

THE INNER AND OUTER WORLDS OF AFRICAN LITERATURE IN PORTUGUESE: A GLOBAL EPISTEMOLOGICAL READING

OS MUNDOS INTERIOR E EXTERIOR DA LITERATURA

AFRICANA EM LÍNGUA PORTUGUESA:

UMA LEITURA EPISTEMOLÓGICA GLOBAL

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Resenha de: *Multidimensional Cognition: African Literature in Portuguese from the Perspective of Global History*. Yuan Wang. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2026.

Multidimensional Cognition is a work of literary scholarship with exceptional intellectual breadth. Its subtitle, “African literature in Portuguese from the Perspective of Global History,” clearly indicates both its methodology and subject matter. It should be noted that although Yuan Wang, at the outset, surveys the development of various genres, including poetry and drama, when outlining the evolution of African literature in Portuguese, the book’s primary focus is on novels. Reading this work, one finds oneself situated within a densely interwoven literary network. In this network, oppositional pairs often viewed as being in tension—time and space, materiality and symbol, text and theory, the internal and external qualities of the text—no longer demarcate rigid boundaries or confront each other in ways that produce confusion and stagnation. Instead, they function as mutually constitutive threads and complementary elements. As the Brazilian scholar Laura Cavalcante Padilha puts it, “what interests me is not this or that, but this and that” (Padilha, 2002, p. 39).¹ In many respects, the book can be read as a sustained attempt to put this methodological principle into practice.

Structurally, the book is organized around what the author terms the “Objects-Ideas-Poetics-Events” framework. This schema not only provides a coherent structure that ensures the logical integrity of the argument by

¹ Original: “interessa-me o isto e o aquilo e, não, o isto ou o aquilo.” This formulation is emphasized by Wang in *Multidimensional Cognition*, in Chapter Three, where the concept of animistic realism is explored in relation to magical realism, fantastic realism, and non-realism.

integrating material and symbolic dimensions, everyday experience and large-scale historical processes, as well as the internal and external aspects of literary texts, but also, more importantly, enables it to address multiple critical questions simultaneously. In Chapter One, “A Global History of Objects,” Wang examines works including Manuel Rui Monteiro’s *O relógio* (1977), João Paulo Borges Coelho’s *Museu da revolução* (2022), and the Cape Verdean novel *O Testamento do Sr. Napumoceno da Silva Araújo* (1989). By focusing on objects such as watches, automobiles, and gramophones, the analysis explores how individual lives are entangled with global systems, and how local experiences intersect with broader historical processes. Particularly noteworthy is the author’s discussion of the gramophone, which foregrounds the politics of sound and brings the issue of media—understood not merely as tools of transmission, but as a participatory historical force in twentieth-century global movements—into literary analysis. This perspective addresses a long-standing difficulty in literary studies in linking textual analysis with the broader historical context, where media are often either relegated to popular culture or treated as isolated symbolic motifs within texts.

Rather than following the traditional aggregative model of literary research—organized by region or nation and arranged by authors and works—the book adopts a global-historical perspective that transcends the nation-state. It situates African literature in Portuguese within a decentralized, multi-nodal and dynamic network of worldwide literatures. In this sense, African literature in Portuguese is not treated as a stagnant body of water, but as part of a globally circulating system filled with undercurrents. The title “Multidimensional Cognition” signals an attempt to counter Herbert Marcuse’s notion of “one-dimensional man”, whose subjectivity is flattened under conditions of late modernity. In contrast, the book foregrounds the agency and subjectivity of African literature in Portuguese, understood as occupying a position at the “margins of the margins.” Crucially, the author insists that such subjectivity cannot be adequately articulated through an inward-looking discourse confined solely to African literature in Portuguese itself. Instead, it must be examined relationally, through its historical and literary interactions with the broader Lusophone world, as well as with Anglophone and Francophone African literatures and even Latin American traditions. This is exemplified by Chapter Two, “A Global History of Ideas,” where the discussion of albinism in the works of José Eduardo Agualusa is not treated in isolation, but instead placed in dialogue with representations of similar themes in Nigerian, Zimbabwean, and South African literary contexts. The same comparative logic is applied to the discussion of polygamy in African writing, where the analysis of Paulina Chiziane’s *Niketche: Uma história de poligamia* (2001) is situated within a broader corpus of African

texts addressing the same theme, including Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* (1973), Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* (1979), and Guillermina Mekuy's *Tres almas para un corazón* (2011), before returning to Chiziane's reconfiguration of marriage and female subjectivity. The chapter also addresses the reimagining of the figure of the "terrorist" in *O Terrorista Elegante* (2019), co-authored by Mia Couto and Agualusa. Through such comparative analysis, the distinctive features of African writing in Portuguese are brought into sharper relief.

