completely eradicate certain African beliefs such as the power of water spirits as the thesis will demonstrate. The above recalls Harry Garuba's work on the animistic mode of apprehending the world where "the rational and scientific are appropriated and transformed into the mystical and magical" (2003, 267). In the texts that I explore, animism (the belief that all matter is alive) becomes a usefull tool for exploring the inspirited bodies of water. In the thesis, the mythic and the material become inextricable.

In some of the texts I explore, characters find refuge in different bodies of water. Similarly, Malidoma Somè, an African philosopher and spiritual healer, remarks in his memoir *Of Water and the Spirit* (1994), that being underwater with water people was one of the best moments of his life. Translated to English, Malidoma's name means 'to be friends with the stranger or enemy' (encyclopedia.com) and is telling about his attraction towards water. This attraction to water is also evident in Burger's *She Down There* where the protagonists, Claire and Klaas, feel more at home under water and with water creatures. Here, the line between the human and the non-human, the mythical and the scientific is blurred.

Through exploring the representations of water spirits and engaging with the materiality of water, the study brings fresh insights into novels like Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning* (1998) and Charles Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain* (1975) that are set during Rhodesian times. In Chapter Two, I explore how these two drought narratives work with pre-colonial hydro-imaginaries as a way of refracting their colonial and gender themes. Chapter Three examines how the figure of *MaMlambo* works to reconceptualize freedom and belonging in two South

African texts that are set in different historical moments of South Africa. Sara Blecher's film *Otelo Burning* (2011) depicts a South Africa that is transitioning from apartheid, while Meg Vandermerwe's *The Woman of the Stone Sea* (2019) explores a South Africa that is twenty years into 'democratic' rule. In Chapter Four, the thesis examines how the creolization of knowledges around water in Lynton Burger's *She Down There* (2020) provides a global approach to reading for water in Southern African literature. The same chapter analyses how Mia Couto's *Sleepwalking Land* draws on water spirits to imbue characters with flexibility and mobility during the horrendous Mozambican civil war. Both novels extend our understanding of Meg Samuelson's concept of amphibian aesthetics (2017) which speaks to a dual belonging to both land and water that resonates with water spirits. I further offer that water spirits relativise the concepts of time and truth. Chapter Five extends these considerations to Pepetela's *The Return of the Water Spirit* (2002) and Sergio Graciano's film *Njinga: Queen of Angola* (2013). Some of the above texts also underscore environmental concerns heightened by global warming.

In bringing these different writers from different nations together, the study offers a comparative reading of water spirits in Southern African cultural texts. As the figure of the water spirit has travelled across nations and oceans, it has been adopted, interpreted, and adapted to local needs. The juxtaposition of these different texts will reveal the similarities and differences in the portrayal of these spirits. For instance, though the mythical powers of water spirits are similar in the works of Pepetela, Couto and Burger, their personalities and actions differ according to local beliefs and practices. The powers of water spirits extend beyond the money giving *MaMlambo* in *The Woman of the Stone Sea* as they become spiritual anchors in Burger's *She Down There*. Yet in Couto's *Sleepwalking Land*, they are revered for their curative powers and for mediating between the worlds of the living and of the ancestors.

Literature Review

To create a conceptual framework for the thesis, the subsequent literature review focuses on three bodies of work. The first draws on water mythologies scholarship, beginning with a global overview before it zeroes in on West and Southern African understandings of water. This section

draws on socio-historical sources and relates these to literary works under discussion. The second section discusses water and magical realism, again relating the theoretical insights to the chosen literary texts. Finally, the third section considers water and post-colonial ecocriticism, again drawing out insights relevant to my study.

Water Myths

Before engaging with different water mythologies, I draw attention to the trope of myth that resonates with this study. Mark Mutharay (2009) notes that the "derogation of a 'mythical' aesthetic and its ability to offer a coherent political vision represents a dominant trend in African literary criticism" (3). However, critics and writers such as Wole Soyinka use myth as a basis for their understanding of African religious, political and philosophical thought and practice. Soyinka (1976) uses myth to probe and comprehend the African world. The incorporation of myth in cultural products provides what Isidore Okpehwo (1992) sees as the mythic texture to modern African literature. He perceives myth as a creative resource that writers can manipulate to comment on numerous issues. The above resonates with Halpe Aparna's (2010) take on myth in post-colonial literature as "a framing device that interrogates socio-cultural and historical moments" (1). This study borrows from the above understandings of myth and reads the trope of water spirits as providing a "fertile conceptual terrain for constructing, considering and contesting the multiple manifestations of modernity that positively flourish at the crossroads of local and global worlds" (Sanders 2003, 339).

The Comaroffs 1993 (qtd in Felicity Wood, 2008) usefully suggest that we should engage metaphysical beings such as water spirits in a dialectic manner rather than in monologic terms. Wood goes on to suggest that "[s]uch an approach seems appropriate…bearing in mind the fluid, ambiguous aspects of concepts of modernity and the occult; and the way in which they take on new and complex forms as they interact, each exerting influence upon the other" (2008, 358). Mircea Eliade (1963) cautions that rather than viewing myths as eternal stories applicable to all times and places, they should be seen as reflecting the realities and societies in which they were created by their ability to describe "the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred (or the supernatural) into the world" (6). In that vein, Eriks Uskalis (2000) contends that

"the stories of myth are usually of a neutral nature…, they are in some senses inactive until motivated by context" (n.p). He goes on to argue that it is when myths are "linked to some other element at the level of plot, character or metaphor that they can be transformed into narratives of dissent" (ibid) (see also Heehs 1994, Wheelwright 1968, and Leeming 2010).

There is a growing body of literature on the centrality of water and water myths in different societies. Christina Bacchilega and Marie Aholani Brown (2015) argue that:

> [g]iven that everything we need to survive, in one way or another, depends on water, it is unsurprising that peoples across place and time have ascribed religious significance to water and developed water symbolism. But water is also a shape-shifter that is not easily grasped and that affects nearly everything it touches. Whether fresh, brackish, or salty, water holds a mystery that fascinates humans, has aesthetic qualities that delight our senses, and–like water spirits is both attractive and destructive. (19)

This is pertinent in drawing our attention to the diverse ways of knowing and being with water. Megan Jennaway (2008) notes that "[t]he recent spate of anthropological attention to water is a timely reminder not only of its salience in cultural representations of place and identity among many indigenous and local communities… but also of its likely prominence in future water wars" (17). These recent studies have engaged with both the various uses and powers associated with water bodies and explored the representations of the mythical creatures that are believed to inhabit the same waters. Commenting on the depiction of these mythical sea creatures in 20th and 21st century audio-visual media, Philip Hayward (2017) observes that "water-dwelling people with fully human, fish-tailed or other compound physiques feature in the mythologies and folklore of maritime, lacustrine and riverine societies across the planet" (6). This reminds us that water myths are a global phenomenon, of which Southern African water myths are under-researched. Hayward goes on to demonstrate that these:

> …fish-tailed aquatic humanoids have had particular prominence in contemporary culture… and [that] their compound forms derived from specific aquapelagic contexts have been deployed to reflect various socio-cultural imaginations and representations of gender, difference and desire. (7)

These creatures have different names and forms depending on socio-historical and cultural contexts and authorial intention. As this thesis will show, they can manifest as mermaids, snakes, humans, rainbows, songs and even as water itself. Sometimes we even encounter formless water spirits that emphasise their ethereal attributes.

The section below firstly looks at Western trends on water myths. This is useful in explaining the overlaps in forms and meanings associated with water beings across cultures and geographies. Hayward explains that:

> [t]he prevalence of the mermaid as a figure in the western culture in the early modern era (c1600-1800), when a number of European powers began to explore, claim and colonise areas of Africa and North and South America – and to transport slaves from the former to the latter – appears to have facilitated the diffusion of the figure to other cultural contexts. (2017, 9)

Explorers might in turn have taken some indigenous stories to their home countries, thus creating a situation where these stories flowed into one another. In the second sub-section, I come closer home as I explore the West African figure of Mami Wata, which is also popular within the black diasporic communities. Exploring Mami Wata frames my focus in the last section on Southern African water spirits, since the figure has also been employed "to address issues of gender, race, morality, identity, economics, environment, and politics" (Drewal 2008, 179).

"Of mermaids, undines, selkies and sea nymphs": Water Beings in Western Traditions

In Western circles water spirits also appear as "…undines, selkies or seals, nixies, and sea nymphs in many shapes and forms, some of which are not even described" (Bacchilega and Brown 2015, 16). In a similar vein, Vaughn Scribner (2018) notes that:

> [d]ating to ancient times, men and women both worshipped and claimed to have contacted merpeople. As early as 4,000 to 5,000 BC, the Babylonians revered Ea, a fish-tailed god in the form of a man. The Philistines, Syrians and Israelites, meanwhile, worshipped Atargatis (also known as Dercerto), a fish-tailed goddess. By the classical age, the Greeks venerated Triton and feared

> sirens, while similar gods (in the form of sea-creatures) characterised Chinese and Indian religious traditions. (53-54)

From these several Western water beings, this section dwells more on the figure of the mermaid largely because her form (gorgeous half human-half fish with fair skin and long flowing hair) appears to have influenced some of the features of water spirits in Southern Africa. Scribner (2018) suggests that "[m]ermaids originated with Homer's sirens: though Homer's beasts were harpies who attacked seafarers from the sky, subsequent authors transformed these bird-like creatures, for reasons unknown, into a woman whose lower portion resembled a fish tail" (54). This mermaid is both alluring and repulsive at the same time. Franchesca Noemi Guzman (2018) writes that in "…folklore, the mermaid is seen as either a beautiful, alluring creature that is the cause of the demise of sailors or as a creature that comes to the aid and rescue of sailors and men alike. She, depending on the tale, can be representative of life or death" (2). Guzman goes on to note that the comb and the mirror that a mermaid is usually associated with symbolise her beauty and vanity. We find these paradoxical traits of mermaids manifesting in the representations of the same creature in some African traditions. A Zulu *sangoma* who claimed to have been initiated underwater confirmed that the mermaid who gave her powers looked like a white woman, with fair skin and long flowing hair (Drewal 2008). This Eurocentric visualization of the mermaid figure also abounds in Nollywood (Nigerian) movies where the mermaids have long, flowing hair. In Chapter Three of this thesis, I argue that Meg Vandermerwe's *The Woman of the Stone Sea* subverts this image as she offers a mermaid comprising the upper body of a black woman with short curly hair, gesturing towards indigenous formulations.

In her study of mermaids in Western traditions, Tara Pederson (2015, 250-251) posits that mermaids are visually depicted in scripts and maps and also appear as characters, tropes, and subjects within literary, scientific, and religious works. She excavates them from some of the most popular works of Shakespeare, Marlowe and Milton. Elise Caroll (2020) associates mermaids and sirens with sailors. Although the two (mermaids and sirens) were originally different, they have come to mean the same in contemporary literature. Caroll argues that "sailors had their lore to aid in comprehending why inexplicable events happen such as why ships regularly crashed in an area, and why some ships left port and never returned. Sea

monsters, mysterious triangles, and legends helped rationalize unknown rocks and reefs, and weather events like hurricanes and currents".[1] She goes on to cite the Greek legend of Odysseus, a sailor who placed wax in the ears of his men and tied himself to a mast in an attempt to stay clear of the music of the sirens that enticed sailors to a watery death or madness. Scribner (2018, 54) suggests that "[f]or medieval Europeans, the mermaid was a mysterious reminder of the hazard of the sea, as well as of women's charms." She adds that her appearance "…in churches was probably a reminder to Christians of the dangers of the lust for flesh, while her repeated presence in sea folklore was probably an attempt to explain myriad deaths and mysteries that the ocean presented" (ibid).

If water spirits have preoccupied human imaginations since time immermorial, this thesis will demonstrate that the trend continues. The forms might differ in accordance with geographical, ideological and cultural differences, but the common association of these beings with the unknown, and the dangerous but desirable resonates with prior conceptualisations. Our ambivalent relationship with the element of water seems to inform our characterisation of water creatures. In the right circumstances and proportions, water can sustain life but in excess it can also kill. Similarly, the mermaid figure has come to represent both the desires of men and the dangers of the ocean. However, Bacchilega and Brown (2015) remind us that tales of "mermaids and other water spirits [also] raise issues of gender, voice, and sexuality, as well as knowledge, ecology, and spirituality – especially but not only in indigenous contexts" (12). The next sub-section shifts from the European to the Western African context.

"If you see Mami Water ooh/ never, never you run away": West Africa's Mami Wata

Guzman (2018) argues that "[t]hough attributed to African practices and worship, Mami Wata has somewhat ambiguous beginnings and, at times, diverging creation myths or histories" (7). Besides her mysterious origins, her name is also complex. While in some instances it represents the spirit in its singular manifestation, Madhu Krishnan (2012) contends that Mami Wata is also

[1] https://www.qaronline.org/blog/2020-07-20/mermaids-and-sirens

"a general name used for the hybridized river and sea goddesses popularized across Africa and the African diaspora in the nineteenth century" (2). While cognisant of her different manifestations in Western and Central Africa and the diaspora, in this section I explore her universal attributes that inform my conceptualisation of Southern African water spirits. For instance, that the presence of this goddess transforms water bodies into spiritual realms. The notion of sacred spiritual waters carries over to the Southern African region, speaking to what Hofmeyr (forthcoming) terms inspirited waters. The water goddess is said to inhabit oceans, lakes, rivers, and streams. Just like the diverse bodies of water she occupies, Mami Wata takes various forms that range from the western white female with blonde hair to the African black female with flowing locks of hair. Unsurprisingly, some critics insist that her form is trans-racial, transgendered and transcontinental as she swims through imaginative and physical waters (Salmans 1977; Drewal 1988).

Drewal (1988), a leading scholar on Mami Wata argues that "[b]uilding on indigenous beliefs in water spirits, often represented as aquatic creatures like fish, crocodiles, and water snakes, Africans incorporated new spirits, such as the mermaid, when Europeans arrived along the coast in the late fifteenth century" (103). Echoing Drewal, certain characters in some of the texts that I explore insist that mermaids are European water beings different from African water spirits. I will consider this point in more detail later in Chapter Five where Kianda the water spirit is depicted as formless and mediated through song and the lagoon. While scholars like Drewal read Mami Wata as a spirit linked to the West, Elizabeth Ofosuah Johnson (2018) locates her origins in Africa. Johnson counter argues that Mami Wata is an African "mermaid-like deity who crossed over to the West" (n.p). She writes that the name Mami Wata:

> … is traced to the early languages of many modern African societies today. The first root of its name is considered to be from Ethiopian and Egyptian Coptic societies. In the Ethiopian Coptic language, the word "mama" was used as a description of truth and wisdom and the term "uat-ur" meant ocean water. Another definition of the name traces to the early Sudanese society where the word wata referred to a woman. (n.p.)

Johnson's theory seems to rest on the historical fact that African slaves took their water spirit beliefs and rituals to the New World during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Johnson argues that Mami Wata crossed the ocean with the captured Africans, watching over them. Johnson further contends that for many "African diasporan communities in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Brazil, Mami Wata took the form of Lasirèn, Yemanja, Santa Marta la Dominadora and Oxum" (2018, n.p.). In these communities, celebrations and rituals are still performed to honour this water deity. The divergent theories on Mami Wata's origins speak to the idea of diffusion and creolization as different cultures clashed, feeding, and borrowing from each other's knowledges. Drewal (1988) concurs that "[t]he term mediates between Africans and those from overseas. It represents African attempts to understand, that is, to construct meaning from their encounters with overseas strangers" (102). Like the water spirits in the Western tradition, Mami Wata is associated with both good and evil. It is believed that she provides:

> spiritual and material healing to her worshippers, while also protecting their emotional and mental health and growth. She is the guardian of the water bodies. Many traditional groups in Africa till today do not go to the beach or fish on certain days in order to provide peace to the water deity's home. (Johnson 2018, np)

She is responsible for the well being of her followers, the ocean, and its creatures. This becomes a crucial aspect especially in this age where the ocean is subjected to increased pollution and aquatic creatures are facing extinction. Mami Wata is also believed to be a "…spirit whose primary gift to her devotees is wealth, especially monetary riches from abroad" (Drewal 1988, 102).

Most of the studies on the literary deployment of Mami Wata in West African literature have referenced works by Ben Okri, Amos Tutuola and Flora Nwapa (see Cooper 1998, Soyinka 1976, Quayson 2009, Mathuray 2009). This figure has served many purposes that include offering new modes for writing and reading gender in African literature. This point aligns with Drewal (2008) who sees Mami Wata as representing a free spirit outside patriarchal social norms. One literary example is found in Flora Nwapa's works where female characters draw strength from certain goddesses of the river. The water goddess is Nwapa's source of inspiration

but she "also re-constructs the myth to problematise the notion of divine womanhood" (Jell-Bahlsen 1995, 32). The way Mami Wata owns and gains from her sexuality helps rewrite African women stories. I discuss this strand in greater detail in Chapter Two where I argue that *Butterfly Burning*'s Phephelaphi is connected to water spirits. Another example in popular cultural products where Mami Wata is venerated is the hit song 'Guitar Boy' by Sir Victor Uwaifo, the Ghanaian singer. Uwaifo narrates his worthwhile encounter with Mami Wata at the beginning of the song revealing how she is responsible for his success. The catchy chorus, 'if you see Mami Water ooh/ never, never you run away' is a call to embrace this goddess to gain wealth and power. However, in some instances, Mami Wata's link to riches and success is used as a warning against unbridled consumerism. In her essay on the use of Mami Wata in West African texts, Barbara Frank (1995) cites one of Chinua Achebe's short stories "Uncle Ben's Choice" (1972) where the connection to the water goddess ultimately leads to loneliness and misery.

Southern African Water Spirits

In Southern Africa, studies on water spirits have mainly been conducted by anthropologists, sociologists and philosophers (see Bernard 2010, Wood 2007, Siegel 2000, Mbiti 1969). These studies highlight the significance of the metaphysical in this region. They recognise "the existence of snake-like and fishtailed deities that are believed to reside in various water sources and to be responsible for the calling of certain chosen individuals to their underwater realm" (Bernard 2010,1). These divinities are thought to "reside in deep pools at the base of waterfalls or along certain areas of the coastline, sometimes where big waves crash against rocks which have deep cave inlets and tidal pools" (Bernard 2013, 144). Although domiciled in water, "these divinities occupy and move between the subterranean, the terrestrial and celestial worlds, uniting these worlds in a vital cosmic flow of life" (Ibid, 147). Though they share certain traits, these spirits also adapt to local socio-historical conditions. Below, I consider the water spirit beliefs from four countries, namely South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Angola, from which the texts under study are selected.

Zimbabwe's *Injuzi/Njuzu*

In his essay on mermaids in Zimbabwe (2020), Percy Zvomuya narrates an incident where two men drowned under mysterious circumstances while chasing a mermaid in Mashambanzou, a local dam in Mhondoro. The dam, according to the headman of the area, is so spooky that local people avoid it. It is believed a mermaid came to the dam via a whirlwind and took control over it. The headman's wife witnessed the spectacle and recalls that:

> [t]he whirlwind was narrow and towering, seeming to reach into the lower stratosphere, but always moving towards the lake... When the column of air reached the middle of the pool [I] heard the sound of splashing water, as if a huge boulder had been deposited into the dam, creating a ripple of waves. An older woman doing her laundry at the dam was watching the spectacle and thought it ominous: it is a mermaid come to live in the pool... (Zvomuya 2020, n.p.)

The villagers note that once the mermaid settled in the pool, strange things started to happen in the village. In one instance, women were unable to do their laundry because the waters would have been muddied overnight, a sign that they were no longer welcome to the dam. The second incident involved the headman's son whose dog disappeared into the waters as he was fishing, a sign which again pointed to the presence of a *Njuzu*. As the headman intimates, "it was a warning… Mermaids are said to hate dogs" (np). While the villagers heeded the warnings to stay away from the dam, a church sect congregated next to the dam to get rid of the mermaid. The leader mobilised his flock and told them, "[w]e are going to chase the mermaids who are stopping us from praying. We want them to leave so that it is only us occupying the area" (np). Some accounts however suggest that the "prophet wanted to get the mermaid's power to perform miracles so he could get followers and wealth" (np). Of the three divers who were armed with clay pots and red strings of cloth, only the prophet survived. He relates that he saw the mermaid who overcome him to the extent that he could not warn the other men before they drowned to death. The two men paid the price of their irreverence towards the mermaid.

Zvomuya's article introduces some Zimbabwean views on the *Njuzu* figure. The piece highlights central traits which include supernatural powers sometimes perceived as evil by some religious groups. Similar to other Southern African perspectives, the *Njuzu* is also linked to the training of *sangomas* and supernatural wealth. Edison Mhaka (2015) gives a Shona perspective on the origins of this shadowy creature. He links the *Njuzu* to aquatic beings, the spirit world and even people who died young and those sacrificed to the spirits in rainmaking rituals. From a Ndebele perspective, Xolile Ncube (2019) gives a brief context on the *Injuzi*. Like the Shona's *Njuzu*, it is associated with training of *sangomas*, the disappearance of people in its pools and rain making rituals in the Matopo area. Grant Lilford (1999) notes that the "*Njuzu* has power over water in all its forms. Prayers for rain take place near *Njuzu* pools and in times of drought, their pools always have water" (209). Bernard (2003) also links the *Njuzu* to rain-making rituals:

> The njuzu (mermaids), closely linked with the python and the puffadder, feature very strongly at the shrines to Mwari (Mlimo) at the Matonjeni Cave complex in the Matopos region of southwest Zimbabwe, as well as at the Nyamakati Pool shrine to Dzivaguru in northeast Zimbabwe. The aforementioned shrines are central to the rain-making cult in the region. (150)

Most scholars on the *Njuzu* figure are anthropologists (see Daneel 1971, Aschwanden 1989, Ranger 1995, Reynolds 1990). A common trait of the *Njuzu* in most of their works is the initiation of chosen healers. Zvomuya (2020) emphasises that:

> the fantastical half-woman half-fish thought to cause people to disappear, drive some into madness and make healers of others, had become a denizen of the pool. (*sangomas* with water or riverain guardian spirits are thought to be powerful. Someone who has disappeared at a river, when they emerge after a period of apprenticeship in the aqua-subterranean world they are fully fledged healers). (n.p.)

Following the dynamic nature of the *Njuzu* figure, Collins Garikai Machoko links it to environmental conservation concerns in Zimbabwe. He argues that:

> the mermaid spirits possessed some Zimbabweans who then became mermaid (*Njuzu*) spirit mediums. Some of the duties of water spirit mediums were rain-making and to mobilize the chiefs (*madzishe*) and the community to conserve

> the natural environment. The water spirit mediums (*majukwa*) were not only restricted to rain-making but to the conservation of the whole natural environment. (Machoko 2013, 286)

Machoko demonstrates that the beliefs in mermaids recognise the sacredness of the natural environment, hence the need for its preservation. This link of the *Njuzu* to environmental conservation is relevant in this era of unprecedented environmental degradation. It is a link that several authors I reference in this thesis underscore.

The *Njuzu/Injuzi* also assumes many shapes just like Mami Wata. Bernard (2010) observes that the *Njuzu* in Shona tradition manifests as "the fish or snake tailed beings that guard the water" (188). She cites Herbert Aschwanden (1989, 137) who notes that *Njuzu* have "…many different forms, most frequently as beings with human heads and fish-or snake-bodies, but sometimes also as a beautiful woman, an old woman, a snake, and so on" (220). Sometimes the *Njuzu* can take the form of a whirlwind or use it to move from one body of water to the next. This ability to morph is a chief trait of the elusive *Njuzu*.

In Zimbabwe, apart from the *Njuzu/Injuzi* figure there is also the *Nyaminyami* River God of the Tonga people who live along the Kariba basin. It is believed that *Nyaminyami* has a head of a fish and a body of a snake. Tonga people relate that this benevolent water deity used to rescue them from starvation during periods of drought. He would come to the shores of the Zambezi River and expose his shoulders so that people could cut meat for their consumption. His name loosely translates to 'meat-meat' in English. To outsiders, *Nyaminyami* is popular for his struggle against the damming of the Zambezi River at Kariba gorge from 1956 to 1959. That struggle has been represented in numerous cultural products such as *Nyaminyami: The Zambezi River God* (Thackwell 2016), *Nyaminyami and the Kariba Dam* (House et al. 2001), *In the Shadow of Nyaminyami* (Thomson 2012) and *Kariba: The Struggle with the River God* (Clements 1959). There are also several *Nyaminyami* curio artefacts like pendants, t-shirts and even walking sticks linked to its mystical powers that are sold in Victoria Falls and other tourist resorts.

Just like *Nyaminyami,* the *Njuzu* figure appears in several literary productions. Lilford (1999) explores how the *Njuzu* has been employed to depict change in Zimbabwe. He examines two Shona texts; one by Christopher Tagwireyi (*Dziva reNjuzu* 1980) and another by Wiseman Magwa (*Njuzu* 1991). Lilford notes how in *Dziva reNjuzu* that is set in pre-colonial Zimbabwe, the *Njuzu* is depicted in a positive light while in *Njuzu* that is set during and after the war of liberation, the same figure represents the fearsome white man and the fear of the unknown. Dambudzo Marechera has also used the *Njuzu* figure in his fictional works. In one of his short stories, 'Protista' in the novella *House of Hunger* (1978), the *Njuzu* has an unsettling presence. The manfish figure in the story which I read as *Njuzu* is symbolic of the toxic nature of life during colonial Rhodesia. I use the above insights on the *Njuzu/Injuzi* figure to help me to explore Vera's and Mungoshi's texts in Chapter Two.

South Africa's *MaMlambo*

Water spirits are known and are languaged differently in the different regions of South Africa. The Zulu people commonly refer to water spirits as *Inkosazana* or *Nomkhubulwane*. Bernard (2003) states that *Inkosazana* can manifest "…as the mermaid, the snake, the rainbow, and gentle soft rain" (150). For the Cape Nguni, these aquatic spirits are referred to as 'abantu boMlambo', which in English translates to people of the river. Like the Zulu's *Inkosazana,* the Cape Nguni's *MaMlambo* (singular) assumes different forms that include a mermaid and a snake (see Bernard 2010). While they may share similar traits, these creatures can also differ depending on socio-historical contexts obtaining in the different regions. For purposes of this thesis, the section below focuses on the various ways the figure of *MaMlambo* has been employed in different cultural products.

A few weeks after the airing of some episodes featuring *MaMlambo* on the popular South African television series *Generations: The Legacy* on SABC 1 (South African Broadcasting Cooperation), the script writers were criticised by some members of the public. Roxanne Handerson's article in *Sowetan Live* reported that the producers were criticized by one religious leader who accused them of showing "satanic harmful religious practices and misrepresentation

of our traditional healers" (2016: np). In the series, one scene aired in February 2016 shows a desperate couple (Tshidi and Gadaffi) consulting a traditional healer to solve some family problems and improve their business prospects. The *sangoma* conducts "various rituals including the spilling of blood on the forehead and the draping of a big yellow snake, called "MaMlambo" around Tshidi's neck" (n.p). The visualisation of these underworld dealings on a public broadcaster during prime time viewing outraged some people. However, the producers of the show maintained that the episodes were crafted to expose, confront, and dissuade people from resorting to such practices. One such practice is what is known as *ukuthwala*. Wood (2008) defines it as:

> …the Xhosa term for a dangerous, powerful procedure for long-term wealth, widely believed to involve the ownership of a wealth-giving being. An individual receives medicine for *ukuthwala* and acquires a familiar, the *MaMlambo*, which bestows wealth upon its owner. However, the *MaMlambo*'s owner is required to sustain the *ukuthwala* pact with sacrifices that come at a great personal and moral cost. (338)

This section takes as its point of departure the statements by the SABC producers and Wood. Originally, *Abantu boMlambo* (the people of the river) were known as the "guardians of tribal law and custom…[who] serve[d] the people of the land by giving knowledge and wisdom to those suitable persons who are to heal the sick and combat the evils of witchcraft" (Laubscher 1937 qtd in Bernard 2010, 210-211). Studies however indicate that the figure of *MaMlambo* has over the years ironically become associated with the witchcraft that it was meant to combat. Wood (2008) confirms that *MaMlambo* has evolved into a mysterious wealth-giving snake. She cites Khotso Sethuntsa who was an impoverished young man from rural Lesotho but became a successful businessman and herbalist through ties with MaMlambo in the 1960s.[2] From this basis, Wood contends that the popular link between *MaMlambo* and wealth in South African texts can be read as a commentary on the imbalances in the socio-economic order and the lure of western materialism.

[2] For a more detailed study on Khotso Sethuntsa's life and rise to fame and his link to the occult see Felicity Wood's *The Extraordinary Khotso: Millionaire Medicine Man of Lusisiki* (2007).

It is believed that one who courts *MaMlambo* is called upon to continually sacrifice human blood at the altar of *MaMlambo* (see Niehaus 2001, Wood and Lewis 2007). In addition, s/he must relinquish other relationships, failure of which can cause death or misfortune. Wood (2008) concludes that the *MaMlambo* ultimately "controls its owner just as the desire for money can control people's lives" (103). Tshidi, the character in *Generations* (the series I cited earlier) who owns *Mamlambo,* is undone by *MaMlambo's* bottomless thirst for blood and attention. The demands of the snake to share Tshidi's bed strain the couple's marriage. As stated earlier, *MaMlambo* is a jealous spirit. It is believed *MaMlambo,* besides financial success, also provides sexual gratification to her clients. In this light, *MaMlambo* is closely linked to prejudices about migrant workers from different parts of Africa who worked in the gold mines of Johannesburg. Some of these workers reportedly derived sexual favours from *MaMlambo* during those times of prolonged separation from their wives.

MaMlambo is a shapeshifter. She can at first appear as a small fish or twig before later transforming into a large snake or an attractive man or woman (Stadler 2010, Sigel 2007). The metamorphic nature of *MaMlambo* resonates with the ability of myth to absorb and reflect new belief systems like Christianity and capitalism. Expectedly, authors like Bheki Maseko have employed the flexible figure of *MaMlambo* in their literary texts to capture different concerns. For instance, Maseko's short story 'Mamlambo' (1984) depicts the migrant workers' lack of familial connections in cities like Johannesburg and Durban. I argue in Chapter Three that Palesa Letlaka's film *MaMlambo* (1997) deploys *Mamlambo* to represent the desires and anxieties of post-apartheid life.

Angola's Kianda

While the water spirits in Angola take different names and forms such as Dona Fish and *Kianda,* this section is going to focus on the latter who is associated with the Kimbundu people. The Kimbundu people represent one of the largest ethnic groups in Angola, mostly located in the northen parts of the country, extensively in Luanda. Kimbundu cosmology perceives *Kianda* as a water deity who protects fishermen. *Kianda* is imagined as a female water spirit who takes on

various forms and "whose dominion extends across Angola's rivers, lakes and the salt-waters extending along the coast of the Angolan Atlantic" (Zora 1967 qtd in Waller 2020, 9). Followers of *Kianda* often express their devotion by offering food and clothing to the sea. Ineke-Phaf Rheinberger (2017) states that "in reality, in the oral tradition, *Kianda* is a much more complex water spirit, who has to be taken care of and venerated in order to win her goodwill and protection" (67). If disrespected, she withholds the fish and makes the sea ominous (see Onofre 2008 and Secco 2005). However, on most occasions, she is seen as a benevolent deity who warns people of looming dangers. In this light, *Kianda* resembles *Nyaminyami* the river God of Tonga people as discussed earlier. Frank Merksamer (2019) contends that in a broad Southern African regional sense, "Kianda manifests clear similarities with the Malawian Napolo as a spirit-creature associated with the natural environment and whom a community heeds for survival…" (151). She therefore exemplifies the "indivisibility of culture and nature… [in] Bantu ethnophilosophical beliefs" (ibid) (see also Rheinberger 2017).

Just like *Nyaminyami, Kianda* has been incorporated in popular cultural products. Rheinberger (2017) notes that *Kianda* was a literary character before 1975 (Angola's independence) and is even more popular today. Carmen Ribeiro Secco (2005) explains that in various literary texts and on various canvases by painters in Angola, *Kianda* has been used as a "metaphor of an Angolanity that is in transit, the deity allegorizes, in several current novels, the country in crisis" (2). I build on this conception in Chapter Five where I argue that *Kianda* embodies the circulation of ideas and transformation in post-colonial Angolan discourse.

There are several texts that draw on *Kianda*. One example is *Magias do Mar*, a short story published by Pepetela in 2017, where *Kianda* manifests as a sea goddess who inhabits the Kwanza River and different adjoining islands. Anita De Melo comments that *Magias do Mar* "…revives the Angolan myth of Kianda, the goddess of the ocean, as a symbol of African traditional beliefs, and a counter-hegemonic discourse" (2020, 120). She adds that "[t]he omniscient narrator of 'Magias do Mar' blends mythology with other traditional beliefs and practices, creating hybrid spaces of representation in lieu of colonized histories, pointing out that Angolans must also look to local, pre-colonial epistemes" (ibid). She further reasons that

Pepetela employs the figure of *Kianda* "with the goal of using it to disrupt colonial and modern Western thinking that promotes the destruction of colonized environments" (ibid, 115). De Boer, the protagonist of the story, dies mysteriously in water on his mission to hunt *Kianda*. One can explain De Boer's disappearance as *Kianda's* doing. Again, as is the case in *The Return of the Water Spirit* and the Zimbabwean case where two people die under mysterious circumstances during a mission to capture a *Njuzu*, we see nature resisting human encroachment and indigenous people making sense of a troubled and troubling world.

I argue in Chapter Five that in *The Return of the Water Spirit*, Pepetela spins the local narratives around *Kianda* by giving us a male *Kianda* who fights his wars from a lagoon. Pepetela presents a somewhat fractured relationship between *Kianda* and the city of Luanda, departing from the harmonious one perceived in Kimbundu cosmology. Perhaps the harsh post-colonial realities of Angola inspire the spin on *Kianda*. The depiction of this water being is also prominent in his other novel, *A Gloriosa Familia* (1997) that is again set in Luanda where *Kianda* lives in the Kinaxixi lagoon. Here, the lagoon seems to "function as the reservoir of public memories and opinions" (Secco 2005, 69).

Elsewhere, the Angolan film *Hollow City* (2004) directed by Maria Joao Ganga also references the figure of *Kianda*. Ndala, the young main actor of the film becomes homeless after escaping from the nuns who had earlier rescued him from his war-torn village. He soon befriends an old fisherman − Antonio − who tells him stories about *Kianda*. In the film, Antonio is determined to remain a fisherman till *Kianda* comes to take him. In this instance, Antonio's wish speaks to the belief that *Kianda* is a protector of fishermen. The local fishermen also believe that while it might be difficult to see her, she can speak to a select few as is the case in *The Return of the Water Spirit* (the spirit takes a male form in this novel). The above literature on *Kianda* contextualises Chapter Five where I explore two texts set in Angola: *Njinga: Queen of Angola* and *The Return of the Water Spirit*.

Mozambique's *Nzuzu/Njonji*

This section focuses on Mozambican water-based beliefs around water spirits known as *Nzuzu* and *Njonji*. The centrality of water and water spirits in writings from Mozambique highlights their prominence in the country's imaginaries. Like in most parts of Southern Africa, water emerges as a repository of different cultural beliefs. In some cases, these creatures are thought to be mermaids but to the Lenge tribe, *Nzunzu* is associated with a snake that like in South Africa and Zimbabwe also trains *sangomas*.

As in other parts of Southern Africa, the *Nzuzu* in Mozambique elicits both fear and desire. It is envisioned as a supernatural creature that can exert its power on humans. Just like *MaMlambo*, the *Nzuzu* is also linked to shadowy wealth and power. This shared belief is perhaps a result of the massive labour migration in Southern Africa where workers move from Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Malawi to work in South Africa. This trend has origins in the gold mines era and has intensified thereafter. The constant back and forth movement of people also affects beliefs and stories. As stated earlier, the *Nzuzu* is also associated with the training of *sangomas* underwater and just like in the rest of Southern Africa, those trained underwater are the most powerful. The *Nzuzu* populates the sea and other various bodies of water in Mozambique. These water beings also inhabit some literary works that include those of Mia Couto that I examine in Chapter Four. In one of Couto's short stories, 'The Waters of Time', the protagonist often accompanies his grandfather to a river where the latter perceives and interacts with spirits. From this story we learn of Couto's fascination with the notion of inspirited waters.

The above context situates the study within broader Southern African beliefs around water and water spirits from anthropological, religious, and popular culture perspectives. This is useful in setting the tone for my in-depth examination of the representation of water and water spirits in the chosen texts from South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Angola in the subsequent chapters. I now turn to explore the nexus between water and magic.

Of Water and Magical Realism

In my reading of the chosen texts, I borrow insights from magical realism. I am aware of the problematic nature of this term, whose definition changes with different locations and cultures. The concept has mostly been associated with writers from Latin America such as Isabel Allende and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Literary scholars like Stephen Slemon note the lack of theoretical specificity in relation to magical realism. He argues that "…in all its applications, [it] has never successfully differentiated between itself and neighbouring genres such as fabulation, metafiction, the baroque, the fantastic, the uncanny, or the marvellous" (1988, 9). Other scholars like Fayezah Aljohani, however, maintain that the signature of magical realism that differentiates it from its sister genres is that it does not explain the magical elements found in it but persuades the reader to accept these events as natural. In his words, "the story proceeds with a logical precision as if nothing extraordinary took place" (2016, 74). He goes on to cite Eugene Arva (2008) who notes that "[t]he plots in magical realistic novels characteristically employ hybrid multiple planes of reality that take place in juxtaposed arenas of such opposites as urban and rural, western and indigenous, and so on" (ibid).

As a mode of narrative mediation, magical realism has been applied to the work of several writers from Africa who include Ben Okri, Zakes Mda, Bessie Head, K. Sello Duiker and Amos Tutuola to make sense of bewildering socio-political dynamics. In some instances, as the body of this thesis will show, magical realism works to reconceptualize notions of belonging and identity, challenge knowledge hierarchies and speak to the anxieties of the post-colonial world. This reorientation of colonial and post-colonial discourse resonates with what water and water spirits can do.

However, several African writers and critics have noted the problematic nature of this term in relation to works set in African locales where happenings that are classified as magic constitute the lived experiences of the people. In this thesis, I mediate this challenge through Garuba's (2003) concept of animism, which hinges on the notion of reenchanting the world. That formulation dovetails with magical realism in its thrust to capture the thin line between the scientific and the mythical. For purposes of this thesis, the evolution of water spirits across shifting historical, socio-political, and economic contexts will help me examine the ongoing re-

enchantment of the world. The idea of re-enchantment implies the dis-enchantment of the world with the movement of time. Max Weber, a German sociologist coined the term 'disenchantment' to speak to the loss of the spiritual and mystical engagements with the world in favour of the purely scientific and mechanical approaches (1971). To re-enchant the world suggests that we are all (human and non-human) connected and alive. The study engages the notion of re-enchanting the world via magical realism in the readings of some of the texts under consideration. To this end, I adopt Brenda Cooper's formulation of magical realism as a concept that "thrives on transition, on the process of change, borders and ambiguity. Such zones occur where burgeoning capitalist development mingles with older pre-capitalist modes in post-colonial societies, and where there is syncretizing of cultures as creolized communities are created" (1998, 15). This reading is useful for this thesis as the different settings the writers draw on are all undergoing waves of change. For instance, in *Otelo Burning*, apartheid South Africa is disintegrating while *The Woman of the Stone Sea* grapples with the paradoxes of 'democratic' rule in South Africa. Similarly, the Angola Pepetela depicts in *The Return of the Water Spirit* is embroiled in a bitter civil war as is the case in Couto's *Sleepwalking Land* that is set in Mozambique.

