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"The Real Tragedy of Historical Contingency": Rehearsing the Failed Revolution in Postcolonial Angolan Theater*

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Abstract: I analyze two agit-prop plays produced in Angola during the social revolutionary phase immediately after independence (1975-1986). Arguably, this period's literary and cultural production was governed by a *liberation script* grounded on a largely "mythic" account of the armed struggle that afforded a monopoly of explanation of the decolonization process to the ruling party. In my examination of this modality of political or pedagogic theatre, I seek to explore the extent to which the political praxis mobilized by these collective productions risked lapsing into an imposed orthodoxy or a form of censorship, which is, in the last instance disavowed. I suggest that the fissures and divisions against which these plays strive to educate their audiences and participants are as much external to the political pedagogics they seek to activate (arising from social, ethnic and racial conflicts and rivalries) as they are *internal* to, and constitutive of it. The rhetorical construction of the People—the privileged agent of social and political change—finally reveals itself to be ineluctably fractured. The didactic ascription of agency to the People becomes, in this sense, slippery, revocable whenever political expediency warrants it. We might thus understand these largely forgotten samples of revolutionary theater as unintentionally "prophetic." They adumbrate a future in which the Angolan people will be consistently precluded from "writing their own history."

Keywords: People's theater, didactic drama, agitprop, revolutionary nationalism

* This article is excerpted from a monograph I am currently completing on Lusophone drama.

According to the late Aijaz Ahmad's "rough" periodization, 1975—the year in which Portugal's former colonies acquired full national sovereignty—ended the second phase of decolonization[1] (1965–1975), a period "dominated by the wars of national liberation which had a distinctly socialist trajectory" (30). Ahmad hastens to add that the economic precarity of these fledgling nation-states, combined with the scale of colonial depredation, ultimately rendered these socialist projects unviable. Arguably, from its inception, this global decolonization project rested on unstable ground. Most of the regimes that assumed the reins of power during the first wave of decolonization (ca. 1945–1965) quickly reverted either to autocracies or to authoritarian rule fueled by the barrel of the gun (Prashad 19). Political leaders often proved either spectacularly corrupt or disastrously incompetent in their stewardship of economic and natural resources. Indeed, beginning in the early 1980s, the more or less compulsory imposition of structural adjustment programs throughout the Global South played a crucial role in the collapse of this undeniably fragile project of liberation. The ensuing unequal integration of the "poorer nations" into "the global geography of production" (Prashad 22) became "a means of ensuring that postcolonial states retain[ed] their peripheral status, neither attempting to delink themselves from the world system nor ever imagining themselves capable of participating in it from any position of parity, let alone power" (Lazarus 37–38). As with the "states looking for nations" arising in the initial phase of independence (Appiah 162), Lusophone Africa's swift transition from revolutionary nationalism to neoliberalism toward the end of the 1980s generally followed the trend outlined above.

In the light of this calamitous (second) reversal of the wind of change into "a destructive whirlwind" (Mbembe 20), it was perhaps inevitable that the literary production most closely identified with the anticolonial struggle would eventually fall out of favor. Emerging concurrently with the armed struggle, a so-called combat poetry, ostensibly produced by the liberation guerrillas, was animated by a spirit of anticolonial revolt, projecting utopianly toward the nation to come. Literary expression remained circumscribed, in large measure, to the teleology of the socialist revolution. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o writes about Agostinho Neto, Angola's first president and poet laureate, "the gun, the pen and the platform . . .

[1] The first phase of decolonization occurred during the first two decades following the end of the Second World War. As Tamara Sivanandan indicates, Ahmad's second phase could be slightly extended into 1980 to include Zimbabwe's armed struggle and subsequent independence (55).

served the same ends . . . total liberation" (73). According to Mozambican critic Francisco Noa's retrospective survey of the postindependence period (1975–1986), its massive literary production was of scant aesthetic relevance (41). Similarly, Mozambican novelist and historian João Paulo Borges Coelho contends that this literature emerged in a context in which "the political sphere" drastically curtailed its "capacity to interpret the world autonomously"; it is a literature that "has not resisted well the passage of time" ("Writing" 26). As Patrick Chabal remarks, while it may hold a place in the history of the liberation struggle, this literary production contributed little to the formation of an African literature (*Postcolonial Literature* 22).