Similarly, when addressing how African literature in Portuguese engages with global historical events in Chapter Four, Wang situates this inquiry within the broader landscape of Anglophone and Francophone African literary responses to World War I. In doing so, the book offers detailed readings of writers such as João Paulo Borges Coelho and Mia Couto, with particular attention to works such as *O olho de Hertzog* (2010) and *A cegueira do rio* (2024). It demonstrates how narrative strategies, including historical fiction, espionage plots, allegorical structures, and polyphonic narration, enable African texts to move beyond representing the continent as a passive backdrop. Instead, Africa is repositioned as an active participant in the making of world history. However, although in the section of the Introduction titled "Explorations of Subjectivity in African Literature in Portuguese," the author, invoking Mia Couto, problematizes the Marxist belief of "the economic base determining the superstructure" when interpreting African literary texts, instead argues that issues of the superstructure constitute the central predicament of African subjectivity, the extent to which this "writing back" in the colonizer's language can contribute to the construction of African subjectivity remains an unresolved question in the broader field of African literature, particularly within Anglophone African literary contexts.

Another distinctive feature of the book lies in its emphasis on African subjectivity not through abstract theoretical deduction, but through close engagement with specific literary texts. In this way, the approaches that privilege theoretical preconceptions often reveal their limitations. As discussed in Chapter Three, "A Global History of Poetics," the widespread tendency to categorize writers such as Mia Couto and Agualusa under the label of "magical realism" frequently leads to vague formulations and critics are left with little more than generalized praise for its "uniqueness". By contrast, in adopting a locally grounded critical approach, Wang turns to forms of animistic realism that foreground indigenous epistemologies. This shift is exemplified in the reading of Pepetela's *Lueji* (1990), in which animistic realism emerges as an endogenous aesthetic rooted in African oral and spiritual traditions. It is further developed through the discussion of Agualusa's *Barroco tropical* (2009), where the novel engages with tropicalist and baroque traditions

across Brazil and Mozambique to explore a Lusophone cultural identity, and in *Os vivos e os outros* (2020), where Wang examines the island narrative in dialogue with Luís de Camões's *Os Lusíadas* and Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, highlighting Agualusa's broader project of reimagining insular space and African futurity.

The concluding sections and appendix further underscore the author's reflexive engagement with their own positionality as a Chinese scholar of African literature. A central question guiding this reflection is how Chinese scholarship might contribute new perspectives to the study of African literature in Portuguese. The answer proposed is a return to both historical awareness and contemporary realities. Wang argues that Chinese researchers should neither uncritically adopt Western paradigms nor ignore the profound and enduring influence of Western social and cultural forces on Africa and China. Instead, greater attention should be paid to intra-African dynamics and to the connections between Africa and the broader Global South. As the conclusion puts it, the book seeks to move the Global South away from abstract, macro-level political discourse and back toward the realm of lived experience and textual practice, using the framework of "Objects-Ideas-Poetics-Events". Building on a review of the development of African literary studies in China, the author proposes a "China–Africa–West" triangular model as a more viable epistemological framework for facilitating cross-cultural exchange within the Global South. Importantly, these theoretical propositions are not presented as abstract slogans; they are substantiated through detailed textual analysis and sustained critical argumentation.

For scholars of African literature in China, this work significantly expands the intellectual map of African studies in Portuguese while offering valuable methodological insights into how African literary experience might be articulated. For international audiences, it provides an illuminating window into the trajectories and ambitions of Chinese scholarship in this field. In particular, it highlights ongoing efforts to construct a framework for cross-cultural dialogue within the Global South, as well as the concrete contributions made by Chinese scholars toward what Wang describes as the "third side of the triangle", that is, a mode of understanding characterized by directness, depth, and mutual embeddedness in Sino-African relations.

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