In her reading of magical realism in South African texts that deal with transition phases, Paulina Grzeda (2013) reasons that it "clearly facilitates the engagement with this transformational moment in a country's history when the past and the future are brought together, intertwining, thus locking the author and his audience between the two poles; the turbulent past and the hoped for, peaceful future" (168-169). Similarly, in some of the texts I examine, the past and the present collide as characters battle to forge a way forward under grim circumstances. Moreover, at the level of narration, this thesis also considers magical realism as a mode of mediation in the texts. I therefore concur with Grzeda's submission that "magical realism proves specifically well attuned to thematise the collision of any incompatible categories, be it the rational and the magical, the core and the periphery, the pre- and the post-capitalist, fact and fiction, as well as the past and the present" (2013, 158). In the same way, and in tune with Garuba's notion of the re-enchantment of the world (2003), the "rational and the scientific are reappropriated and transformed into the mystical and magical" (267). For example, Mia Couto's *The Sleepwalking*

Land (1992) presents a world where the lines between the tangible and the spiritual realms are too fine to notice as one's attention glides from what is familiar to the mysterious world of water spirits. Kindzu, one of the characters, morphs into an aquatic being at sea on his way to the Naparamas. This metamorphosis evokes Cat Helissen's story, the *The Worme Bridge* (2015) which focuses on a family that grapples with an unfathomable curse which transforms all its members into merpeople. This other worldly reality involves the alteration of human beings into something that is strange, and which calls for a re-conceptualization of the world from the way we know it. The transformation of this family into sea creatures may be read as a way of blurring the lines between the human and the other. This metamorphosis also manifests in Vandermerwe's *The Woman of the Stone Sea* where there is constant shapeshifting as the mermaid in the novel morphs into a woman whenever she wishes. Elsewhere in Pepetela's *The Return of the Water Spirit*, *Kianda* disrupts the modern notions of time and space. The water spirit encroaches into the physical world from the spiritual realm and begins to influence the present.

Commenting on the narrative potential of the trope of the fantastic, Maurice Vambe (2004) suggests that a fabulous story can free the human imagination from the constraints of time and space, defy literary borders and transgress the boundaries of the material and spiritual worlds. This observation applies to most of the texts that I explore in this thesis. For example, the character Hendrick in *The Woman of the Stone Sea* co-habits with a black mermaid in his cottage by the sea in the Western Cape, South Africa. I argue that these writers employ magical realism as it resonates with African beliefs and traditions that blur the lines between the physical and spiritual realms. Cooper (1998) similarly posits that African writers "often resort to the use of spirits, ancestors and talking animals in their stories to express their passions, aesthetics and their politics" (40).

Rather than following the trends that read modernity as purely dis-enchanted, this study attempts to show, in thinking with Steve Pile (2005), that "magic itself continuously emerges from modern city life as people seek ways to improve their conditions and influence their futures" (59). I read modernity as colonial innovation after the encounter between the West and Africa, a

meeting that resulted in the transformation of African cultures in terms of religion, economics, politics, and social life. The story 'MaMlambo' in Bheki Maseko's collection of short stories demonstrates that the concept of *MaMlambo* is still relevant in the modern city. The story narrates the plot of a young woman who struggles to sustain a stable relationship with men but finally succeeds with the help of *MaMlambo*. These responses that involve those thought of as modern harmonise with other responses to the challenges of apartheid. In *The Return of the Water Spirit*, *Kianda* manifests in the middle of the city centre, in a puddle which grows next to concrete and steel buildings which can be read as symbols of modernity.

This blends with Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2000) argument that modernity is a function of entangled times where past, present, and future mingle in profoundly complex relations. Spirits cease to be mere relics of the past as they become products of modernity, not symbols of a haunting loss but actors under changing circumstances. In these stories, "magical elements of thought are not displaced but continually assimilate new developments in science, technology and the organization of the world within a basically magical worldview" (Garuba 2003, 267). Elsewhere and in departure from the above, the narrator in a short story 'Finding Mermaids' (2015) by Zimbabwean Chido Muchemwa raves: "Mermaids? Who the fuck still believes in mermaids?" (2015). The scorn which the narrator has for these water creatures and all those who believe in them is obvious from the first line of the story. One gets the feeling that there is something amiss with those who still believe in mermaids in this 'modern day era'. The narrator shares her condescending attitude with her twenty-six-year-old guide Lovemore, who is her contact with the villagers. He also believes that '*Njuzu*' are nothing but figments of the imagination. He labels beliefs in mermaids as the epitome of rural backwardness. In as much as the narrator and her guide are quick to freeze the *Njuzu* in this primeval phase, which refuses to catch up with the 'modern' times, the study will expose the limitations of such a reading. *Njuzu* beliefs remain alive in contemporary cultural productions and people's imaginations throughout Southern Africa.

In an example that is set during the pre-colonial times, Thomas Mofolo's novel *Chaka* (1931) can be read as an enchanted text. There is a connection between Chaka's supernatural powers

and a certain sacred river that becomes a link between him and the realm of the ancestors. Only Chaka is known to have gone into this sacred river that houses a snake god seen as instrumental to the leader's rise to power. This familiarity with natural elements such as water brings to the fore what has come to be known as animism, especially its connection to the notion of the continuous re-enchantment of the world. Animism is the belief that the gods and spirits can inhabit objects such as stones, trees, or rivers (Garuba 2003). In line with this belief of animated elements of nature, Mofolo endows Chaka with magical powers derived from a river that contribute to his greatness. In his youth, he is associated with the fearless and ferocious qualities of wild beasts. It is tempting to read Chaka as half-human and half-god. Just like the family portrayed in *The Worme Bridge*, there is more to this fictionalized Chaka than the mere human. His courage and boldness become evident when he defies superstition and baths in a sacred pool. Chaka's persistent return to this pool explains his matchless success in the numerous battles he conducted. However, his ultimate inglorious fall can as well be attributed to his irreverence towards the sacred pool. After all, the gods are known to take their time before meting out revenge to those who defy them.

Water and Post-colonial Ecocriticism

Writing in the context of Nigerian fiction, Joyce Onoromhenre Agofure (2018) notes that:

> …fundamental issues of environmental destruction induced by capitalism, globalisation, [and] exploitation of natural resource… have generated anxieties over ecological degradation such as, loss of biodiversity, erosion, global warming, desertification, flooding, oil pollution along with increased inequality, exploitation, and under-development. (249)

While Agofure's argument is specific to Nigeria, I find it useful for this thesis as it resonates with some Southern African texts that have been read as allegories of the nation. What is overlooked is how they also foreground environmental concerns. For instance, Pepetela's *The Return of the Water Spirit*, Couto's *Sleepwalking Land*, Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain*, Burger's *She Down There* and Vera's *Butterfly Burning* touch on the environment. While some

critics have commented on the environmental crisis depicted in these texts, my point of departure is that I read for the same with a bias towards water bodies and water creatures.

Inescapably, I draw on ecocriticism. Ikechukwu Emmanuel Asika (2014) defines ecocriticism as "the study of nature in its natural phenomenon as well as man and his activities as it affects nature and the environment" (118). Sule Emmanuel Egya (2013) adds that it involves the "revisionist foregrounding of nature (the earth, the flora and fauna, and other natural objects and phenomena) to draw attention to the phenomenal presence of nature in literatures, oral and written" (257). Ecocritical discourse has gained more traction as a result of the ongoing climate change crisis. The need arises to rethink how we relate with the environment. One productive means of re-ordering that relationship is through perceiving the world from the perspective of the non-human so as to relativise simplistic but entrenched human objectification of the-other-than human.

In his ecocritical reading of *Water Testament: An Anthology of Poems on Water and Water-related Issues*, literary scholar, Asika (2014) argues that "[t]he ecological changes, environmental terrorism and degradation, threats of human collapse and annihilation as a result of nature induced elements are fast becoming burning and contemporary issues in our literature today" (118). In the body of this thesis, I will show how the texts deal with both the exploitation of nature and the empowerment of the same through the depiction of water spirits, and the materiality of water. I place emphasis on how the depiction of water (its materiality) and water spirits contribute to environmental readings of Southern African texts.

I also pay attention to "the cultural peculiarity of the African context in addressing environmental justice and sustainable development" (Aghoghovwia 2014, 31). Although ecocriticism (also known as ecological literary criticism, green criticism, literary-environmental studies) began as a sub-field in Anglo-American literary studies, there is now a growing body of scholarship that combines ecocriticism and post-colonial studies, resulting in what is known as post-colonial ecocriticism. Post-colonial ecocriticism brings together decolonial thought and environmental issues. Other scholars have also noted the useful debates that might arise from

bringing post-colonial thought together with ecocriticism (see Rob Nixon 2005, Chikwurah Isiguzo 2017). This resonates with Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2010) who contend that:

> …human liberation will never be fully achieved without challenging the historical conditions under which human societies have constructed themselves in hierarchical relation to other societies, both human and non-human, and without imagining new ways in which these societies, understood as being ecologically connected, can be creatively transformed. (22)

Despite the differences in style, the texts I explore in this thesis feature various encounters between humans, water, water spirits, the living, and the ancestors. Different bodies of water such as rivers, dams, swamps, lagoons, and oceans are foregrounded making it easier to read for the materiality of water. By focusing on water spirits and water, I underscore the entanglements between the human and non-human, between the environment and the human without privileging either. This mutual interdependency between humans and nature is one of the main premises of ecocriticism. The belief that nature is not outside of us but part of us is encouraged in various regions of the world (see Haraway 2008).

In the texts I explore, the spirits and water cease to be mere backdrops for human desires but become protagonists. The continual abuse of nature has indeed been a preoccupation of many writers and critics from Africa and beyond, but the trend has seen a bias towards land. It is only in recent times, in the Global South at least, that water is reclaiming the centre stage in its material and spiritual dimensions (see Blum 2010, Bystrom and Hofmeyr 2017, Goyal 2014 and Samuelson 2020).

In the texts that I examine, the anthropocentric climate change is intricately linked to the colonial legacies and manifestations. For example, in *Butterfly Burning* the land is arid and the only source of water is the polluted Umguza River. Besides this river, water appears in oily ditches and breeds harmful insects. As I will show in my second chapter, it is through the representation of (and lack of) water that Vera captures the predicament of Makokoba residents as they survive within the cracks. The absence of water is amplified by the scene in the novel where some children drench themselves in imaginary rain. While this water scarcity can be blamed on the

city's geographic location (semi-arid) and climatic conditions (high temperatures and erratic rainfall patterns), Musemwa argues that this lack is also a product of the city's governing policies both before and after independence (2008). The colonial government on its part reserved the bulk of clean water that was available for white minority suburbs. Black townships like Makokoba had to scramble for the little that trickled to them. The polluted water, which affects the residents of Bulawayo, recalls the growing scholarship on the Niger Delta crisis where the ongoing extraction of oil is negatively affecting the locals and the landscape leading to armed conflicts. Several authors and critics expose these injustices in the Niger in their works (see Iheka 2018, Aghoghovwia 2014, Okuyade 2013, and Isiguzo 2017).

Like Marechera's *House of Hunger*, Mungoshi's *Coming of the Dry Season* and *Waiting for the Rain* transcend the typical colonial injustices as they also underscore environmental issues. Isiguzo notes how "…in more recent years, they (writers and critics) are looking beyond colonial and neo-colonial impact on humans to the impact of historical human activities on the environment and extra human elements" (2017, 45). While the distribution of the land in *Waiting for the Rain* and *Butterfly Burning* speaks to the dynamics of power in the then Rhodesia, the description of the bodies of water in the texts, the rivers that refuse to flow and wells that have sinister snakes in them, captures the calamity of the times. Coletta Kandemiri (2018) argues that "…in *Waiting for the Rain* (1975), the black people were forced into reserves such as the Manyene Tribal Trust Land by the colonial rule and as such natural resources such as Suka River ended up giving in due to siltation and other factors such as the inordinate overpopulation" (106). The displacement of people from favourable areas of the land with flowing water sources is also witnessed in Pepetela's *The Return of the Water Spirit*. The residents of Luanda live in constant fear, especially those of Kinaxixi square where buildings crumble at the instigation of *Kianda,* the water spirit who is reclaiming his lagoon from modern infrastructural developments. This fighting back of nature culminates in *Kianda*'s flooding of the whole city as he moves to the ocean. The way colonialism impacts the environment, and the people invokes Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence, which though not spectacular and dramatic as floods or earthquakes are, remains "incremental and accretive" (2011, 2). This violence, which occurs gradually has devastating long-term effects.

In response to such muted violence on the other-than human, conscious creative artists sometimes assign a degree of agency to these non-human entities. This is the case in some of the texts that I explore such as Pepetela's *The Return of the Water Spirit* and Burger's *She Down There* where water spirits and aquatic creatures are personified protagonists. In as much as this turn can contribute towards demystifying and de-objectifying the non-human, some critics question the tangible value of such efforts. In this light, while in *She Down There* the protagonists, Claire and Klaas have a special relationship with water and communicate with sea creatures in a manner that blurs the lines between the human and non-human, the simplistic access to the intricate aquatic world that the reader is given is problematic. Similarly, Kenneth Toah Nsah (2019) argues in a different context that while texts can attempt to "speak for nature, there can be deficiencies in their speech, given that nature does not use human language or, in other words, given that nature speaks/communicates in ways humans cannot rationally prove to comprehend" (99). Despite these misgivings, these texts expose the vulnerability and muteness of nature. Moreover, shifting perspectives can emanate from a non-humancentric turn in this time of acute environmental crisis.

By privileging an ecocritical lens, novels like *She Down There* and *The Return of the Water Spirit* underscore the need to understand water, its creatures, uses and associations. In this thesis I also lean on Bernard's work on the role of indigenous knowledges in the protection of the environment (2003). Bernard suggests that because some bodies of water are believed to house different spirits, they become sacred sites where different rituals take place. This sanctification of these water bodies ensures their protection. Elsewhere, Jauquelyne Kosgei highlights the value of indigenous knowledges in the conservation of marine life through a reading of poetry by Kenya's coastal communities (2021). She argues that because of their dependence on the sea for survival, these communities mostly made up of fisherfolk are in "possession of unique knowledge and practices that aid in the conservation of the ocean" (2021, 71). In a Zimbabwean context, Collins Garikai Machoko (2013) notes that "[d]ue to the ever-increasing degradation of the natural environment as a result of disregard for water spirits, ATR [African Traditional Religion] devotees advocated a return to worshipping water spirits as the best natural environmental conservation strategy" (ibid). The three scholars, despite their different geographical locations,

share the belief that indigenous knowledges can go a long way in helping preserve the environment, a theme that I explore through the texts I examine.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter Two revisits two famous Zimbabwean drought novels, Vera's *Butterfly Burning* (1998) and Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain* (1975) to offer a watery reading that produces fresh insights on these novels. Most scholarship on both texts has overlooked water, reflecting the broader obsession with land as the 'elemental media' of anti-colonial discourse. I consider what happens when we decentre land and foreground water in these texts. I seek to explore how both narratives work with pre-colonial hydro-imaginaries as a way of refracting their colonial and gender themes. Indigenous water beliefs such as the myth of water spirits become sites for dealing with and embracing the contradictions and complexities of surviving in precarious colonial spaces. The chapter also examines the representations of the materiality of water or fluids. In both texts, water becomes a significant narrative tool even when it appears to be absent.

In Chapter Three, I focus on how the trope of *MaMlambo* is represented in two South African texts: the film *Otelo Burning* (2011) and the novel *The Woman of the Stone Sea* (2019), both produced in the post-apartheid era. The incorporation of *MaMlambo* into these texts places them within the realm of magical realism where the line between the probable and improbable is blurred. In the two texts chosen for this chapter, the past and the present clash as characters strive to forge a way forward. Moreover, in thinking with Isabel Hofmeyr (forthcoming), the chapter also reads for water in its material and metaphoric manifestations in both texts; that is the notion of inspirited waters and water as a narrative technique.

The fourth chapter shifts focus to Mozambique, again chasing the elusive figure of the water spirit in *Sleepwalking Land* by Mia Couto (2006) and Lynton Burger's *She Down There* (2020). I consider how both texts draw on water-based indigenous beliefs to capture their various themes. Couto draws on water spirit beliefs to imbue his characters with flexibility and mobility during Mozambique's civil war. In relation to *She Down There*, the chapter examines the employment

of the mythical water goddess Sedna that blurs the lines between the human and the non-human, the natural and the supernatural. I argue that the creolized waters of *She Down There* (through the intermingling of indigenous Canadian Haidan, South African Khoisan and the Mozambican Bitonga water myths) provide a global approach to reading for water in Southern African literature. I further explore the ways in which both novels extend our understanding of amphibian aesthetics. By employing amphibian aesthetics, *Sleepwalking Land* gives us spirits who straddle both land and water, and in *She Down There* there is the intermingling of water myths.

In the fifth chapter, I focus on two texts from Angola, the novel *The Return of the Water Spirit* (2002) by Pepetela which is set in Angola's capital city Luanda and *Njinga: Queen of Angola* (2013), a film directed by Sergio Graciano. Building on the previous chapter, I consider the animistic mode employed in both texts, which draws on the Kimbundu water spirit myths. I argue that *The Return of the Water Spirit* explores the theme of inspirited waters through the presence of *Kianda,* the water spirit in the lagoon. I also examine how water in its different manifestations becomes a narrative and structuring device especially in the film, *Njinga: Queen of Angola*. In the film, water enables a re-narration of the masculine politics of land and nationalism. As an internal structuring device, it drives the plot in the film.

The conclusion summarizes and reflects on the issues which have been explored in the study. The chapter will underscore the common and uncommon threads that cut across all the chapters, flesh out the contradictions that arise from the thesis and suggest possible areas for future studies.

CHAPTER TWO

A Watery Reading of Charles Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain* and Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*

This chapter revisits two Zimbabwean drought novels,[3] Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning* (1998) and Charles Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain* (1975) to offer a watery reading that offers fresh insights. Little existing scholarship on both texts has focused on water, reflecting the obsession with land as the 'elemental media' of anti-colonial discourse.[4] What happens when we decentre land in these texts and foreground water instead? How can material and spiritual water reconfigure the narrative of Zimbabwean literature? I explore how both narratives work with pre-colonial hydro-imaginaries to refract colonial and gender themes. In *Waiting for the Rain*, bodies of water are populated with ancestral and diabolical spirits making them inspirited. The missing rainmaker and the impotent rain tree all point to an error in the land, a condition that might explain the rain that never comes. Pertaining to *Butterfly Burning*, indigenous water spirit myths (mermaids]) become sites for mediating the contradictions and complexities of surviving in precarious colonial and phallocratic spaces. Fiona McCann (2008) captures the contradictions and complexities in Vera's works when she states that "the binaries of attacker and victim, destruction and catharsis, past and present are significantly nuanced" (59). The chapter also examines the materiality of water where I think with Hofmeyr in "…paying careful attention to what water does… [and] …what kind of water is being depicted. What are its material characteristics and is the narrative potential of these exploited?" (Forthcoming, 17-18). I here

[3] For a longer discussion on Zimbabwean drought narratives see Lilford (1996). See also Zimunya (1982).

[4] For more on Zimbabwe's anti-colonial discourse read Zhuwarara (2001), Zimunya (1982), Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems (2009), Bull-Christiansen (2004) and Ranger (2004).

consider the depiction of different kinds of water or fluids: is it on the surface, subterranean or intangible? Is the water flowing or stagnant and what is its colour? Through probing these questions, water becomes a significant narrative and metaphorical tool in both texts even when it appears to be absent. I suggest that a watery reading of both novels draws attention to some characters and themes that embody the complexities of surviving colonial and patriarchal structures. By drawing on folkloric elements such as myths and legends, both novelists join a cohort of African writers who according to James Tar Tsaaior "mobilize their creative energies in the direction of exploiting the rich oral, literary and cultural resources of their cultural backgrounds as raw materials" (2009, 2). Both novels offer interesting examples of thinking about water myths and also provide ways of historicising water.

Below I first focus on Vera's *Butterfly Burning* before I turn to Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain*. I consider the inspirited waters and the materiality of water in both texts. Though these texts are often read as drought narratives, I trace their subterranean waters, absent waters and other forms of fluids.

Butterfly Burning

Vera's *Butterfly Burning* (1998) is set in the 1940s and underscores the experiences of black people in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). It explores the apprehensions and dreams of the protagonist Phephelaphi, an ambitious young woman battling to survive under inhospitable colonial conditions in Bulawayo's Makokoba Township. Phephelaphi's name which means 'where to find refuge', suggests an ongoing quest for shelter and safety as she meanders the socio-economic and political boulders of colonial Rhodesia. The novel is set in Makokoba Township, one of the oldest townships of Bulawayo. It is believed that it was named after a Native Commisioner who was slightly bent at the waist and used a walking stick. This is known as 'ukukhokhoba' in isiNdebele. During the colonial period, Makokoba was a dormitory township that housed cheap black labour needed in various industries (see Foti 2018). The township slowly became a hub of black political resistance against white dominance (see Ranger

2010). The novel details Phephelaphi's life in this township as she battles colonial and patriarchal norms in chasing her desires. At the beginning of the novel, she falls in love with an older man, Fumbatha. Fumbatha is an isiNdebele verb that means tightly clenching one's fist, an image that speaks to his rigid demeanour throughout the narrative. He is portrayed as a conservative man who distrusts change. The two lovers (Phephelaphi and Fumbatha) move into a "[o]ne room… [that is made of] solid brick walls. Asbestos and cement" (Vera 1998, 47). The metaphor 'solid brick walls' captures the stifling environment Phephelaphi strives to escape as the novel progresses. The text suggests that patriarchal and colonial inhibitors are hard to overcome as "[t]he idea is to live within the cracks. Unnoticed and unnoticeable, offering every service but with the capacity to vanish when the task required is accomplished" (6). One form of escape that the novel offers is through construing Phephelapi as a water spirit. I argue that the way she is introduced to the reader suggests her association with water spirits. This connection between Phephelaphi and water is offset by a strong link of Fumbatha and land.

Vera associates Phephelaphi with water and Fumbatha with land to demonstrate how elemental media is configured in masculinist anti-colonial projects. In these works, water is perceived to be unpredictable, treacherous and therefore female. The land on the other hand is considered to be firm, reliable and therefore male. With this context in mind, a watery reading of the text that centres the trope of water spirits offers an alternative vision of the novel. Although Phephelaphi appears to be relaxed in water, she cannot live there, and on land her dreams and desires are frustrated. Resultantly, she creates her own 'space' in fire when she self-immolates at the end of the novel. Her first abortion, performed without Fumbatha's knowledge, sets the tone for her escape. When Fumbatha finds out, he leaves her for Deliwe,[5] an owner of a local shebeen in Makokoba. It is soon after this abandonment that Phephelaphi discovers that she is pregnant again and in a moment of despair and defiance, self-immolates. Her close association with water enables the argument I make that Phephelaphi's death ceases to signify the ultimate end but gestures towards beginnings of a new life in a different form. I conceptualise this reading from

[5] Her name is a Ndebele term which means abandoned but Deliwe subverts the meaning of this name as she fights to own her destiny. In the novel, she lives by her own rules and defies authority.

the hydrological cycle where water changes from liquid to gas as it evaporates before it condenses to fall again as rain.

Vera also draws on the materiality of water to mirror the material conditions of her setting; for instance, the water that one finds in the ditches of Makokoba is repulsive. The narrator describes the ditch along Sidojiwe E2[6] as a "…long ditch which carries waste from the factory on the other side of Jukwa Road. This ditch is black with sediment, a viscous factory water and oil, harsh…" (Vera, 1998, 20). The polluted water speaks to the harsh living conditions of the Makokoba residents. The next section explores this deployment of different forms of water in more detail.

The Materiality of Water in *Butterfly Burning*

This section examines the materiality of water in *Butterfly Burning*. I consider the depiction of different kinds of water or fluids, paying particular attention to their location, movement, and colour. I ask, is the water on the surface, subterranean or under the skin? Is it flowing or stagnant? I argue that the form of water depicted in the novel mirror the deplorable conditions of the black populace in Bulawayo, such as death, lack, broken family relationships and the degradation of the environment.

While Zimbabwe is described as a nation of dams (with over ten thousand dams), Bulawayo has a perennial crisis of water (Baker 2012; Nilsson and Hammer 1996). The city has endured a meagre water supply since it was established in 1894. While this water scarcity can be blamed on the city's location[7], Muchaparara Musemwa (2008) argues that this lack is also a product of the city's governing bodies both before and after independence. The current Zimbabwe African

[6] Opara describes Sidojiwe E2 as "the longest and darkest street in the irrational world of Makokoba township [and] constitutes the epicentre of the problem of change, poverty, oppression and disillusionment that has evidently ravaged the entire colonized African nation" (2008, 124).

[7] Bulawayo is located in Southwestern Zimbabwe, a semi-arid region of high temperatures, long dry seasons and erratic rainfall patterns. For a thorough discussion on Bulawayo and its water politics see Musemwa (2006).

National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) government considers Bulawayo to be a 'dissident city' that supports opposition parties and thus has not prioritized its water needs (ibid). The colonial government's racial and spatial segregation directed the bulk of clean water to the white minority, while the black population in townshps like Makokoba had to scramble for the little that was availed to them. Musemwa adds that "the colonial municipality's water policies and practices were designed to create a luxurious, green, and prosperous city, while the same policies did not apply to the segregated Makokoba township" (2006, 187). Moreover, Ake Nilsson and Amanda Hammer's report on water resources in Zimbabwe contend that "the available water resources have still not been fully developed: out of a total estimated annual potential surface water yield of 8.5 cubic km, only a minor part of the potential groundwater resource is being utilised" (1996, i). Bulawayo's water problem is therefore a combination of natural factors and human lapses.

Vera draws on this water scarcity to capture the physical and spiritual aridity of Bulawayo. In this dry city, she resorts to other forms of water that include imagined rain, the oily smelly water of the ditches, sweat, blood and tears that all point to harsh living conditions and loss of life. In the following subsection, I divide these into two categories: physical bodies of water and bodily fluids.

Naturally Occurring Bodies of Water in *Butterfly Burning*

Umguza River[8] is significant in the plot of *Butterfly Burning*. Vera introduces her readers to this river in the fourth chapter of the novel. This is after three chapters that depict unspeakable living conditions of blacks who live in Makokoba. The land of Makokoba has "nothing but bushes blooming with large thorns that jut out like porcupine quills, the thorn on each bush is thick like branches, with the tips sharp and pointed, tight, holding on to the last drop of water inside

[8] Umguza River is in Matabeleland North Province of Zimbabwe and skirts Bulawayo. Its tributaries feed from an urban catchment area that makes it vulnerable to pollution and therefore renders its water unsuitable for domestic use.

them…" (Vera 1998, 24). The sustained thorn metaphor speaks to the inhospitable conditions of the colonial city. The phrase 'holding on to the last drop of water inside them' amplifies the lack of water in the area. The dryness of the city is captured elsewhere in the novel where Phephelaphi ironically "insist[s] that it was important to know how to swim, even if there was only one river, not much rain and therefore very little chance to drown" (27). However, despite this scarcity of natural water, the children of Makokoba envisage this water through popular games. In what Annie Gagiano (2009) identifies as unbounded imaginations, the children of Makokoba imagine rain and choose to see rainbows in the midst of the dryness. The children of Sidojiwe E2 enact a scene in which 'imagined' rain drenches them. They accordingly seek shelter under 'imagined' umbrellas.

> They pick the skeleton of an old umbrella and hold it up to the sun as though they have found shelter of a separate and distinguished kind. They huddle under the umbrella and pretend heavy rain is falling and their tattered clothes are now wet. They bend over, drenched, and wipe water seeping down their foreheads, and draw their dripping arms under their chests to retain whatever warmth they can, in this beating rain. One of them holds the umbrella upright. The children raise their eyes to the empty sky: it hardly ever rains. (Vera 1998, 17)

This yearning for rain can be read as a longing for things that are seemingly out of reach for the Rhodesian black populace. The deliberate use of water related terms such as drenching, heavy rain, seeping, and dripping in the above quote serves to emphasise the emptiness of the Bulawayo skies. Rain is usually associated with renewal and rebirth. By enacting the rainy scene, the children temporarily 'experience' better conditions. Just like Phephelaphi who yearns for places 'untried', the children rise above the squalor of their present.

It is in the midst of this dryness that Umguza River becomes "something to look at, to marvel, and live near" (Vera 1998, 24). The river introduces the protagonists of the novel, Phephelaphi and Fumbatha. We read that as "Fumbatha sat on a rock that was half-submerged in Umguza River, Phephelaphi emerged from the same river like a spirit" (26). Her melodramatic entrance introduces a spiritual dimension to the text that I will unpack later when I discuss the inspirited waters of the novel. Umguza is described as "a full river on this dry earth where the sun is seen

rising before it rises" (24). This draws attention to the surface of the river, making the sun seem mesmerising as the river itself. Ironically, it is the same sun that will beat down on the township later in the day. The quote foregrounds the surface of the river as opposed to the depth that is usually associated with the sacred. The emphasis on the surface therefore underlines the spiritual aridity that runs throughout the text.

Described as a full river, it is alive and "contrasts sharply with the stagnant polluted water in the ditch on Sidojiwe E2..." (Opara 2008, 126). In line with its life-giving nature, the river offers Fumbatha a gift, Phephelaphi, the woman who steals his heart. He:

> …had never met a woman who helped him forget each of his footsteps on this ground which he longed for. Here was a woman who made him notice that his feet were not on solid ground but on rapid and flowing water, and that this was a delight, that there was no harm. (Vera 1998, 29)

Fumbatha considers her to be from and of water, but Phephelaphi leaves this water for land where she struggles to belong. In a different context where Yulith Chigwedere (2015) looks at the representation of madness in Zimbabwean literature, the scholar reads Phephelaphi as a liminal figure who belongs neither on land nor water. She further states that this liminality, which is characterised by states of inbetweenness speaks to Phephelaphi's character.

While it is initially associated with life, Umguza River later becomes a site of violence, death, and pollution. Read in this light, the river becomes an ambivalent space and a catalyst in the novel. We read that the waste from the industries found its way to Umguza River via the ditches of Makokoba:

> Along Sidojiwe E2 is a long ditch which carries waste from the factory on the other side of Jukwa Road. This ditch is black with sediment, a viscous factory water and oil, harsh yet fascinating to young minds and absolutely tolerable to their senses, going past and flowing, over the other side of Makokoba, pouring into the Umguza River. (Vera 1998, 20)

In her reading of the natural elements in Vera's works, Buhle Dlodlo (2020) notes that Umguza River has been a source of water and fish for local communities. She reveals that "apart from the industries and their own share of pollution, the National Railways of Zimbabwe with its headquarters in Bulawayo also contributed to the contamination of Umguza River. Trains were serviced there, and the oil residue was disposed in ditches which poured into Umguza River" (27). It is clear that the violence that was heaped upon the black populace of Makokoba also bruised the environment. Umguza River received tonnes of toxic industrial waste. Commenting on environmental pollution in Africa, Abioye Fayiga, Mabel Ipinmoroti and Tait Chirenje (2018) observe that "the major pollution sources for surface waters are the urban and industrial discharges of untreated effluents into the water" (41). They also note how oil spills contribute to water pollution in countries like Angola and Nigeria. These instances show how the pollution of Umguza River examplifies a global phenomenon.

Vera also associates this river with the lynching of the seventeen men (one of which was Fumbatha's father) who were involved in the 1896-97 Zimbabwe's First Chimurenga/ Umvukela Uprisings. The rebellion which was led by Zimbabwean spirit mediums − Mbuya Nehanda and Sekuru Kaguvi − saw black Zimbabweans resisting the colonization of Zimbabwe by British Pioneer Column forces. The lynching occurs on the riverbanks, but Vera describes the scene as taking place underwater. The association of the river with the death of these freedom fighters renders it a necropolis. As Maya Vinuesa argues, "the waters of the river Umguza are not only the space for lovers to meet, or a space for the joys of life. These waters also tell stories of death, being a sort of cemetery, with mutilated dead bodies lying on the riverbed" (2008, 72-73). According to Opara (2008), "[t]he imagery of the drowned hanged men assumes an abstract portraiture in Fumbatha's nightmare. He drowns in the deaths of the seventeen men" (126). Vera uses the metaphor of water to capture the psychological and physical brutalities of colonialism on black lives. Submerging this scene underwater enables Vera to defamiliarize that gruesome experience so that it becomes less traumatic. However, Stephen Chan in a different context, notes how the effect remains "thoroughly deadly" (2005, 275).

> The drowned die in whispers. They die in infinite solitude. The air leaves their bodies in a liquid breeze. First they sink as far as the weight of their bodies

> will allow, then they float. They touch the surface with their faces, not their arms, with their lips. (Vera 1998, 10)

The graphic description above is dramatic in its rendering of the men's last moments and complicates our reading of the river. The spirits of the dead men lingering under its depths create inspirited waters according to Southern African water beliefs. The scene also evokes memories of those African slaves who drowned at sea before reaching their destinations during the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade. Alarmingly, African refugees continue to lose their lives on the Mediterranean Sea as they strive to reach Europe. Umguza River becomes a site of colonial memories, capturing the colonial regime's injustices against black lives. This reading explains why Fumbatha's mother takes him to the river. The narrator relates that "when she calls again, her voice is impatient, and he knows that she had expected him to remain close to her, to witness the shiver of her arms, to see her eyes burn. His birth a witness to dying, a pledge to life. She expects him to know his link with the past" (Vera 1998, 14). In this instance, the river becomes a text that bears witness to the traumas of Zimbabwe's liberation struggles.

The other form of water in *Butterfly Burning* is present in ditches. These stagnant waters provide breeding ground for insects, which "hum… incessantly like a hostile cloud" (Vera 1998, 20). The insects symbolise decay and hostility. These ditches filled with "the pungent and decayed water" (20) represent the life denying forces of that period. This water is stagnant and polluted hence the pungent smell of death. These material conditions inspire a need for better places, and for the children of Makokoba prompts "their own ceaseless talk of imagined places" (20) far from the bleakness of Makokoba.

As mentioned earlier, the ditch that runs along Sidojiwe E2 is "black with sediment, a viscous factory water and oil, harsh yet fascinating to young minds and absolutely tolerable to their senses" (Vera 1998, 20). This fascination may be a result of the rainbow-like effect caused by the presence of oil on water. The play of colours due to the refraction of light on this oily water

appeals to the children of Sidojiwe. This might be read as the lure of modernity[9] (represented by the city space) whose effect on the local populace is as enticing and ambivalent as water itself. In another instance in the novel, the narrator describes the water trickling with oil as shiny as new fabric, yet it is that same oil that cause the men who were working under the tank to "vanish in a cloud of violent and impeccable flame" (21). Through these pungent and polluted canals, the author re-narrates the ambivalent effects of colonial modernity on Rhodesian blacks.

Bodily Fluids in *Butterfly Burning*

In the novel, Vera also uses bodily fluids to examine themes of depravation, frustrated dreams and death. Regarding the issue of Rhodesian labour relations, we read that rather than 'eating off' their sweat, the men 'die of' their sweat: "sweat drips like honey over the firm length of the arms tearing and tugging and splitting the grass" (Vera 1998, 1). The honey simile sustains the initial ironic turn as whatever these men produce becomes bittersweet as it does not belong to them, in direct contrast to the sweetness of honey. The dripping sweat metaphor captures a ceaseless trickling of water, an action that represents an ongoing draining of the men's life force. In the text, sweat becomes a narrative device that captures the unavailing efforts of the characters. Fumbatha exemplifies this frustration as the narrator makes apparent that "[f]or almost twenty years Fumbatha has done nothing but build, and through this contact, Bulawayo is a city he understands closely, which he has held brick by brick, on his palm, felt the tension of effort over his back" (25). It is thus ironic that despite all his efforts, he finds himself in a one-roomed hovel in Makokoba (see Opara 2008). Gagiano (2009) explains that "under colonial direction the men create a modern city, but nothing in it belongs to them" (45). The colonial economy robs the men of their time and fruits of their labour.

Blood is another form of fluid that is prominent in *Butterfly Burning*. Blood is often associated with life in most imaginaries. It also speaks to familial connections. For instance, those from the same ancestral lineage are said to be of the same blood. I will explore this notion in greater detail

[9] For more on the theme of modernity in *Butterfly Burning* see Gagiano 2009, Samuelson 2007 and Muponde 2005.

when I examine the representation of blood in Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain.* In *Butterfly Burning,* blood illustrates death and broken family lineages. In a context where most of the water is trapped and refuses to flow, blood overflows. This is evident in the novel during Phephelaphi's self-induced abortion where she loses a lot of blood. Gagiano suggests that although Vera represents the act as heroic, she does so "without softening or blurring the awfulness and pain of the experience" (2009, 49). The flow of blood is likened to water that is spilling over, a metaphor sustained in Vera's formulation of Phephelaphi as a vessel that is filled to the brim. The blood first trickles before it pours:

> …and she feels it, beginning with the lukewarm warmth along her arm, hardly felt, like water left uncovered under the sun now spilling over, a vessel filled to the brim, the lukewarm warmth trickling down, then pouring, sinking, excruciating. (1998, 115)

Conceptualising Phephelaphi as a 'vessel' that is now spilling over captures her fragile emotional state as she nears her breaking point in her sustained rebellion against societal chains. Described in watery terms, her blood at first trickles and slowly gains momentum, mirroring the traumatic stages of the abortion. The narrator relates of "wave after wave [of] lukewarm warmth [that] is thickening and brave" (115) and as she passes out, she is seen as a swimmer in noiseless water "through something soft and liquid which surrounds her entire body" (116). The loss of blood comes with the loss of her unborn child and foreshadows her self-immolation as the novel comes to an end. In refusing to mother Fumbatha's two children, she frustrates the continuity of Fumbatha's name and cuts his link to the ancestors and the land. In this symbolical action, Vera demystifies the notion that the female body is a terrain that mothers the nation. She refuses the objectification of the female body that reduces it to a reproductive machine, denying women political and personal subjectivity. By resorting to abortion, Phephelaphi rebels against the conventional norms related to mothering. Her action evokes Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* which offers an alternative "dimension that challenges the myth that motherhood is synonymous with female self-fulfilment" (Fonchingong 2006, 143). Phephelaphi's negation of motherhood may also be read as a logical response to barren material conditions that cannot sustain fruitful lives (see Opara 2008, McCann 2008, Hunter 2000). It is an emblematic means

of protecting herself (reproducing as a form of giving birth to oneself) from despair, poverty and living death. I now move to the exploration of Phephelaphi, a figure I read as associated to water.

Fumbatha's Mermaid: A Rereading of Phephelaphi

Water spirits manifest in many different physical forms such as snakes, mermaids, whirlwinds and even as humans. In this section, I focus on Phephelaphi, who according to Fumbatha is "… a being entirely from the water even though she reminded him of an antelope. The river was not as greedy as he had said. It had given him this woman, spitting her onto the rock like a dream" (Vera 1998, 27). The metaphor of an antelope is compelling as its hopping movements speak to Phephelaphi's continuous quest for self-emancipation. She emerges from the river in a manner of spirits and, as the plot unfolds, her rebellious character further links her to water spirits. Water spirits are hybrid creatures who defy neat categorization. I suggest that in drawing from local mythical beliefs of water spirits, Vera's text can be read as part of discourses that seeks to emancipate women from the confines of the female body and restrictive patriarchal frames. Phephelaphi's water-spirit-like qualities − such as ambivalence, slipperiness, and ambiguity − enable the female body to "…negotiate its way around experiences which seek to limit its scope of action and freedom" (2007, 50), in the words of Grace Musila.