Coelho defines the revolutionary doxa that pervaded not only Mozambique's public history and postcolonial historiography but most cultural production as well as a "liberation script" that adhered to a specific set of structural constraints ("Politics" 20–31). Grounded on a largely "mythic" account of the armed struggle, dependent on tidy binary oppositions and a particular formulation of experience and subjectivity, this narrative moves in linear, strictly sequential fashion, according to Coelho. It retains considerable flexibility and affords a monopoly of explanation to the ruling party, remaining ultimately impermeable to external interference. In sum, "the liberation script is an apparatus located at the intersection of power and knowledge, which has legitimised the exercise of authority in the post-colonial period" (Israel 13).

One of the key traits of this political framing of cultural and artistic expression "according to the narrow revolutionary standards of the period" (Coelho, "Writing" 25)—which Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique (the three countries that gained independence in the wake of protracted wars of liberation) as well as Cabo Verde shared in common—was thus the "imaginary causality" binding the armed liberation struggle with the socialist revolution (Chabal, *Power* 27). Ironically characterized by Mozambican novelist Ungulani Ba Ka Khosa as a deluded endeavor to fashion the nation "à imagem e semelhança do que imaginaram na mata da libertação," this notion finds perhaps its most compelling articulation in Amílcar Cabral's often-quoted maxim that the liberation struggle ("uma verdadeira marcha forçada da sociedade no caminho do progresso cultural") "não é apenas um facto cultural, é também um factor de cultura" (Khosa 148). With minor variations, this commitment to the socialist revolution and attendant link between cultural (and literary) production and national liberation underpins

the Angolan theatrical production I study in this paper.

In its broadest sense, the task of this essay is to gauge the extent to which we can perceive in these dramatic enactments of revolutionary struggle a fatal refusal to acknowledge what Raymond Williams calls the tragedy of revolution—that is, the fact that the most ardent and committed agents of revolution "can become its factual enemies, even while to others, and even to themselves, they seem its most perfect embodiment" (107). I ask whether we can detect in the structure of these productions the seeds of an inchoate and contrapuntal[2] recognition (anagnorisis) that the performance or "dramatization" of this culture of resistance was, from its inception, tragically flawed. My aim is to inquire into the complex and subtle ways in which these dramatic iterations of what Coelho calls the "liberation script" signify a mode of "unconscious" recognition that the revolutionary struggle might *always-already* have been a "fruitless war that brought nothing but false hope and a fresh, more complete variety of discouragement"—to borrow the sober description of the Zimbabwean war of liberation by the protagonist of Tsitsi Dangarembga's recent novel (68).

In his historical overview of theatrical activity in Angola, Angolan playwright José Mena Abrantes traces a link between the emergence of the nation's first theater company and the rise in Luanda of a modality of "political theater" performed by students and workers before audiences of refugees from the incipient civil conflict during the student strikes that took place in the first half of 1975—that is, just prior to the country's independence (*O teatro* 1: 36–37). Purportedly, one of the forerunners of this type of relatively improvised agitprop theater[3] (aimed at the "desmascaramento de manobras reaccionárias nem sempre imediatamente detectáveis" [Abrantes, *O teatro* 1: 26]) was the "oral" and "spontaneous"

[2] I am repurposing here the term *contrapuntal*, which Edward Said (who was also an accomplished pianist and music critic) famously adapted from the musical compositional technique of counterpoint to comparative literary analysis: "a contrapuntal perspective [entails] think[ing] through and interpret[ing] together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting with others" (32).

[3] *Agitprop* (short for *agitation* and *propaganda*) is a blanket term describing politically engaged or oppositional art. In *What Is to Be Done* (1902), Lenin defines the practice as combining propaganda (raising public awareness of "political and economic oppression") and agitation (eliciting an informed reaction to such "concrete instances of oppression") (400–401). After the Bolshevik Revolution, this mode of artistic production was widely implemented by departments and commissions of Agitation and Propaganda in the USSR and the Comintern. In the context of this discussion, *agitprop* refers to a mode of exhortative revolutionary theater adaptive to outdoor performances in variable locations.

pedagogic theater produced during the liberation struggle in the early 1970s among schoolchildren in the liberated zones of eastern Angola (Abrantes, *O teatro* 1: 92).

With respect to the circumstances informing its production, this drama subscribes *grosso modo* to Olaniyan's definition of African "development theater" (or, in its more "polemical" designation, "people's theater")—a theater devised by a collective of politically shrewd intellectuals, workers, peasants, and students whose central aim is "to advance the interests of the underprivileged classes in society" (41). The productions I examine here deviate from Olaniyan's model in two obvious yet significant respects, however. First, this "committed" drama was not generally constructed by individuals associated with either development agencies or nongovernmental organizations, as is the case with the development theater Olaniyan describes. Rather, its practitioners closely identified and collaborated with the self-defined revolutionary state. The second related difference pertains to the conditions underlying these productions' political engagement or opposition. For example, Biodun Jeyifo argues in an early study that a fundamental antagonism between a "culture of accommodation" and a "culture of resistance" defines the "committed African drama" he surveys (24). By contrast, in the staging of this struggle by the Angolan plays I explore, the "culture which thrives on and sustains neocolonialism" is embodied not by state agents and beneficiaries of state action, but putatively by the state's opponents (Jeyifo 24). The culture of resistance, "which radically contests [the culture of accommodation] and defines a revolutionary reconstitution," is thus ultimately sanctioned and underwritten by the state, not oppositional to it. It is the revolutionary state, in short, that shoulders the radical historical mission of representing and ultimately liberating the "underprivileged classes [that] constitute the majority" of the population: "the people" (Olaniyan 41).

"People's Theater" and the Liberation Struggle in Angola

For Angolan writer and former MPLA operative Fernando Costa Andrade (Ndunduma,[4] 1936–2009), who, along with Pepetela, Júlio de Almeida, and Elsa de Sousa, coordinated much of Angola's early theatrical activity, the radically

[4] Costa Andrade's *nom de guerre* pays tribute to an Angolan ruler from the Central Plateau (Ndunduma I) who waged a fierce campaign against Portuguese colonial domination in the late 19th century. Lépi, located about 70km south of Huambo, was Costa Andrade's hometown.

innovative and analytical character of that country's collective productions places them at a remarkably elevated level of political praxis (quoted in Abrantes, *O teatro* 2: 37). Likewise, Pepetela underscores the extent to which young performers effortlessly incorporated cultural practices from eastern Angola. Possibly alluding to Augusto Boal's notion of Forum Theatre, he regards as one of the most original aspects of this theatrical activity the audience's "active" participation in these performances (quoted in Abrantes, *O teatro* 2: 40–41).

It is probably no coincidence, then, that Pepetela and Costa Andrade would go on to contribute signally to what Abrantes calls the slow emergence of a dramatic literature in postindependence Angola (*O teatro* 1: 88). In 1978, Pepetela published *A corda*, the first dramatic work, "já estruturada como tal," to appear after independence in Angola (Abrantes, *O teatro* 1: 89), and Costa Andrade released *No velho ninguém toca*. In 1979, Pepetela published *A revolta da casa dos ídolos*, "uma das mais logradas obras de teatro escritas por um dramaturgo angolano" (Abrantes, *O teatro* 1: 89). This play's first staging by an Angolan troupe (Elinga-Teatro) took place in Italy in September 1988 (around four months after the group's formation in May of the same year). A condensed adaptation of the play was performed by the Mozambican company Tchova Xita Duma in 1985. Other published plays worthy of mention from this period include Mena Abrantes's *O grande circo autêntico* (1977–-78) and *Ana, Zé e os escravos* (1980). To my knowledge, neither of these two plays has been staged, although the Angolan group Xilenga-Teatro reportedly conducted extensive rehearsals or "recreations of almost every situation" that *O grande circo autêntico* depicts (Abrantes, *O teatro* 1: 61).

The Timebound Didactics of Pepetela's A corda

Pepetela's *A corda*, which Abrantes describes as "enferma do excessivo didacticismo que presidiu à sua elaboração" (*O teatro* 1: 89), exemplifies the type of political drama that is my central concern here. Alternately, the play has been designated a "uma sátira didática comicamente maniqueísta" that has the rare merit of addressing Angola's civil war at a time when the discourses of officialdom had yet to register its existence (Mata 245). Presumably, Pepetela's sustained involvement with political theater for young students (or *pioneiros*, in the