Bacchilega and Brown (2019) submit that "[w]hen investigating water spirits from societies that hold an animistic or all-animate view of the world… it is important to keep water's life-giving and death-dealing properties in mind, because as a collective these water spirits embody most, if not all, of water's attributes" (27). In the text, Phephelaphi is not only likened to a spirit but at some point becomes water: "[s]he was water and air" (Vera 1998, 27). According to Bacchilega and Brown "water is also a shape-shifter that is not easily grasped and that affects nearly everything it touches. Whether fresh, brackish, or salty, water holds a mystery that fascinates humans, has aesthetic qualities that delight our senses, and – like water spirits – is both attractive and destructive" (2019, 19). Phephelaphi impacts the course of Fumbatha's life from the moment they first meet. We read that she was "unaware of the manner in which she had, by her presence, transformed him" (Vera 1998, 26). Fumbatha, true to his name:

> …held the name closely, on his palm. It was like holding one part of her inner self. He never wanted to let her go, even though they were strangers. He could never free her, even if she rose and disappeared once more into the water. He would remember her. He would hold her. (28)

He was truly ensnared, and his obsession drives Phephelaphi away. Phephelaphi is described as a woman who chose her own destinations: "[i]t is not the being a nurse which matters, but the movement forward – the entrance into something untried" (Vera 1998, 17). As stated earlier, one way of allowing for this movement forward is through linking Phephelaphi to water spirits. Vinuesa explores how this image of water spirits "operates intertextually in the African female literary tradition" (2008, 71). She goes on to give an example of Flora Nwapa's works[10] where the female protagonists are associated with and draw strength from water spirits, particularly the *Uhamiri*, one of the water goddesses from Nigeria. In both texts (*Efuru* and *Butterfly Burning*), the protagonists reject motherhood to chase their desires. In *Butterfly Burning* Vera deploys the trope of the female water spirit to give her protagonist a chance to navigate colonial and traditional boulders which is no easy task.

The link between Phephelaphi and water spirits is first hinted at when she emerges from Umguza River. We read that:

> She emerged breathless and gasping for air beneath his feet and rose out of the river like a spirit. The water streamed down her face, sparkling rivulets. She wore a thin cloth that clung over her like skin. She placed her hands above the rock where it leaned into the water and dragged herself out. (Vera 1998, 26)

The depiction of Phephelaphi who emerges from water like a spirit, appears to be Vera's way of pointing to the fine line between the physical and spiritual worlds in Ndebele cosmologies. It also evokes the classic image of a mermaid that depicts a young, topless, gorgeous woman with a

[10] Flora Nwapa is a famous Nigerian writer who is recognised as one of the forerunners of African feminism through her numerous works that depicted Ibo norms from a feminine perspective. Some of her works are *Idu* (1970), *This is Lagos, and Other Stories* (1971), *One Is Enough* (1981), *Never Again* (1975), *Wives at War, and Other Stories* (1980) and *Women Are Different* (1986).

lower body of a fish reclining on a rock that is half submerged in water. If it is not her looks that entice men, then it is her beautiful voice. The same happens when water spirits assume the human form as is the case in *Butterfly Burning.* Fumbatha is drawn to Phephelaphi the moment he sets eyes on her on the banks of Umguza River. He beholds a woman "whose body was all promise, breasts firm and rounded, a voice so soothing soft no other woman could exceed its charm and no men ignore its plea" (Vera 1998, 63). Other characters like Deliwe concur that "Phephelaphi did not possess a single blemish and no other woman would find one no matter how hard they tried" (63). Later in the novel Fumbatha, "claimed he had pulled her [Phephelaphi] out of the river like a fish" (63). The simile 'like a fish' further strengthens her link to water beings and captures Fumbatha's objectification and possesiveness; he had fished her for his sole consumption: "He could never free her . . . He would hold her. Fumbatha had never wanted to possess anything before, except the land. He wanted her like the land beneath his feet" (29). Likening her to the land under his feet explains his desire to own and control her.

The thin cloth that Phephelaphi wore as she emerges from the river and the way she carries herself is also suggestive of the seductive nature inherent in water spirits.

> Her eyes glittering like jewels before him, her arms the same colour as the rock on which she rested. Each of her motions carefully guided, and her voice rising drop by drop, toward him, smooth like the water before them. She was sunlight. Her beauty was more than this, not expressed in her appearance alone but in the strength that shone beneath each word, each motion of her body. (Vera 1998, 26)

The imagery above identifies the protagonist as an unruffled woman whose allure and strength also manifest in her movements and manner of speech. In their own realm, water beings are known to glitter, another tactic to lure their victims. Phephelaphi is likened to sunlight and glittering jewels both which amplify her appeal. It takes no time for Fumbatha to drown in Phephelaphi's splendour and his life begins to revolve around her. While the author aligns the protagonist to water to create some measure of agency, Fumbatha links her to the land, something he desperately needs to control. This is the stifling environment Phephelaphi wishes to escape as the plot progresses.

Phephelaphi's link to water can also be traced to her name. She tells Fumbatha that her mother changed her name from Sakhile (we have built) to Phephelaphi (constant movement in search of a sanctuary). There is an interesting play with names that is evident here. The names 'Sakhile' and 'Fumbatha' suggest permanence and rigidness, the two conditions that Vera subverts by linking Phephelaphi to water and mermaid-like characteristics. From her name's overtones of constant movement, it is possible to make a link to the flow of water that erodes the stagnation of the initial name. Water thrives in motion and indicates the notion of regeneration rather than stasis. It is one element in which forming (state of becoming) rather than form (solid shape) takes precedence. These aqueous attributes enable a dissolving of inflexible binaries and boundaries towards a constant invention of self, something to which Fumbatha is averse. As his name hints, he exhibits "a rigidness that clashes with Phephelaphi's open nature" (Gagiano 2009, 45). To no one's surprise, his rigidity turns their home into a war zone from which they both wish to escape.

In addition to her looks and the overtones of her name, Phephelaphi's link to water spirits also manifests through her anomalous behaviour that challenges the expected norms of her society. Two instances of this are her obstinate refusal to mother Fumbatha's two children and her idolization of Deliwe, the shebeen queen of Makokoba. Vinuesa captures this aptly when she states that:

> Deliwe represents for Phephelaphi an idealized type of woman who, like the Mammiwata, has unrestricted ties to men and no children of her own and enjoys economic independence, running an illegal bar in her own house, where drinks are sold and men meet every night: 'She thought Deliwe was some kind of sun, and herself some kind of horizon'. (Vinuesa 2008, 73)

Deliwe represents Phephelaphi's repressed desires and Deliwe's ability to articulate them complicates the essentialization of women characters in some African texts as flat figures, either

respectable or unrespectable.[11] Vera departs from this reductionist representation of women as her female characters are complex and elusive. In his reading of the city in Zimbabwean literature, Kizito Muchemwa (2013) observes that "[a]ll the women characters in the novel subvert traditional conceptions of motherhood, attesting to the city's capacity to rework tradition" (100). Instead of bowing to the reproductive role assigned to her by phallocratic regimes, Phephelaphi battles to imprint her mark in productive public spaces. This might explain her attraction to Deliwe who is portrayed "as a figure of resistance for her hatred of black policemen" (Muchemwa 2013,101).

In the above and similar instances, like her visit to Deliwe's shebeen, Phephelaphi pursues her quest for freedom. Pucherova (2012) speaks of Phephelaphi's "desire to become the subject of her own desires rather than the object of the desires of others" (190). She is described as a woman "who chose her own destination and liked to watch the horizon change from pale morning to blue light" (Vera 1998, 63). Phephelaphi seems to have a fascination of the unknown, the forbidden and is intent on broadening her horizons from the start.

> I want to become a nurse at the hospital,' she says, 'I am sending in my application.' She has all the qualifications to enter the course, and the absurdity to imagine - without ever having seen the evidence - that her application would be considered. (Vera 1998, 70)

Her dreams look absurd in the context of colonial Rhodesia where her race and gender were obstacles. Her "yearning for newness, change, fluidity, and hybridity are formed in opposition to the traditional values of stability, rootedness, permanence, and familiarity" (Pucherova, 2012, 186). Fumbatha embodies these traditional norms and is opposed to Phephelaphi finding employment. He insists on taking care of her. The narrator voices Fumbatha's mission that "[h]e must keep her close. Somehow. All the time. He must make her belong" (Vera 1998, 70). It is ironic for someone who is alive to Phephelaphi's elusiveness. For he intimates that "here was a

[11] Chipo Hungwe's notion of respectable and unrespectable women unravels how traditional patriarchal structures domesticate women in private spaces and out of public domains through calculated labeling strategies such as the prostitute trope.

woman who made him notice that his feet were not on solid ground but on rapid flowing water, and that it was a delight, that there was no harm" (29). He wonders "…what words [to] use to hold her and keep her still" (31). But how does one hold water?

With the progression of the plot, feeling trapped by Fumbatha's expectations, Phephelaphi reverts to her watery form, this time mediated through kwela music.[12] Kwela music, usually associated with defiance, was "developed from traditional marabi music and jazz [and] signifies the excitement of new lifestyles, horizons, and the generative mixing of ethnicities, dialects, and cultures in the city" (Pucherova 2010, 194). It is when she is listening to kwela music that Phephelaphi feels she "can swim, but she prefers to sink deep down and touch the bottom of the river with her naked body and her stretching arms" (Vera 1998, 66). Her naked body and outstretched arms suggest an uninhibitedness and a return to the safety of a mother's womb (bottom of the river). For Phephelaphi the music feels like a "healing", "precious liquid" in a room that is quiet like a "rainbow". She knows "this song, its every touch" (67). This strong association of music with water (precious liquid and rainbow) is reminiscent of water spirits and their love for music and also captures water as being Phephelaphi's natural habitat, a place she could go back to for solace. This healing is compared to "a furrow, the groove, the trough, the unbounded channel which the river had found" (68).

Vera develops the association between Phephelaphi's new sense of freedom with kwela music by an ingenious choice of words and metaphors that appeal across human senses. The music is described as "far and low and way back beneath her eyes where it trickles away like a stream" (66). She listens to "the stream grow into a river and shift every boulder, every firm rock in her body" (ibid). The boulders and the rocks can be read as the stifling environment that resulted from her relationship with Fumbatha.

Water spirits tend to move, to vanish from a society that has disrespected, disregarded them or their abodes. Read within this context, Phephelaphi relearns to "… love her own body now, after

[12] For a detailed discussion on the role of kwela music in the text see Akemark 2009, Davis 2007 and Borg 2005.

he has loved and left it, to love her own eyebrows and her own knees, finally she has done so, embracing each part of herself with flame, deeply and specially" (Vera 1998, 150). As she burns, she "is dying in her own storm…she will eventually rise into her own song" (ibid). As stated earlier, Phephelaphi's burning can also be read as a completion of the hydrological cycle. As associated to water, she evaporates from the arid land of Makokoba, condenses again in the sky and comes back as rain, filling water bodies such as Umguza River. This reading suggests a continuous cycle with no definite origin nor destination, the same way Vera's text does not offer closure for any of her characters but gestures towards open possibilities. In thinking within this frame of a continuous hydrological cycle, Zimbabwean nationalist discourse is unmoored from rigid land-based epistemologies towards multiple narratives, and ways of being.

As a water spirit inhabiting the human frame, she seems to embody the multiple elements of air, water, and fire. Throughout the novel, Phephelaphi seems to adapt to the appropriate element that enables her to negotiate the oppressive colonial and traditional boulders thrust in her way. She also problematises the dichotomisations related to gender and race in her insistence to own her body.

Waiting for the Rain

In *Waiting for The Rain* (1975), the action revolves around the troubled Mandengu family that falls into three distinct generations. The old generation of the Old Man − the protector and patriarch of the family − his wife Japi and Old Mandisa, his extended mother-in-law. The middle generation comprises the Old Man's two sons, Tongoona and Kuruku and their wives Raina and Rhoda who are struggling to provide for their respective families. The younger generation includes Tongoona's children, Garaba, Lucifer, Betty and Kuruku's son John who are all trying to make sense of the colonial world they inhabit. Jenjekwa (2013) suggests that "[a]s the family gathers, reflects and gossips over Lucifer's arrival from town and his eventual departure overseas, Mungoshi takes an opportunity to subtly expose the negative and divisive impact of colonialism on the African way of life" (407).

The family is anxious over Lucifer's surprise departure, against their expectation that he would come home to take charge. Tongoona tramples upon tradition when he chooses Lucifer instead of Garabha as heir apparent. He prefers his younger son largely because of his (Lucifer's) modern education that is perceived as a passport out of the wretchedness of the village. The peripapetic older son Garabha is dismissed as a hopeless case. Betty (Tongoona and Raina's first daughter) is similarly looked down upon, cursed and stranded without a husband nor child. She is described as "…a victim of the prevalent patriarchal apathy towards the position of women in society…" (Borain 2017, 23). She however rejects her fate throughout the narrative. Through flashbacks in the novel, we learn about the family's internal squabbles and sour relations with their neighbours.

The story is set in October when "… the bushes show little bright green, red and orange leaves: preparing for the rain" (Mungoshi 1975, 17). The rain however is overdue and never comes. I read this deffered rain as indicative of a broken hydrological cycle that also manifests in the fragmented Mandengu family. The geographical setting is Manyene Tribal Trust Lands, described by the author as the "scorched nothing-between-here-and-the-horizon white lands…" (40). The Manyene in *Waiting for the Rain* resembles the actual Manyene communal lands, located close to Chivhu, a drought prone semi-arid region in western Zimbabwe. The author's brother David Mungoshi[13] describes it as a place of "…wide plains with sparse vegetation as well as occasional thickets of forest [and] …a few hills". He adds that the area is "inevitably inhospitable at times…" (Mungoshi 2018, n.p). In the novel, the author centers Manyene and draws on local myths of the absent rain maker and the impotent sacred tree which help to explain the literal and figurative drought of Rhodesia. Mungoshi also deploys different kinds of water and fluids that include the stagnant and rusty waters of Suka river, rain, tears, blood and sweat, to capture colonial injustices as *Butterfly Burning* also does. It is in considering the literal and metaphorical import of these different types of water and fluids that drought narratives like

[13] David Mungoshi is an author, poet and scholar and brother to Charles Mungoshi. Some of his works include novels *The Fading Sun* (2009) and *Stains on the Wall* (1992), and a collection of short stories titled 'Broken Dream and other Stories' (1987).

Waiting for the Rain become more nuanced. Water is always present, if not on the surface, then underground, or as bodily fluids, and even in the imaginative realm.

Naturally Occurring Bodies of Water in *Waiting for the Rain*

In one of his dreams in the novel, the Old Man in *Waiting for the Rain* encounters a landscape that he describes in the following aqueous terms:

> Hazy blue mountains across heat-tortured plains. Dark forests always in cold-grey rain-mist and a yellow leaf suspended in mid-flight to the dank floor below. Dust-storms in desert wastes and the half-buried face of a friend who will mind the sand no more. Across rivers which don't seem to flow any more. The water: black…slowly turning human-blood-red. (Mungoshi 1975, 2)

The scorched plains, dust storms, desert wastes, tired rivers, yellow leaf, rain-mist, dank floor, and dark forests capture the inhospitable landscape of Manyene Tribal Lands which the protagonist Lucifer describes elsewhere as "…the failure's junk heap…[where] you come back to die, having lived all your life elsewhere" (Mungoshi 1975,163). It is instructive that amidst such aridness and despair, the old man's dreamscape is painted in aqueous terms, highlighting water's hold on human imaginations even when it is absent on the surface. The mountains in the dream are described as "hazy blue" (2), the colour that is often used to describe oceans, swimming pools and dams. The phrase 'cold-grey rain-mist' speaks to the droplets of water that lie suspended in air never reaching the parched ground beneath, just like the yellow leaf that evokes wilting of life. The suspended water is tied to the title of the novel, *Waiting for the Rain*, which points to the water that clings to the atmosphere and refuses to fall. The use of words like cold, wastes, tortured, storms, half-buried, grey, damp, and dark sustains the funereal atmosphere that pervades the novel. By contrast, the the moist forest that seems to harbour life cannot promote communal agrarian activities. It is associated with coldness and darkness. Although the forest ground is moist and fertile, crops cannot be grown on it because the shade of the tree leaves and branches blocks sunshine. The lack of balance between the elements of sun and water cause despair for the Manyene inhabitants. Suggestively, non-human life thrives where human life

ceases. For in the forest "…it's neither day nor night but greyish with dark patches and lighter patches and the eternal heart-thumping drip-drop-plop of dark water dripping from the beards of the trees" (2).

The type of water depicted above aptly captures the bleak atmosphere of the land. The novel's representation of strange waters is sustained through the description of the rivers. From early in the narrative, we are introduced to rivers which "don't seem to flow any more" and whose waters are "black…slowly turning human-blood-red" (Mungoshi 1975, 2). This description of the river foregrounds the tropes of lack and inertia that run in the text. The mark of a river is its flow, and when that is gone, death and degeneration follow. It is apt that the water is described as black and red, suggesting pollution and bleeding to death as this water cannot sustain life. This negative signification of water manifests elsewhere in the novel where the Suka River is described as a river "which has given up flowing" (40). We read that it is "… now almost dry, a mere trickle of rusty water on a bed of sun-browned sand… water begins to sip into the hole through the grains of sand" (37). The trickling again speaks to the incapacitation of the river and its failure to sustain human life. The rusty colour hints at deteriorating river conditions that compel Betty to dig under the sand in search of drinking water. Betty's action speaks to the argument that I make earlier that despite its absence on the surface, water is trapped underground. That Suka River has given up flowing speaks to bigger issues such as environmental degradation and the plummeting fortunes of black people in colonial Rhodesia. Like Vera in *Butterfly Burning*, Mungoshi also employs fluids such as sweat, blood and tears to represent the plight of the black populace. Although these fluids are significantly different in their composition, they all lurk beneath the skin, offsetting the absence of flowing water.

Bodily Fluids in *Waiting for the Rain*

In this section, I explore how Mungoshi manipulates blood, tears and sweat to capture the appalling conditions of black people in Rhodesia. In a context where there is scarcity of surface water, there is a flow of blood that floods the novel. Firstly, blood denotes familial ties and relations in *Waiting for the Rain*. On the eve of Lucifer's departure for Europe, the Old Man

reminds him that "[t]radition says a man whose blood still flows on the face of the earth is no beggar, so, while you are alive let no one of your own blood go in need. That is the way it is with us. Remember it and you will live" (Mungoshi 1975, 162). This sentiment recognises how Shona culture perceives blood ties to be functional and permanent. This is also evident when John presents his farewell gift of a radio to his cousin Lucifer, inviting Raina's remark that "it should always be like this among those of the same blood" (66).

While the above captures the benign side of blood ties, the other side presents insidious generational curses that flow through the same blood. Matandangoma, the diviner discerns "wreck and ruin and rivers of blood running in this [Mandengu] family" (Mungoshi 1975, 140). She traces the source of the curse to one of the Mandengu ancestors who murdered an innocent person. To curb further bloodshed in the family, she advises them to atone for this crime. Tongoona expounds to Lucifer that "it is because your mother has the blood of the family of Kandengwa in her that the curse includes us today. That is why Betty can't get married. And that is why Old Mandisa is worried" (160). It is from this basis that Raina pleads with her mother Old Mandisa that "[i]t would be all right if, after you are gone, you come back to me. I am, at least, your blood-and spare his children the curse of the grave" (15). As argued earlier, Betty is a victim of this curse that is transferred through blood lines. In accordance with the Shona traditions that Mungoshi draws on, the Mandengu family must offer one of their own daughters to the wronged family in atonement. Betty becomes the sacrificial lamb. If Betty disagrees, the curse will linger. In this instance, flowing blood speaks to the anxieties of the black populace rather than the joys of life.

Through a total inversion, blood begins to work differently as it symbolises not only misfortune and death, but also speaks to broken kinships, curses, and strained relations which I argue Mungoshi manipulates to mirror the fragmentation of the nation due to colonialism. In another instance, the Old Man wakes up from a dream and proceeds to inspect his entire compound for any tell-tale signs of ominous night visitations from wizards and witches. We are told these signs range from strange footprints on the ground to blood stains on doors:

> He goes around every hut, every building, studying carefully the doors for any bloodstains and the ground for any footmarks or anything unusual, and then the bush and weeds round the home for any tell-tale shadows because this is the hour that the enemy loves to attack… (Mungoshi 1975, 5)

Just as the colour of blood is used to describe lifeless rivers, blood again becomes a symbol of evil that threatens the Mandengu clan. Elsewhere in the novel, after a nasty quarrel with his wife, "Tongoona clicks his tongue to disperse the hard knot of hot blood that had begun to clot in his chest" (14). Blood that is meant to flow in the body begins to clot in his chest, portending death from a cardiac arrest. Just like the water that refuses to flow in Suka river, the blood refuses to flow in Tongoona's veins.

Unvoiced emotions of fear, frustration and anger manifest in liquid forms, hence Tongoona 'cries' when the land and his health fail him. Tears in the novel also depict pain, and cleansing. It is indicative that in the arid region of Manyene where people struggle to get water for domestic purposes, there is a compensating abundance of tears. In one illustrative example we read of Raina's mouth:

> …always her mouth! - opens, wider; her eyes-unblinking-pierce into his, her breath catches and quickly, like a suddenly burst subterranean stream, they fill up, overflow; the corners of her mouth twist from the flanks of the nostrils as if she is going to sneeze, and slowly-ever so slowly-she sinks, breaking down like a rotten house into a mess of uncontrolled silent tears. There is no sobbing at all, Garabha notes. All is clear, quietly flowing tears, like water poured on top of the head flowing into the earth. (Mungoshi 1975, 104)

Tears flow as a way of cleansing one's soul from pent up pain and anger. Raina's tears help her to let go of her conflictual emotions that emanate from a troubled relationship with her first-born son Garabha. The narrator notes how "[s]lowly and clearly, their past life – their relationship – flows with her tears before him" (105). While it is tempting to reduce Raina's anguish to her tense relationship with Garabha, her pain also mirrors the broader issues that confronted women during colonial times – as is the case in *Butterfly Burning*. The disgruntlement that Raina exhibits also encompass the anger from all the years of trying to eke out a living from a barren land.

In another instance, Raina manipulates her husband through tears. She "succeed[s] in accusing and crying him out of his idea of a second wife after the death of their third child" (Mungoshi 1975, 8). While these tears may be dismissed as those of a jealous wife, the reader is drawn to the ridiculousness of enlarging the family in such a hostile environment. Without any other means available to them, tears speak to the helplessness and hopelessness of the characters. Elsewhere in the novel, Raina plunges into tears as she feels helpless and commiserates with her daughter Betty who fails to get married because of an ancestral curse. On Betty's part, being single makes her feel forlorn, disconsolate, and disgraced in a society that values marriage and childbearing as defining milestones for women. It is under the burden of these societal expectations that at one time "Betty's mouth opens, closes … [as] tears roll down her cheeks and she turns away…" (33). As stated earlier, these rolling tears can be read as symbols of the unbearable burden women faced in colonial times.

These stifling conditions are amplified through the use of sweat in the novel. To begin with, characters sweat due to the scorching heat of Manyene that makes work untenable when the sun is out. In one instance, the narrator reveals as Raina is working the fields that "[a]gain she doesn't say anything. She is already sweating, not so much from the work as the heat" (Mungoshi 1975, 35). Similar to Vera's *Butterfly Burning*, sweat in *Waiting for Rain* does not symbolise fruitful labour for the workers as it should. In both texts, the sweat of the characters benefits colonial industries and farms. Because Vera publishes her novel in the post-colonial period, she can afford to be blatant in her criticism of the colonial system's abuse of black labour. She writes in characteristic poetic prose that "[t]he work is not their own: it is summoned. The time is not theirs: it is seized. The ordeal is their own. They work again and again, and in unguarded moments of hunger and surprise, they mistake their fate for their fortune" (Vera 1998, 5). The deep despair of the workers is clear for the reader to note. However, because Mungoshi publishes his novel in hazardous colonial times, he must be cautious in bemoaning the colonial marginalisation of black bodies to arid lands. He self-sensors in critiquing the segregated distribution of land where unproductive Tribal Trust Lands were given to blacks and fertile lands to whites. As Florence Stratton (1986) reminds us, the land on which black people lived was becoming less and less productive due to population pressures and droughts, while the most

fertile areas were allocated to the white settlers (12). I suggest that the author inscribes the intolerable Rhodesian socio-politico-economic conditions on the climate to avoid censure by the authorities. In this instance, sweat draws our attention to the uninhabitable black Trust Lands and the exploitation of black labour for colonial ends.

Elsewhere in the novel, sweat is used to capture the fear and discomfort of characters. This is the case when Raina asks Lucifer why he did not respond to the letters sent to him by his family members. Embarrassed, he "… looks down at his hands which are sweating a little" (Mungoshi 1975, 46). Similarly, when he has a conversation with his father, "Lucifer is aware of his father's look and he feels sweat pricking his forehead" (75). Lucifer's sweat is out of discomfort from being in a hostile place and with people he does not feel connected to. As he tells the reader, "I was born here against my will. I should have been born elsewhere, of some other parents. I have never liked it here, and I never shall and if ever I leave this place, I am not going to come back" (162). Clearly, although surface water is scarce in *Waiting for the Rain,* it is present in other forms and in subterranean realms. It shapes the author's imaginative and narrative approach.

'Watered Ancestral and Diabolical Beings': Inspirited Waters in *Waiting for the Rain*

The concept of inspirited waters suggests alternative modes of perception where water is animated with ancestral, celestial, and diabolical beings. In *Waiting for the Rain*, this is noticeable through depictions of the pool, the well and the broken hydrological cycle. Right from the evocative title and throughout the novel, there is a promise of rain that never falls. The idea of the rain that threatens to fall is also captured in the Old Man's dream in the first chapter of the novel. In the dream:

> The air trembles with roaring thunder and the earth grumbles with earthquakes and shrieking lightning splits the darkness into quivering shreds of light and he is a lonely whirling little dot who has to hold his own to stay alive. (Mungoshi 1975, 1)

The roaring thunder, grumbling of the earth and shrieking lightning herald heavy rainfall which unfortunately never comes. The elements: earth, air and sky are prominent in the hydrological

cycle and that the rain fails to fall indicates that there has been a break in this cycle. This incomplete hydrological cycle is also linked to the "now impotent Ancient Rain Tree…standing guard in an empty landscape" (41). The phrase 'empty landscape' metaphorically represents the absence of ancestors that results in a curse in Ndebele and Shona cosmologies. Such a curse manifests in the novel through the impotent rain tree that marks a significant gap in indigenous rain-making processes. As the plot unravels, we learn that rainmakers who are also crucial in the rain-making process are absent.

> It's been a hard winter and it's going to be a hard summer. In the old days, the very old women and the virgins of the village would be preparing beer for the Rainmaking Feast. But now, there is hardly any rainmaker left, and what's more, the in-time-of-need one or two left have tainted their hands with the foreign disease. It's really a laugh, a village without a rainmaker. Like a people without God. (Mungoshi 1975, 169)

In the novel, since the rainmakers are missing, and the sacred trees are impotent, the ancestors cannot be placated and summoned to help. The absurdity of the situation is captured by the phrase "it's really a laugh" and the phrase "like a people without God" speaks to the vulnerability of the people now that they are without protection. The rain that fails to fall again represents the desperate situation of black people during Rhodesian colonial times. Rainmakers are quite significant in traditional rain-making ceremonies mostly because of their supernatural powers. To summon the rains, rainmakers conduct prayers, rituals, and offerings. In Zimbabwe, rain-making ceremonies known as *mukwerera* (in Shona) and *umtolo* (in Ndebele) constitute a central part of most people's lives that hinge on agriculture. The ceremony involves beer brewing, dancing, and offering prayers to the ancestors to cleanse the land of evil that might invite the wrath of the ancestors and drought (see Chiminya 2015, Mberengwa 2016 and Ngara 2012). The supplication for and provision of abundant rains guarantees a bumper harvest. In the rural Zimbabwean setup, the ceremony is performed as the rainy season is about to commence and is often led by spirit mediums of the area. The Njelele[14] sacred site at Matopos Hills in the

[14] Njelele is one example of a famous rainmaking shrine that is located just outside Matobo National Park in Matabeleland Province of Zimbabwe. For more on this site see Makuvaza 2008 and Bhebhe 2019.

south of Zimbabwe is one such rain-making shrine in Zimbabwe. These indigenous rain-making ceremonies can be likened to cloud seeding in Western knowledge systems. Therefore, the absence of a rainmaker and the break of ancestral links can be seen as a metaphorical manifestation of the broken hydrological cycle in *Waiting for the Rain*.

There is more to rain-making ceremonies than requesting for rain. They are also about cleansing the land and appeasing the ancestors. This is apparent in the novel when the Old Man shares his experiences of fighting the first white men who came into the country with Garabha: "[t]hat year there was no rain. The Earth was angry with so much spilling of blood. We were hungry. Most of our people gave themselves up" (Mungoshi 1975, 115). The above provides an example of a situation which invited the services of the rainmakers; the earth needed cleansing from the blood that had been shed as much as to beg for the much-needed rain. Elsewhere, Zimbabwean historian Simba Chiminya (2015) notes that at such rain-making occasions people would gather under a sacred tree and make propitiation sacrifices to the ancestors. I suggest that the impotence of the sacred tree in *Waiting for the Rain* signifies the literal and spiritual barrenness that pervades the novel.

The absence of ancestors is also shown through the Old Man's drum whose beat is waning under colonial modernity. The drum, another symbol that connects the physical and the ancestral realm in the text plays a significant role, but most ignore it:

> But you don't hear it because you are making so much noise with your cracked little tin toys. If you could only stop and listen, you would hear it. It starts from a nameless, placeless place somewhere in this darkness, and, as you listen, you think it's only a small sound, but listen carefully: it has the very rhythm of something disturbing the deep bowels of the earth. You don't hear it? It is there! Always has been there! Once you hear it, it fills you up, it shakes you down to the roots, then you realize in a flash that it's not itself that has been absent but you: it is it that hears you and answers. But you keep on making a racket, you keep on making a din and so when it comes to you, you don't hear it. But it will come to you…you wait and see. And when it finally comes to you, you will be lost. Meanwhile you can laugh and play and pretend and ignore it, but you will not ignore it for long. No, you won't! Meanwhile it's the Old Man's drum. (Mungoshi 1975, 2)

The drum underscores the significance of music in invoking the spiritual world. As I shall show later in my reading of Pepetela's *The Return of the Water Spirit,* some water spirits manifest through sound as is the case with *Kianda*. Elsewhere, in *Butterfly Burning* the protagonist Phephelaphi also has a deep relationship with kwela music. In *Waiting for the Rain*, the sounds from the ancestral drum are hypnotic and dazzle the hearer. There is also the idea of drowning under these ancestral sounds as action shifts into the supernatural realm, that is the ancestral worlds of Ndebele/Shona cosmology which complete the cycle of life − the living and the departed.

In the novel, the notion of inspirited waters also manifests through the pool. The animated waters of the pool house ancestral memories and the Mandengu lineage histories. It becomes a gateway to the realm of departed ancestors, echoing Putuma's submission that water (the sea) is a place where people can connect with the dead. Her reflection in 'Water'[15] evokes the numerous black lives that were lost at sea during the heinous Trans-Atlantic Slave trade and whose souls populate the oceans. In *Waiting for the Rain*, Samambwa, the founder of the Mandengu clan commits suicide in a deep pool to connect with his ancestors. The pool becomes a paradoxical veil that separates and connects the living with the dead.

> They had almost given him up for lost when one day, happening to hear the howling of dogs by the pool, people went there and found all his dogs there, surrounding the pool, mourning their master. He had found he was growing too feeble with old age and he had thrown himself in his pool. It came to be known as The Pool, the place where he had had his first drink of water when he first came to live in these lands, and the place where he had had his last drink when he left these lands and the world to be with his people who had gone before him. (Mungoshi 1975, 130)

The ironical character of water as life-giver and life-taker is underlined although that dichotomisation is complicated in Shona cosmological beliefs where death does not mean the

[15] 'Water' is one of Koleka Putuma's poems in her collection Amnesia published in 2017. It captures our ambivalent relationship with water as a source of life and death from the Atlantic slave trade period to date. In the poem, water becomes a space on which politics of capitalism, race, gender and class are inscribed and traceable.

end but a transition to the world of the ancestors. That Samambwa's death takes place in a pool makes its waters inspirited and a cultural text from which to recover the histories of the Mandengu lineage. The family's history is not tied to the land but to the waters of the pool.

The last inspirited body of water in *Waiting for the Rain* is the compound well of the Mandengu family. Like other instances in the novel, the underground water seem to be linked to the supernatural realm. Unlike the pool which links the Mandengu family to their ancestors, the well hints at the sinister side of the underworld. Again, the paradoxical nature of water becomes conspicuous. The well houses a diabolic snake. In some indigenous cultures of Southern Africa, some snakes such as pythons represent ancestors on earth and merit reverence. This is apparent in Archibald Campbell Jordan's historical novel *The Wrath of the Ancestors* (1940) where ancestors inhabit the Majola snake. In indigenous South African Xhosa beliefs, the presence of the Majola snake signal the contentment and protection of the ancestors. As the novel shows, disrespecting the snake invites the wrath of the ancestors. Similarly, in *Waiting for the Rain* the ancestors seem to be furious as the snake that Raina and Sekai encounter in the well portends danger. Raina narrates the incident of that snake which brought misfortune to their home. She tells Lucifer that "Sekai saw it first, in the well…" Raina goes on to state that:

> The snake was meant for me…but Sekai went ahead of me. I saw her look into the well, then she jumped back, screaming…There is a snake in the well…A very big snake, I haven't seen its likes before. It was looking up at me. I hurried to look. By the time I got there only its tail was still above the water. Then it too quickly disappeared. That was the beginning of my headache, right there at the well. I felt a splitting pain start from my scalp down to the right eye. And Sekai couldn't move her hand either." (Mungoshi 1975, 55)

The eeriness of the incident creates a melancholic atmosphere that pervades the passage and is sustained throughout the novel. It is similar to the fearsome snake portrayed in the South African film, *Otelo Burning* (2010) which is also a source of unease. The snake in the film is said to be as big as a telephone pole, just like the snake in *Waiting for the Rain* that Raina describes as "[a] very big snake" (Mungoshi 1975, 55). The apparition and disappearance of this strange snake inspirits the water of the well and turns it into a hazardous space. While other water spirits such

as *Nyaminyami* of the Tonga people are benevolent and protective, the water snake in *Waiting for the Rain* is perilous and malevolent. Sekai and her parents develop mysterious ailments soon after this snake incident. According to Shona beliefs, the spirits become sinister when disrespected. One is left to guess what the Mandengu family did to antagonise the spirits. Is it John's selling out his brother to Rhodesian police or the murder of an innocent person by one of their ancestors centuries ago? Reading from the series of misfortunes that hound the Mandengu family, it is most probably a combination of both.

Conclusion

Water and other forms of liquids play a crucial role in human-human and human-ancestor relationships in both texts. Although surface water is scarce in *Waiting for the Rain* and *Butterfly Burning,* both narratives draw heavily on the narrative potentialities of water to represent black people's experiences in colonial Rhodesia. In my watery reading of these two Zimbabwean texts, it has been possible to reread Phephelaphi and reimagine gender relations that typical nationalist narratives undermine. On the one hand, I have argued that Vera draws from the local myth of water spirits to render agency and subjectivity to her female characters and to problematise phallocentric obstacles that oppress them. On the other hand, I argued that Mungoshi deploys inspirited waters and the materiality of water as narrative devices that advance the plot, become aesthetic elements and underscore themes such as drought and death. Although there is a shortage of tangible water in both texts, there are copious references to water in dreams, beneath the earth and fluids that reside under the skin.

CHAPTER THREE

‘Slither Freedom’: Reading MaMlambo in *Otelo Burning* and *The Woman of the Stone Sea*

In this chapter, I focus on how the figure of *MaMlambo* is represented in the film *Otelo Burning* (2011) and the novel *The Woman of the Stone Sea* (2019) both produced in the South African post-apartheid era. There is a blending of magical realism and African mythology as *MaMlambo* becomes a rich thematic and narrative device that illustrates the flexible nature of myths. As argued in the introductory chapter, myths can be adapted to local needs and circumstances and be re-appropriated in either form or content. The depictions of *MaMlambo* in both texts underscore her ambivalent qualities as both ominous and benevolent.

In the opening scene of *Otelo Burning*, the voice over narrator, New Year, states that:

> Growing up in Lamontville, we were taught to be scared of water. Otelo’s dad said that there was a snake that lived there. He said he had seen it in a dream. It was as long as a telephone pole and as thick as a cow’s head. And it would sing to you like a beautiful girl. Then it would take you.

Oscar (Otelo’s father) has troubling recurring dreams where the snake, which I read as *MaMlambo*, takes his youngest son before he turns thirteen. To cheat that fate, he forbids his sons from visiting the local river. From this unease, we notice the thin line between the natural and supernatural, as well as the conscious and subconscious that pervades the film. In *The Woman of the Stone Sea*, the protagonist Hendrick’s living arrangement with a black watermeisie (water maiden) he rescues from the sea again speaks to the interplay between the natural and the supernatural. In the novel, Hendrick is baffled by the half woman-half fish he finds stranded by the West Coast beach. While the creature reminds him of the mermaids his wife used to obsess over, he also wonders if she is *MaMlambo* which the Xhosa people believe in.

The incorporation of *MaMlambo* into these texts places them within the realm of magical realism where supernatural events are naturalised. As mentioned in the introduction, this chapter benefits from the works of scholars such as Maurice Vambe and their reading of the fantastic mode which frees most texts from the constraints of the measurable and blurs the line between the material and spiritual worlds (2004). In her reading of fantastic literature, Rosemary Jackson, argues that the fantastic "…traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over..." (1981, 4). This reading of the fantastic is useful to my reading of water spirits that are associated with the obscure depths of the oceans and rivers. Submerged in water, they get to be imagined and manipulated in a number of ways, sometimes conveying the society's anxieties and fears especially when it comes to the unknown or dreaded. Moreover, Jackson (1981) suggests that fantastic literature is "a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss" (2).

In the same vein, Cooper (1998) argues that magical realism flourishes in communities "… where old and new, modern and ancient, the scientific and magical views of the world co-exist" (216). Especially important for this chapter is her argument that magical realism thrives on transition considering that the South Africa depicted in both texts is undergoing waves of change. In *Otelo Burning* Apartheid South Africa is imploding while *The Woman of the Stone Sea* explores issues of belonging twenty years into 'democratic' rule. In this chapter, I work with magical realism as a mode of narration in both texts and as stated earlier, Grzeda's reading of magical realism in South African texts becomes invaluable as the texts considered in this chapter are concerned with the tensions that come with reconciling the different time periods in South African history. In both texts, the past and the present clash as characters strive to forge a way forward. Moreover, in thinking with Hofmeyr (forthcoming), the chapter also reads for water in its material and metaphoric manifestations in both texts; that is the notion of inspirited waters and water as a narrative technique.

Below I first consider the film *Otelo Burning*, exploring how water, water bodies and the trope of *MaMlambo* are manipulated to speak to the unpredictable transition period from apartheid to democracy. Thereafter, a close reading of Vandermerwe's *The Woman of the Stone Sea* follows,

where I examine how the figure of *MaMlambo* is deployed to capture post-apartheid moments in South Africa.

Otelo Burning

Otelo Burning is a 2011 film produced by Sara Blecher. The main actors are three teen friends Otelo, Mandla and New Year, who is also the narrator. There are also supporting actors such as Dezi (Otelo's girlfriend), 'Ma-Christmas' (New Year and Dezi's mother) who runs a shebeen, Blade her militant son, Skumbuzo (who oversees the communal swimming pool) and Ntwe (Otelo's twelve-year-old younger brother). It is a tragic *bildungsroman* of three South African teenagers on the eve of Nelson Mandela's release from Victor Verster prison. The times are unpredictable, unknowable, and according to Bhekizizwe Peterson, filled with "uncertainties, contradictions and hopes as [South Africa] transitions from apartheid to democracy" (2014, 341). Litheko Modisane observes that the "film is indicative of changing fortunes of the township and portrays it [the township] as an object of ambivalence and sometimes rejection" (2014, 345). To capture this uncertain and unsettling phase, Blecher employs the figure of the water snake which is an elusive, ambiguous, and ambivalent creature. In the film, the water snake is portrayed as both a typical water spirit that lurks underwater before it strikes its unsuspecting victim, but also as a figurative embodiment of human greed, jealousy, anger, and violence. To speak to the first aspect, a few minutes into the film, Ntwe almost drowns when he disregards his father's (Oscar) misgivings about the river. In relation to the second aspect, a cloud of internecine violence between ANC freedom fighters and Inkatha freedom fighters forms the backdrop of the film. Blecher also underscores individual challenges of family relationships and broader friendships throughout the movie. In privileging the personal over the national, Blecher rescues individual narratives of common people that are often buried under the glamour of liberation struggles.