revolutionary cant of the period[5]) in Angola's eastern front shapes the plot, dramaturgy, and ultimately the play's brief production history. Angola's Grupo de Instrutores de Teatro—one of the more prominent "official" troupes at the time—staged it in 1980, under the direction of Cuban playwright and director Ignacio Gutiérrez (1929–2007) (Abrantes, *O teatro* 1: 94). Four or five years later, secondary school pupils would perform it in the then strategically important city of Lubango (Rodrigues 56). Reevaluating the play a decade after he wrote it, Pepetela concedes that, from its outset, *A corda* discloses "uma limitação à partida," and exposes too readily its "objectivo didáctico" (Laban 2: 772). To be sure, *A corda*'s "característica definidora" is a kind of unvarnished didacticism (Rodrigues 64). Like the "resistance poetry" Coelho and Noa survey, it is certainly "narrow in approach" and "technically fragile" (Coelho, "Writing" 26). However, the main question I should like to pursue in what follows is whether the shortcomings Pepetela would later discern pertain exclusively to the play's structure and explicit didacticism, or whether they ultimately turn out to be constitutive of the very logic of its political didactics.

The play is structured "somewhat schematically" (Abrantes, *O teatro* 1: 89) around a "tug of war" pitting two camps: a "nationalist" (i.e., MPLA) faction composed of five unnamed, racially and ethnically diverse "freedom fighters" (or *combatentes*) and a side comprising five grotesque caricatures of the forces of "imperialist reaction": "um imperialista americano; branco, de preferência gordo," a white South African "Racista," and the latter's "puppets" (*fantoches*), FNLA's Holden (Roberto), UNITA's (Jonas) Savimbi, and (Daniel) Chipenda, a rebel commander who split from the MPLA to join the FNLA in 1974 (*A corda* 7). A *likishi,* or Chokwe dancer, introduces the proceedings and referees the "war-game" with relative impartiality, bluntly explaining the high stakes of this ostensible child's play: "O vencedor ficará com Angola. O país, as suas riquezas, vocês todos, nós todos, pertenceremos ao vendedor" (Pepetela, *A corda* 9). Whatever affinities the likishi "master of ceremonies" may have with Augusto Boal's "joker"[6]

[5] The stage directions stipulate that "the actors should be preferentially children between the ages of 12 and 16" (Pepetela, *A corda* 7).

[6] Augusto Boal developed what he called the "joker system" ("sistema coringa") while working with São Paulo's Arena Theater in 1965. Just as the "joker" (*coringa* in Brazilian Portuguese) takes on different values (or functions) in a deck of playing cards, the coringa in Boal's "teatro do oprimido" ("theater of the oppressed") can assume disparate roles in varying dramaturgical contexts, including director, referee, facilitator, and workshop leader. The coringa can also be a practitioner who is able to play different roles: actor, character, chorus, and protagonist, all in the same performance.

(*coringa*) (Valentim 83), he figures both the incorporation *and* the necessary transformation (or subsumption) of precolonial cultural patterns and practices into the collective and insurgent "body" of the emergent nation. As an emblem of tradition, the reinvented role and function of the likishi in the play exemplify the cultural creativity and innovation that the struggle for national liberation arguably produces (Cabral).

In Fanon's related formulation, the likishi figures the radical reconfiguration of a tradition "previously classified [*répertorié*] and frozen in time" into "new models, national models" (*Wretched* 174). Like Fanon's "combat literature," *A corda* seeks to call "upon a whole people to join in the struggle for the existence of the nation" (173). In effect, the play closes with the last verses of the national anthem (from 1975 to 1992): "Um só povo, uma só nação" (Pepetela, *A corda* 48). It becomes increasingly evident in the course of the play's twelve scenes that, just as the "traditional" or locally defined role of the likishi must be reshaped and expanded to project a "national consciousness" (Fanon, *Wretched* 173), so must the young nationalists overcome their racial and ethnic antagonisms to ensure that their "A Vitória é Certa," one of MPLA's familiar watchwords from the period (Pepetela, *A corda* 13). The play endeavors, therefore, to identify with "the people's daily lot," and participate in "a concerted action . . . in the making or already in progress" (Fanon, *Wretched* 175). It summons the Angolan people to assume the protagonist's role in shaping "their nation's future" (Boz 297), urging them to unite under the sign of the one and indivisible nation (Rodrigues 58).