The plot details the protagonists' quest to escape poverty through becoming professional surfers, a sport that is more popular with white people. While all goes well for a season as Mandla and Otelo reach national championships against all odds, all collapse due to a series of betrayals that

compel Otelo to kill Mandla and commit suicide. To begin with, Ntwe is necklaced[16] to death by ANC fighters after Mandla misleads Skumbuzo into believing that Ntwe is a sell-out. It is ironical that Ntwe is 'necklaced' on the day that Otelo wins crucial inter-provincial surfing championships. The death of Ntwe breaks Otelo's relationship with his father who blames him for his young brother's tragic death. He is chased away from home and relocates to what appears to be a derelict lighthouse called the 'Dead man's Point' where he continues to train for the national championships. He later learns from Dezi (his girlfriend) that Mandla raped her. Distraught, Otelo follows Mandla to the national surfing championships and shoots him to death besides the ocean. He throws his gun on the sand and disappears into the same ocean.

In an interview with Meg Samuelson and Glen Thompson (2014), Sara Blecher, the director of the film, states that the movie mirrors William Shakespeare's *Othello* in that it is about greed, jealousy, and betrayal. Both protagonists (Otelo and Othello) rise above the inhibitions of race to conquer hostile public stages but fail to master their hearts and the tempests of their private lives. However, whereas Othello murders Desdemona in a moment of blind rage fuelled by Iago's deceptive schemes, Otelo justifiably murders Mandla for raping Dezi and for betraying his young brother. Blecher intimates that "the film include[s] so many different people's stories. It is all based on their real stories" (ibid). The setting is the Durban township of Lamontville.[17] Writing about the township setting of the movie, Peterson (2014) describes it as "…a dark, menacing, and depraved landscape, where all sorts physical, psychological, and political forms of violence are ever present…" (341). The dystopic township is contrasted to the Lamontville pool and Indian ocean, that throughout the film promise escape from the toxic politics of the land but also become ambivalent spaces that witness the death of Ntwe and Mandla. The ominous side of these aquatic spaces accords with local Zulu cosmological beliefs that are embodied in Oscar and which Bernard ties with the training of *sangomas*. The chosen *sangomas* either physically submerge in water or via dreams. While some survive this training, there is always a risk of not

[16] Necklacing in this context refers to a tactic that was used to kill traitors during apartheid. It involves placing a tyre which would be later set alight on the victim's neck. In most cases, the body would be burnt beyond recognition.

[17] For more on the township of Lamontville, read Litheko Modisane's article 'Otelo Burning: On the turbulence of freedom' (2014).

coming back from the depths of the waters. (Bernard 2010). The water deities, if angered or disrespected do not hesitate to kill.

The film also deploys the image of the train and still photographs as markers of different spaces and time. According to Blecher, the train in *Otelo Burning* shows that the experiences of being at the beach and then in the township are so radically different that you need a journey between them (2014). Moreover, the image of the train also aptly represents the transitional trope of the film and reminds us that liberation is an ongoing journey or process rather than a destination or event. In terms of the device of still photographs, Glen Thompson (2014) suggests that "the photo album is an interesting visual device to mark the passing of time" (356). Still photographs break the chronological flow of the narrative and invite the viewer to reflect on the promises of liberation and the fruits thereof. This reminds the viewer that what is engrossing them is fiction rather than real life, a critical gesture considering that movies simulate real life experiences with their tactile, visual, and aural capabilities.

The film *Otelo Burning* centres water as setting, material, and metaphor. Even the actions that happen on land are somehow prompted by water, hence we see the myths affecting and ordering life on land. The most significant scenes happen near or around water bodies: Ntwe's death at the swimming pool and Otelo's revenge on the beach. *Otelo Burning* draws on the darker side of the mythical *MaMlambo* (she lures her victims to doom by singing sweetly to them before she strikes) to speak to the fears and anxieties of the black South Africans as they grapple with the different meanings of freedom. Set against the backdrop of the violent collapse of apartheid, *Otelo Burning* interrogates "different paths to freedom, finding it in moments of escape, fighting others for it, and the significant costs inherent in each approach" (Arnold 2012, n.p).

In the midst of what Peterson (2014) describes as a dark, menacing and depraved landscape, we have three significant bodies of water, the river, the community swimming pool and the sea which all propel the plot. The portrayal of these bodies of water contrasts sharply with what is usually associated with water (life, cleansing and purification). With the township literally burning as suggested by the title, water does nothing to extinguish the fire as one would expect.

On the one hand, the river is associated with *MaMlambo*, not the spirit that protects but the one that kills; hence the children are forbidden from getting near the river. On the other hand, the pool and the sea are seen as possible escape routes despite the apartheid laws which excluded black people from these spaces. The portrayal of these water bodies also brings in the paradoxical nature of water: its ability to be and to do several things at the same time. In what follows, my first focus is the river followed by the swimming pool. Because it is familiar and man-made, the pool is usually not a place for superstitions, but this is where Ntwe dies just before he turns thirteen as per his father's dream. Contrary to its calm waters, the pool turns out to be more dangerous than the river's raging waters. My last focus will be the ocean, the waves that beckon with all sorts of wonderful promises, offering Otelo a real chance of escaping Lamontville, of getting money, fame and 'room service'. The price is too high however as *MaMlambo* seemingly follows from the pool where she takes Ntwe, to the ocean waves where she claims the lives of Otelo and Mandla.

The River

In their representation in literature, rivers are both landscapes and figurative frames for the narration of diverse themes. This is in line with Manuel Gómez's (2018) observation that "…the water imagery of the river is particularly ingrained in cultures as the source of life, mythical significance, symbolic revelations as well as literary inspiration; therefore, the imagery of and about the river has become part of the universal human experience from primeval times to our present" (139). In the film, the river is portrayed as an ambivalent space whose surface fascinates the beholder, but its depth terrifies the imagination. There is a palpable sense of lurking, invisible danger beneath the flowing waters of the river. It is a wild and inaccessible space, bolstering local beliefs of ominous spirits that dwell underneath. From this basis, in the film, Oscar alleges that a giant water snake inhabits this river. The natural shape and flow of the river as it meanders around rocks visually evokes the movement of a snake, as does the water's shimmery surface and melodic sounds that all serve to lure its unsuspecting victim. It is no surprise that humans have projected their fears of the alien on rivers. *Otelo Burning* draws on this unfathomable and monstrous character of the river.

For the first eighteen seconds of the film, the screen is pitch black and there is total silence. The next cinematic sequence visualises blurry underwater shots that are accompanied by echoing sounds of water drops that establish an eerie atmosphere and sensation of doom which is sustained throughout the film. The movement of the camera slowly draws the viewer into this dark underwater world. The extreme close shots of the depth of the river resonate with Oscar's dream of the water snake which lures its victim to a watery death. The camerawork creates a strong contrast between the bright water surface and the dark underwater shots, and this sets the scene for Oscar's fears. It is within this backdrop that the voice – over narrator introduces the viewer to Oscar's belief that beneath the river lurks a dangerous giant snake that is set to take his youngest son Ntwe before his thirteenth birthday. To avoid this catastrophe, Oscar forbids his son from going near the river until he turns thirteen years old. The significance of the danger becomes evident when Ntwe visits the river in the company of his brother Otelo and friend New Year. Ntwe dives into the river and is swept along its raging waves before he is rescued from the river in an unconscious state. This scene draws on beliefs of water snakes in some parts of Southern Africa. These water snakes can drown people by pulling them down to their watery abodes to train them as *sangomas* or kill them as punishment for sins committed against the ancestors.

Going back to the depiction of the river in the film, its water is fast flowing and becomes foamy as it encounters rocks and reeds. Bernard (2010) suggests that this marks the perfect abode of water spirits who prefer flowing living waters to the entrapment of stagnant waters. Such favoured habitats are generally characterized by remoteness from human habitation and minimal human interference which all reinforce their mysteriousness, as the unknown allows for the free play of imagination. While, from a western scientific perspective foam results from decaying organic matter, Sotho cosmological beliefs consider the presence of foam in water bodies as signaling the presence of water spirits. Oftentimes, foam is read as a welcoming gesture from the spirits, but Oscar's fear of the river brings to the fore the other side of rivers and demonstrate the paradoxical qualities of water: their ability to be or do several things at once: they can nurture life but can also kill, just like the spirits who populate their depths. When one is favoured, the spirits grant life but when provoked, they terminate it. Rivers can also connect people and

separate them at the same time. This separation does not just manifest when rivers become barriers as physical boundaries as is the case in Ngugi's *The River Between* but also in separating the spiritual realms from the physical and living worlds.

In her book, *Writing the Ancestral River* (2001) that also draws on local South African water beliefs, Jacklyn Cock suggests that the deep pools of Kowie River provide access to the realm of the ancestors which the Xhosa people term 'abantu boMlambo'. This feeds into the conceptualization of the river as a metaphysical space where people can connect with their departed relatives. Putuma emphasizes the same idea in her poem 'Water*'* in which she depicts the sea as a sacred space when she states that "[w]e have come to be baptized here, we have come to stir the other world here, we have come to cleanse ourselves here, we have come to connect our living to the dead here" (2017, np). While in these instances, bodies of water seem to be populated with benign divine spirits, *Otelo Burning* transforms the river into a dangerous space that houses a monstrous snake. This again evokes Putuma's poem 'Water'. Although Putuma's poem makes no mention of a snake, the persona recalls how her elders also forbade her from daring the hazardous waters of the ocean, for fear that she would not return. Just like the snake which haunted Oscar in his dreams, Putuma invokes the same fears of dying and getting lost at sea forever like those slaves during the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Despite his father's warnings, Ntwe cannot resist the pull of the river as shown in the first river scene. He disregards the advice of his father and plunges into the river and almost drowns to death. It is ironical and indicative that the first words Ntwe utters when he regains consciousness are "there is no snake under the water". These subversive words which are reiterated as the film progresses, mark Blecher's reworking of the water spirit myth to speak to the challenges that come with South Africa's political transition. The challenges lurk everywhere. This revision is made more explicit as the film reaches its denouement when the voice-over narrator intimates after the tragic shooting of Mandla by Otelo that:

> on that day Otelo finally saw the snake. He realised it doesn't live in the river in Lamontville. Or in the swimming pool or in the sea. The snake that Otelo

> saw lives in all of us. And it does sing to you like a beautiful girl. Songs of freedom. Then it takes you. It took Mandla. And it took Otelo too.

In most colonial works of art, the river is portrayed as savage and in need of taming to serve the the modern human being. It is depicted as a symbol of the Dark Continent and becomes a target for the colonial project as is the case with the Congo River in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* ([1899] 1993). Blecher problematises these earlier associations as she moves the scenes of death from the river to the domesticated swimming pool and the luxurious beach which have mostly been associated with modernization and progress. From that angle, both the pool and the sea seem to repudiate the idea of a superstitious and perilous snake which kills its victims. Yet in *Otelo Burning*, *MaMlambo* seems to strike besides these 'safe' bodies of water. Ntwe, Otelo and Mandla all perish besides, and in these waters. In many cultural productions, the river is usually associated with life, purification, cleansing and although the film flips this narrative, the river remains the only body of water in the film that is not tainted with blood. Ntwe's near-death experience at the river can be read as a sign that the river was not as empty as he wanted to believe but housed ancestors who protected him from death.

Elsewhere, Sir Victor Uwaifo, a Ghanaian singer underscores the benevolent side of the water spirit, which is known as *Mamiwata* in Western Africa, a pidgin term for mother of water. He has mentioned of his encounter with this water spirit in several interviews and how his fortunes turned around for the better thereafter. In one of his famous songs, 'Guitar Boy', he sings that "If you see *Mamiwata*, never ever you run away". In this instance water spirits are associated with wealth creation; thus, it becomes beneficial to embrace them. In Oscar's case however, the encounter with the snake in his dream traumatizes him.

So far, I have tried to show how the river is traditionally associated with dread and menace on the one hand, and life and nourishment on the other. But the menace is illusory, it seems. What does this suggest about freedom? I argue that the concept of freedom in the film remains as elusive and ambiguous as water and the spirits that reside in it. One notices that the depiction of the water spirits keeps changing with circumstances and as people mingle with different cultures, speaking to the creolization of the figure.

The Pool

In contrast to the wild and mysterious river, the Lamontville community swimming pool seems to represent shelter and hope for the youth of the township whose homes and streets are battlefields. The water in the pool is blue, placid, glittering and welcoming unlike the boisterous, brownish, and treacherous waters of the river. As man-made, the pool represents order, structure and even control. Because it follows human designs and desires, this water ceases to be associated with the mysterious, unknown, invisible forces of rivers and seas. Instead, it represents man's triumph over nature. Humans control the type and amount of water that goes into a pool making it more accessible when compared to the river. The waters of the pool are therefore known, predictable, tame and amenable to human needs.

In the interview with Samuelson and Thompson cited earlier, Blecher (2014, 352) intimates that the Lamontville pool:

> …was the only swimming pool along that whole Kwazulu-Natal coastline in any black area that survived through the years of gangsterism and violence [in the late 1980s and early 1990s]. Most of the township pools were commandeered by gangsters as the place where they could do girls or get drugs. Later the comrades saw the pools as symbols of apartheid. The same way municipal offices were destroyed, and libraries, the pools were destroyed.

The Lamontville pool is, therefore, an important historical and narrative device in the film *Otelo Burning*. It is introduced to the viewer through an aerial shot sequence that shifts from a depressing sight of the ramshackle shacks of Lamontville before it closes in on the immaculate blue waters of the pool. The visuals alone help to separate the pool from the decay of the township. It comes as a confirmation when Skumbuzo, the caretaker of the pool tells the young swimmers under his tutelage that "this pool holds a bright future for you." New Year reveals that "Skumbuzo was like a father to us. He knew how to make us happy." Indeed, for most of the children like New Year, Dezi and Mandla, Skumbuzo was the sole father figure in their lives since their families were broken. In the same vein, although Otelo and Ntwe's biological father was around, his iron-fist rendered him the nemesis. Throughout the film, Lamontville homes and families are presented as prisons where parents bruise and abuse their children. For this reason,

the lighting in scenes that feature the different homes is darkish, setting a somber atmosphere. This pessimistic depiction of the home is contrasted to the bright atmosphere of the Lamontville pool where children learn to swim, braai, dance, and chat with abandon. In the first swimming pool scene of the film, the children seem to be cherishing the rare moments from the violence of the streets and their homes. During a party that is held beside the calming pool waters, the nondiegetic music is upbeat and pleasant unlike the eerie diegetic sounds of the river scene and the chaotic noises from children's homes. The pool then seems to hold the future for the troubled children especially when compared to the river with the gigantic snake lurking beneath its waters. By offering an escape route, the swimming pool seems to promise a different form of life that is kinder and safer than that of the harsh homes, perilous streets, and hostile nation.

In the film, the swimming pool seems to offer refuge from the toxic politics of the land. We get this impression in at least three scenes. In the first one, people running from bloody skirmishes with Inkatha Freedom Party fighters hide behind the gates of the pool. An unidentified victim of these clashes dies and lies outside the pool where Skumbuzo later sits helpless and in tears. In the second scene, Oscar entrusts his son Ntwe to Skumbuzo so he can teach him to swim and perhaps position him to elude the water snake. In relation to the third scene, Otelo and Mandla take Ntwe to the pool and ask Skumbuzo to look after him so that they can go to compete at the regional surfing championships. However, the idealistic side of the pool is here shattered as the paradoxical violence of national freedom leads to Ntwe's death beside the pool. In this traumatic scene, ANC comrades under the leadership of Blade douse Ntwe with petrol, hang a tire around his neck and burn him to death, an act that reminds one of the necklacing of sellouts during the fight for liberation. The 'freedom' fighters sing and dance around the helpless twelve-year-old Ntwe fulfilling Blade's belief that "Freedom costs. It costs a lot. And it is not easy to get. It costs blood. People have to die." That Ntwe is burnt to ashes besides the waters of a swimming pool that was meant to be a refuge and under the watch of Skumbuzo raises questions about the cost of freedom and what it entails. It anticipates the betrayal of liberation promises in the post-colonial state. The flame of freedom is well capable of consuming its children, the very people it is supposed to protect. This becomes the meaning of the snake that traumatizes Oscar and was supposed to kill Ntwe before he turned thirteen. From its calming waters in the midst of the

relentless chaos of the streets and homes, the pool soon changes to become a site of murder, a place where dreams are killed. If the pool can be read as a symbol of the yearning for freedom in South Africa, then the killing of Ntwe signals that the new South Africa was not yet ready to fulfill these dreams.

Ironically, the denouement of the film again re-establishes the pool as a place of refuge and hope. This time it is New Year rather than Skumbuzo who tells the children, "This pool here can give you a future. Are you sure you want to go in?" One can argue that this is Blecher's way of reminding the viewer that the struggle for freedom is sacred and must be pursued regardless of the inherent dangers. Samuelson contends that "[i]n the final frame, then, freedom is no longer identified with escape from the township, but invested rather in the pool, blue spaces immanent to it that function as 'portals to other worlds'" (2014, 318). In this closing scene, an establishing aerial shot again depicts the pool as the sole bright spot of the dystopic Lamontville surroundings. The sequence zooms in on the pool where children gather around New Year and answer yes to his question before plunging into its glimmering waters. The pool again becomes a site for refuge and happiness for these children who are running from the chaos and violence of the township. However, we must ask what sort of future could be envisioned for the children as represented by the swimming pool? Besides the lives lost next and close to it, the water in the pool is controlled and stagnant, and there is a need for an instructor all the time. Although this may speak to safety, is there not a suggestion of lives being contained?

The Sea

Considering the above constrictions of the pool, the ocean at first offers the promise of ultimate freedom and success, miles from the chaos and despair of Lamontville township. Samuelson (2014, 308) suggests that "as limen between land and sea, the beach is moreover a potent site for performing the rites of passage that, in *Otelo Burning* have an individual and national referent." The initial introduction of the ocean to the viewer comprises an establishing shot of raging but inviting blue ocean waters into which Mandla plunges with his surfboard. The next cinematic sequence shows underwater visuals of Mandla riding the waves before we are taken to the surface of the waters where he weathers the tempestuous currents. He is temporarily buried

under these waters and Ntwe fears that Mandla is going to die. The suspense and danger are dispelled moments later when Mandla resurfaces triumphant as he attacks the oncoming wave before he balances on his surfboard to the palpable satisfaction of Otelo who intimates "[t]hat is what people mean when they talk about freedom." Exultant, Mandla raises his hands in conquest and this moment is frozen on the screen via a still image that reads "April 1988, Mandla walking on water." Otelo reiterates the association of the ocean with freedom later that night as he converses with his girlfriend Dezi. He poses and answers a rhetorical question; "Do you know how freedom feels? We haven't seen anything yet. I see myself somewhere. Doing big things with my life. Not driving taxis. You getting your room service. Me surfing. I have realised that life doesn't end here."

Sihle Xaba who plays Mandla in the film, provides insightful background to the freedom connotations of the ocean in an interview with Samuelson and Thompson (2014). He divulges that for black township youths who:

> have been locked in this world of poverty and violence; to them it was another planet. This is something that I experienced coming from Lamontville and going to the beach. When I look at it now, the beach is an everyday thing. But when we never used to have access to the beach, even if you saw a little bit of the ocean you were like: 'Wow! That is totally another planet'. It is still fascinating to me: being locked up in a township is something totally different from the beach; whatever has been happening in the township you have already forgotten about it at the beach. When you look back at the township, the trauma starts all over again. When you go back to the beach all the trauma is flushed away. (358)

The film represents the Indian Ocean as a place of refuge, adventure, and individual progress through the sport of surfing. Here the boys (Otelo, Mandla and New Year) meet a white surfer Kurt who introduces them to the alluring glamorous life of a professional surfer that includes hotel room service, travelling and material wealth. Samuelson (2014, 314) emphasizes that "…for Otelo and his peers… surfing is freedom and an alternative to both the entrapping logic of apartheid and the violence of (counter) revolutionary activity." While Kurt introduces the boys to professional surfing, the boys first learn about surfing from Mandla who was introduced to the sport by her mother's white boss's son. In a bid to impress Dezi and outwit Otelo for the girl's

affection, Mandla always brags about his numerous skills at sea, especially surfing, a sport closely associated with white people at the time. His friends disbelieve him at first, compelling Mandla to invite them and offer his services as their coach. The moment they see Mandla riding the waves, they instantly fall in love with the sea. Samuelson (2014, 314) suggests that "[t]hroughout the film, the sea extends a glistening, clear blue-green vista; its waters spatter the camera lens to produce brilliant light-spots that render the surfing scenes simultaneously magical and authentic." I read these captivating moments of the boys falling in love with the sea waves as *MaMlambo* singing out harmoniously, seducing, beckoning to the boys with numerous promises, one of which is freedom. Elsewhere in another South African film by Palesa Letlaka titled *MaMlambo*, the figure of *MaMlambo* is imagined as a beautiful girl who is capable of bestowing immense wealth and joy on her chosen ones. In Letlaka's film, two homeless boys summon *MaMlambo* to provide material wealth such as shelter, money and cars. In *Otelo Burning*, although material riches are anticipated through professional surfing, Blecher further underscores *MaMlambo's* association with freedom as that was the most pressing issue of the time. The above observation illustrates the flexibility of *MaMlambo* who can represent different things to different people, all depending on their circumstances.

In the film, Otelo conceptualizes freedom from the endless horizons of the ocean, its fresh air, and enchanting waves. This space is by no means something he can relate to; so, it fosters idealistic notions about peace and freedom that have hitherto eluded his troubled life. At home, his father is abusive and autocratic, while the streets are as violent and punitive. Coming from these terrible spaces where dreaming seems to be pointless and sometimes forbidden, Otelo's idea of freedom is unsurprisingly more personal than communal and national. As Samuelson observes in her reading of the trope of surfing in literature (2014, 313), "[i]n many a '*surf noir*', surfing is shaded by greed and competition, or the anti-social willingness to pay any price for the ultimate wave." Thus, like the snake which sings to you before it strikes, the sea becomes something he cannot resist.

In as much as the boys derived from the sea and the beach the much-needed distraction from their quotidian drudgery, they still had to contend with apartheid racism and classism. As the

symbolic signpost that is shown in one scene from the film reminds us, the beach was a "WHITES ONLY" space during those times. This shows how the exclusionary politics of the land were carried to water as well. However, with the help of Kurt who soon takes over their training and manages to get them sponsors and into competitions, the world seems a bit brighter for the boys as the walls of apartheid begin to crumble on the Durban beach. As Blecher intimates in an interview with Thompson and Samuelson, "the beach [becomes] a meeting place for white and black people…" (2014, 357). For the teenage black friends, it is about getting into the competitions and winning them too. So, in subtle ways, these aspiring surfers wage their own struggle against racism on the beach. As New Year reminds the viewer, "[w]hen you are on top of the waves, all this shit goes away. It is freedom."

Yet one can argue that this feeling of freedom is *MaMlambo's* sweet but ensnaring song, drawing them closer before her fatal strike. On the day of the championships, the boys heed Kurt's advice to forget about the ritual of throwing objects into water to gauge if the ancestors welcome them or not. This decision marks the collapse of the boys' union and dream. As Otelo utters the portentous words "Fuck tradition. Let us surf", Ntwe meets his calamitous death besides the pool. From this point on, the movie's intertextuality with Shakespeare's *Othello* is brought to the fore as the rivalry between Otelo and Mandla, which all along has been simmering, reaches its climax. The friction between the two intensifies as Otelo outwits Mandla in the race to Dezi's heart and the regional championships. When Otelo learns that Mandla is the real impimpi (spy) and that he raped Dezi, he shoots Mandla and escapes into the ocean. In the words of Samuelson (2014, 314) "the sea [becomes] dark and malevolent and the camera sinks with Otelo into its obscure depths." She goes on to observe that "Otelo Burning suggests that the beach is a setting in which the black subject is driven towards tragic conclusions" (ibid, 317).

Those like Otelo and Mandla who heeded *MaMlambo's* call and took to professional surfing with its enticing promises of fame and wealth pay the ultimate price. The 'snake' was never in the wild river but lurking under the glistening blue and clear waters of the swimming pool and the alluring currents of the ocean where Mandla and Otelo perish. The sea, like the pool, proves to be destructive, because, although it cannot be contained, it is reduced to a recreational arena −

and there too *MaMlambo* takes her revenge. So, what might this suggest about the quest of freedom? The ambivalence of freedom itself. Modisane (2014, 347) offers that:

> In considering the nature of the ocean, it becomes immediately apparent that if it is a site of free expressivity, it also signifies the instabilities of the concept of freedom and the costs of attaining it. Simultaneously ominous and thrilling, the ocean, by implication, alludes to the inconclusive labour of comprehending the meaning of freedom and the potential dangers inherent in the search for this desirable but elusive state of being.

The river, the pool and the sea are the three bodies of water that one encounters in the film and although only the river is linked to the dangerous snake, we see the 'snake' making its way from the river to the pool and the sea where it strikes in the most unexpected ways. I argue that the symbolic presence of the snake speaks to the shifting and changing ideas of freedom. The film is set in the last years of apartheid, and although most people have an idea of what their freedom should entail, the whole notion is elusive and cannot be fully apprehended. The idea of freedom continuously shifts depending on who is selling and telling it.

The Woman of the Stone Sea

While the first part of this chapter discusses the different ideas of freedom from the late 1980s to the 1990s in South Africa, my analysis of *The Woman of the Stone Sea* (2019) takes these notions further by showing how through the trope of the fantastic, Vandermerwe deploys a multiplicity of perspectives in representing the ambivalent, fragile, and somewhat confounding nature of life in post-apartheid South Africa. Just as in Mohale Mashigo's *Intruders*, an anthology of short stories that through speculative fiction foregrounds marginalised characters, *The Woman of the Stone Sea* relativises the borders between past and present, the real and supernatural. The supernatural and human worlds co-mingle as people try to make sense of their fears and anxieties. This is in a South Africa "… where raw inequality has become most blatant" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 288); a place "of rapid social transformation, under historical conditions that yield an ambiguous mix of possibility and powerlessness, of desire and despair, of mass joblessness and hunger amidst the accumulation, by some, of great amounts of new

wealth" (Gluck1963 qtd in Comaroff 1999, 283). Lee (2017) reiterates that "this is the period of transition during which South Africa's social and national reality continues to shift and change" (83). This is the context that informs Vandemerwe's text: A South Africa that is letting go of the post-apartheid euphoria and is now dealing with disenchantment and melancholy (Stobie 2012). What better way to explore and problematise this unsettled South Africa than through the figure of the watermeisie (water maiden) which is as slippery and fluid as the element of water, its abode.

The story is set around 2017, more than two decades into democratic rule, yet despair and disenchantment saturate the novel, matching what Pallavi Rastogi terms "South African writing after apartheid which reflects and refracts not only the change in political dispensation but also the push-pull of hope and despair still marking the post-apartheid nation" (2019, 382). Through underlining the theme of desolation, the novel emplaces itself within a dystopian trend in South African cultural production that includes *Zoo City* (2010) by Lauren Beukes, Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to our Hillbrow* (2001), Kgebetle Moele's *Room 207* (2006) and *The Blacks of Cape Town* (2013) by Carolann Davids. As Moylan (2000) suggests, "…as dystopian fictions criticize socio-political systems from the perspective of disaffected outsiders, the reader becomes infused with militant pessimism and further, the characteristically open endings foster focused anger and radical hope" (57). In *The Woman of the Stone Sea*, while most characters seem to have come to the cynical conclusion that surviving in South Africa is like trying to sail in a stone sea, the building of Hendrik's ship at the end of the novel suggests some form of hope.

In *The Woman of the Stone Sea*, the South African born writer Meg Vandermerwe explores the place of the subaltern in the new South Africa. We witness a similar trend in most of her works, from her collection of short stories *This Place I call Home* (2010) to her widely acclaimed debut novel *Zebra Crossing* (2013) where she underscores the untold stories of the ordinary people, stories side-lined in the mainstream media. Her characters are not confined to South African stereotypes as shown in *Zebra Crossing* (2013) where the plot chronicles the precarious life of seventeen-year-old immigrant Chipo in Cape Town during the 2010 Soccer World Cup period. Chipo is extra 'othered' by her immigration status, her albino condition, and her female sex. In

her essay 'Imagining the Forbidden Racial Other', Vandermerwe stresses that it is this desire to "imagine the other for self-illumination and self-humanisation that inspired [her] first collection of short stories…. And which underpins… *The Woman of the Stone Sea*…" (2018, 87). She further explains in an interview with *Aerodrome* in 2014 that:

> Writing for me means exploring people and situations that I acknowledge I know little about and desperately want to understand better. It means imagining the other so that I can build bridges of empathy and with it humanity both for myself and for my reader. It means shining a light on darkened corners. It means asking questions rather than offering answers (n.p.)

In her bid to imagine the other and to build bridges across humanity, Vandermerwe resorts to what could be called fantasy or magical realism in *The Woman of the Stone Sea.* The deployment of magical realism enables her to cross boundaries, which, according to Njabulo Ndebele must be transgressed deliberately in other ways because they cannot always be crossed physically (qtd in Vandemerwe 2018, 89). In her own words, the need to stretch these boundaries is her way "to better understand and empathize with the memories and motivations of a country that [she] was considering returning to after twenty-two years in self-imposed exile" (2018, 88).

Synopsis of *The Woman of the Stone Sea*

The Woman of the Stone Sea is set in a small village on the west coast of South Africa. It is the story of Hendrik, a struggling fisherman, whose brother Anton, a liberation comrade is tortured to death for his political activities against the apartheid regime. The protagonist's wife Rebekkah relocates to this coastal village from the dry lands of Karoo, a fact that might explain her fascination with water and mermaid stories throughout the novel. She later disappears into the Atlantic Ocean, never to be seen again. We are introduced to Hendrik five years after the disappearance of Rebekkah, as a broken man on a mission to destroy his life. With all his family gone, he has lost all hope. The novel opens with one such scene as he tries to drown himself at sea. He is rescued by a mysterious figure whom we later learn is Xolani, a caretaker at a local school. As the plot develops, his life seems to take a dramatic turn when he rescues a black

mermaid he finds stranded on an isolated beach. Confused and believing this mermaid to be connected to Rebekah, Hendrick smuggles her to his cottage where he keeps her in his bathing tub which he constantly fills with sea water. He feeds the mermaid with crayfish, her favourite dish. With the mermaid now settled in his cottage, Hendrick has a fresh purpose in life which is to keep the mermaid alive until he can take her back to her home. He believes the mermaid came from an estuary in Port Elizabeth which was destroyed to make way for a building belonging to the President's daughter. As the plot unravels, the mermaid begins to shapeshift into a woman and takes a keen interest in Rebekkah's possessions, in particular a yellow dress which she wears often. Apart from shapeshifting into a woman, she changes Hendrick's fortunes significantly. Before the mermaid comes into his life, his circumstances are straitened. We read that he is sick of being:

> …a crayfish man, of hocking his kreef to whoever will take them, and never for a fair price. Of the liquor store that won't give him credit, the snotty Richards girl on the till looking down her nose at him even though he's known her family since before she was a worm in her mother's womb. (Vandermerwe 2019, 12)

However, after the arrival of the mermaid, he becomes the chief supplier of the juiciest crayfish in the village and money starts pouring in. But as we later discover, his liaison with this water maiden costs him dearly. The water maiden kills Sara, Hendrick's latest love interest. The reader is introduced to Sara later in the novel as a flame from Hendrick's past who had moved to Cape Town for cancer treatment at around the same time of Rebekah's disappearance. Not knowing the reason for Sara's disappearance, Hendrick takes it as another betrayal (how could she leave when he needed her the most) and cuts ties with her. Through her insistence however, the two finally reconnect. Sara eventually reveals the truth about Rebekkah's disappearance and how all along Rebekkah had been having an affair with Hendrick's nephew, Jarrad. Feeling betrayed but willing to recover, Hendrick begins to spend a lot of time with Sara. This leads to the mermaid killing Sara out of envy. She lures her into the depths of the ocean where she drowns. Not accepting defeat, Sara returns as a ghost and dispenses with the mermaid just as Hendrick is about to take her back to the ocean.

The novel draws on the watermeisie (water maiden) tradition which unites Khoisan ideas on water spirits and popular ideas on *MaMlambo*. This conceptualization is in line with the creolised Cape and 'coloured' setting of the novel. Through this aquatic figure, we encounter creolised water beliefs of the slaves brought to the Cape and indigenous Khoisan beliefs which I explore in detail in later sections of this chapter. The story's setting (a small coastal village in the Western Cape), might explain the characters' codeswitching between English and Cape Afrikaans. This codeswitching literary technique not only grounds the text specifically in the Cape but also highlights the hybrid nature of the coloured characters. Deumert (2005,130) elucidates that coloured people "bring together a number of ethnicities – the diverse slave population, the indigenous Khoi as well as everyone who could not be classified unambiguously as being black or white." This union of different ethnicities with diverse cultures manifests in the creolised figure of the watermeisie that is central to the plot of the novel.

Though drawing on the reality of the post-apartheid era, the employment of a fantastic mermaid creature in the novel frees it from the constraints of 'absolute truths'. As the figure of the water maid keeps changing, nothing is certain and can be taken for the 'truth' in Vandermerwe's novel. The figure of the mermaid becomes useful in the text in that its main attributes (slipperiness, ambiguity, morphing) allow it to resist clear cut definitions and purposes, enabling Vandermerwe to explore grey areas without establishing certainties to her claims. The slippery notion of truth and democracy is thus open to contending interpretations. Besides using the shape shifting figure of *MaMlambo* to destabilise her narrative, there are other instances in the novel where Vandermerwe makes the reader question the reliability of her text. For example, she deploys the trope of the drunken protagonist: Hendrick is inebriated most of the times. There are also some instances where Hendrick draws attention to his hallucinations making the reader wonder whether the mermaid and the ghost are not mere figments of the imagination. There is also the use of dreams in the text, making one wonder if it is not all happening in Hendrick's head. I argue that all these devices speak to the elusive concept of freedom and democracy in post-apartheid South Africa.

This rest of this chapter proceeds according to the following steps: It begins by exploring the symbolism of the stone sea as it links to the broader concerns of the novel. I then move on to read Rebekkah as the woman of the stone sea, resonating with the title of the novel. From this section, I examine the representation of the water maid in the text. Before concluding the chapter, I explore the portrayal of Sara the ghost. I argue throughout the chapter that the portrayal of these uncanny figures enables Vandermerwe to again comment on the slippery notion of freedom in South Africa.

The Symbol of the Stone Sea

In most imaginaries, the ocean is associated with vastness, freedom, escape and danger. It suggests constant movement, be it the ships that sail off to distant shores, the waves that crash into each other or fish and other unknown sea creatures swimming or drifting. The notion of movement is tied to the sea. Even when the sea seems still to the naked eye, tiny molecules of water are always forming and un-forming. The oxymoron 'stone sea' from the title of the novel serves then to complicate all these ideas about the ocean, nudging us instead towards fresh ways of conceptualizing the ocean and by analogy post-apartheid South Africa.

In her provocative coinage 'stone sea', Vandermerwe combines two incongruous images to capture the paradoxical nature of freedom in post-apartheid South Africa. The sense of disenchantment that pervades the novel is mirrored in the scenes where the sea is brought to the fore, making it work as both setting and a metaphor. The lives of most of the characters and the plot of the novel revolve around the sea. There is a constant movement from the sea to land and the beach, a cyclic movement of the plot as past and present become intertwined, a technique that is reminiscent of Braithwaite's concept of tidalectics.[18] The concept of tidalectics draws on the

[18] For a broader discussion of Braithwaite's tidalectics, see Elizabeth DeLoughrey and Tatiana Flores. "Submerged Bodies: The Tidalectics of Representability and the Sea in Caribbean Art" (2020).

cyclic movement of water at sea as opposed to linear movement associated mostly with land, an idea that speaks to the disjointed episodes in the text.

The sea features from the first pages of the novel to the last, making it a core cog of the text. In the many descriptive passages of the sea, it is cast as a toxic and inhospitable space, in antithesis to characteristic associations of water with life, birth/rebirth and fertility. In the novel, Vandermerwe anchors *The Woman of the Stone Sea* on the destructive and negative traits that are sometimes associated with the sea. This marks a departure from the ambivalent depiction of the ocean in *Otelo Burning*.

In the first chapter of the novel, Hendrick chooses the sea as the ideal location for the termination of his life: "Summer is as good a season as any to commit suicide...So tonight he's standing up to his knees in the sea, ready to sink his siel (soul) beneath it" (Vandermerwe 2019, 9). The sea is described as "ice cold", "impatient", whose waters are "tumbling", menacing and "black" (9-10). The depiction of the sea not only captures Hendrick's mood but also the somber tone that pervades the whole narrative. From the moment we are introduced to it, the sea is not brimming with endless possibilities but rather teeming with waste such as empty cartons and dead bodies. While it spits out "…all sorts of indestructible rubbish on these beaches, belched out by the waters" (10), it also sucks in the lives of his wife Rebekkah and later Sara. This first ominous impression of the sea, together with the indicative title of the novel sets the overall somber tone of the book.

The eerier sounds emitted by the roaring waves and the portentous wind further contribute to the atmosphere of terror and mystery that characterises this ocean space.

> He focuses all his senses on the low roar of the waves…like a mischievous child, the wind is slapping his ears, saying, Boo! Boo! And he can also hear the seespoke making their suckle sounds. With every breaking wave, they exhale slowly like someone mourning the cards life has dealt them. Jaaaaaaa, Jaaaaaaa, Jaaaaaaa. Sometimes there's a burp. (Vandermerwe 2019, 10)

The roaring waves and suckle sounds from the *seespoke* (sea ghosts) stimulate uncanny emotions of the unknown and the unseen of the ocean, specifically its abysmal and inaccessible depths. The protagonist envisages sea ghosts exhaling slowly, as if in 'mourning', reminiscent of how he has been mourning his wife for the past five years. The *seespoke* "keep saying jaaaaaa, jaaaaaa, jaaaaaa, over and over" (12) as if encouraging him to terminate his life. They seem to be drawing him deeper and deeper into the dark waters of the ocean and death and besides the creepy sounds from the ghosts and the wind, the waves and the kelp fronds are also "pounding" his body and the water is "boxing him about" (10). At this point, it seems all elements (the real and the supernatural) are all working together to mirror Hendrick's emotional state and to also make sure that he succeeds in his self-destructive mission: suicide.

As he plunges deeper and deeper into the sea, Hendrick draws suggestive parallels between the icy cold ocean waters and his desolate and stony home ever since the disappearance of his wife Rebekkah: "[a]ll he knows is that their home has grown cold without her, as cold as this ocean. And the village…He pushes his body deeper into the icy black. Ja, without her this is just a kak place" (Vandermerwe 2019, 12). The sea seems to be as repulsive as the land which reconciles the 'stone sea' paradox from the title of the novel. Just as the land is portrayed as arid and unyielding, the ocean is signified as a mausoleum that harbors the "ghosts of all the sunken, the drowned and the lost" (13). This subtle historical allusion to those African slaves who perished at sea during the trans-Atlantic slave trade is amplified when we read that "in the sunlight, if you hold it up in a plastic bottle (seawater), it's cloudy at first, then it settles and goes clear with little flecks of seaweed in it. But at the bottom of the sea, the water is black and deep" (13). This conceptualization of the sea as dark and haunted evokes Mapule Mohulatsi's (2019) work on the sea as an archive which points to a significant part of Southern African history that lies buried in the depth of the ocean. This conceptualization also evokes Putuma's poem 'Water'. The *seespoke* that are haunting and hounding Hendrick echo the fears of the parents in Putuma's poem who encourage their children to shun the ocean.