Yet, upon closer scrutiny, the efficacy and cogency of its pedagogic and mobilizing goal seem considerably less clear. Pepetela has alluded to the text's timebound relevance: "era uma peça para aquele momento apenas . . . . Hoje mesmo [1988] já não tem interesse" (Laban 2: 772, 797). Nevertheless, this restricted temporality derives not just from the play's contextual immediacy but—in its printed version at least—it is indelibly inscribed in its *hors-texte*. Pepetela dedicates *A corda* to Hélder Neto, "a quem pertence a ideia deste texto" (n.p.). On the next page, he adjoins the following elucidation: "Esta peça é editada no momento em que reverenciamos o autor da sua ideia. Que seja homengem ao seu exemplo militante" (6). It is perhaps intentional that the wording of this dedication echoes the lines from one of Hélder Neto's own poems, "Não choraremos pois os mortos!": "A libertação da Pátria necessita de sangue. / Do sangue dos seus melhores filhos . . . levantaremos o exemplo / do [seu] heroísmo / do [seu] valor /

para avançarmos" (Neto, *Estão de pé* 25, 26). Given the key "exergual" place accorded to Hélder Neto's "example," it is instructive to inquire further into who Hélder Neto was, as well as the nature of his "militant example."

Neto (no relation to MPLA leader and Angola's first president Agostinho Neto) belonged to the generation Pepetela would memorably call the *Geração da Utopia*[7] (The Generation of Utopia). Like Pepetela himself, Agostinho Neto, and indeed most of the MPLA leadership, Hélder Neto had joined the Movement after a crucial period of activism in the formative Casa dos Estudantes do Império (Residence of Students of the Empire) located in Lisbon. Although his literary production was sparse, it was sufficiently significant to merit mention in Manuel Ferreira's pioneering survey of Lusophone African literatures (45).[8] In 1977, he was serving as the director of INFANAL (the Portuguese acronym for Information and Analysis Services), an organ parallel to the MPLA's political police, the DISA (Directorate of Information and Security of Angola). On May 27, 1977, Hélder Neto was visiting the São Paulo prison in Luanda when it was assaulted by forces loyal to Interior Minister Nito Alves, the opening salvo to Alves's alleged attempted coup against President Neto,[9] "the defining moment of Angola's loss of innocence," according to David Birmingham (*Empire* 161). Hélder Neto died during the attack, but, like the coup itself, the circumstances surrounding his death remain cloaked in controversy and uncertainty. According to the official MPLA account, he "gloriously fell at his post," while vying heroically to thwart the liberation of inmates loyal to Alves and the coup plotters, the so-called Nitistas (quoted in Mateus and Mateus, 90). This is precisely the exemplary militancy that *A corda* purports to honor. Nevertheless, a competing version of the episode alleges that Hélder Neto committed suicide upon realizing that he would be unable to stop the coup sympathizers from freeing Nito Alves's supporters from the jail (Mateus and Mateus 90). In this version, of course, Neto's revolutionary exemplarity becomes considerably less straightforward, its political pedagogics

[7] The title of his 1992 novel.

[8] A collection of Hélder Neto's poetry and short fiction (*Estão de pé para sempre*) was published jointly in the 1970s (no publication date) by the União de Escritores Angolanos (Angolan Writers Union) and the Lisbon-based publishing house Edições 70.

[9] The term *coup* is by no means consensual as an accurate descriptor of the events that transpired on May 27, 1977, and I use it throughout this chapter as a convenient shorthand. Indeed, Pepetela himself has called the term's adequateness into question: "It was an attempt to change the existing order . . . It would be difficult to call it a coup d'état, although the armed forces were implicated in it" (quoted in Mateus and Mateus, 111).

substantially more ambivalent. Yet, even if we countenance the version portraying Neto as a hero fallen for the sake of the nation's survival, the cohesion of this exemplary narrative breaks apart upon closer reading.