The morning after the near suicide, Hendrick wonders if it was the dolphins that rescued him, in line with the myths of dolphins who rescue drowning fishermen and sailors and carry them to the

shore. When reality hits, he remembers that whatever saved him had arms and legs, and that this was not just a "dom droom [stupid dream]" (Vandermerwe 2019, 14). He is convinced that "something was in that water. Something or someone pulled him up…Tomorrow he'll take the boat out and see what he can find" (17). His resolve to go and search for that which saved him, whatever it was, blends with Percy Zvomuya's article 'Chasing Mermaids' that I mentioned in the introductory chapter. In the article, Zvomuya depicts two religious zealots who drowned while chasing after mermaids. Instead of catching the mermaids who were interfering with their holy work, the two men perish. Is Hendrick's fate the same? In his bid to discover the elusive creature that saves him from drowning and in hunting for his wife who disappeared into the sea, is he going to meet the monstrous mermaids? As my analysis will show, the sea becomes a major structuring device of the novel as it shapes the female protagonists Rebekkah, the mermaid and Sara who all vanish into its obscure depths. From this basis, one can argue that the sea not only provides the setting but also shapes the thematic content, character development and moves the plot.

Rebekkah: The Woman from the Stone Sea

The trope of mermaids in the novel is introduced to the readers through Rebekkah, Hendrick's wife, who is obsessed with both the idea of mermaids and water itself. She tells Hendrick that she moved to the village to be near the ocean. We later read that "Rebekkah loved all water. She could spend hours in it" (Vandermerwe 2019, 66). After her disappearance, Hendrick remembers how "she loved to sit in the bath and drink her tea while both were hot. He wanted her to be happy. Sometimes she'd sing. No words, just melodies. Scraps of song that maybe she'd heard on the farm" (66). One can link Rebekkah's love for water and passion for singing to the nature of mythical water maidens. In most accounts of these aquatic creatures, it is their love for singing and their melodious voices that help to lure their victims into their watery abodes. To Rebekkah, water is life: "n Boer weet water is lewe... [a farmer knows water is life]" (66). She goes on to reveal to Hendrick that "on the farm…they knew drought. She couldn't bear to see water go to waste" (66). In contrast, Hendrick as a fisherman is alive to the deathly side of water as he recalls all the fishermen and sailors who have drowned in the world's deep oceans. But he keeps his

thoughts to himself for fear of infuriating Rebekkah who takes strong exception to being contradicted.

Later in the novel we discover that Rebekkah is from the Karoo, one of the driest regions of South Africa. Hendrick describes the place as possessing:

> …a single silver windpomp, with a clump of green under it, turning slowly, bringing water silently up to the surface from far beneath this dry earth. So this was the landscape his Rebekkah came from. This was her stony land. He could understand why she longed so much to have the blue blanket of ocean fill her vision. Here the only blue was the cloudless sky. (Vandermerwe 2019, 55)

It is from this picture of her place of birth that I read Rebekkah as the woman from the stone sea. Despite the arid conditions captured above, Rebekkah's grandmother shares with Hendrick that "[t]here used to be a sea in these parts too…long, long ago" (55). Marteen J de Wit (2011) also suggests that "[s]ome 275 million years ago, the Karoo was a vast anoxic lake, much like the present Black Sea" (2). This revelation contrasts with the "…dusty stone valleys and rock koppies like giant knobbly knees that he'd [Hendrick] passed for hours and hours" (55). This description of the Karoo as a dry, rocky place is also foregrounded in Burger's *She Down There* which I examine later in the thesis. Stories about mermaids from this region can thus be read as historical archives, providing some insights into past connections with an ocean that is now long gone. The stony land and cloudless sky that Hendrick mentions indicates a drastic climatic change in this region. This realization might explain Rebekkah's obsession with all forms of water and how water represented the freedom that she lacked growing up in a family of labourers on a land-locked farm. As the plot develops, Rebekkah begins to resemble the nature of the water maidens she is obsessed with.

Rebekkah learns about the mysterious water beings through her grandmother's stories. She divulges to Hendrick that; "[w]hen I was a girl on the farm, Ouma told me stories. About water maidens. When I was little… even as a teenager, that's what I wanted to be. Beautiful and free in the water like them" (Vandermerwe 2019, 32). The simile captures Rebekkah's desires

throughout the narrative, to be free in water like the water maidens. These water maids have a light brown complexion which "in some light sparkles" (33). Rebekkah goes on to suggest that they possess a "mooi silver tail and long blonde hair" (ibid). They were "completely free… I looked for them all over the farm, in all the dams, but never saw one" (32). For her the mermaids were as real as the people around her, hence her dejection when Hendrick doubts her Ouma's stories. We read that "when she spoke again, her voice was frostbite. 'My ouma [grandmother] didn't tell lies'" (33). When Ouma learns of her disappearance by the beach she reasons that "[m]aybe the water maidens took her" (56). She wonders if, "Hendrick want[s] her to perform the rituals needed to get her back?" (ibid). This offer by the grandmother to conduct rituals to get Rebekkah back recalls some Southern African beliefs where *sangomas* beseech water spirits to safely return captured individuals. With the help of the *sangomas*, the victim's family performs certain rituals by the water and makes sacrifices. If the water spirits accept the sacrifices, the person returns from the depths of the waters without harm and at times with the added endowment of powerful healing powers. If the procedure is done incorrectly however, the family might never see their relative again (see Bernard 2010).

Rebbekah is introduced as the new primary school teacher who is determined to start her own traditions: "[f]or the past three Sundays, since her arrival in the village, it seemed Rebekkah had been feeding the braks after church. Now the dogs gathered in packs waiting for her" (Vandermerwe 2019, 23). Not everyone is happy about this and in no time, she comes to be known as an *inkommer* who has no respect for village traditions. Rebekkah's independence sets her apart in a village where everyone tried to do what was expected of them. She carries this aloof nature to her relationship with Hendrick. In most popular imaginaries, the mermaid is an enchantress who arouses utopian desires that are unquenchable since she remains unattainable (Goodman 1982). From Hendrick's flashbacks we get that Rebekkah was likewise inaccessible both before and after their marriage, "she's been swimming. She's wearing an orange costume and she's laughing; but her eyes are like they often were with him, distant and hard" (67).

In another instance after their wedding, Hendrick states that:

> [h]e pulled her close and pushed his cheek against hers. I love you, he whispered. You make me so happy. My pragtige vroutjie (beautiful woman). But he could feel her stiffen as he moved her, without music, in circles on the sand. She only lasted three or four turns before she gently unlocked his arms and stepped away. (Vandermerwe 2019, 98)

Like the water maids she is drawn to, Rebekkah refuses to fully commit to Hendrick after marriage and insists on making her own decisions. When Hendrick tries to warn her about the dangers of loitering alone in the dark, she firmly tells him, "I can look after myself. Don't tell me what to do…" (108). In this and many other instances in the novel, Rebekkah insists on making her own decisions just like Phephelaphi in *Butterfly Burning*. Rebekkah also performs chores that Hendrik felt needed a male touch, like starting her own garden from scratch. For fear of contradicting Rebekkah, he even fails to warn her against growing flowers in the village: "Should he have warned her that her flowers wouldn't grow? That the flowers she chose would never make it in the salty sea air and the sandy soil, even with the help of the manure… But his tongue had been all twisted like rope" (45). The final straw, however, is when again just like Vera's Phephelaphi, she refuses to have Hendrick's children: "I do not want a baby, Hendrick. Not with you or anyone. I'm not going to stop having the injection" (93). Rebekkah is on birth control measures, an indication of her determination to own her body just as Phephelaphi desires to in *Butterfly Burning*. I argue that although Rebekkah marries Hendrick, she remains elusive just like a mermaid until she returns to the ocean forever. Rebekkah also comes off as a melancholic figure: always longing for distant horizons. It is only later that we realize that she was never in love with Hendrick, but she just used him for a season. She truly loved Jarred (Hendrick's nephew who was nonetheless married to someone else). Rebekkah's romantic adventure as she relocates to the coastal village for her love is reminiscent of the little mermaid who left the sea for a love which was never requited.

The day Rebekkah disappears she is seen "standing, stockstil, up to her ankles in the surf, looking out to the silver horizon" (Vandermerwe 2019, 53). The narrator stresses that "everyone knew she liked to swim by herself, even early in the morning, and since women don't just evaporate and since no one saw her leave the village by the small dirt road, it was decided that she must have paddled out and been swept away by a sudden strong current" (53). From these

illustrative attributes, Rebekkah can be likened to the water maids she often spoke about. Coincidence or not, all these associations with water leads the narrator to reveal that: "Ja, the more he [Hendrick] thinks about it, the more he's convinced that his Rebekkah has sent this darkie visvrou [black fishwoman]" (67).

The Black Mermaid: Hendrick's *MaMlambo*

While *Otelo Burning* frames *MaMlambo* as a river snake, the *MaMlambo* we meet in *The Woman of the Stone Sea* assumes diverse forms in line with the different traditions Vandermerwe draws on. In one article, Vandermerwe states that "[b]oth the amaXhosa peoples and Karoo communities share similar water people myths. Ultimately, I settled mostly on the depiction that was told to me by a *sangoma* in a small village in Transkei" (2019: n.p.). All these different beliefs give us the creolized water maid in the story. Firstly, when Hendrick discovers the water maid, she is half-human-half-fish and she maintains this form as she settles in Hendrick's bathtub. However, as the plot unravels, she shapeshifts into a woman. We read that:

> There are puddles of water and strands of kelp leading across the floor from the bathroom. Panicked, he hurries to the bedroom. The visvrou is sitting on his bed. She's wearing Rebekkah's yellow cotton dress. Fok…! Where her great shining stert was just a few hours ago, there is now a pair of long, shapely legs. (Vandermerwe 2019, 80)

My analysis will show that in these different forms the visvrou still retains most traits that *MaMlambo* is associated with, like beauty, temptation, power, and money. The same ocean that supposedly swallows Hendrick's wife spouts out this black mermaid that Hendrick finds stranded at a secluded beach. Hendrick suspects that this mermaid is somehow connected to his wife. He believes that "… maybe Rebekkah has sent her with a message. Didn't she always say she wanted to be a water maiden?" (40). Convinced of this link, he asks the water maid, "[d]o you know my Rebekkah? Did you water people take her?" (57). He is determined to keep her alive at all costs as he believes she might be the missing link to his wife's disappearance.

When he finds her, the mermaid is stuck and hurt with "…cuts and gushes on her arms, hands, back and one on her right cheek" (Vandermerwe 2019, 33). It is unconventional for a mermaid to be portrayed in such a powerless and helpless position, at the mercy of human beings. They usually hold the edge over humans, but in this instance the roles are reversed; the mermaid needs help. This scenario however quickly changes as the mermaid recovers and asserts her power. There are instances in the novel where she uses her incomprehensible high-pitched utterances to communicate her displeasure and to get Hendrick to do what she wants. One example is when Hendrick tries to get back the baby blanket which the visvrou takes from Rebekkah's possessions. He had bought the blanket for his wife hoping to start a family. When he approaches, "the visvrou turns her green unblinking eyes on him and from somewhere, because she doesn't actually move her lips, comes that sound, that high-pitched, piercing wail. Again, a pain, more terrible than toothache, shoots through Hendrick's entire body, from his brain down to his crotch" (90-91). This marks the move from a helpless mermaid stuck at the beach to this powerful creature capable of making people do her bidding.

Instead of the usual light skin and long flowing gold hair that is usually attributed to mermaids including the ones in Rebekkah's Ouma's stories, the mermaid in the novel is "…as swart as looking out onto the ocean on a moonless night, and her hair is short and curly on her head, like a normal darkie woman" (Vandermerwe 2019, 33). While moving her away from the typical, westernized visuals of mermaids, Vandermerwe maintains the idea of beauty associated with most mermaids. Hendrick submits that:

> …he doesn't usually have an appetite for darkie women, but he supposes this creature is beautiful, just like Rebekkah said they were. Not just her face and top half, which are like the face and body of an attractive African woman, maybe like a pop singer or someone famous on television. Her fish half, too, has a nice shine to it. (Vandermerwe 2019, 44)

Later in the novel, we read that her eyes were as green as the ocean and her teeth resemble white pearls. The mermaid's remarkable beauty captured above fits into what one of the characters in Letlaka's film 'MaMlambo' says about the figure of *MaMlambo*: "…she is beautiful, the second you see her, you will fall in love with her, you can't stop yourself…" (Letlaka 1998). In another

example but this time from Nigeria, Elechi Amadi's novel *The Concubine* (1966) depicts protagonist Ihuoma as a water being who is married to a jealous Sea King. Ihuoma typifies the infamous femme fatale of the waters whose beauty is bewitching. We read in *The Concubine* that "[t]he women adored her. Men are awestruck before her. She was becoming something of a phenomenon" (153). While these water beings may be imagined differently in different contexts, some traits like their beauty and seductive nature stick. These different faces of *MaMlambo* resemble Drewal's (2008) observation that culture plays a huge role in how the water maidens are engaged. Drewal's observation directs our attention to the flexibility and plasticity of myth, invariably in a constant state of formation and reformation depending on the particular context they are being articulated in.

In the novel, after the initial bewilderment on what to make of the mermaid he finds stranded on the beach, Hendrick takes to calling her 'meisie', a shortened version of the term watermeisie which is an Afrikaans word for water maid. The creolized history of Afrikaans itself already signals the creolization of the watermeisie. She becomes a product of the diverse belief systems and cultures that came into contact at the Cape. Water creatures have always been part of the Khoisan belief systems (see Hoff 2011, Lange 2015, Bernard 2010). From the ancient rituals of water cleansing practiced in or next to the ocean, to rock art which depict various water creatures, there existed an intimate relationship between the Khoisan, water, and aquatic creatures. To the Khoisan, the inhabitants of these waters were one with the rivers (Lange 2015, 1). This intimate relationship between the Khoisan and water is aptly captured in Lynton Burger's *She Down There*, a text that I consider in the next chapter. In the novel, Klaas, one of the protagonists who the author refers to as the Bush Merman, discovers several rock paintings depicting his ancestors in water and in some cases transforming into water creatures.

The Khoisan have typically imagined these water beings as water bulls and snakes. The water snakes could be either male or female, with the former responsible for luring male victims while the latter preferred females. Lange (2015) explicates that for most indigenous people the water bulls and snakes were never associated with negative powers. The people had nothing to fear

from these water creatures as they avoided abduction through prescribed preventive measures. Moreover, those who were abducted could be saved with the help of medicine men.

This benign relationship gradually shifts as the water element itself begins to be diluted with detrimental historical waves linked to slavery and colonization (the white people who came over the sea with their ships). Inevitably, the water creatures begin to take new forms (one of them being the watermeisie (half human and half fish) due to the assaults of imperial cultural values and belief systems. Though localized in the novel, watermeisie shares some similar traits, like her wealth giving capabilities with both regional and international water spirits like the Mami Wata figure from West Africa. The watermeisie then becomes a creolization of Western and African mythologies. Through this cross-fertilization of cultures, one notices an evolution in the representation of these water creatures from non-threatening creatures into unpredictable monsters. Consequently, one can read the figure of the watermeisie as a post-apartheid creolization of the water snake. In sharp contradiction to the water creatures of the Khoisan, the adulterated modern watermeisie is known to be selfish, jealous, and cruel. She is also known for her wealth giving capabilities. According to Xolani, the Xhosa caretaker at the school Hendrick's wife used to teach, *MaMlambo* can be:

> …a snake, and then become a woman who's half fish, or just a woman - but she always leaves water wherever she goes. They come and start to act like your wife and bring you wealth. But they're very possessive, very jealous. They cannot share you with others. (Vandermerwe 2019, 137)

This is the same *MaMlambo* we meet in Bheki Maseko's eponymous short story. In the first few lines of the story, he describes *MaMlambo* as:

> … a kind of snake that brings fortune to anyone who accommodates it. One's money or livestock multiplies incredibly. This snake is available from traditional doctors who provide instructions regarding its exploitation. Certain necessities are to be sacrificed in order to maintain it. Sometimes you may have to sacrifice your own children or go without car or clothes. It all depends on the instructions of the doctor concerned. (1984, 74)

This conceptualization of *MaMlambo* (albeit in a different form) manifests in the novel as we see Hendrick's fortunes changing drastically. He becomes the talk of the village, and many believe that he was hijacking business from the other fishermen. The narrator concurs that: "[j]ust like his catches, for some reason, business has never been better. He doesn't even have to look for customers, dangling bags of crayfish in front of passing motorists. They're coming to him" (Vandermerwe 2019, 106). It is only after his talk with Xolani about *MaMlambo* that his new fortunes begin to make sense. After the conversation, he quickly makes the connection between his new fortunes and the *visvrou* in his bathtub. With the extra cash, he now takes to expensive alcohol instead of his usual box wine. He begins to entertain ideas of upgrading the furniture in his cottage such as getting a new couch and a bigger freezer for his crayfish.

As stated earlier, the money comes with strings attached. It is tied to *MaMlambo's* possessiveness. She cannot share her love object with anyone. As Malusi the protagonist in Letlaka's *Mamlambo* explains to his friend, "MaMlambo is beautiful, the second you see her, you will fall in love with her…but then she takes over your life. She's the most jealous river spirit in the world. She'll drive you mad…chase all your friends away" (Letlaka 1998). Indeed, she monopolizes Hendrick's life. To keep her as a secret, he has to isolate himself as much as he can. When she finds out about Sara, she does not hesitate to get rid of her. Wearing Rebekkah's yellow dress might be read as a sign of her desire to assume the role of Hendrick's wife. When Sara and Hendrick reconnect, they begin spending a lot of time together. In anger, *MaMlambo* lures Sara to the sea. As they go deeper and deeper into the sea, Sara "… wants to grab this strange woman. To grab her and shake her. She reaches out. And as she touches her, Sara feels herself go under" (Vandermerwe 2019, 228). Ironically, it is in her death that Sara becomes powerful and can fight back. In killing Sara, *MaMlambo* also kills herself in that it is Sara's ghost that eventually drives her out of Hendrick's house.

Vandermerwe's rewriting of the mermaid in the story draws on what Louise Milne (2006) sees as "…the motif's equally remarkable variability in visual form" (65). It also speaks to Vandermerwe's wish of reinventing the Western literary trope of the mermaid and the fisherman which usually features a drowning fisherman being rescued by a mermaid. In the novel, the

fisherman rescues the mermaid and takes it to his home. Amy Carlson (2019) speaks of how "even simple changes transform these stories to foster, to question, or to produce new meanings and morals" (83). She further argues that: "alterations, removals, and additions all have the power to reimagine, reflect, and resist social and cultural attitudes through story" (84). On her part, Vandermerwe reimagines the figure of the mermaid in *The Woman of the Stone Sea*, to build on:

> …questions and themes, which [she] began to explore in [her] previous novel, *Zebra Crossing*. These include what does home mean in a South African context; what is the relationship in this country between the supernatural world and the so called 'real' and how can we navigate our painful history and disappointing present in order to carve a noble and hopeful future.[19]

In her exploration of these themes, Vandermerwe also employs the figure of the ghost that I now turn to.

Sara the Ghost

Having followed *MaMlambo* into and died at sea, Sara comes back, this time as an omnipotent and omniscient ghost recalling the *seespoke* or sea ghosts from the beginning of the novel. Hendrick reveals that "she doesn't even look pale or transparent or whatever else ghosts and ancestors are supposed to be. If it wasn't for the fact that they all buried her only a few hours ago, he'd think she was alive. Is it possible to be dead and alive at the same time?" (Vandermerwe 2019, 236). This question posed by Hendrick speaks to the ambiguity of the figure of the ghost, its liminality. As a figure that cannot be placed either with the living or with the dead, a ghost is always in an in-between state. It is in this fluid state that they destabilize fixed notions of "presence and absence, dominant and subordinate, self and other in terms of race, gender, and class in a postcolonial context" (Lee 2017, 29). Similarly, concerning the figure of the ghost, Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (2013) posit that:

[19] http://taking-liberties.com/2018/05/29/meg-vandermerwe/

> Its presence in cultural imagination blurs multiple borders, between life and death, body and spirit, past and present, reality and imagination. In other words, through their 'ambivalent multiplicity' − their different shapes, acts, and effects, and their association with transgression of temporality, corporality, and causality, ghosts are never subjected to a fixed meaning. (33)

As the above qualities show, the figure of the ghost, just like the mermaid, becomes a useful narrative tool that enables writers to explore and present situations or people that defy categorization or that are constantly changing. In his study of the figure of the ghost in the works of Amos Tutuola, Achille Mbembe (2003) also notes how the figure of the ghost defies singularity but embraces different forms of being.

Sara comes back as an indignant ghost seeking revenge against her killer. She gets rid of *MaMlambo* and later tells Hendrick that "You couldn't have both of us. Ancestor or *MaMlambo*. I showed her where she could take a jump. I'm stronger dead than I was alive" (Vandermerwe 2019, 239). Having avenged herself, Sara starts having fun with Hendrick. She tells him that "I don't think I've ever felt more alive" (235). In a manner of speaking, she refuses to be forgotten and writes herself back into Hendrick's narrative.

Earlier in the novel, before turning into a ghost herself, Sara warns Hendrick about all the other ghosts haunting the country:

> Ja, you really, you can't even see past your own fokkenpiel! And when you talk, it's only ever about your own fokken self. Never ask about the other person. You're not the only fokken one whose heart is sore. This whole fokken village and this whole fokken country is full of fokkenhartseer people haunted by their ghosts, Hendrik. You talk all the time about your seespoke. But there are also sickness ghosts and dead-children ghosts and missed-opportunity ghosts and lost-love ghosts. (Vandermerwe 2019, 165)

From the above quote, it seems Hendrick had been dealing with his seespoke for a while. The sea in the novel thus becomes a haunted space. One might argue that throughout the novel, Hendrick's trauma is linked to the sea; hence, the ghosts that haunt him are specifically sea related. The sea is linked to the disappearance of his wife and his fisherman business. His

memories of his parents (his father was also a fisherman) and his brother Anton are all intertwined with the sea. It is thus understandable that his ghosts are seespoke as the sea is the place of his individual trauma. While everyone else is dealing with other ghosts, the seespoke turn the sea into a menacing space as the threat of death invariably lurks beneath and above its surfaces. The different ghosts mentioned by Sara might be speaking to the throes of post-colonial trauma born from the raw wounds of apartheid that reconciliation has failed to alleviate. This pain manifests in different modes for different people in South Africa.

Just like the figure of the mermaid that defies strict categorization, "it is difficult to think of something as formally resistant to definition as a ghost" (Schenstead-Harris 2015, ii). Harris goes on to characterise a ghost as "something that was once here but is no longer. Perhaps something that could be here in the future. Or something that seems like it is here, although it is not" (2015, 1). That Vandermerwe gives the ghost the last word in the novel speaks to the unstable post-apartheid epoch in South Africa. For some South Africans, the fruits of liberation remain intangible but perhaps might be realized in the future, just like the ghost. To borrow Harris's words, "[t]he reason why so many turn to words like 'haunting,' 'ghosts,' 'appears,' or 'apparitions' is clear. Very little in life is certain, and these words accept partial or even contradictory apprehensions of truth on the part of those who use them" (2015, 3). In line with Harris's formulation of the spectral, it becomes clear why Vandermerwe employed the figure of the ghost in the novel. As she intimates, her writing does not offer solutions but pokes provoking questions about post-apartheid South Africa.

While the figure of the ghost is usually associated with "the scary spirit of the unsettled dead that disturbs the life of the living and haunts our unjust memories" (Lee 2017, 7), Sara's ghost in the novel becomes a source of solace for Hendrick. She becomes Hendrick's companion, appearing to him in the most unlikely fashion and places. As a ghost, Sara refuses to, and cannot be ignored. Their relationship defies the norm and continues even in the afterlife. While earlier in the novel, Hendrick seems to be haunted by his past to a point of paralysis, the appearance of Sara both in life and as a ghost seems to propel him forward. He finally accepts that his wife never loved him and is lost forever. To mark his break with the past, he quits drinking, puts his

cottage up for sale and prepares to leave the village in a newly refurbished boat. Although the main reason for the trip was to take the *visvrou* back to her home, Hendrick uses it to mark the beginning of his new life away from his troubles and ghosts. The only ghost that he chooses to sail away with is that of Sara. Even with the disappearance of the *visvrou* just before the trip, Hendrick leaves together with his friend Xolani and Sara the ghost.

Ghosts have been a trope in African literature for a long time and they have been used to represent repressed desires and the shadow-like presence of some marginalized groups in newly formed nations. It is Sara, the ghost who concludes the novel. Just before they set sail on the Antony (the ship is named after Hendrick's brother), Hendrick asks Sara if all of them were going to be alright. The ghost, true to its ambivalent self, gives an equally ambiguous answer stating that only time will tell. This open ending is suggestive of the pull between hope and despair that is characteristic of dystopian texts. At this point, anything is possible. As the readers, we can only hope Hendrick finds peace in this unknown land he is sailing to. We also hope that his second mate, Xolani is re-united with his estranged family and that the nation also finds healing.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that Blecher and Vandermerwe draw on a number of mythical beliefs concerning the existence of water snakes and mermaids offering us a creolized version of these water spirits. In *The Woman of the Stone Sea*, Vandermerwe brings together the mermaid figure and the ghost as a way of pushing the boundaries between the physical and the supernatural world, and as a way of exploring the fluidity of the post-apartheid condition. Both the figure of the mermaid and the ghost are elusive figures who are only visible to Hendrick making one wonder if they are just figments of his imagination. He tells Sara that: "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I wasn't sure if she was real, and then I wasn't sure what to tell you. It's all been mal, man. I feel mal. Maybe you're both existing only in my imagination. Too much wyn. Too many years" (Vandermerwe 2019, 235). Hendrick's doubts concerning the ghost and the mermaid speak to misgivings over the notion of democracy in South Africa. In *Otelo Burning*, it

is the presence of the elusive snake and the depiction of the three bodies of water (the river, the pool and the sea) that speak to the unpredictable transition period from apartheid to democracy. Blecher plays with various elements of water, from the unknown and not so accessible depths of rivers and seas to the unboundedness, elusiveness and the fluid nature of the element itself to highlight the many attitudes towards what was an unknown territory for many. Does freedom mean the same thing to all South Africans? The film's symbolism suggests that freedom is both alluring and potentially destructive just like *MaMlambo* who lures one under false pretences into her grip. The waves and the ocean (which are framed to represent freedom) call, but when times get tough, fail to actually provide the characters with the safety and solace they so desire (Heath 2012, n.p.). Just like water spirits who constantly need sacrifices to be placated, freedom in South Africa demanded blood. There had to be sacrificial lambs as shown in the film. By employing fantastic figures, both forms of literature manage to deal with the fears, anxieties and hopes as the country transitions from apartheid to democracy.

CHAPTER FOUR

Interstitial Water Spirits in Mia Couto's *Sleepwalking Land* and Lynton Burger's *She Down There*

Building on the use of magical realism from the previous chapter which explored the figure of *MaMlambo* in two South African texts, this chapter shifts to Mozambique, again chasing water spirits in Mia Couto's *Sleepwalking Land* (2006)[20] and Lynton Burger's *She Down There* (2020). I consider how these texts draw on water-based indigenous beliefs to represent their various themes. Couto draws on water spirit myths to imbue his characters with flexibility and mobility in the context of the Mozambican civil war. Concerning *She Down There*, the author deploys the mythical water goddess Sedna to blur the lines between the human and the non-human, the natural and the supernatural. I argue that the creolized waters of *She Down There* (through the intermingling of indigenous Canadian Haidan, South African Khoisan and the Mozambican Bitonga water myths) provide a global approach to reading for water in Southern African literature. I further explore the ways in which both novels extend our understanding of amphibian aesthetics as the blended myths mirror intermingling elements of land and water.

Mia Couto is a prominent Mozambiquan writer known for depicting the fantastic in his numerous works. Hofmeyr (2005) contends that Couto offers a slithery continuum, allowing for a continuous invention of self. I explore this elusiveness and fluidity in this chapter, arguing that some characters in *Sleepwalking Land* are modelled after water spirits. In this reading I think with Irene Marques' observation that most of Couto's works foster trans-personal and trans-human affiliations (2018). She highlights how Couto underlines traditional Mozambican epistemologies which "… privilege intelligences like emotion, spirit, instinct, the mythical and the mystical and do not rely solely on rationalistic insights that tend to compartmentalise and

[20] This is a translation into English by David Brookshaw from the Portuguese original *Terra Sonambula* that was published in 1992.

look at reality from a finite angle …" (2018, 4). In exploring the intertwining of these worlds (the spiritual and the physical), I draw on Samuelson's concept of amphibious aesthetics, which disrupts the reductionist apprehension of the world, as Bill Ashcroft (2016) has observed in a different context. For Samuelson, the amphibious aesthetic "…entwines apparently distinct perspectives…different voices jostling alongside one another and stories-within-stories that complicate distinctions between inside and outside" (2017, 20). The open and accommodating nature of this aesthetic enables it to capture the ambivalent, complex, and sometimes confusing nature of most post-colonial states. This resonates with most of Couto's characters in *Sleepwalking Land* who always seem to hang on the edges in ways that "refus[e] an either/or logic" (ibid).

The general tone of *Sleepwalking Land* is of ambiguity and hybridity, in line with water spirits that defy categorization. The characters this chapter explores are as elusive as they assume different forms at different stages of the plots. Their stories are multi-layered and "inevitably bound up in events, incidents or actions that are simultaneously within and outside the common range of human experience, beyond the pale of everyday life" (Chabal 2016, 103). Just like the hybrid water spirits, the traits of Couto's characters challenge the readers' assumptions (ibid). In most of Couto's works, including *Sleepwalking Land*, the lines between human and environment are blurred. Benjamin Klein describes Couto's works as "often encompassing human-animal encounters that result in cultural and ecological transformation" (2019, 330). It appears that the in-betweenness of Couto's writings derives from his scientific work and the Mozambican indigenous beliefs he acquired from birth. Because of this fusion (the scientific and the spiritual), Chabal (1996) charactrise his works as "a peculiar blend of fantasy and reality" that "appear plausible but are also as magical or fantastic as fairy tales" (qtd in Long-Innes 1998, 156). Elsewhere, in a review of the novel, Uzodinma Iweala reiterates that the world created in *Sleep Walking Land* is a dreamscape of uncertainty (2006). It is this refusal to paint the world in Manichean absolutes that makes the amphibious figure of the water spirit an ideal tool for reading his works.

In line with the trans-personal and trans-human affiliations in Couto's works, *She Down There* is also concerned with the multi-species entanglements of humans, sea creatures and spiritual beings that create the inspirited waters of the novel. The novel introduces the reader to a predominantly watery world. This marks a departure from the terrestrial setting of Couto's *Sleepwalking Land* where the sea only facilitates the flight of the protagonist. On one hand, Couto's open ending leaves Tuahir, the protagonist walking into the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, *She Down There* submerges the reader into that same ocean.

In *She Down There*, the author endeavours to think with sea creatures, the oceans (Atlantic and Indian) and spiritual beings such as Sedna the Half-Away woman to blur the line between the human and non-human. But besides the two oceans, there is a farm dam and the deep pools − captured in the rock paintings − in the Karoo that also move the plot. The cyclical narrative mode of the novel disrupts linear temporalities as past, present, and future intermingle. Burger underscores the plight of the world's oceans through an underwater perspective that personifies the ocean and its creatures. His passion for environmental activism nevertheless at times becomes moralistic and didactic. While anthropomorphism advances the preservation of the other-than-human, other critics question its projection of human desires onto the other. As Peter Rutherford (cited in Wilson 2019) suggests, the "the staging of intimacy between human and non-human animals is not only a way of encouraging people to care for wild animals and nature but also a way of disciplining them" (720). Despite these misgivings, Burger only wanted to tell a story and share the wonder of the ocean and its creatures.[21]

Below, I first examine *Sleepwalking Land*, focusing on how Couto deploys the myth of water spirits to give his characters some flexibility and to capture the complexity of the Mozambiquan civil war. This is followed by an analysis of Burger's *She Down There*, where I argue that the

[21] Richards, Nancy. "Nancy Richards speaks to author Lynton Burger", Episode 17, Country Life, 8 June 2020, https://anchorfm/country-life/episodes/Country-Life-Podcast.

multi-inspirited waters in the text give us a global perspective in reading for water in Southern Africa.

Sleepwalking Land

The novel begins with an old man (Tuahir) and a young boy (Muidinga) who escape from a refugee camp and travel to the open sea in the hope that it will provide an exit route from their war-torn land. Ashcroft echoes that "[t]he sea, towards which the land is drawn, offers the surest promise of freedom from boundaries, a promise of freedom from the traumatic world of Mozambican history" (2016, 122). The narrative soon introduces other characters trying to make sense of, and survive the civil war. My analysis of *Sleepwalking Land* will show that neither the land nor the sea offers respite from the effects of the civil war. Both spaces are precarious and treacherous. Luis Goncalves (1995) argues that the novel "…maps the psychic terrain they [the characters] explore by venturing through post-colonial deformations of their war-devastated present" (60).

While the story of Tuahir and Muidinga constitutes the major plot of the novel, there is also the subplot of Kindzu − a dead man. We acquaint with Kindzu through a series of entries in his notebooks, found by Tuahir and Muidinga in a bag next to a burnt *machimbombo* (bus). This bus becomes a temporary home for the travellers. The novel can also be read as the story of a dead man (Kindzu) incarnate in the sleepwalking Tuahir and Muidinga. The narrative alternates between the present struggle of the two travellers and the past experiences of Kindzu. Goncalves rightly notes that the text offers "two interacting narratives" (1995, 60). These narratives complement each other as temporalities are blurred and the boundaries between land and water, the spiritual and the physical overlap. The novel is also a story of tales within tales as different voices, from Kindzu's stories and from other characters offer plural perspectives on the civil war. This evokes Samuelson's notion of the amphibian aesthetic which embraces multiple perspectives. Like Vera's characters who attempt to survive within the cracks in colonial

Rhodesia, Couto's characters grapple with a senseless civil war. I argue that the author models his characters after water spirits to enable them to navigate the treacherous spaces they find themselves in.

Kindzu's narrative emerges as Muidinga reads the notebooks to Tuahir. We learn of Kindzu's childhood in a small village by the sea and his journey from a war-torn village in search of *naparamas*. *Naparamas* "were traditional healers blessed by the witch doctors, who fought against the warmongers" (Couto 2006, 20). From Kindzu's adventures, what is foregrounded is his affiliation to water. His shape-shifting abilities align him closer to water spirits. During his travels (his search for the *naparamas*) he meets the twins Carolinda and Farida, who are introduced as daughters of the sky. Both display several traits associated with water spirits and occupy different spaces. Farida is closer to water while Carolinda is nearer to the land. In my analysis of the novel, I focus on Farida and her link to water. The other character I read as linked to water spirits is Nhamataca, Tuahir's old friend from colonial times. He is a product of a water spirit and a mortal. His name literally means the creator of rivers. The seemingly possessed Nhamataca is bent on creating a river that he considers to be the solution to all the woes of his country. Through these characters, Couto complicates the relationship between the material (the ocean, the beach, the river, and the swamps) and the spiritual (the water spirits invoked in their numerous forms).

I read the characters Kindzu, Nhamataca, and Farida as connected to water spirits to account for their restless spirits and navigation of the harsh realities of war. *Sleepwalking Land* underscores the experiences of the ordinary people (the non-combatants), placing emphasis on how they resort to their indigenous beliefs to comprehend a destructive civil war. The chaos of war is amplified by the presence of spirits who encroach into the human world to influence events, defying laws of logic, time, and space. The novel's characters constantly "move from the known world into a frequently aqueous and spiritual one" (Mitchel 2017, 122). This movement between different realms foreground questions of belonging and identity under the strain of a civil war. In my analysis of the novel, I will show how porous and slippery these constructs can be.

By enabling his characters to access multiple realms, Couto blurs the lines between the spiritual and the physical, the conscious and the unconscious, the human and the non-human, the dead and the living. Ashcroft explains that "[in] such a context of loss and turbulence, the question of who belongs to the nation and even what it means to be alive at all becomes urgent" (2016, 108). While Ashcroft reads this blurring of boundaries in Couto's works through the mulatto figure, I probe the same through the figure of the water spirit, a hybrid creature that is at home on both land and water. Couto underlines the multiple ways of being and belonging drawing on the animist beliefs of Mozambique encapsulated in the realization that "[w]e're all brothers, trees and animals, animals and men, men and stones. We are all related, created out of the same matter" (Couto 2001, 64).

The cyclic movement of the plot and the subversion of chronological time in the text evokes Braithewaite's theory of tidalectics (1971) and Samuelson's amphibian aesthetics (2017). Both concepts challenge rigid terra-centric epistemologies as they gesture towards fluid and alternative ways of living and apprehending the world. Past and present intertwine in the story as Kindzu fails to "place time in its unruffled order..." (Couto 2006, 7) with his memories "disobedient, uncertain of their desire to be nothing and their fondness for stealing… away from the present" (ibid). To add to the fluid nature of the text, the characters also shapeshift as they move between land and sea. Samantha Cairo (1999) observes that shape shifters "are people or animals who are able to change their shape either at will or under special circumstances" (7), often with the aid of supernatural intervention. Cairo goes on to argue that in literature, "[s]hape-shifting may be used for strategic deception, escape, punishment, liberation, and immortalization" (1999, 1). In Couto, it is the special circumstance of war that oblige this shapeshifting. These characters resort to metamorphic, borderline ambiguity and alternative identities to navigate a treacherous space. In the novel, shapeshifting is enabled by a link to the spiritual world as I will demonstrate in my reading of Kindzu and Farida. As they shapeshift, "they project our human anxieties regarding ... the very notion of what it means to be human" (Cairo 1999, 2). However, this metamorphosis does not provide any easy escape. Goncalves reminds us that "transformation does not sketch simplistic fantasies of harmony and resolution; it

engraves a challenge to despair" (1995, 63). This statement speaks to the stubborn hope that pervades the novel.

One instance of this transformation in the novel is when Juney (Kindzu's youngest brother) is banished to the henhouse for his own protection. Taimo (their father) schemes to transform Juney into a hen reasoning that "[w]hen the marauders came, they wouldn't take him. A hen wasn't a creature that inspired acts of brutality and cruelty" (Couto 2006, 12). Thereafter, Juney is treated like a hen and taught to behave like one. With time, all he can do is to "… let out a cluck or two and nestle his head under his arm. And that's how he would fall asleep" (ibid). He soon disappears compelling his family to speculate on his whereabouts. Later in the novel, in another town that is close to the sea, Kindzu is drawn to a rooster he suspects to be his brother. This example of shapeshifting, and several others, which I will consider in subsequent sections of this chapter, speak to the desperate coping mechanisms during the Mozambican civil war that draw on animism. They involve constant interactions between the dead and the living, the human and the non-human that enchant the world[22]. The dead and the non-human are given ample narrative space in the text thereby recognizing a heterogenous, porous and fluid world. Nothing is impossible in this world.

Nasser (2016) observes that the journeys the characters undertake, and their locations necessitate and amplify shapeshifting in the novel. Regarding the civil war, Kindzu states that it "... is a snake that bites us with our own teeth. Its poison flowed through all the rivers of our soul. We no longer ventured outside during the day, and at night we no longer dreamed" (Couto 2006, 9). The words snake, poison and bite capture the detrimental impact of war on communities and individuals. That people could not venture outside of their homes neither during the day nor at night resonates with the title of the novel. It is of course ironical and tragic that people can not dare to dream in this figurative sleep. The stagnation and barrenness of life and dreams also manifest in the physical appearance of Muidinga and Tuahir, the two travellers whose demeanor

[22] For a detailed discussion on enchantment and African Literature, see Harry Garuba's "Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature Culture, and Society" (2003).

match the withered road that is devoid of hope (2). The description of the landscape below creates an atmosphere of despondency, which is sustained throughout the novel.

> The landscape had blended sadness the likes of which had never been seen before, in colours that clung to the inside of the mouth. They were dirty colours, so dirty that they had lost all their freshness, no longer daring to rise into the blue of the wing. Here the sky had become unimaginable. And creatures had got used to the ground, in resigned apprenticeship of death. (Couto 2006, 1)

The somber diction (sadness, dirty, unimaginable, resigned and death) depict the terrible circumstances of civil war. Because the land has become inhospitable, we witness some of the characters moving to different littoral spaces such as the beach, the ocean, the river, and the swamp. Ashcroft (2016) notes how Couto employs evocative imagery like dying whales and wounded elephants to depict this dying nation. These images according to Ashcroft, mirror the bleeding nation that Couto is writing about and from. By enabling his characters to tap into both the aqueous and the spiritual worlds, Couto gives them a chance to forge ahead amid the civil war which was no easy task as we see most of them dying along the way.

The foregoing underscores the resilience of the will to live under the most terrible conditions. I now turn to Kindzu, whose amphibious nature enables him to traverse both spaces, land and water, in search of self-redemption.

Kindzu: The Waterman

Kindzu's entry into the novel introduces two central aspects of this thesis: water and shapeshifting. While critics have noted the use of a shifting landscape in the novel as a way of exploring unstable identity in Mozambique during the civil war, I re-read characters like Kindzu as affiliated to water spirits. As the two travellers, Muidinga and Tuahir trek through the barren land, they come across a burnt-out bus wreckage with charred corpses inside. The bus wreckage becomes an apt metaphor for the imploding nation, while the charred corpses symbolize all the

unknown victims of the civil war. Unlike all the other bodies found in the bus that have been burnt beyond recognition, Kindzu's body was not "…burnt. It had been killed by a shot. The shirt was soaked in blood…" (Couto 2006, 4). Blood then becomes the first fluid that we encounter in the arid environment of the text. Soon after, in a moment of despair, we encounter the second fluid as Muidinga breaks down in tears, "…aching with a sadness…" (5). Blood and tears are emblematic symbols of death, loss, and despair. The tears introduce the spiritual dimension of the narrative as Tuahir cautions Muidinga: "If you cry like that, you'll call the spirits…" (5). This statement that connects spirits to tears and by extension water, sets the tone for the different forms of water and spirits that one encounters in the novel.

From one of his notebooks, we learn that Kindzu's father was a fisherman and that "water had always made me [Kindzu] feel at ease, and next to it, I was like a cricket among grass" (Couto 2006, 38). This solace he derives from water points to his precarious existence on land. We read that he gets his name "as a tribute to his [father's] one and only predilection: drinking sura, palm wine" (7). The name, which is the "same name given to the skinny little palms that bend and sway along the beach" (7) portends his many encounters with the sea. This connection with water is cemented after his father's death when he turns to the ocean for consolation. "I would spend the day wandering here and there, my feet caressing the waves that caressed the beach" (15), he intimates. I argue that both as a child and adult, he is an amphibious being who is drawn to both land and water.

The Indian trader Surendra Vala who owned a shop in Kindzu's village, also hints at the link between Kindzu and the waters of the Indian Ocean:

> We coastal people weren't the inhabitants of a continent but of an ocean. Surendra and I shared the same country: the Indian Ocean. It was as if in that immense sea, the threads of history untangled, ancient balls of thread where our blood had mingled together. That was why we lingered there to worship the sea: our common ancestors were there, floating without frontiers. That, at heart, was why I loved to linger in Surendra Vala's shop. (Couto 2006,18)

Samuelson (2017) describes the "yearning for an 'Indian' identity" (18) as Couto's way of celebrating what he terms the 'dense web of exchanges'. The web of exchanges "reveals Africa's

participation in the mixture of mixtures" (ibid, 18). In one incident that exposes the bite of prejudice, Surendra loses his shop and livelihood after he is attacked because of his race. Unsurprisingly, soon after he flees the village. Kindzu is disoriented when he loses his sole friend and before long follows suit. He tells us, "[o]ne solution was to go off by myself, on my account, before I got pushed into the fire out there that was consuming everything" (Couto 2006, 22). The metaphor of fire captures the all-consuming destruction of the war which unsettles the characters. Kindzu consults the medicine man about his plans to leave his homeland and is advised to "go by sea, [to] travel along the farthest lip of land, where water causes thirst, and the sand leaves no footprints" (24). He is told the sea will cure him as it has no ruler and will cover his tracks. The romanticized idea of the ocean is checked through the recognition of the ironical nature of sea water that cannot quench thirst. Kindzu is also told to "[t]ake care… [because] only the sea lives upon the sea" (26). As welcoming as it seems, the sea spews out its foes. This description of the sea brings out the ambivalent nature of water and evokes the prior mentioned character Hendrick in *The Woman of the Stone Sea* who as a fisherman, appreciates the ambivalent dangers and pleasures of the sea.

Kindzu and Surendra's paths cross again, this time in Matimati, another tiny village by the sea. It is as if, like water, they flow into each other's lives. Kindzu's journey is non-linear and, in a way, ruffles our ideas of time and space. The past and the present are intertwined and Kindzu's story becomes circular. Samuelson (2017) sees non-linearity as one of the defining features of amphibious aesthetics. As Kindzu embarks on his journey, he remembers to "travel next to the shore, where the waters tumble forward in white foam." (Couto 2006, 35). The shore, a marginal place, already places him on the boundary, in between the land and the sea, enhancing his ambiguous nature and capturing his fragile existence in a war-torn nation. Being close to the shore facilitates prompt access to land to rest his boat from the waves but also to the sea to escape. This appears to be a strategic narrative device that Couto deploys to portray the senseless chaos caused by the Mozambican civil war.

Survival becomes an art as new forms of being emerge. Kindzu's metamorphosis begins at sea. He relates that "a web of overlapping skin grew between my fingers. In the water I felt I had

scales instead of skin" (Couto 2006, 36). He remembers the medicine man telling him that "in the sea, you will become the sea" (36). Everything around him begins to metamorphose. Some fragments of sails from his ship become fish as his oars become trees. Similar to my discussion of *The Woman of the Stone Sea* (2019) where there is shapeshifting from mermaid to woman and from woman to ghost, Kindzu adopts a form that helps him navigate the perilous space of war. Douglas Mulliken makes the point that Kindzu's isolation on water "means that he is gradually giving in to the ocean's power and becoming a marine animal instead of one designed for the land" (2013, 120). But before his transformation begins, he must assume a hybrid form that allows him to lose the *chissila* curse that is cast over him. This starts with a ritual to ensure that he will not leave any tracks as he journeys. To that end, he plants feathers in all the holes created by the oars in the sea. He plucks the feathers from the carcass of a bird he receives from the medicine man. From each feather, a gull is born and as it takes to its wings, the holes disappear erasing any traces of him. By flying away, the sea gulls seem to be transposing him into the atmosphere to protect him, changing his form into shapeless and colourless vapor. The gulls flying away build on the enabling narrative frame, from water to atmospheric media. This resonates with Phephelaphi's ultimate metamorphosis discussed in Chapter Two.

Later in the narrative, Kindzu finds himself in Matimati, so named because of its proximity to the sea. The narrator reveals that the "… town lay in the water's embrace; it looked as if it had been there since before the arrival of the sea" (Couto 2006, 51). It is this town and its people that change the course of Kindzu's life. The locals fled from the interior and are now gathered by the beach without any means of survival. They spend their time summoning the ancestors to provide for them. Sometimes the help comes in the form of food and commodities recovered from sinking or sunken ships. The denizens advise Kindzu to head back to the sea, as the town administrators are always on the lookout for strangers to blame for all the town's misfortunes.

As he leaves Matimati, his narrative changes from that of the seeker (his search of the *naparamas*), to that of the hunted:

> The boat was bobbing on the waves, slumbering in unknown waters. My heart thumped, quickly. Something was calling, whether from inside me or outside I

> could not tell. That was when I saw the fire…but the boat began to go forward by itself. It carved out its route in zigzag fashion. I was overcome by fright: I was moving swiftly away from dry land. (Couto 2006, 55)

We later find out that Farida − one of the twins – is the one doing the calling. This meeting with Farida happens at sea but it is a detour as he heads back to the land again in search of Farida's son, Gaspar.

So far, my analysis has highlighted how Kindzu and Juney shapeshift at different points in their lives. As the narrative progresses, Kindzu transforms into a sea creature, and to borrow Samuelson's words, he is drawn "simultaneously towards land and sea, interior and exterior, here and there" (2017, 20). Not one of these different forms is privileged over the other, but they co-exist. In enabling his characters to shapeshift, the text fits into the genre of magical realism where, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, characters can metamorphose into ghosts and mermaids within the realm of the everyday. In Samuelson's words, Couto's narrative form becomes "capable of conveying other ways of being and knowing – particularly, animist worldviews that present profound responses to the world – destroying forces of colonialism and the market, without in turn ossifying and isolating cultural traditions" (ibid, 22).

Farida: The Daughter of the Sky

Just like the watermeisie in *The Woman of the Stone Sea* who assumes different forms, Farida changes multiple times during the course of the narrative. At first, she is just a "…a noise from a thousand depths…" (Couto 2006, 58). At this stage, she is invisible but perceptible to the ear. This noise is soon replaced by a dancing apparition which shapeshifts into a woman: "…on the deck… dancing, leaping around, skipping. Its chain was limp, as if its substance were no more than the flesh of a fish. It swayed to the rhythm of unseen drums" (58). One can speculate that through this dance, Farida is tapping into the spiritual realm. Thereafter she transfroms into a beautiful woman who dazzles Kindzu with "her wet clothes panted against her skin" (58). He confesses that "[t]he beauty of that woman robbed me of all words" (ibid) echoing the words of

Fumbatha when he beholds Phephelaphi in *Butterfly Burning*. Kindzu is equally mesmerized and cannot say no to Farida's demands. Later in the novel, she reveals to Kindzu that she comes from a family of xipocos (ghosts). Mitchell (2017) reads her as akin to elusive water spirits. Farida is defying compartmentalization through assuming these diverse forms and associating with all the elements of nature. O'Brien Wicker (qtd in Mitchell 2017) reminds us that water spirits are the most adaptable, flexible, and innovative of all African divinities. It is that "constant motion, of shifts, transformation, hybridization, and fluidity that evoke not a loss of identity but rather an enrichment of it" (Afolabi 2017, 183). Such fluidity blends with Samuelson's amphibian aesthetics "… open to planetary alterity and are alive to both the mundane and the extraordinary or improbable …" (2017, 23).

Mitchell (2017) reads Farida and the other female characters (Assma, Dona Virginia) in the text as aquatic women. In her essay, she links water, the supernatural and the feminine to African religious and cosmological origins. She goes on to argue that Couto draws on what she terms the 'aqueous divine' to give voice to "those who often go unheard in the chaos of war, particularly women and children" (Mitchell 2017, 123). My reading of the use of the supernatural (invoking water spirits) in the text differs slightly from the above. I argue that Couto subverts the powers that are usually associated with water spirits. While Mitchell claims that the feminine waters serve as the ultimate source of knowledge and understanding, and form the path to national healing, this section will show how the association with water spirits does not always empower. There is no easy escape in this land of slumbering people. The female characters like Farida and Carolinda seek means to navigate the dangerous space created by the civil war. These efforts however do not translate to emancipation but enable relative mobility in a land where stillness meant death and not peace. In the same way that Phephelaphi had to navigate the oppressive patriarchal boulders in colonial Bulawayo, Couto's female characters must dodge the civil war bullets. While the spirits are called upon in times of distress to proffer solutions, in the world created by Couto, the spirits offer little.

Because of her shapeshifting abilities, one is tempted to read Farida as a female water deity. Nonetheless, such a reading is problematised by the fact that her domain is a shipwreck. In this

way, Couto reimagines the myth of water spirits as does Vandermerwe in *The Woman of the Stone Sea* disccused in the previous chapter. Just as Vandermerwe's mermaid is stranded by the beach, Couto's woman-spirit is marooned in an abandoned ship at sea. To make sense of a cruel life that involves getting raped in her childhood by a man who had helped raise her and the traumatic loss of her son, Farida sets her sights on faraway lands. She severes all links with the land and self-confines in a grounded ship hoping that she will one day be rescued by the owners of the vessel. While Kindzu felt he had to keep moving to find the *naparamas* (for him, joining this group of warriors was his way of helping end the war in his country), for Farida waiting alone in an abandoned ship is the solution, away from the madness and chaos of the land and people.

While the ship appears to be a safe harbour for Farida, away from the ravaged land, it all the same remains a contained and controlled vessel. This realisation problematises her association with water spirits who prefer the freedom of open and living waters. According to Bernard (2010), the notion of living waters refers to undammed free flowing waters. Farida might be safe on the ship that is far from the flames of war, but that it is wrecked offers little hope for an escape. She seems just as stuck as those on land. In contrast with the active waters of the sea – the abode of free water spirits − the ship limits Farida's movements and powers.

Despite this containment, Farida has certain powers akin to water spirits. She confesses to Kindzu: "…I had already seen you from that other side, but your contours were aqueous, your face was morning mist. It was I who brought you here, it was I who summoned you … I knew you were coming. I was waiting for you" (Couto 2006, 83). The way she describes Kindzu in aqueous terms feeds into my earlier reading of him as associated with water. From these narratives, we sense that their connection transcends the physical realm.

Besides her amphibian inclinations, I argue that Farida incorporates the four elements − fire, water, air, and earth − just like her mother who "rose among vapours, emerging from the depths of a hole and carrying in her hands a pot like the ones used for burying infants. Her fingers were roots, which later turned into snakes made of fire" (Couto 2006, 71). The description of the

mother's dream extends the reading of Couto's characters as multidimensional beings who unite the forces of nature. Again, like in Kindzu's transformation, we see the meeting of multiple species within a single body.

Later in the narrative, tired of waiting for news for her son, Farida declared:

> She would go and light the lamps, repair the darkness. Its light would guide ships in, and they would carry her away from there … he saw her reach the little island and enter the lighthouse. She was in there for a while, then came out only to return inside carrying some oil drums. Suddenly the tower was shaken by a huge explosion. Flames like greedy tongues licked the building. The whole island was ablaze. (Couto 2006, 207)

One can read her death as self-willed just like Phephelaphi's in *Butterfly Burning*. However, her death speaks to the despair of the characters during this unstable time. Farida crumbles together with her hopes of reuniting with her son and escape from the chaos of war.

Through Farida and her numerous guises to the moment of her death, Couto explores the complexities of post-colonial Mozambique. Just like Kindzu who was always on the move in search for the *naparamas*, Farida's story also refuses linearity as it embraces different and sometimes contradicting forms to capture the challenges of trying to survive a war. The stories within stories that we find in both Kindzu and Farida's narratives hint at Couto's narrative strategy which allows him to explore the multiplicity of perspectives surrounding the Mozambican civil conflict. As Samuelson argues, the coastal form allows for the improbable to become a part of our reality (2017, 23). This strategy is further cemented through the depiction of Nhamataca, a composite character who is both a water spirit and a human.

Nhamataca: The Maker of Rivers

Nhamataca's name means 'he who makes rain'. He is Tuahir's friend from colonial times. We are introduced to him as he makes a river "on the other side of the slope, carefully digging a huge

hole" (Couto 2006, 84). Chabal theorizes that Couto's works present a "…range of characters that are often not just strange, different, but also behave in a highly unusual fashion" (2003, 109). Chabal goes on to state that "the hallmark of Couto's writing then, is the ability to present these characters, as though what they were doing, what was happening to them, was in every respect logical" (ibid). This comes through in the representation of Nhamataca. His determination as he digs day after day does not hint at the absurdity of the whole pursuit. He is convinced that his project will come to fruition. This is one example where Couto juxtaposes the plausible and the non-plausible to blur the line between the real and the unreal, and the logical and illogical.

As Nhamataca's subplot unravels, he calls himself the son of the waters. One can trace his link with water to his mother who seems to have a connection with water spirits. She first appears to her husband (Nhamataca's father) as an apparition before she becomes a melodious voice. She then assumes the form of a woman when she shows herself to Nhamataca's father. The initial interaction they have evokes the many stories of sailors seduced by sirens with beautiful voices. Nhamataca's father braves the waves to meet this being with a melodious voice who resides on the other side of the river. His raft is however no match for the turbulent waves of the river as it begins to sink. It is at this moment that Nhamataca's mother reveals herself to him. She is gorgeous (Couto 2006, 88) like the water maids I have looked at so far. The two consummate their love and produce Nhamataca, "…born on a boat… the son of the waters" (88). Being born of a man and a spirit, Nhamataca can be read as an in-betweener, in line with Samuelson's amphibian concept of pluri-belonging.

The way Nhamataca's mother and father meet also reminds one of Couto's short story, 'The Waters of Time", where the protagonist and his grandfather make numerous trips up the river towards the lake. What I find relevant to my argument from this story are the mysterious apparitions that only the grandfather can see. These apparitions manifest at times as white or red cloths blowing in the wind. The grandfather later intimates that these are the invisible spirits he wishes to familiarize him with before his [the grandfather's] demise. Couto frequently revisits the theme of inspirited waters in his oeuvre. To him, the waters are home to different spirits like the *namwetxo moha* "…that emerged at night, made only of halves: one eye, one leg, one arm"

(Couto 2014, 240). The protagonist's mother also "feared the threats that lurked there" (ibid). This fear of the deep unknown evokes Otelo's father's fear of a huge snake in the depths of a river I explored in the previous chapter.

When Nhamataca is introduced to the reader, he is making a river to serve as a protective frontier against the war. While everyone else around him seems to be lost, either sleepwalking or waiting for death at refugee camps, Nhamataca single-handedly constructs the river. This venture isolates him from his family and friends who begin to question his sanity. Nhamataca however believes that his river:

> …would never grow stormy or angry, and it would never let itself sink into the ground. Its waters would serve as a protective frontier against the war. Any man or boat carrying arms would go straight to the bottom without return. Death would be confined to the other side. The river would clean the soil, healing its wounds. (Couto 2006, 86)

The river would "quench many a thirst, embellish fish and land alike" (Couto 2006, 86). The foregoing magnifies the dryness of the land, both literally and metaphorically. The only solution for this dry country of unfulfilled dreams is his river (to be named Mother Water) tied to all life-giving forces rather than the death dealing forces of the land. While in some instances water is associated with the feminine because it is one element that is considered unreliable and treacherous, Nhamataca subverts this association "…for a river's vocation is to be a gentle, slow-moving creature" (86). The hope that he places on this river is shown as he starts by digging the floor of his own house. "On and on he went, meandering between valleys and hills, his hands shedding and renewing countless times their bloody, calloused skin" (86), undeterred by the loss of family and friends in the process.

If one reads this digging as symbolizing the summoning of the spirits, the betrayal of the river highlights Couto's refusal to privilege any space – be it the physical or the metaphysical – as safe or productive. Even when rainwater brings it to life, the river is a ferocious and threatens its creator. This symbolic river has different meanings attached to it. For Nhamataca it will heal the wounds from the war. On the other hand, for Muidinga and Tuahir the pursuit presents an

opportunity to control their destiny, "instead of waiting on the road, we make our way" (Couto 2006, 88). However, the project does not yield the desired results. When it fills up with water, Nhamataca's celebration is cut short as the ferocious stream swallows him. Tuahir and Muidinga witness this misfortune. The narrator relates that the "…memory of what happened will be recollected with tears…The old man and the boy try to grab the digger's body, but the current, along with its malevolent eddies, grows angrily and chaotically" (89). The turbulent eddies evoke the malevolent water spirits who strike and kill, sometimes unprovoked. On a metaphorical level, this river might symbolize the unforeseen thorns (civil war) of independence in Mozambique.

To emphasize the catastrophe, the rain that swallows Nhamataca suddenly stops at noon. The landscape goes back to the way it was:

> At noon, the rain stops. The sun is right overhead, and so vengeful that in an instant it sucks up the excess water from the savannah. The earth imbibes the flood, squeezing the smallest puddle dry. As the scene changes so unbelievably, the drought once again prevails. (Couto 2006, 89)

Muidinga and Tuahir also start to wander aimlessly as their dream of escape vanishes with Nhamataca's river. We read, "[n]ow, however, the two seem to be wandering directionless. Hunger begins to demand satisfaction. Day after day, they advance in circles, spiraling on their feet" (90).

Like in most of his stories, Couto maintains an ambiguous tone. No single space or voice is privileged. The land continues to be barren, and the river brings death instead of life. There is no way out for Couto's characters as those spaces usually associated with healing and dreams turn treacherous. The power that is normally associated with water and spirits is undermined not only in Nhamataca's case but throughout the novel. Being a son of the waters did not save Nhamataca the same way Farida's link to both water and land could not protect her from the different forms of abuse she encounters. Couto's use of water myths undescores how myths are re-imagined and re-written depending on the motive of the author. For Couto, the intention is to depict the ambiguity and complexity of life during a civil war. War makes a mockery of permanence and

fixed structures on land. The fluidity and elusiveness of water spirits hence best dramatizes the senseless reality of a war-torn Mozambique.

She Down There

From the war-raveged landscape of Coutos's *Sleepwalking Land*, Lynton Burger's *She Down There* plunges the reader under water. He draws largely from his experience as a marine biologist, professional diver, and underwater photographer in his representations of the non-human. In a gesture which might be read as an act of authenticating his narrative, he even showcases a photograph of himself swimming with a dugong taken off Bazaruto Island, Mozambique. Burger describes himself as a "writer who delight[s] in exploring the beauty and the essence of our oceans, and the relationships people have with nature and each other when nature is at the center".[23] He goes on to mention that "[a]s an underwater photographer, I combine my love affair with the aesthetics of the underwater world with my keen interest in abstract and contemporary art" (ibid). This passion with the underwater aesthetics and photography manifests in *She Down There* through his use of graphic imagery as the reader is drawn to the depths of the ocean where together with the two protagonists, Claire and Klaas, they meet various sea creatures. Burger's novel invokes "compassion, affect, sentiment and cognition" (Villanueva 2019, 189) through emotive diction and a combination of visual, auditory, and tactile imagery.

It is Burger's deep relationship with the ocean that informs the depiction of Claire, a marine biologist who "feels as comfortable underwater as on land" (Burger 2020, 20). Claire and her fiancée Todd "share the desire to understand how it all works down [there and to] …use this knowledge to protect what is left" (22). Outside the desire to understand and preserve the ecology of the oceans, Claire has deep ancestral links that tie her to water. Her great grandfather was a whaler while her grandmother, Naan requests to have her remains spread on both "…the

[23] https://www.lyntonburger.com/about

land …[and] the sea" (14). Elsewhere in the novel, Naan reminds Claire, "[y]ou know who you are…We are sea people" (21). She further sustains their connection to the sea when she intimates that "[y]ou my Claire, remind me of Sedna. You want to live down there and serve all those sea creatures, don't you just?" (22). The passion to protect marine life which begins in the waters of the Pacific Ocean later takes her to the Indian Ocean following the tragic death of her fiancée − Todd − during an underwater expedition.

The bulk of the action of the novel occurs in Praia do Tofo in Mozambique. Tofo is a small coastal village in the southern part of Mozambique. It is a popular tourist destination because of its warm waters, manta rays and whale sharks. In the novel, the inspirited waters of Tofo are a major setting that facilitate an interspecies entanglement. The title of the novel, *She Down There,* pulls the reader under the waters of the North Pacific and the Indian Ocean to meet the 'She' who inhabits the depths of the oceans. Though we later learn that the water goddess's name is Sedna, Burger symbolically identifies her as 'She down there' to create an expansive narrative space that encompasses the diverse forms and names that this creature assumes across the world.

The story begins in 1768 in the Commander Islands of the North Pacific Ocean where we are introduced to 'She Down There' who is also known as Sedna or the Half-Away Woman in Haida Gwaai, British Colombia. Her mission is to save sea creatures from poachers. Sedna is the voice, ruler, and protector of the sea and all its creatures. In the words of Naan (Claire's grandmother) she is the:

> Half-Away Woman. Her name is her destiny: half woman, half sea creature. Down with the octopus she dives. She swims out beyond the waves with the sea lions and the orcas. She rolls with the sea otters in the kelp. She rests in the intertidal-that place which is half sea, half land…she sees all in the sea. She feels all. And she is forever destined to be the voice of the sea creatures, the one the Shamans have to dive down to each spring to appease, to ask to release the animals for the summer hunt. (Burger 2020, 26)

The narrative moves from 1768 North Pacific Ocean where we witness Sedna trying to save the endangered Steller Sea cows to 1991 in Southern Haida Gwaii Archipelago where we meet Claire. Haida Gwaii is a collection of islands surrounded by large bodies of water. As the Marine

Plan Partnership for the North Pacific Coast observes, "the intimate relationship with the marine environment is reflected in Haida traditional knowledge, a living body of knowledge that is built upon past and current Haida experiences throughout the archipelago".[24] From Haida Gwaii, the action of the novel shifts to the Boesmansvlakte Farm, which is in the Karoo region of South Africa. The year is 1980. Karoo means the 'land of thirst' in the language of the Khoisan, its earliest inhabitants. Although the region was once submerged under water (see Bruce Rubidge and Mike Day 2015), at present it lacks surface water. Residents drill boreholes and construct dams. To detect water that is trapped underground, local people use the forked-stick method. The method involves "locating groundwater by walking the surface of a property while holding a forked stick…that responds when the person moves above a location that will yield an adequate flow of water to a drilled well" (King n.p). Surprising for a semi-desert region, the Karoo is also awash with myths of mermaids. Wendy Hardie (2008) states that "the mermaid has been an integral part of the Karoo folklore for years…There are mysterious San rock paintings of creatures with the upper body of a human, and a fish tail, on the walls of caves high up in the Little Karoo Mountains" (n.p).

The Karoo setting and local beliefs inform Burger's depiction of Klaas Afrikaner – the 'bush merman'. When we first meet him, Klaas just like his father, is a labourer at Boesmansvlakte Farm. Here, "[t]he windmill draws from the vast, brackish sea trapped deep below this dry, weathered land. Once a swamp inhabited by dinosaurs, but hardly vegetated now" (Burger 2020, 58). Just as in the arid Manyene Tribal Trust Lands in Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain* where underground water dominates, the idea of a sea trapped underground in *She Down There* recognises the presence of water in its seeming absence. It is in this semi-desert place that Klaas's ironic connection to water manifests. Klaas later enlists as one of the first Coloured divers in the South African navy. He wants to be "…like Jacques Cousteau…to be with the sea animals. The navy will teach [him] how" (73). After completing his training, he is deployed in a clandestine mission to destroy ANC structures in Maputo. Klaas plunges in a dilemma as he is forced to choose between duty and Gwen – his childhood lover who happens to be one of the

[24] http://mappocean.org/

members of the ANC – who is hiding in Maputo. He chooses Gwen. Unable to go back home, he resettles in Tofo where he leads a quiet life as a dive master and later meets Claire with whom he has a daughter, Alice. Burger's protagonists have inextricable ties with water and the way they relate to sea animals muddles the line between the human and non-human.

The multi-species entanglements between humans, sea creatures and spiritual beings in *She Down There* create the inspirited waters of the novel. The waters creolize through the intermingling of indigenous Canadian Haidan, South African Khoisan and the Mozambican Bitonga water myths. Interspecies and multi-spiritual entanglements also populate the novel. I argue that the mingling of these myths provides a global approach to reading for water in Southern African literature.

On one level, the novel details the love between the two protagonists, Claire Lutrisque – born of a French-Canadian father and a Haidan mother – and Klaas Afrikaner, a coloured South African of Khoisan origin. The deep love for water and its creatures takes the two protagonists to the Tofo Islands towards the end of the novel. On another level, the novel foregrounds the friction between humans and the non-human, in this case the ocean and its creatures. In thinking with Villanueva (2019, 188), I read the ocean "as an affective space in which animals communicate their suffering and also display their individuality". I also draw on Danson Mwangi's conceptualization of a multi-species landscape where the human and non-human co-exist (2019). This multi-species landscape is captured in the final scene of the novel when Alice shares her dream with her mother Claire:

> A dream woke me up Mummy. It felt so real. I was sitting in a clearing in a forest. It was nighttime and there was a fire, and all around the fire were animals. Sea animals. I woke up with my heart bumping. It didn't make sense…There were all staring at me, Mummy. Like they wanted me to do something. Then an old lady was there. She was smiling, and she said, 'You can do it.' But what, Mummy? I just know that I want to be with the sea animals. To help them… (Burger 2020, 233-234)

A multi-species frame recognises non-humans as beings with unique legitimate interests and rights which deserve to be respected, hence the sea animals pleading with the little girl to save

them. In the novel, we are presented with sea creatures who in the words of Eduardo Kohn, albeit in a different context, "engage with the world and with each other as selves – that is, as beings that have a point of view" (2007, 4). The use of 'who' instead of 'it' when referring to sea creatures is meant to place them on the same level with humans. This is in line with anthropomorphism[25] that advances the cause of the non-human albeit at the risk of projecting human ideas on the same. As Joanne Mierek (2010, 46) cautions, "[b]ecause we are unable to separate ourselves from our own subjectivity, we cannot objectively approach another's." However, since no better means of allowing animals to speak for themselves exists – at least in literature, Burger's novel deserves special recognition. In the novel, sea creatures 'speak', and the onus is on the humans to 'listen'. In this instance, to speak and listen transcend our conventional comprehension. Mierek (2010, 7) reminds us that:

> [s]haring thoughts, intentions, and feelings with animals does not depend on language; that is, although the ability to talk about the relationship does rely on language, the ability to have it doesn't. With animals, 'thoughts' can be understood as the focus of attention through vocalizing or eye contact, as when a dog checks in or glances at the door or the leash or the food dish.

Mierek's intimation informs Burger's depiction of the human-animal relationship that I consider in greater detail later in this chapter.

Multi-Spirited Waters in *She Down There*

In the novel, the multi-spirited waters comprise mythical beings that reside in the ocean such as Sedna and ancestral spirits like Naan. In addition, we have living human beings like Claire and Klaas who feel at home underwater as on land, and spirit sea animals like turtles, orcas, mantas, sea horses, whales, and dolphins that also constitute these multi-spirited waters of the novel. In the words of Naan "the sea is inhabited by many supernatural creatures, the underwater people...

[25] For more on anthropomorphism see Fisher, John Andrew (1996) "The Myth of Anthropomorphism." In *Readings in Animal Cognition*, edited by Marc Bekoff and Dale Jamieson, 3—16. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press and Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman (2005) Thinking with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism.

Creatures from a time when the veil between humans and other animals was thin" (Burger 2020, 30-31). The ocean becomes a space that dissolves species hierarchizations popular in land-based narratives. All these life forms intermingle and transform the ocean into inspirited waters. The subsequent sections will discuss the three indigenous water myths, the ancestral links and then the animal spirits represented in *She Down There*.

Burger draws on Canadian Haidan, South African Khoisan and the Mozambican Bitonga water myths to creolize the oceans. Through the stories that his characters share, Burger imbues the oceans with a host of water spirits who though languaged differently share some similar traits. To begin with, Burger draws on one of the oldest Haidan myths of the sea. It is the tale of Sedna that has been passed down from generation to generation. The myth explains how different sea creatures came to be and how Sedna became their ruler. The legend has it that Sedna, the most beautiful girl in the village shunned all men to fall for a raven, the spirit bird who disguised himself as a whaler from another village. The two went on to settle on a faraway island. Her departure riled the elders who ordered her father to get her back. On his way back from fetching his daughter:

> Before he could reach the village, a raven came flapping low across the water. And as he drew near, he transformed and filled the sky above them. The great spirit bird flapped around the canoe, screeching and beating the surface of the water in a fury, so that the sea rose up, becoming one with the mist. Her father was terrified. (Burger 2020, 24)

The reader is introduced to the great spirit bird, which draws attention to the spiritual world of the novel that links water, earth, and the sky. Moreover, the passage sustains the mythical atmosphere of the novel as the three elements unite. Frightened and eager to appease the fury of the raven, Sedna's father threw her into the ocean. As she struggled to hold on to the canoe, the father, "leaned forward and hacked at her knuckles…He reached down to where her still warm fingers lay and hastily threw them overboard" (25).

> Sedna and her severed fingers drifted down into the cold depths. One by one the fingers turned into sea creatures. A sea lion, a seal, an otter. One thumb became a rockfish, the other a grey whale. One finger turned into a whole

> school of herring, while another became an orca. They all circled around Sedna, whose braids were unravelling, the dark hair swirling in the current. They were joined by the other animals of the ocean who heard the orcas and the whales calling out her name. All the creatures swam with her in a mighty vortex, and from then onwards, she was Sedna. Ruler of the sea creatures. (Burger 2020, 25)

Through the fantastic mode, Sedna's death, which at first suggests an ending, is transformed into a beginning of new lives, a multi-species turn that explains the interconnectedness of diverse creatures in the novel. The legend becomes part of Haidan creation myths. Sedna transforms into a mystical being, half-woman, half-fish. From her chopped hands emerges the different creatures that populate the ocean. It is no surprise that Sedna feels the pain of even the smallest sea creature and desires to protect them. They are part of each other. Furthermore, Sedna's hybridity – half-fish, half-woman – impacts the representation of Claire and Klaas. Just like Sedna who is a hybrid being, Claire is half-Haidan, half-European. The similarities between the two extend to the work both perform for the ocean. In a podcast discussing his novel, Burger states that "through her conservation work, Claire becomes Sedna as a protector of the sea creatures". [26] It is therefore possible to read Claire as a contemporary water spirit who carries the torch of her Haidan ancestors who as "indigenous peoples regard the inland waters, rivers, wetlands, sea, islands, reefs, sandbars and sea grass beds as an inseparable part of their estate" (Jon Altman and Sue Jackson 2008, 169). Heeding the instructive words from Naan, "we are sea people…" (Burger 2020, 21), Claire makes it her life mission to save the marine creatures, the same way Sedna has always done. In as much as Sedna makes the depths of the ocean her home, Claire's profession as a marine biologist allows her access to the depths of the oceans.

From the cold waters of the North Pacific Ocean Sedna moves to the warm waters of the Southern Indian Ocean. In this way, Burger notes that "Sedna seems to be the unifying thread of these continental waters".[27] She is present and operates in both the Pacific and the Indian Ocean.

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[26] https://www.lyntonburger.com/about

[27] Richards, Nancy. "Nancy Richards speaks to author Lynton Burger", Episode 17, Country Life, 8 June 2020, https://anchorfm/country-life/episodes/Country-Life-Podcasts.

The waters in the novel are not only connected through Sedna but also through the characters – Claire, Klaas and Benito – who seem to flow from one body of water to the next, bringing with them their embodied knowledges about the ocean and the life within it. Their stories foreground the sacredness of these waters.

The ocean carries different meanings for different people. The belief that the ocean is inhabited by numerous spirits (dead, alive, human, animal, and plant) is sustained in Burger's novel when Claire disperses her grandmother's ashes on land and water according to latter's will. Submerging Naan's ashes in the ocean can be read as a ritual that reconnects her with her origins. Earlier in the novel, Naan informs Claire that she is a direct descendant of the Foam Woman, She Down There. This ancestral connection to a half-human, half-fish creature helps to explain why Claire continues to sense Sedna's presence even in the Indian Ocean. In her words, "she's still around, goes with me wherever I go. Especially underwater" (Burger 2020, 113).

The ocean space in the novel is also populated with spirit sea animals. Claire's totem is the Sea Otter which is believed to be one with the ocean. Her grandmother persuades her to "flow like Otter flows" (Burger 2020, 30) and this further explains Claire's intimate connection with the ocean. Writing in the context of Zimbabwean Shona beliefs, Clemence Makamure and Vengesai Chimininge (2015) argue that totems are "seen as personifications of spiritual beings" (11). Claire's grandmother feels obliged to share the stories of her people and the ocean. Their totem is the Turtle, the messenger. Makamure and Chimininge go on to argue that:

> Such a conception of the relationship between the human society and the environment foster sound environmental ethics that does [sic] not only take into account the well-being of the individual and his community, but also that of the environment. The environment should be construed as an end in itself in a similar way that human beings are perceived, rather than viewing it as a mere means to some human ends. (Makamure and Chimininge 2015, 8)

In the case of Klaas, he is connected to the manta. When he encounters one, "she hangs, hardly moving her wide wings, maintaining eye contact with him. Her eye bores into him and time ceases. *My spirit manta*" (Burger 2020, 185). Mashudu Mashige suggests that "[b]eliefs

regarding totems can vary, from merely adopting one as a whim, to adopting an animal that a person sees representing favourable traits reflected in their own behaviour or appearance. Other clans believe their totem literally acts as a spirit guide" (2021, 16). In the novel, the sea creatures act as spirit guides and materialize when needed the most. These spirit animals share profound and intimate moments with humans. Totems are therefore used in the novel to underscore the relational connection between the human and the other-than-human world – the ocean and its creatures.

As I have shown, the oceans in this novel are populated by different spirits which are accessed in various ways. One such means is through diving, which Melody Jue tells us makes three-dimensional movement that is impossible on land attainable.[28] In the documentary film 'My Octopus Teacher' (2020), Craig Foster echoes that "[w]hat is so amazing about this environment is you are in a three-dimensional forest, and you can jump off the top and go wherever you want. You are flying basically. You might as well be on another planet. You naturally just get more relaxed in the water." The enhanced underwater movement in turn inspire perspectival shifts in terms of our relationship with the ocean and its creatures. Foster further explains that plunging under the ocean implies "stepping into this completely different world. You go into that water, and it is extremely liberating. All your worries and problems and life drama just dissolve. You slowly start to care about all the animals, even the tiniest little animals. You realize that everyone is very important" (ibid). Besides diving, the animated oceans of the novel are also accessesible through dreams where "… there is no veil between the spirits of humans and the spirits of other creatures. This is the realm of the supernatural creatures…" (Burger 2020, 10-11), according to the Haidan shamaan. That in the depths of the ocean there is no veil between human and animal spirits points to the belief in existence of a universal consciousness that unites all life and non-life forms. The practice of accessing water bodies through dreams, recalls the initiation rituals of *sangomas* in some parts of Southern Africa. The initiates might not physically submerge

[28] Hannabach Cathy. "Melody Jue on Thinking Through Seawater", Imagine Otherwise, Episode 97, 9 October 2019, https://ideasonfire.net/97-melody-jue/.

underwater but can access these water depths and the spirit realm through dreams (see Mutwa 2003).

The foregoing resonates with Khoisan access to the underwater world through dream-like trances in *She Down There*. Divers also experience a trance-like sensation underwater because of the difference of pressure levels. Foster (2020) narrates in 'My Octopus Teacher' that ocean water "upgrades the brain because you are getting this flood of chemicals every time you immerse in that cold water. Your whole body becomes alive. And then as your body adapts it just becomes easier and easier." Elsewhere in a podcast interview with Nancy Richards, Burger, drawing from his extensive diving experience observes that "being underwater is an altered state, it brings about a dream state because of the pressure and floating in three dimensions, like being in space where you can move in any direction you want".[29] As I hinted earlier, it is through similar dream-like trances that the reader experiences the underwater world of the Great Karoo in South Africa. The Kalahari Meerkat Project article titled "Kalahari Bushmen" suggests that because the Khoi-San people "lived in a very dry area, water to them has a very magical power that could revive them". In the semi-arid region of the Karoo, we are introduced to the underwater people and spirits through cave rock paintings. It is only when he is in a trance that the Khoisan artist can access and paint the underwater spirits. He goes "within himself to become one with the stars and the wind and the living, dry land of his ancestors" (Burger 2020, 11). In the midst of this dryness however, there is water that is trapped underground, and in the deep pools. As Herbert Aschwanden explains, "[p]ools, springs and swamps sustain the life of the rivers and they give the vital water. Therefore, such places are regarded as an origin of the fertility of nature. Also, they safeguard human life and are thus to be especially respected as sacred places" (1933, 9).

These sacred pools seem to be the home of the strange looking beings as shown by the Khoisan rock painting below:

[29] Richards, Nancy. "Nancy Richards speaks to author Lynton Burger", Episode 17, Country Life, 8 June 2020, https://anchorfm/country-life/episodes/Country-Life-Podcast.

> When he is ready, he dips a supple twig into the ochre paste in the ostrich shell he holds and lifts it reverently to apply the pigment to the rock. Stroke by stroke, the mystical abhumans emerge. A reminder to be left for his grandchildren, and theirs, that life is not always as it seems. And perhaps one day one of his people will find a way to go where he could not. Down there, into that dark-blue, mysterious sea. (Burger 2020, 11-12)

The painting represents the Khoisan links to water and water spirits. The novel's depiction of the sea creatures which draws on ancient rock paintings shows that the mermaid myth has been around for a long time (see Varner 2010). The rupestrian abhumans help narrow the gap between human beings and non-human creatures, pointing to the intermingling of both worlds. The prophetic utterance from the Khoisan artist, "perhaps one day one of his people will find a way to go where he could not. Down there, into that dark blue, mysterious sea" (Burger 2020, 12) manifests years later through Klaas. He experiences what his forefathers had frozen on the rocks. This materializes the moment Klaas falls from a windmill into the farm dam and experiences "what it's like underwater" (60) for the first time. He finds himself in "a cool, all-encompassing wetness. It's strangely familiar, comforting…." (ibid). The ironical comforting familiarity resonates with his bush merman status: a water spirit in a waterless space. As the impact of the fall sets in, he loses consciousness, and has visions of:

> …strange human like creatures drifting in a forest of seaweed. These creatures are dancing and drumming as well as swimming in a sky that is water. It's as if the world of the land has met the world of underwater…They have the heads, arms, and torsos of human beings, but from the waist down they are like dolphins. (Burger 2020, 60)

This moment leads to a series of dreams where Klaas is underwater, a world that is strangely familiar for someone who had spent his whole life in semi-desert Karoo. He "dreams of the strange swimming people who appeared in his watery vision. And during the day he looks toward the dam, thinks of the real creatures that live there. Water now contains magic for him. The sea becomes a dream" (63). Through this encounter, the dam becomes a sacred space that links Klaas to his ancestors and sustains the mythical atmosphere of the novel. It is these experiences that sustain his intimate relationship with the ocean later at Tofo when he becomes a diving master. He is aware of the other beings that are found in the depths of the ocean, which

his ancestors captured on the rock paintings. He approaches the ocean with some reverence and demands the same from his tourist clients. He urges them to respect every sea creature.

As the novel ends, the Indian Ocean becomes a melting pot that brings together different characters who share knowledges and attitudes about the ocean. In addition to the Haidian and South African water myths, Benito brings the beliefs of the Mozambican Bitonga people similar to those of East African communities. The unifying thread of these beliefs is that the ocean is populated with supernatural beings and spirits. These beings communicate with humans in different ways including the sounds dolphins make which evokes the Khoisan click language. Again, these animals communicate with humans through eye contact, movement and thoughts. This ability to cross-communicate bridges the gap between humans and the non-human.

While the above considers diverse indigenous water myths that feed into the notion of inspirited waters, the next section examines the representation of sea creatures in the novel, which constitutes Burger's mission to give voice and agency to voiceless and apparently passive oceanic beings.

Thinking with Underwater Animals

In *She Down There*, we are invited to sink with the sea animals into their underwater world and to appreciate them as special creatures who possess peculiar individual feelings, interests and needs. Kira Gee (2019) cites Rachel Carson (1937) and poses the provocative question: Who knows the ocean? Gee goes on to suggest that our 'earth bound senses' limit our knowledge of the ocean. We cannot grasp:

> the foam and surge of the tide that beats over the crab hiding under the seaweed of his tide pool home; or the lilt of the long, slow swells of mid-ocean, where shoals of wandering fish prey and are preyed upon. (2019, 23)

To better engage this aquatic world, we need to "shed our human perceptions of length and breadth and time and place and enter vicariously into a universe of all-pervading water" (ibid).

The sea creatures that we encounter in *She Down There* are imbued with human-like qualities and feelings: they are individual characters who love, mother, play, despair and experience pain. Burger's representation resonates with Lori Gruen's concept of entangled empathy. She defines the concept as:

> a type of caring perception focused on attending to another's experience of well-being. It is an experiential process involving a blend of emotion and cognition in which we recognise we are in relationships with others and are called upon to be responsive and responsible in these relationships by attending to another's needs, interests, desires, vulnerabilities, hopes and sensitivities. (2015, 227)

While some have regarded this humanising of animals as a human egocentric gesture, others maintain that it helps in the protection of non-human life. The argument is that thinking with and understanding "non-human animals and their agency can inform how humans empathise, relate, and interact with animals" (Villanueva 2019, 192). In Burger's words, "I needed to go beyond the facts and figures that amaze us about underwater. I wanted to bring an emotional and human story to that wonder and explore what lies between the facts and figures and explore the interaction with sea creatures".[30] It is this experience that he shares with the reader to bridge the gap between two seemingly different worlds.

One way to bridge this gulf is to stop conceiving sea creatures as one mass but to individualize them through name designations. The National Geographic channel has documentaries where they trace named sea creatures to comprehend them within their particular worlds. In this way, they become distinct sentient beings with agency. This, however, is not without its problems. For instance, Wilson (2019, 713) argues that in attempting to represent the other, "questions about translation, decipherability, and the dangers of misunderstanding" may arise.

[30] Nancy Richards. "Nancy Richards speaks to author Lynton Burger", Episode 17, Country Life, 8 June 2020, https://anchorfm/country-life/episodes/Country-Life-Podcast.

In the novel the first sea creatures we meet are the Steller Sea cows, the last of their kind due to poaching. In opening the novel with a close encounter between Steller Sea cows and the poachers, Burger frames his narrative as the fight between men and the sea creatures. The sea cows seem to be content in their world. Like humans, they love, mate, feel and communicate. This foregrounds the author's intention of rendering subjectivity and individuality to these sea creatures. The novel opens with a beautiful mating scene that underscores their passion driven relations. However, this erotic scene contrasts sharply with the pain and death of sea cows that comes immediately after. The somber words used to capture the ordeal highlight the callousness of it all. The male sea cow shudders in pain as he is impaled by the poachers and helplessly calls out to his partner for help. She is sadly oblivious to the danger they are in. The narrator writes:

> But all she can see in that deep-set eye is a complete lack of fear- a being who has never known a foe. The sea cow is confused. Her mate is calling out to her as if she isn't near. A strange floating thing has come between them. Below her, through the clear water, the comforting sounds of the reef come rushing up to her. Her eyes close involuntarily as a blinding pain arcs across her back. (Burger 2020, 9)

Human beings pose the greatest threat to the survival of marine life. Without the intrusion of men, the underwater world provides shelter, captured in the phrase 'the comforting sounds of the reef'. Left to its own devices, the marine world self-regulates and ensures the survival of the different sea creatures.

We also meet "a large yellow-eye rockfish, close to a metre in length, the fish is gravid, her belly visibly swollen with live young…*precious, pregnant life*" (Burger 2020, 52). In this description, emphasis is on the foetus. This accentuation is reiterated in the encounter between Klaas and a manta. Klaas's "eyes go to its belly and narrow with deep appreciation when he notices the swelling. A smile spreads on his face. *You're pregnant!* He arches away. Swings around gracefully in the water to meet the mother's eye once more" (184). In the same manner that Claire's heart swells when she encounters the pregnant rockfish, Klaas is awed by the pregnant manta. He perceives it not just as a manta but a proud mother to be. We read that "she is grace,

she is poise, she is one with the sea. As is he. He communicates, through his movements, through his flow, all of his loneliness. All of his joy at her pup, which must be coming soon" (184-185).

Thinking of these creatures as mothers and families obliges one to protect them, to empathise with them and their offspring. The sea creatures are portrayed as sentient beings, living, loving, preying and being preyed upon, precarious but seemingly content in their world. Whilst Burger's representation of these sea creatures sometimes slides into idealism, for him the desperate desire to protect these animals from human-induced extinction justifies the means.

Another example is the representation of sharks as amiable beings. The narrator relates that:

> She turns. He is in awe. She is magnificent. All powerful. The most beautiful creature he's ever seen. He can't tell if her round, black, expressionless eye is on him or not. As the light plays on her graceful lines, her body eases through the water like it's a part of it. Without hesitation, Klaas swims out, straight towards the four-metre great white. The shark completely ignores him, but instinct tells him not to venture closer–that the shark is well aware of him. He hangs in the water, frozen. She is magnificent. Massive. Sleek. She glides away from him, and he loses sight of her black eye. (Burger 2020, 75)

The encounter departs from the monster image that most people are familiar with. Endearing diction such as magnificent, beautiful, graceful, powerful, sleek and massive is used to describe the shark Klaas encounters. These adjectives do not depict a dangerous animal but one that is majestic. It targets a seal rather than Klaas, demonstrating that the human fear of sharks is baseless. As Molly Edmonds (2020) argues, human beings are not part of the shark diet. She further notes that humans kill more sharks than otherwise. Of the few shark attacks, most are of mistaken identity when humans are misconstrued for large sea creatures like seals or dolphins. Normally, sharks prefer fish and invertebrates like squid and clams to humans.[31] Burger seems to corroborate the view that sharks are harmless to humans. In place of the supposed monster, Klaas identifies with the shark and has an epiphanic moment: "He knows why he loves it down there. It's because he feels totally safe" (Burger 2020, 76).

[31] https://animals.howstuufworks.com/fish/sharks/most-dangerous-sharks.htm

Another encounter involves Klaas and dolphins:

> the four dolphins surround him, and he makes eye contact with those glistening hyper-intelligent eyes before they veer off playfully, clicking and whistling all the while. He can't help himself. He 'talks' to them as they twirl around him, in what he believes is some version of Bushman language. (Burger 2020, 150)

Klaas perceives that the dolphins talk back to him, inviting him to "Come! Ride this wave with us!" (150). When he surfaces for air, Klaas is "filled with pure child-like joy of having played with kindred souls" (150). Again, the term 'kindred souls' suggests a deep attachment between Klaas and the dolphins, which gestures to an interspecies connection. The child-like joy he experiences underwater captures a powerful connection to the sea creatures and to water.

The reverence is also manifest in Claire's relationship with sea creatures. As she intimates to Benito towards the end of the novel, "… [m]y own inner journey is moving toward a practice of connecting personally with sea creatures. As beings. Individuals. Sometimes it honestly feels like I'm talking to them. Hearing them" (166). This alternative human-sea creature relationship resonates with Foster's connection to an octopus in 'My Octopus Teacher' (2020). Foster narrates that "a lot of people say that an octopus is like an alien. But the strange thing is that as you get closer them, you realize that we are very similar in a lot of ways…" Through compelling cinematic techniques, the film visualises a deep relationship that grows between Foster and the octopus. Just like Klaas and Claire, Foster feels welcome and at home with sea creatures.

Benito (who heads the Tofo marine project in Mozambique that Claire later becomes part of) links this reverential attitude towards sea beings to Credo Mutwa's philosophy on Zulu traditional African knowledge, dreams, and practices. Mutwa, a well-known *sangoma* and spiritualist believes that there is a hidden lake in the spiritual world where the knowledge of everything resides and is accessible – past, present and future – in the form of small silver fishes (Mutwa 2003). It is in this vein that sea creatures such as whales and dolphins are held in great reverence.

Building on the idea that people will always care about what they know and understand, Burger paints a captivating image of the ocean world (sea creatures, human beings and its flora) as part of his environmental activism. In Claire's words, "[h]ow do we get people who can't dive down here to appreciate, and to protect, this miracle of life" (Burger 2020, 123). This miracle of life encompasses both marine creatures and the coral reefs that sustain them. In another illustrative instance, we read that:

> Claire's hand comes up and moves involuntarily in a slow, regal wave, acknowledging the subtle shades: the greens, oranges, yellows and faded browns that indicate healthy coral growth. And in between, the soft corals, the sponges and tunicates, in an array of colours. Bunches, branches, fans. All of these permanently attached invertebrates are filtering the seawater soup for nutrients. Feeding, cycling, recycling. And with light angling down through the blue, catching the throngs of fish, she becomes aware of a gentle warmth spreading throughout her body as she breathes easefully. She feels into the reef's vulnerability. She knows that if the sun heats up just a few degrees, the polyps will spit out the algae and go into a kind of hibernation. And if the warm water persists, even for a few days, the polyps will starve and die. And the wonderland she is floating over will turn white overnight. Dead, bleached limestone sculptures. Millions of fish without food. (Burger 2020, 123)

The world depicted in the above passage captures a living, self-sufficient marine bionetwork that feeds, cycles and recycles. It is also a beautiful, multi-coloured world that sustains a vast underwater ecosystem. Through evocative diction, Burger depicts a world which is both enchanting and under threat. In the novel, the underwater world is not just beautiful but also fragile and susceptible to human intrusion and climate change. Claire's anxieties for the reef are echoed in the Coral Reef Alliance Report (2005) that states that:

> rising sea temperatures and sea levels and increasing frequency of storms will increase coral mortality and seriously endanger coral reefs, especially those already under stress. These climatic changes could become the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back for reefs facing stresses such as poor water quality, destructive fishing and tourism impacts (n.p).

The common image of the ocean that most people are familiar with derives from television programmes (such as National Geographic), nature magazines and paintings. In these different

multimedia representations, the ocean space is always a mysterious place outside of our lived experiences. The perpetuation of 'otherness' is responsible for how the ocean and its creatures have been objectified and exploited. In his novel, Burger not only shares the beauty of these inspirited oceans but also alerts us to the fragility of these spaces in hopes of changing the humans' relationship with the seas and its creatures for the better.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how *Sleepwalking Land* and *She Down There* draw on water-based indigenous beliefs to capture their diverse themes. I have argued that Couto draws on water spirit beliefs to capture the complexity of post-colonial Mozambique during the civil war. The uncertainty which frames Couto's characters mirrors the deep anxieties of people during a civil war. In *She Down There*, the chapter examined the deployment of the mythical water goddess – Sedna – and the representation of sea creatures to blur the lines between the human and the non-human, the natural and the supernatural. In reconciling the human to the ocean, Burger does not restrict us to the materiality of the ocean but instead unites us with the ocean and its creatures. By immersing the readers underwater, it becomes possible to think and feel with sea animals.

CHAPTER FIVE

Re-narrating Kianda the Water Spirit and Queen Njinga in Pepetela's *The Return of the Water Spirit* and Graciano's *Njinga: Queen of Angola*

In this chapter, I focus on the novel *The Return of the Water Spirit* (2002)[32] by Pepetela which is set in Angola's Luanda and *Njinga: Queen of Angola* (2013), a historical film directed by Sergio Graciano. Building on the previous chapter, I consider the animistic mode in both texts that draws on the Kimbundu water spirit myths. In this reading, I follow Garuba's concept of animist consciousness. Garuba contends that there is a constant re-enchantment of the world as the "rational and scientific are appropriated and transformed into the mystical and magical" (2003, 267) in contemporary Africa. I argue that *The Return of the Water Spirit* centres the theme of inspirited waters through *Kianda* the water spirit. I also suggest that water − in its different manifestations − is a narrative and structuring device in the film, *Njinga: Queen of Angola*. It enables a re-narration of the masculine politics fixated on land and nationalism. As an internal structuring device, water drives the plot in the film.

In Pepetela's *The Return of the Water Spirit*, I explore the way *Kianda* the water spirit, is represented and mediated. He is formless and is encountered through music and the water in the lagoon forming next to the Kinaxixi square in central Luanda. Kianda's lack of an embodied form contrasts with the representations of water spirits discussed in my previous chapters where these beings took human form, became snakes or sometimes mermaids. This deviation deepens our understanding of the water spirit as essentially spiritual, as the diverse forms it takes become secondary to its spiritual nature. In Pepetela's context, this lack of form adds to Kianda's enigmatic and elusive nature. I associate the text with a detective novel since the plot revolves

[32] This is a translation into English by Luis R. Mitras from the Portuguese original O Desejo de Kianda that was published in 1995.

around solving the mystery of the collapsing buildings around the Kinaxixi square, a phenomenon that came to be known as the Luanda Syndrome. Regarding the structure of the novel, there is a back-and-forth movement between the protagonist Carmina's adventures and *Kianda's* story, an interplay that carries to the end of the text. The plot constantly moves from the world of Carmina on land to *Kianda's* realm of the lagoon. The novel's form can thus be conceptualized through the movement of waves. As discussed in my previous chapters, the concept of tidalectics disrupts the linear comprehension of the world and problematises absolutes in terms of time and space.

Virgilio Coelho (2010) describes Luanda as the city of *Kianda*, cementing the relationship between the water deity and the coastal city. In *The Return of the Water Spirit*, *Kianda* is determined to reclaim his city seized by the Portuguese during colonialism and years after independence, remained inaccessible to the ordinary Angolans (See Ribeiro 2018, Gastrow 2013). This explains why *Kianda* has been read as a symbol of resistance both before and after independence. Zuleide Duarte and Izabel Cristina Oliveira Martins (2018) argue that the figure of *Kianda* is "inserted in the [political] narrative to alert us about the ethical values lost during liberation, as well as to disclose and preserve the Angolan identity roots, which were once threatened with the extinction by the colonization process" (37). Victor Ogbeide (2013) further argues that "the mythic example of Kianda in reclaiming what rightly belongs to him points the way forward in the Angolan people's quest for a genuine reclamation of their political voice" (157). He goes on to suggest that "Angolan problems can only be truly solved by Angolan-bred ideas" (ibid). Frank Merksamer (2019) echoes that "*The Return of the Water Spirit* evokes a pan-Africanism that seems to reject 'foreign' influence and promote a return to regionally intelligible African culture" (152). My analysis of the novel interrogates these ideas as I argue that while the water spirit trope inspires Angolans to recapture their agency through indigenous epistemologies, *Kianda's* 'return' negates definite resolutions. His representation in the novel as an elusive figure problematises any such return and in so doing, complicates the idea of a pristine Angolanness or authentic Angolan experience that is retrievable.

While *Njinga: Queen of Angola* is less explicitly concerned with the depictions of water spirits than other texts studied in this thesis, it communicates its central themes and preoccupations through water. This resonates with what film critic Adriano D'Aloia (2012) says about the representation of water in contemporary films. He argues that "cinema has recognised that water can visually give matter and meaning to human desires, dreams and secrets, eliciting suspense and fear" (87). As my analysis of the film will show, water becomes a narrative structuring device. It enables an aquatic-filmic re-narration of the phallocentric politics of land and nationalism. Most scenes start with establishing shots of the river. While these scenes help orient the viewer in terms of location, they also drive the plot forward since they invariably feature people arriving and leaving by canoe. This raises questions around what motives these new arrivals bring and what their subsequent departures entail, creating suspense. The different shots of water in the film also create a sense of foreboding, and impending disaster in the film. Moreover, these waters function beyond the figurative aspect as they become animated as sites of drowning political opponents.

The film depicts 17th century Angola, a time of great turmoil for this south-west African kingdom. It was a period of mounting European imperialist ventures as the trans-Atlantic slave trade was reaching its peak. In the movie the Portuguese and the Dutch compete to control local territories and trading routes, linking these to the then lucrative business of buying and selling slaves. These territories and trading routes are not limited to land but encompass watery spaces, displacing land as the only space of contestation in Angolan politics. The imperial enterprises of the Dutch and the Portuguese contend with Njinga, who begins to confront them first as an ambassador for the Mbundu and later as their legitimate ruler. She ascends the throne to become a tough general and strategic ruler of the Mbundu kingdom. To attain this position, she fights the Portuguese and her brother, who secures the throne after their father's death. While the movie chronicles the life and battles of Queen Njinga as she consolidates her kingdom, water also becomes a protagonist in the film as it allows for a re-telling of this key moment in the history of Angola.

Below, I explore the ambiguous representation of *Kianda* in *The Return of the Water Spirit.* I start with a plot summary of the novel. From there I delve into the original water myth that Pepetela draws on before exploring the representation of Kianda in the novel. Thereafter, I turn to *Njinga: Queen of Angola* whose visualisation of water dramatizes and rearticulates early Angolan contact with Portugal and Holland. I underscore the experiences of Queen Njinga to problematise the masculinisation of the African nation. Whereas the notion of inspirited waters dominates the section on Kianda, it becomes less prominent in the last section on Queen Njinga where the major concern is the materiality of water as a structuring device.

The Return of the Water Spirit

The novel is set in the late 90s, nearly two decades after Angola attained independence from Portugal. The newly independent nation is embroiled in a bitter civil war "as different political ideologies – anti-colonialism, socialism, and capitalism – refuse to compromise with each other" (Chow 2012, 55). This failure to compromise leads to a costly civil war that cripples the nation. While at one level, the novel portrays the political reality of the newly independent state, it also addresses issues of class, gender, and the environment.

The novel narrates the story of Joao and Carmina Evangelista whose good fortunes contrasts with the immiseration of most Angolans. Chaos frustrates the promises of independence. The decadence transforms the couple's virtuous friend − Honorio − into a fraudster. He ends up losing his home, job, and family. With nothing left to lose and in protest, he and other demonstrators occupy Kinaxixi square (the central part of town). The 'naked protesters' become famous for stripping their clothes to emphasize their material lack. Philip Rothwell argues, in his analysis of the novel that "[t]his spontaneous protest takes the form of nakedness, as the dispossessed flaunt their nothingness in the faces of those who have everything" (2004, 203). He goes on to contend that:

> Flaunting nakedness in the faces of these newly converted capitalists is a powerful gesture that simultaneously points to a rejection of any form of

> concealment and the immense poverty that has been hidden, forgotten, or simply not spoken of, as the nation is swept along on the tidal wave of capitalism, which now operates through a relentless and refractive exchange of signs. (Rothwell 2004, 203)

The novel is also about *Kianda*, the water spirit we later discover is responsible for the mysterious collapse of the buildings in Kinaxixi square. *Kianda* destroys the buildings to reclaim his lagoon. The narrator reveals that "Kianda felt asphyxiated with all that weight on top of him. He was unable to swim, and so finally he revolted" (Pepetela 2002, 108). These different but connected threads in the novel (Kianda and Carmina's stories) present a non-linear concept of time and space as *Kianda's* return relaxes rigid boundaries between past and present, and between natural and supernatural. Moreover, by returning, *Kianda* narrows the divide between the dead and the living. His return invokes multiple realities which are juxtapositioned in the novel, a multiplicity mirrored and extended by its mythical form.

The novel begins as a realist plot of Carmina's rags-to-riches story. This thread is soon upset by *Kianda's* paranormal subplot. *Kianda's* story appears in italicized segments that are strategically placed throughout the novel as if to disrupt what has been staged as the main narrative (Carmina's story). While Carmina's story is well detailed, chronicling her childhood, her marriage, and her political acumen, *Kianda's* tale, like a flowing river, gathers momentum in short bursts till he breaks free and flows back into the ocean as the novel closes. While one can argue that the italics initially emphasize the enigmatic world seemingly represented by water spirits, this distinction soon collapses as *Kianda* begins to affect real time, space, and activities. Similarly, *Kianda's* song that begins as soft and elegiac, ends up loud and triumphant as an increasing number of buildings collapse and the lagoon floods the city. Thomas Waller (2020) argues that "the crescendo of Kianda's moans accordingly functions as a mouthpiece for those natures excluded from the local acceleration of capitalist development" (12). As the novel progresses, we see a link between *Kianda's* protest (his song and the expanding lagoon) and that of the naked protesters gathered at the Kinaxixi square.

Through the ecological aspects of the novel, we witness the emergence of a self-sustaining ecosystem of the lagoon that supports different plants, animals and even humans. This contrasts

the environmental catastrophe of Luanda. Waller (2020) notes that one of the novel's preoccupations is with "the extinction of local sea life, the commercialization of fishing industries and the intensification of import traffic across the oceans" (3). The need to conscientize and to protect our oceans has also been a major theme of this thesis, most explicitly in the analysis of Burger's *She Down There*. In *The Return of the Water Spirit*, this theme is explored through one of Carmina's People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) colleagues, Joaquim Domingos who fraudulently acquires a Navy vessel and converts it into a fishing trawler. We read that:

> On the stern, where the cannons had been, he had quick-reaction harpoons installed; these were guided by lasers and other such state-of-the-art technologies. The last whales of the ocean were ready to be obliterated. The truth is that there was no escape possible for the poor sea breams and groupers in Mussulo Bay: off to one side went their heads, their entrails to the other. (Pepetela 2002, 14)

We discern that because of humans and their technologies, there is little hope for sea animals. The phrase "the last whales of the ocean were ready to be obliterated" speaks to the ongoing slaughter of these sea creatures. It is not only the whales but other sea creatures like breams that are in danger of extinction. That they are described as 'poor' amplifies their helplessness in a callous Anthropocene age. In this reading, the denouement of the novel where *Kianda* returns to the sea can be read as nature fighting back. I now delve into the representation of *Kianda* in *The Return of the Water Spirit.*

Pepetela's Kianda in *The Return of the Water Spirit*

In the text, *Kianda* makes his return as an angry water spirit. In an act of revenge and in a bid to get back his lagoon, *Kianda* 'sings' the buildings on and near Kinaxixi square to the ground. In one scene in the novel, we read that "[t]he walls disintegrated in a leisurely way and then slowly the furniture fell on top of the plaster and the sanitary fittings. This was followed by falling people and dogs, parrots and cats, nests of mice and cockroaches, until eventually everything had tumbled to the ground" (Pepetela 2002, 3-4).

Since he targets the buildings occupying his square rather than people, only the buildings collapse: "as one can see, it was only the building itself that was destroyed – reduced to rubble. Neither the people nor the animals that lodged with them, nor the furniture nor the household appliance, suffered so much as a scratch. It was something which had never been seen before…" (Pepetela 2002, 4). In his analysis of the novel, Waller (2020) argues that the water-spirit in the novel is "angry, active and only too immediate, seeking revenge for the extractivist violence carried out in the name of neoliberalism" (1). During the narrative, we discover that his lagoon had been drained to make way for the modern skyscrapers that now dominate Kinaxixi square. We read that the weight of these buildings chocked *Kianda,* hence his reaction. In shielding the occupants, furniture, and the animals, Pepetela stresses Kianda's role as protector of the people. This benevolence evokes *Nyaminyami*, the Zambezi River god who fought for his waters and Tonga people during the construction of Kariba Dam (see Siwila 2015). Some Kimbundu people believe *Kianda* can empower selected individuals to make wealth for the benefit of the entire community. If the chosen person becomes selfish, *Kianda* will reclaim his wealth. This seems to inform *Kianda's* revolt in post-colonial Luanda filled with the "non-stop begging of the street kids, the war amputees and the old people thrown out on to the street by poverty" (Pepetela 2002, 80). Unsurprisingly, ordinary citizens like Honorio take to the street "dissatisfied with the climate of corruption that dominates the city and the country at that time" (Secco 2005, 69). *Kianda's* role in the political landscape of Luanda however remains ambiguous as evidenced by his return to the sea. He leaves behind a large group of protesters without solving their issues and with no clear way forward. The building next to the lagoon which the homeless had turned into a home also comes crashing down, problematising the role of *Kianda* in the novel. This can indicate Pepetela's refusal to create a messiah out of *Kianda*. The struggle for solutions in war-torn Angola continues.

The title of the novel − 'The Return of the Water Spirit' − suggests that *Kianda* is reclaiming his lagoon from the cruel forces of modernisation. The question is in what form is this spirit returning? Is it *Kianda* before colonisation? Or an incomprehensible and unnrecognisable version? Pepetela does not answer these questions overtly. In denying this spirit a definite form, he leaves it to his readers to speculate. No one sees *Kianda*. Moreover, besides Cassandra and

Old Kalumbo, no other character hears Kianda's mysterious song. *Kianda* does not wait to be invoked. As the protagonist of the novel, he propels the plot with his force.

It is useful to consider how characters in the novel read *Kianda*. To start with, Pepetela alludes to two Angolan writers − Arnaldo Santos and Luandino Viera − who have also written extensively on *Kianda*. This intertextuality underlines the central place of water spirits in Angolan cultural products. Joao remembers when he sat down "at a table where they were two writers present, Luandino Vieira and Arnaldo Santos, both of them extremely knowledgeable about things to do with Luanda" (Pepetela 2002, 37). The two writers were reliving the history of the Kinaxixi square. During this discussion, Joao learns that the the square was once a lagoon with "a sacred tree which was cut down and which shed blood from its stump for an entire week" (37). Regarding the bleeding tree, Luandino Vieira offers mythic explanations. He pleads with his colleague to "stop trying to explain the inexplicable…it was blood. The people said so. You see, the Water Spirit's tree cries blood when it is cut" (38). Viera's reasoning invokes Garuba's insistence that in animism, objects are the physical and material manifestation of the spirits, and vice versa (2003). Through this formulation, the tree becomes a water spirit, which at the same time inspirits the tree. This view explains the local belief that the tree shed blood tears. However, Anarldo Santos offers a scientific comprehension of the 'bleeding' tree. He argues that "the land around the lagoon was all red, and the liquid which came out from the stump that was cut was perhaps the sap mixed with the products that the roots had sucked from the red earth, and which the people took to be blood" (38). The conflicting explanations illiustrate the multiple ways of apprehending the world in Africa, evoking the navigation of the scientific and spiritual interpretations to which Garuba (2003) refers.

The different versions of *Kianda* and the sacred tree feed into the mystery of the falling buildings. The Luanda Syndrome soon attracts experts who try to make sense of it from different perspectives:

> All the departments are studying the phenomenon. Each one from its particular area of interest. …everyone is here, those trained in chemistry, in mathematics, in the earth sciences, physics. Each one is studying this

> phenomenon from their own vantage point. Is the Luanda syndrome of biological origin? Or is it chemical? Or does it have to do with physics? We have to explore all possibilities. (Pepetela 2002, 29)

Not to be outdone, the religious sector concocts its own theory. One Christian pastor ascribes the fall of the buildings to God's punishment for all the sins people have been committing, especially not returning tithes to the church. The selfish pastor manipulates the misfortune to line his pockets. Another theory is that the cement used "goes back to its original state, as though the water had suddenly been removed from it" (29). Since concrete is a mixture of water, cement, quarry stones and sand, *Kianda* seemingly collapses the buildings by removing water from this mixture.

Before independence, Luanda was known as a "cement city that had been built for settlers" (Tomas 2012, 50) and for that reason Merksamer (2019) refers to Kinaxixi square as a "Portuguese-built environment" (102). These buildings had represented Portugal's colonial control in Angola, and after independence these structures continued to symbolize the unequal distribution of resources. Claudia Gastrow (2013) argues that while Luanda became a massive construction site between 1975 to 2002 because of investments from all over the world, the buildings were inadequate to cater for the growing population of Luanda. The poor still overcrowded the slums on the outskirts of the city. In the context of post-colonial Angola, as the poor kept being marginalized from the center of the city, these building projects came to represent what Waller terms "an urbanisation process geared towards providing houses for private investors and the governmental elite, while the majority of the population are imprisoned in poverty" (2020, 13). This might explain why *Kianda* destroyed the buildings, symbols of exploitation and marginalisation. For Pepetela, the myth of *Kianda* becomes a loaded narrative device for capturing colonial and post-colonial anxieties of the common people in Angola. The multiple explanations for the Luanda syndrome resonate with numerous ways and forms that the return of *Kianda* might look like, including contradictory ones.

Luanda turns into a crime scene as people try to solve this mysterious puzzle. The first people to make the connection between the falling buildings and *Kianda* are Cassandra, the little girl, and

the old man Kalumbo who together with other homeless people had taken over an unfinished building next to the lagoon. As I stated earlier, *Kianda* reveals himself to Cassandra and Kalumbo. Cassandra is the only character who hears this song of "the Water Spirit … [who] sings to her" (Pepetela 2002, 83). Kalumbo is the translator who helps her decipher the message behind the song. We read that "Cassandra listened, and she learnt. Each new word she was able to make out from the water spirit's song she told the old man. Little by little, the two were able to reconstruct the text" (84). *Kianda's* determined return is also shown through a cumulative narrative structure as the italicized segments of his account keep getting longer and more detailed as the novel progresses.

Kianda's mounting presence in the text resembles water, which after reaching a certain point, saturates. It also resonates with the broader fears over the rising sea levels because of global warming. The fear is that habitable landmasses are being submerged. Similarly, at first *Kianda's* song is just a whisper but as the novel progresses, it increases in volume and impact. As the song becomes louder, the lagoon grows, the fish and plants multiply. *Kianda's* traditional role included preserving fish and plants, and the novel alludes to this. We read that in the lagoon "the tadpoles were born. Then came the frogs. The puddle began to grow and the plants that burst from within the water gave it a greenish appearance. Fish appeared. And the children took to swimming in it" (Pepetela 2002, 8). This lagoon becomes home to different types of living organisms that thrive in contrast to the death on the land.

Kianda's Song

Like some of Couto's characters in *Sleepwalking Land* (Farida and Nhamataca's mother) who have deep connections to music and water, we are introduced to *Kianda* through a song which begins as "soft, yet sorrowful… far too soft. No one heard it" (Pepetela 2002, 8). Duarte and Martins (2005) aptly refer to *Kianda's* song as a lament, *Kianda* mourning the loss of his lagoon. With time however, we are told that "he sang. He sang until all the buildings fell down, one by one slowly" (93). Pepetela presents a male water spirit whose greatest weapon is his voice. Sirens are reputed for luring sailors through songs. While they have been imagined as female,

they may sometimes be male as is the case with *Kianda*. Linda Austern and Inna Naroditskaya (2006) argue that "sirens have been overwhelmingly associated with the acoustic world and the powers of sound and that the song of the siren has often been the most memorable aspect and the principal locus of their tremendous power" (4). Pepetela seems to draw on these beliefs as well. No one sees *Kianda*, but all suffer his wrath eunleashed through song. At the beginning of the novel, the song is soft and subtle, but even then, it manages to bring down the registry office building in which Joao and Carmina have just gotten married. Despite the different narratives on the falling buildings, all bear witness to the "light musical tinkling sound, such as there would have been if the wind were to beat against a curtain made of thin glass strips" (Pepetela 2002, 3) and the "eerie lights across the entire spectrum of the rainbow" (4). This eerie sound and the rainbow are the first clues that link the Luanda Syndrome to *Kianda*. The presence of a rainbow sets the tone for the introduction of the supernatural in the novel. Kalumbo is aware of the transformative capabilities of water spirits and states that "Kianda manifests himself in many ways. Sometimes it's a ribbon of colours over the water. Other times it's a team of ducks flying in a unique manner. Or it's the whistling of the wind. Why shouldn't it be a song?" (83).

The idea of water spirits assuming the form of a song and a rainbow seems to cut across geographies and cultures. In a South African context, Lange (2015) notes that wherever there is "deep or turbulent water, mist, a sweet smell, reeds, rushes, water buchu and a rainbow" water spirits are likely to be present. Similarly, Bernard (2003) argues that water creatures can manifest as mermaids, snakes, the rainbow, and the gentle soft rain. While writing from a Mozambican context, Mia Couto's water spirits also assume the form of a song. In *Sleepwalking Land*, there is Farida and Nhamata's mother who metamorphose into a sound.

As stated earlier, *Kianda's* manifestation as a song starts off as a tinkling sound. When the connection to *Kianda* is established, we read that "it was a soft yet pained song that a child one day heard. She told her friends, and they scoffed at her: Since when does the water sing?" (Pepetela 2002, 45). This question invites us to think of *Kianda* as both the song and the water in the lagoon. Just like the tree, which is said to have bled, the water in the lagoon sings. What might at first appear to be personification of the tree and the lagoon is better mediated through

animism, the belief that all things are alive and have a spiritual essence. In this way, as Waller argues, the text "casts water as a conscious and living entity" (2020, 5). Garuba argues that such beliefs are a result of "a manifestation of an *animist unconscious*" (2003, 265) whose re-enchantment "subverts the authority of Western science by reinscribing the authority of magic within the interstices of the rational/secular/modern" (ibid, 271).

Cassandra describes the song to her friends and family as "pretty but so sad" (Pepetela 2002, 45). The song's pretty aspect evokes the tales of the beautiful sounds of water creatures' alluring voices. These voices are known to be hypnotic as well. Cassandra, like one under a spell, is drawn to the water through the song even as her family and friends dissuade her. To most of them, she "really lost her marbles this time... Isn't a person who can hear what no one else can hear or who sees what's invisible to others mad?" (45). Though dismissed as insanity, *Kianda's* song continues to rise. Not long afterwards, Cassandra notices an increase in the song's volume. We read that:

> The song was much stronger than usual. If only she could understand a word or two… Did the water spirit – for that was how she referred to the voice that sang the sorrowful song – wish to speak to her ... The song was becoming louder still, and the level of the dark water was rising. Some of the water was overflowing on to the pavement… the water was running down the pavement, dragging with it some of the leaves from the round water plants that had grown on the surface of the lagoon and had fed the river fish and the toads. Cassandra didn't want to go back to the building under construction, for she could not sleep; she was drawn by the soft sorrowful song, fascinated by the sheet of water that ran down the sides, but he pulled her away... (Pepetela 2002, 64)

The water and the song both rise imperceptibly but steadily, invisible to everyone but the sleepless girl. The darkness of the water and its sheet-like qualities suggest this slow, quiet destruction, not so much a violent wave as a gradual rising. The water brings with it water plants, fish and toads. The strength of the song and the water seem to correlate with the number of buildings that keep falling. One can also read this as a sign that *Kianda* could no longer be stopped as he had had enough. The lagoon could not contain *Kianda* anymore hence he was now carving his escape path, from the outskirts of the town to the very centre of Kinaxixi square. As

this is happening, "the song was becoming stronger and stronger and, almost imperceptibly, it was getting less and less sorrowful; slowly, bit by bit, it was transforming itself into a battle song" (Pepetela 2002, 69). As the unfinished building that stood next to the lagoon comes tumbling down, *Kianda's* song also reaches its peak and it "burst through the thickness of water and flooded the city, telling *Kianda's* until-then secret wish."

This aural and kinetic manifestation of *Kianda* as opposed to corporeal materialisation shifts our understanding of water spirits. In this reformulation, Kianda begins to "… exist beyond humans and their dominant interpretive filters (particularly vision)" (Oakes and Price 2008, 151). As a metamorphous being, *Kianda* is perceptible through the body – he is heard and felt. The aural manifestation of *Kianda* gesture to alternative representation beyond the sense of sight. Drawing on Kimbundu mythology, which is typically oral rather than written, Pepetela sticks to the earlier. The aural manifestation of *Kianda* also departs from the mermaid figure discussed in previous chapters. In the novel, Pepetela seems to be dismissive of the idea of *Kianda* manifesting as a mermaid. In explaining the notion of water spirits to Cassandra, Old Kalumbo links mermaids to the white settlers. In his words uttered "with a sudden vexation", he notes:

> That's a white man's thing. That's their mermaid. Kianda is not a half-woman, half-fish. No one has seen him in that form. The settlers stole our soul; they changed everything that was ours, even our way of thinking of Kianda. The result is out there, with this country turned upside down. (Pepetela 2002, 83-84)

Elsewhere, Brian Siegel argues that in Zambia, water spirits are either referred to as 'chitapo' or 'chikupo' and imagined as evasive, shadowy apparitions (2008). Siegel adds that these creatures were not originally envisioned as mermaids, but only assumed this guise through a twentieth-century process of cultural borrowing. We see the same dimension again in Pepetela's short story 'Magias do Mar' where the conception of *Kianda* as a mermaid is linked to the Portuguese. In *The Return of the Water Spirit*, although old Kalumbo's negation of European (mis)representation is vehement, his reconstruction of *Kianda* remains elusive, a point I read as speaking to the impossibility of returning to a pristine past.

While this section has looked at Pepetela's representation of Kianda as a song and how this broadens our understanding of water spirits, the next section will read Kianda as the water in the lagoon.

Kianda's Lagoon

Kianda's comeback in the novel is linked to a lagoon, which as stated earlier, first re-asserts its presence as a puddle next to a building under construction in Kinaxixi. We read that a "…song, soft yet sorrowful, was growing from within the green and decaying water … First it was just a puddle growing next to all the iron of the foundations" (Pepetela 2002, 8). With time, "the puddle began to grow and the plants that burst from within the water gave it a greenish appearance" (ibid). As the novel comes to an end, the puddle becomes a lagoon which floods the city. In her reading of James Graham Ballard's, *The Drowned World* (1962), Sarah Nuttall notes that lagoons "animate, dominate, and finally 'submerge' the few characters that remain in their ambit" (2021, 14). Similarly, the lagoon in *The Return of the Water Spirit* starts reordering life on land.

While *A Gloriosa Familia* (1997) also depicts Kianda in a lagoon, in *The Return of the Water Spirit* the lagoon is first introduced without *Kianda*. Through Joao, we learn about the destruction of the original lagoon. Not only was the lagoon drained, but the sacred tree was also chopped down, echoing Mungoshi's absent ancestral tree in *Waiting for the Rain*. In *The Return of the Water Spirit* we read that "[c]lose to that spot must have been the place where, 30 years before, they cut down the tree of the Water Spirit, during the time when they built the square (Pepetela 2002, 37). While this space is transformed into a built environment, Joao's reaction as he passes it suggests that the spirit of *Kianda* is still present. He felt a "cold shiver whistling down his spine" (37) and even though it was a warm night he "stepped up his pace" (37). It is indicative that the shiver whistles down his spine like a soft song. The portrayal of the haunted landscape further embeds the novel in the realm of the supernatural. Even though the sacred tree had been hewn down and the lagoon violated, *Kianda's* spirit hovers above. No one can see him,

but Kianda is still felt as the land remembers. He makes his comeback as a puddle which gradually grows into a lagoon.

Besides being portrayed as an animated space, the lagoon also emerges as an ambiguous zone, a place that allows for decadence and hope. Its ambiguity is heightened by its ability to nurture the many forms of life found within it, while also taking lives such as that of the children who disappear into:

> … the green and decaying water that for years had been allowed to spread next to a building under construction in Kinaxixi…Now and again there was news of a child who had disappeared while swimming on the edge of the lagoon, or of a child who was playing in the unfinished building and who fell in the water. (Pepetela 2002, 8)

From the above quote, one witnesses the rebirth of *Kianda* and the lagoon. The restoration of the lagoon resonates with Nuttall's use of the term, 'suffusion', which pertains to "…that which gradually spreads through or over" (2020, 455). In the passage, the green from rot transforms into the green of fresh life. *Kianda* returns from the forgotten and rotten. No one minded the puddle next to the unfinished ten storey building. One is less threatened by a puddle than rivers and oceans. If anything, people expect it to dry up. The words used to describe the puddle, especially the pairing of 'green' and 'decaying' suggests life but also death. The decaying water evokes effluent from a sewage pipe, connecting it to anthropogenic waste.

The above strengthen the point I made earlier about the environmental offerings of the novel. Water spirits protect water sources and creatures as does Sedna in Burger's *She Down There* (2020). The different species – frogs, fish and plants – found in the lagoon signify a refusal to die, instantiated by *Kianda*. *Kianda* defies those modern and seemingly permanent structures built from iron and concrete. His determination bears fruit as the novel nears its end, when "…the water of the lagoon … spread all the way to Carimba now that the Island of Luanda was once again an island and Kianda, free at long last, had earned for himself the high seas" (Pepetela 2002, 102). In this instance, *Kianda* escapes the confinement of the lagoon – metaphor of (post) colonial modernity – as he embraces the 'freedom' of the ocean.

As the novel ends, *Kianda* becomes more powerful and influential as the dispossessed embark on a naked revolution against the government's neglect. While these parallel actions can be read as triumphant gestures, they nonetheless complicate the idea of victory and return that the novel promises. The text's open ending does not give any sign that life changed for the protestors. Pepetela does not give the reader closure as *Kianda's* triumph leaves the naked protestors stranded. When the remaining buildings crash down – the one that housed Carmina and Joao and the unfinished one next to the lagoon, which housed the poor and the homeless – one questions Kianda's motive and actions. The number of the homeless kept growing with the demolished buildings (see Gastrow 2013). As the buildings collapse, his two followers – Kalumbo and Cassandra – also disappear:

> …the building under construction was also disintegrating to the sound of musical notes. But Old Kalumbo was flying, transformed into a bird. The bricks, the lamps, the stoves, mats, pots were all coming down. Cassandra felt the call that was coming from the waters of the lagoon and she flapped her arms as though she were swimming and she guided her fall by diving into the water. Gone forever. (Pepetela 2002, 102)

Old Kalumbo's metamorphosis into a bird evokes a similar scene from Letlaka's *Mamlambo* (1998). In the film, the protagonist (Malusi) who is linked to water also turns into a bird. It appears the two elements – water and air – become powerful frames for imagining potential freedoms that are unthinkable on land. Swimming or flying away affords the characters an escape route from the destructive politics of the land, be it apartheid in South Africa, colonialism in Rhodesia or civil war in Angola. Metamorphosis in the texts also serves to blur the line between the human and non-human in contexts where being human offers no perceptible advantage over the-other-than-human.

Through *Kianda's* actions, Kinaxixi square is reenchanted. By reclaiming the lagoon, *Kianda* reminds us that it is, was and will never be an empty space. He is turning the place from a capitalist money-making business for the city municipality (through renting out of the apartments) back into a free-flowing lagoon for the sustenance of all life forms as it was before capitalist colonization. While he claims his lagoon, nothing is done about his tree which no one

mentions again in the text. The missing tree might gesture towards the incomplete or rather unpredictable return of the water spirit, and it can also be read as the impossibility of returning to some imagined pre-colonial golden age.

Njinga: Queen of Angola

This section offers a watery reading of the film *Njinga: Queen of Angola* (2013), directed by Sergio Graciano. The film centres a female warrior who exhibits a deep relationship with water. Her name is Njinga Mbandi, an icon of Angolan history and nationalism. Historian John Thornton relates that "by the 1960s and 1970s, she had become firmly entrenched in Angolan nationalist and much of liberal Africanist historiography as a proto-nationalist heroine – the only heroic figure, in fact, upon whom MPLA and UNITA ideologues could agree" (1991, 25). As a gesture to recognise her unassailable contribution to the building of the nation, the Angolan government dedicated a major street in Luanda to her and erected her imposing statue in Kinaxixi Square. Like *Kianda*, Njinga is a symbol of resistance against colonial and post-colonial oppression in Angola. She is also a source of inspiration to women of colour across the globe. Linda Heywood, a leading scholar on Njinga notes that some women "believe that going to the statue and taking pictures there after getting married in church legitimizes their connection and history to Njinga".[33]

My analysis of the film proceeds in three steps. First, I sketch out the representation of Queen Njinga in historical narratives then follow with her depiction in the film. Thereafter, I explore the visualisation of water in the film. I consider its materiality, movements, colour, and form and how these reflect the movement of the plot and the mood of the characters. The river in the film changes from placid during tranquil times to turbulent during turmoil. Lastly, I investigate the notion of inspirited waters (Hofmeyr 2019) that is hinted at throughout the film. To this end, I

[33] https://www.pri.org/stories/2011-07-12/african-queen

read the river as a sacred space where rituals and communication with the ancestors take place. From this basis, the water ceases to be a vacant space and becomes animated, although in a less personified way than in *The Return of the Water Spirit*. In the film, human bodies are submerged in water for cleansing or political ends, highlighting the ambivalence of water. In addition to the river, the waterfall and islands also propel the plot. These waters intermingle in the film as does their different histories and memories associated with colonialism and slave trade.

The Historical Account of Njinga

Queen Njinga was "…undoubtedly pre-colonial Africa's most famous, and certainly her best documented queen" (Thornton 1991, 25). She challenged imperial interests, upset patriarchal structures, problematised gender binaries and became a warrior queen from about 1624 to 1650 in Angolan northern territories. The history of this heroine of Matamba is contested. Most historical accounts depict her as either a saviour or a villain, in line with specific agendas. Some skeptical historians question her existence, speculating that the patriarchal climate of the Mbundu Kingdom could not have countenanced a female ruler. However, Miller (1975) recognises Njinga as an astute strategist who used her diplomatic visit to the Portuguese in Luanda to reinforce her political ambitions, which were being thwarted within the Mbundu kingdom. He opines that she was baptised to endear herself to the Portuguese and later:

> She abruptly ended her predecessors' opposition to Portuguese encroachments, opening her lands to Portuguese slave traders and thus exposing the kinsmen of the kingdom to seizure and sale. She also violated Mbundu ideological preferences by welcoming Christian missionaries to her capital. (208)

Heywood also references colonial historians who describe Njinga as "an uncivilized savage who embodied the worst of womankind…[and] defied gender norms by dressing as a man, leading armies, keeping harems of male and female consorts, and rejecting the female virtues of caring and nurturing" (2017, 1). From these critical accounts, we encounter Njinga the monster who sacrificed her people for personal political advancement.

However, in direct contrast to the monster image is the saviour figure of Njinga celebrated in Angolan nationalist narratives that underscore her heroic anti-imperialist exploits. For instance, Vos suggests that Njinga was "a political figure in the Atlantic world during the 17th century, an African woman who left a major mark on her country and whom her European enemies and allies came to recognise as their equal" (2018, 359). More than three centuries later (1961-1974), nationalist liberation fighters mobilised her symbolical capital to inspire the struggle for independence in Angola. Today, Njinga is an icon of resistance and national cohesion in Angola and beyond.[34] Nationalists mobilise Njinga's symbolical capital for the fight against imperialism. Ribeiro, Moreira and Pimenta suggest that in popular culture, between history and fiction there is "…the life of an African queen who has become iconic and representative in Angolan culture particularly in the black feminist movements, for the force with which she fought against the various forms of oppression in a world of men" (2019, 56). The above recognises her contribution to global feminist movements against patriarchal hegemonies, whether European or African.

Reconciling these two polarised perspectives is scholarship that reads Njinga as a complex character. This body of work captures her conflictual character as a captor and seller of slaves but also as a rescuer of slaves. In this vein, Heywood highlights Njinga's ambivalent nature that encompasses her immense contribution to Angolan nationalism and her less flattering slave holding and trading business. The historiographical detail on Njinga contextualizes the following section that explores her filmic representation.

The Filmic Representation of Njinga

The film idealises Njinga in both private and public spaces, falling into the second historiographical trend described above. In his review of the film, Fernando Arenaz comments that "it memorializes one of Africa's greatest women and the nation's most important hero, who

[34] UNESCO – Women in African History, https://en.unesco.org/womeninafrica/njinga-mbandi/pedagogical-unit/4

is also championed by the global African diaspora" (2016, 324). Njinga inverts the conventional image of the downtrodden black woman. In the film's opening sequence, the voice-over narrator describes her as a "dedicated sister, loving daughter, proud mother…faithful representative of the kingdom of Ndongo, bright strategist and a fearless warrior like no other". It is indicative of the propagandist tenor of the film (the film's nationalist stance) that her role in the slave trading and holding business is muted.

The film emphasizes her sublime looks and fearlessness that help her secure the throne. Her boldness and calculating nature help her outwit her political opponents. For instance, as part of her diplomatic astuteness, she agrees to a Christian baptism to win the Portuguese blessing but remains true to her Mbundu religious beliefs. In relation to her fearlessness, she leads her forces from the frontlines rather than from the rear, as her brother is shown to do in the film. This representation collapses common gender binaries as she dominates in public rather than private spaces.

Her heroic deeds take her to the Mbundu throne. Although her brother (as 'natural' heir) temporally holds fort when their father is assassinated, others object. For instance, one of her sisters remarks that "[i]f it was up to our father, you should be his successor, Njinga". This sentiment is echoed at a council meeting when one of the elders insists that Njinga "… is a greater warrior than Mbandi." Another council member remarks that "she is as strong and brave as a man." These qualities are visualized and cemented in the first major battle scene of the film where she leads an army of male warriors against Portuguese incursion. The scene sequence begins with an establishing wide shot of Njinga holding a spear before shifting to a close shot where the spear fills up the whole screen. This identifies and establishes Njinga as a great warrior who kills several Portuguese soldiers during that battle. Her depiction in the film complicates the stereotype of the soft, weak woman who cannot stand the battlefield.

Through a series of daring acts throughout the movie she strengthens her status as a fierce warrior, shrewd diplomat, and dependable leader. When her son is assassinated, the voice-over narrator informs us that "the blood dried up on the warrior's heart". Here the emphasis is placed

on the warrior's heart rather than the maternal heart that is shattered by the death of her son. The blood that dries up prefigures the family breakup that soon ensues. She relocates to Kindonga Islands, abandons the King's court, and isolates herself from her family. When she arrives on the Island, she first washes herself on the shores of the river, a symbolic cleansing ritual from her misfortunes. Thereafter she establishes her headquarters on the island, reminding the viewer that the fight for land is also a fight for water. The shelter and peace of the island enables her to regroup, train her soldiers and form new strategic alliances.

Njinga's return to power is also linked to the spirits. As one of her soldiers remarks, "the Portuguese replaced Njinga on the throne, but the spirits are on her side. To go against the spirits is to face damnation… Ngola Ari was made king without the blessing of his ancestors." Resultantly, the council resolves that "Njinga should be queen. No man, alive or dead, can do anything about it." The Portuguese are forced to negotiate with her and to release her sister from captivity. Ultimately, they recognise her as queen and give her back her kingdom. In an introspective moment as the film draws to a close, Njinga takes pride in "…honour[ing] our ancestors' heritage… [and becoming] the queen of a sovereign kingdom." Her ultimate triumph fulfils her father's dying words to the effect that "this is our land, and whoever stays here, has to fight until the final victory." To mark her success, the concluding scene of the film presents a sequence of wide, close, and aerial shots where Mbundu people are chanting in jubilation over her conquest against Portuguese forces. True to her own words, she has indeed "fought and won." Njinga's ambivalence and the anticolonial message of the film are both reflected and complicated by the visual representation of water in the film that I now turn to explore.

The Visualisation of Water in the Film

The dominance of water is established during the first two minutes as the opening credits of the film are rolling out, and again at the end of the film. Within the first four seconds of the movie, the establishing shot shows ripples on the surface, as if an object has been dropped into the water. The next sequence comprises extreme close-up shots of blurry underwater bubbles that gestures towards an underwater perspective. The screen is almost dark. One can discern the

movement of water which rapidly changes from minute bubbles to falling rapids. Again, as the movie comes to an end and the closing credits roll out, we are taken underwater, the bubbly, blurry shot dominates the screen cementing the link between land and water. At both the start and the end of the film, the viewer's perspective is underwater, disoriented and spatially unclear in recognition of Njinga's complex life and Angola's intricate history. This underwater shot is akin to the opening shot of *Otelo Burning* that I discussed in Chapter Three.

Maps are significant visual symbols that recur several times during the film *Njinga: Queen of Angola*. Sixteen seconds into the movie, a map of the Mbundu Kingdom emerges from the bubbles, in line with various creation myths in which the earth is said to have emerged from water. The map is surrounded by large bodies of water and has rivers running through it. It disappears after a few seconds, seemingly dissolving into the ocean, again emphasizing the connection between land and water. This shot relativizes the importance of land in narrations of the nation, especially in Southern Africa that has given less prominence to water-based narrations. Later in the movie, the Portuguese governor shows Njinga a map which is "…like a map of the land…but which shows the routes across the water." In another scene, the Portuguese are engrossed in a discussion over the strategic location of the Mbaka prison where all trading routes from inland and the ones leading to the coast and Benguela converge. These routes were important as they facilitated the movement of slaves from inland to the coast. The three maps shown in the film stress the importance of water, placing it on the same level as land, again bringing the two elements together. Here we are reminded that colonization was not just a struggle for land but also for water. The notion of land is also reimagined to encompass water.

The unspecified river that is dominant in the film could be one of the two rivers that surround the Kisami National Park. The Kwanza River forms the northern boundary while the Longa River constitutes the southern border. To the west of the park is the massive 120km of the Atlantic Ocean's coast. The establishing shot of the first scene that portrays a vibrant riverine community highlights the prominence of the river in the movie. The close-up shot of the river draws attention to the close relationship that exists between Mbundu people and the river. The river directs ordinary daily life and rituals. Right by the shores of this river we witness women

pounding grain, children playing games, and what appears to be a dedication ritual of baby Njinga to the river god. These scenes that depict the lives of the Mbundu people alongside the river also include milestone events such as celebrations of births and coronations.

Most scenes of the film are introduced with shots of water in a variety of ways. In some of these shots, the river is part of the landscape. This manifests in the scene where Ngola Mbandi and his son arrive on a canoe. It is a wide shot that encompasses both the river and the shores lined with trees and plants. The river soon fills up the screen with its endless waters. As father and son near the shores, Ngola warns his son not to trust anyone because their enemies are everywhere. This conversation and shot creates suspense as one wonders if their arrival at the court heralds a confrontation or the elimination of these enemies. It is indeed after this talk that together with one of his advisers they eliminate two future threats – his brother and Njinga's son. Another shot of the river appears when Njinga and her party leave the court for Kindongo islands in search of refuge. Again, the shot is a wide one that establishes water as an important setting for negotiating Mbundu politics. Water is foregrounded in this scene as people in their canoes become smaller while the image of the river grows larger. In this film, there is so much movement and action on water that it is visually portrayed as an extension of the territory and living space of land, with similar importance.

In some instances, the river is used as a narrative device. For instance, the turbulence of the river portends the political and social turbulence of the plot. In his examination of the genre of the sea story in fiction and drama, Bluefarb argues that "… the storms and the calms both induce and reflect the storms and the calms within the souls and the bodies of the characters themselves … in this lies the mirror of the sea as a reflector of character" (1959, 501). One example of this in the film is when the king lies on his death bed after a lethal attack by one of his bodyguards. Some characters believe the strike was ordered by the Portuguese to weaken the Mbundu Kingdom. The establishing shot of this scene visualises wild rapids of a river that symbolize the socio-political turbulence that is in store for the Mbundu people after the assassination of their king and Portuguese attacks. The furious movement of water in this scene as Njinga rushes to her father's death bed resonates with the movement of the plot as chaos reigns soon after this. When

Njinga consults with her father's counsellors on the way forward in relation to the leadership vacuum, water rapids again dominate the background portending the turbulent times ahead. Her weak brother Mbandi becomes successor and plunges the Mbandi Kingdom into uproar.

The river also functions as a tool to settle political scores. For example, in one scene, Kalu is killed with a poisonous arrow while he is bathing in the river. Though it is never confirmed, it is suspected that Njinga was the culprit since Kalu – the natural heir – was a barrier to her ascendence to the throne. In this instance, the river becomes a site for political shenanigans, instrumentalized as a way of disposing a rival. In another incident in the film, the Portuguese drown Njinga's sister in the river for her treasonous activities after discovering the secret letters she was writing to Njinga, letters containing sensitive information on the plans of the Portuguese. The river is therefore depicted as both a nurturing space as well as a death trap. This captures the ambivalent nature of water as life giver and life taker. This alludes again to both the Njinga period and to the more recent Angolan struggle for independence when some people were drowned in the same river. One is also reminded of the murders that take place in *She Down There* and *Otelo Burning*, where bodies of water are used to eliminate opponents. In *She Down There*, Portuguese forces throw liberation fighters down a gorge that leads into the Indian Ocean. In *Otelo Burning*, Otelo's young brother Ntwe is killed besides the swimming pool after accusations of spying for the opposition. Water, therefore, is the background for political violence and a weapon itself.

Water's capacity for violence is also witnessed towards the end of the film, as Njinga flees from the Portuguese army. As the scene unfolds, the focus shifts from the close shots of Njinga running along the riverbanks to an aerial shot of a waterfall. The rapid sheets of falling water create a heightened sense of drama and suspense as Njinga is cornered. In the shot, sheets of white-water cascade over a deep rift. The plunging water generates mist that produces a hazy effect on the screen which adds an element of mystery. The aerial shot reminds one of the mighty Victoria Falls, which is also known as the 'Smoke that thunders.' In the scene, there is a contrast between the calm waters of the flowing river and the raging, terrifying waterfall. From this aerial shot, we are taken to a close-up shot of the waterfall that depicts foaming waters. In certain

African belief systems, mist, and foam in bodies of water signal the presence of water spirits (Barnard 2010). In this scene, a diegetic sound of rushing waters suggests looming danger. The camera slowly moves from the flowing water and plunges the viewer into the depths of the waterfall. The next cinematic sequence shows Njinga on the edge of the waterfall, with the Portuguese forces behind her. At this moment she has two unenviable choices: taking a bullet from the Portuguese or daring the waterfall. It takes her seconds to choose the latter. As she jumps, the shot shifts back to the aerial mode which emphasizes the fearsome depth of the waterfall and the looming danger. Her dramatic fall in this scene mirror her plunging fortunes from being the absolute 'king' of the Mbundu Kingdom to a fugitive. The elevated view as Njinga falls invokes a sense of hopelessness and creates the impression that it is the end for Njinga. We see her merging with the falling waters before she disappears into the misty depths.

The subsequent scene depicts an aerial shot of the waterfall that heightens the suspense over Njinga's fate. The protracted hush in the next scene suggests Nijinga is dead. This impression is however negated in the following scene, which depicts Njinga prostrate on the banks of the river. Somehow, the water has carried her from the plunge pool of the waterfall to the banks of the river. In a close up black and white shot, Njinga is half submerged in muddy waters as she slowly regains consciousness. The muddy waters suggest the in-between state of life and death for Njinga. This is sustained by the use of black and white visuals in the shot which provide a dream-like quality to the scene. There is something surreal about Njinga's survival. I read this mythical survival as connected to the river god to whom she is presented in the first scene of the film.

This survival from the waterfall signals a turning point in Njinga's life. Her renewed strength evokes the experiences of *sangoma*s who come back stronger after prolonged submersion in water. In the case of Njinga, she regains strength and forms alliances with Cassanga and the Dutch, her past enemies and through this, she reclaims some of her stolen territories and becomes queen again. The scene also reminds one of the stranded mermaids from *The Woman of the Stone Sea* and *The Sleep Walking Land*. The mermaids in these texts are stranded on the beach and are rescued by humans. On the other hand, Njinga's survival from the waterfall

appears to be supernatural. I tie her survival to the water spirits she is dedicated to when she is born.

Inspirited Waters in the Film

Njinga's dedication to the river god and her miraculous survival that I looked at in the previous section, all point towards the animist beliefs of the Mbundu people. Onwuka A Njoku (1997) suggests that for the Mbundu, natural elements such as water, hills and forests house the ancestors. In Mbundu tradition, the two worlds, that of the living and the dead are separated by water, which functions as a gateway between the different realms. For this reason, the waters of the river are both figurative and inspirited. Water has always been considered sacred in most religions. Mitchell argues that "[f]or African religions, divinities and water are combined entities…it is the divine itself that transmogrifies into the aquatic, making the former one of the most accessible and common parts of life" (2017, 124). This depiction of bodies of water as animated is a major theme of my thesis. For example, Naan's ashes are submerged in water in Burger's *She Down There*. This corroborates the Mbundu belief that natural elements house the ancestors. Similarly, in the film *Otelo Burning,* the river is believed to house the ancestors and a ferocious snake. Another example would be from the novel *She Down There,* where Claire the protagonist senses the presence of spirits underwater. This is in line with the amaXhosa tale that Zakes Mda draws on in *Heart of Redness* (2000) where Nongqawuse advises her people to drive their cattle into the sea in sacrifice to the ancestors. In turn, the ancestors will get rid of the British colonisers. Though the film *Njinga: Queen of Angola* does not dwell much on this, it does hint at the idea of inspirited waters in the two scenes that I now turn to.

These scenes show that in the film, the bodies of water are more than parts of the landscape but constitute part of the sacred spaces of the land. As Bernard argues in her analysis of indigenous Southern African cosmologies, "[w]ater sources are essential parts of the landscape for conducting rituals to aid communication with the spirit world" (2003, 149). The first scene of the film depicts the dedication of the baby Njinga to the river god. This resonates with the belief that "water is the essence of both spiritual and physical life, and the spirit world is regarded as the

ultimate source of such life-sustaining powers" (ibid, 149). As the daughter of the king, it was pertinent that Njinga be introduced to the ancestors and spirits of the land and water for protection. Bernard (2003) explains that:

> Water in itself is regarded among many African religious functionaries as a living force, which has the power to transform us from one state to another at a spiritual or physical level. It has the power to purify and protect one from evil, or to heal and bring one from illness to health. It is thus a vital element in the performance of many religious and healing rituals. (149)

In the scene of dedication, the waters of the river are calm, translucent, and slow moving. These visuals are accompanied by melodious diegetic sounds of the flowing river. While there is no sign of life next to the raging river in *Otelo Burning*, the shores of the river in the film are bustling with life. A group of women surround a man who appears to be a priest. The priest takes baby Njinga from her mother and raises her towards the river in an apparent offering. Njinga the princess is introduced to the ancestors and to the river spirit.

Lastly, I explore the waterfall scene where I read the waterfall to be as inspirited as the river. What is useful towards the argument I am making is Njinga's miraculous survival and the visual representation of the waterfall. As stated in the previous section, the waterfall is characterized by foamy, flowing waters. Bernard suggests that "[c]ertain places are more favoured by the river spirits than others. They are believed to live in deep pools of certain rivers, often below waterfalls, fast moving 'living' water, or in the sea. 'Living' water is often associated with its ability to generate foam…" (2003, 148). Bernard also states that:

> It is believed the ancestors, or spirits of the water, live in a dry area at the bottom of these pools and have a lifestyle very similar to people living on earth, in that they have houses, cattle, chickens, and so forth. They are prosperous, peaceful, happy, and in fact, lead an idyllic life. (149)

Reading this waterfall as an abode of water spirits helps explain Njinga's survival from her dramatic fall. These spirits might have protected her. Flowing waters are associated with life giving forces whereas stagnant waters are linked to death and decay. Her link to the flowing river

when she is born, and her surviving the waterfall foretell her fruitful political and military career as depicted in the film.

Conclusion

In this chapter I focused on the animistic mode employed in *The Return of the Water Spirit* and the film *Njinga: Queen of Angola*. In relation to Pepetela's text, I argued that the author draws on the Kimbundu water spirit myths to rearticulate the anxieties associated with the Angolan post-colonial nation. The elusiveness of *Kianda* in the text speaks to the challenges of reclaiming an authentic Angolan identity. In a departure from the previous readings of water spirits in the thesis, where they manifest in different visible forms, Pepetela gives us a formless water spirit. In so doing, our understanding of water spirits is broadened to an emphasis on their spiritual dimension as opposed to the physical. In relation to the film, I explored how the director manipulates water as a narrative and structuring device. I argued that water, just like land, is a space of contestation that enables a re-narration of masculine politics and nationalism.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

The study explored the representation of water and water spirits in selected Southern African texts. The paucity of critical works on African literature that privilege water and the non-human as primary sites of contestation inspired the watery turn of my thesis. Considering the water woes all over Africa, the need arises to examine the ways in which water is imagined, figured and narrated. The African story has problematically been tied to the loss of land, relegating water to the peripheries. I argue that water is equally central to nation-making, as vividly shown, for instance, in the film *Njinga: Queen of Angola*, which centers water bodies and routes on water. Immersing land-based narratives and epistemes in water offers fresh insights into the texts and also muddies what are usually construed as neat binaries between human/non-human, natural/supernatural, land/water, while expanding our notions of narrative time and space.

The selected texts used are from Zimbabwe, South Africa, Mozambique and Angola, which leaves room to explore watery imaginaries elsewhere on the continent and beyond. Further research can also be done across genres − poetry, memoirs, short stories and music – which will broaden our understanding of narrative form in African cultural production. Moreover, women are shown in this thesis to be especially connected to water, and it would be interesting to read for water in texts by women authors. It will also be fruitful to explore those texts that are written in indigenous languages and others that are purely oral to get a grass-roots perspective on water and water spirits in Southern African Literature. Other prospective projects include cultural histories of distinct water bodies in the region, such as a cultural history of the Orange or Zambezi rivers.

The study deployed several theories that include animism, critical oceanic scholarship and postcolonial ecocriticism, and expands the scholarly archive on the representation of the mythical and the sacred in Southern African literatures by foregrounding water mythologies. Southern African water myths are a rich source of inspiration for an increasing number of

writers, highlighting the elastic nature of myths in mediating different timespans, cultures and ideologies. This under-researched phenomenon draws our attention to the link between land and water, past and present, rational and irrational, and the supernatural and natural. The importance of water in African imaginaries opens other ways of reading literature that are more fluid, complex and less confining. In the texts analysed, water and water myths shape and drive not only the plots, but they also shape the narrative structure, as shown in my reading of *The Return of the Water Spirit*. Through its capacity to occupy different spaces, underground, surface, atmosphere and falling as rain, water in its different forms deepens and broadens the texts and their readings.

When I began this research, I was convinced that all water spirits were the same, at least across Southern Africa popular texts. However, a close reading revealed variances that underscore their diverse and elusive nature. While water spirits share key attributes, their nature follow prevailing socio-historic, economic, cultural, and authorial influences. Water spirits can manifest as mermaids, snakes, humans, rainbows, songs and even as water itself. Their diverse forms enhance our understanding of them as more spiritual than physical beings. From Couto's female characters in *Sleepwalking Land* to Pepetela's *The Return of the Water Spirit*, the aural manifestation of water spirits as opposed to the corporeal form again expands our understanding of water spirits outside privileged "dominant interpretive filters (particularly vision)" (Oakes and Price 2008, 151). The saying, to see is to believe, has blinded us to other means of knowing and relating with the non-human, other-spiritual beings, aquatic creatures or nature in general, which perhaps explains the current unprecedented water pollution, global warming and environmental catastrophes.

In reorienting the human perspective, this thesis demonstrated that different bodies of water (oceans, pools, rivers, and lagoons) are populated with diverse spirits who, by their presence, transform these waters into sacred realms. For some people, water bodies are guarded by water spirits and safer, as *She Down There* compellingly suggests. Water can also be ancestral as is the case with the pool in *Waiting for the Rain.* Housing ancestral spirits and memories, these waters represent overlapping timespans and can be read as a veil between the dead and the living.

One of the inspirations behind the project was to honor and acknowledge Southern African water spirits. This was after months of reading many stories and critical works on Mami Wata from West and Central Africa, and not finding as much scholarship on Southern African water spirits. Months later into the research, I realized that figures such as the watermeisie complicate the idea of a purely Southern African water spirit, as I showed in Chapter Three where I trace the figure of *MaMlambo* in two texts from South Africa. One of the texts, *The Woman of the Stone Sea*, also makes references to the watermeisie. According to Mapule Mohulatsi (2019), the coming together of different cultures in the Cape region overtime gave birth to the creolized figure of the watermeisie. Similar hybrid spirits also populate water bodies in different parts of the Southern African region, as captured in the works of Bernard, Siegel, and Wood. I think of them as similar to the watermeisie because of their attributes that suggest a diffusion of different knowledge systems across Southern Africa. The migration of workers to South Africa from different parts of Southern, Eastern and Central Africa was accompanied with a migration of water spirit stories and beliefs. In analyzing the representation of water spirits in Southern African literature, it became clear that beliefs in water spirits from all over the world have cross-pollinated, creating creolized waters or multi-spirited waters as is the case in Burger's *She Down There*. Creolized waters mirror the manifestation of creolized communities highlighting how it is possible to read human histories and trajectories in water. If anything, the presence of creolized waters makes one alive to the entangled nature of knowledge systems and the problematic nature of 'authentic' identities that most nationalist narratives insist on.

For the creative mind, water spirits can become loaded narrative devices. For instance, in Chapter Five I argued that Pepetela deploys the figure of *Kianda* to represent the challenges of post-colonial Angola in *The Return of the Water Spirit*. The elusive struggle for solutions persists in war-torn Angola mirroring the elusive struggle to pin down *Kianda*, the water spirit in the text. The slipperiness of *Kianda* speaks to the challenges of reclaiming an authentic Angolan identity to which some critics have linked the figure. Similarly, in Chapter Four, Couto's use of water myths in *Sleepwalking Land* indicated the complexity of life during and after the Mozambican civil war. The war unsettled the idea of permanence and fixed structures on land, aptly captured in the fluidity and elusiveness of water spirits. Couto draws on the attributes of water and water

spirits to represent the gruesome reality of a war-torn Mozambique and at the same time to afford the characters mobility denied by the war. In the same vein, I argued in my analysis of *Butterfly Burning* that through a water spirit frame, female characters like Phephelaphi can be reread as individuals with some agency. Drawing on the hydrological cycle, Phephelaphi can also be read as water as she evaporates, condenses and falls again as rain. In this way, a watery reading of the text places more emphasis on the symbolic capital of her heroic death, a kind of enabling feminist politics against all odds.

In Chapter Three, drawing on both magical realism and African water mythologies, I demonstrated that Vandermerwe depicts multiple perspectives on the confounding nature of life in post-apartheid South Africa. The figure of the watermeisie, which is as slippery and fluid as the element of water, presents a poignant way of exploring the complex South Africa of *The Woman of the Stone Sea*. I argued that in as much as water is both nurturing and treacherous, water spirits manifest similar dualities. This range of paradoxical qualities enables water spirits to embody the contradictions and complexities of a post-apartheid South Africa. To characters like Otelo's father in the film *Otelo Burning*, water spirits and water are dangerous. While the ocean in the film is initially tied to ideas of freedom, it later transforms into a grave site with Mandla and Otelo's deaths. This can be read as a prophecy of the bitter disillusionment that comes with the attainment of independence in post-colonial states. The river in the film is also believed to house a diabolical snake. Likewise, in *Waiting for the Rain*, an encounter with a mystical snake at the well brings a series of misfortunes to the Mandengu family. Apart from these sinister water spirits, human bodies are submerged in water either for cleansing or political ends in the film *Njinga: Queen of Angola*, highlighting the sinister side of water. Similarly, by imagining the death of the seventeen men as happening underwater, Vera transforms Umguza River into a grave site but also a rich historical archive. This recalls the murders that take place in *She Down There*, where bodies of water are used as political tools to eliminate opponents. In these instances, we note a refusal to romanticize water, but we instead embrace its contradictory nature as it nurtures and kills in both its natural and inspirited form.

In Chapter Four and Five, the presence of spirits in bodies of water narrows the gulf between the dead and the living. For instance, *Kianda's* encroachment into the world of the living provokes multiple realities which are juxtaposed in the novel. In Couto's *Sleepwalking Land,* Kindzu is also haunted by the spirits of the dead, blurring the boundary between life and death. The ability of water spirits to simultaneously occupy the realm of the dead and the living, to belong to both land and water, and to travel across time complicates our reading of linear time and spatial borders. Through this reading, cyclic and mythical notions of time become central, and the idea of space becomes broad as it encompasses the depths of the oceans and ancestral realms. The past, present, and future become intertwined. This formulation shifts our understanding of time and space from a purely scientific perspective. The beliefs about the supernatural manifest in the everyday lives of the characters reminding one that there is a constant re-enchantment of the world as the "rational and scientific are appropriated and transformed into the mystical and magical" (Garuba 2003, 267). By the same token, the presence of water spirits and their employment in the selected texts remind us of the animist beliefs that are still relevant to some people in Southern Africa, co-existing with postcolonial modernity.

Apart from examining the representation of water spirits in the selected texts, I also explored the materiality of water as an element and a thematic tool. In reading for water, I paid attention to the location, action, and traits of the depicted waters. This kind of reading opens new ways of thinking about water as we shift from its normative metaphorical tenor towards appreciating water as an object of, and for analysis. I considered the depiction of different kinds of water, and their relations to both the text and the myths. The films *Otelo Burning* and *Njinga: Queen of Angola* examined in Chapters Three and Five centres water as a setting, material and metaphor. In both texts, even actions that happen on land are somehow prompted by water as it impacts and orders life. The most significant scenes happen near or around water bodies relativising the importance of land in African narratives. In *Njinga: Queen of Angola* there is so much movement and action on water that it becomes an extension of the territory and living space on land. This reminds us that human settlements, imaginaries and actions are as much a result of water as of land dynamics. Water also ties different thematic concerns such as environmental degradation, gender, belonging, and identity and anthropocentrism.

While some texts depicted oceans and rivers, waterfalls and lagoons, there was a scarcity of water in other texts. Interestingly, in a manner that demonstrates the hold of water on us even when it appears to be absent, there was a compensatory overflow of bodily fluids like blood, tears and sweat. Such unconventional waters were deployed by Mungoshi and Vera to enhance themes of lack and death associated with colonialism and its different forms of violence. In these texts, water was also found underground, in dreams and in imaginations speaking to the role of water in people's imaginaries and also linking it to the mythical. My watery reading of the two drought novels draws attention to marginalized characters in ways that recognise some measure of agency under severe colonial restraints. The sickly state of the waters found in both texts speaks to the harsh living conditions of the black populace during colonialism.

Some of the texts I examined highlighted pressing environmental concerns and global warming. As other critics have argued (see Siwila 2016), the recognition of the presence of spirits in water turn water bodies into sacred sites that are revered and preserved. Clearly, if people take seriously other means of knowing the world (indigenous knowledge systems), conservation efforts can be improved. This is the case made in *She Down There* and *The Return of the Water Spirit.* We are left to ponder what the oceans and rivers would be like if we thought of them as sacred waters – perhaps it is not too late to switch to that reverential attitude before all water bodies are desecrated. Reading *She Down There* suggests that caring for the oceans will benefit sea creatures, coral reefs and human beings. In Chapter Four, I highlighted how Burger personifies the ocean and its creatures to underline the plight of the world's oceans through an underwater perspective. By immersing the readers underwater, it becomes possible to think, feel and live with the sea animals in their world. As Couto (2001, 64) reminds us, "[w]e're all brothers, trees and animals, animals and men, men and stones. We are all related, created out of the same matter." But there are always challenges in this pursuit. How can human beings let go of their prejudices that blind them to the needs of other creatures? The recent Netflix documentary, *My Octopus Teacher* (2020), raised critical debates pertaining to the ability of the human to speak for or to understand the non-human. In this study I highlighted the complications that come with trying to speak for nature, which are captured by Nsah's argument (2019, 99) that while texts attempt to "speak for nature, there can be deficiencies in their speech, given that

nature does not use human language or, in other words, given that nature speaks/communicates in ways humans cannot rationally prove to comprehend."

In this thesis I have demonstrated that a watery turn can surface alternative perspectives on nation, gender, being and belonging to be articulated, beyond binaries and dominance. It is however important to note that where some female characters were linked to water and water spirits so as to empower them, the writers did not minimize the pain they go through on the road to self-discovery but sought to underscore their resilience under impossible circumstances. Water and related spirits magnified the complexities of war narratives, undermined through other lenses, for instance, blurring the line between victim and perpetrator as shown in *Sleepwalking Land* and *The Return of the Water Spirit*. Through a watery reading, interspecies hierarchizations popular in land-based narratives were dissolved, recognising other forms of interstitial being like Samuelson's amphibious form which accommodates states of ambiguity and hybridity.

In reading for water, this thesis has invited an 'unmooring' from the familiar in several ways, which include the call to explore not only the surface of bodies of water, but also to engage with their depths where different forms of spirits reside and the marine life that needs preservation in this age of environmental catastrophes. The need also arose to be alive to the many ways of knowing and being with water and the different aquatic aesthetics of these texts. In engaging with the water spirits, narrative time was broadened, and space expanded to include the more-than-human realm. We are entangled with the past, the present, the future, the non-human, the dead, the unborn and the unimaginable.

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