Fraccionismo ("Factionalism") was how the May 1977 attempted coup became known in official MPLA parlance. The "factionalism" the play's imperialist "lacaios" (Holden, Savimbi, and Chipenda) engage in (Pepetela, *A corda* 15), for example, threatens the nation's integrity (in both senses). It is readily identifiable as cynical opportunism, avarice, and self-interest. In the likishi's words, "se este grupo . . . vencer, eu e todos vocês teremos de trabalhar unicamente para lhes sustentar as barrigas. Vejam só como eles se roubam uns aos outros" (41). "Factionalism" is thus the foil to the sweeping collective story the MPLA and the Angolan people are forging together. To cite the likishi again, "Eu só posso seguir as decisões do Povo . . . Quem manda é o Povo, por isso o Povo deve . . . [não] reagir . . . mas sim fazer, sabendo o que se está a fazer" (42). Only three years prior to May 1977, however, Nito Alves, the alleged coup leader, had played a crucial role in foiling Daniel Chipenda's "internal" challenge to Agostinho Neto's leadership during the so-called Eastern Revolt (*Revolta do Leste*). What, in the last instance, remains unclear is exactly how Nito Alves *fractures* the paradigm of national unity that the play endeavors to instill, or, relatedly, how Hélder Neto's sterling example of militant abnegation is incommensurate with that of the leader of the coup that Neto apparently sacrificed himself trying to thwart. In the end, the "lesson" for which Hélder Neto was willing to die—the lesson the play seeks to teach—and the radical precept in whose name Nito Alves was prepared to challenge the country's leadership are the same: a radical form of direct democracy.

Like the likishi dancer in Pepetela's play, Nito Alves calls for the people's direct participation in forging the nation. For instance, in a poem significantly titled "My Poem Is the People," which appeared in a collection published in 1976, less than a year before he was captured and summarily executed (his body was never found), Alves proclaims:

> Gostaria de cantar o poema que me bate no coração / mas não posso . . . / porque . . . é o próprio Povo em armas . . . / a fazer o poema que eu não posso redigir / e só ele deve continuar. (46)

In his preface to the collection, the publishing house's editor-in-chief maintains that Alves's extraordinary poems are not the product of artistic impulses chiseled with a literary public in mind. Rather, they are "a própria Seiva do Povo e da Terra Angolana em Luta, tornada voz, tornada clarim de combate, a falar do sofrimento comum, a apontar os caminhos do Futuro" (Almeida 17–18).

Nito's lyrical production presumably "reflects the concerns and wishes of a whole society" (Ngara 104). It, too, attempts "to give voice to the voiceless and the poor, to the brave and unarticulated hopes of the downtrodden and the forgotten" (Nkosi 165). Indeed, one could easily attribute to Nito Alves Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's description of Agostinho Neto: "for him, the gun, the pen, and the platform have served the same ends: the total liberation of Angola" (73). The People are thus paradoxically the addressee of both the radical nationalist pedagogics the play enacts and of the "factionalist" discourse that purportedly aims to fragment national cohesion. Comparably, in Angolan author José Eduardo Agualusa's *Estação das chuvas*—his novelized biography of Angolan poet and historian Lídia do Carmo Ferreira—when an interrogator asks one of the characters why he joined Nito Alves's "factionalists," the latter retorts: "Fraccionistas somos todos. A diferença é que nós somos a fracção do povo" (Agualusa 235). From the opposite side of the fracture line, the People in Alves's poem are likewise summoned to play the leading role in the collective drama, to persist in their communal labor as the makers of the grand polyphonic poem that is the unfolding history of Angola. Alves's poem expresses the People's unexpressed hopes and aspirations. It inscribes "the concerted action" they are collectively engaged in but which they lack the schooling and wherewithal to represent: "Os que fazem a História / Nem sempre podem escrevê-la" (Alves 46).

More research needs to be conducted on the nature and origin of the May 1977 coup.[10] It is not unlikely that the "truth" of what transpired will never be fully

[10] Until recently, references to this major event were more or less expunged from official discourse. Two notable fictional exceptions to this willful amnesia include José Eduardo Agualusa's *Estação das chuvas* (1996) and Boaventura Cardoso's *Maio, mês de Maria* (1997). While the latter ultimately "resurrects" the victims of the "alleged" massacres that followed the attempted coup, the former gives a devastating indictment of the MPLA's ruthless suppression of dissent. Reacting to the publication of *Estação*, a pro-MPLA journalist is reported to have proclaimed Agualusa "a traitor to the fatherland," and to have expressed regret that the state had abolished firing squads (quoted in Marques, "À procura"). British historian David Birmingham references the massacres in a few of his publications: *Portugal and Africa* (1999), the chapter on Angola included in *A History of Postcolonial Lusophone Africa* (2002), and *Empire in Africa* (2006). Dalila Cabrita Mateus and Álvaro Mateus's *Purga em Angola* (2009) and Lara Pawson's *In the Name of the People* (2014) both

known. What seems nonetheless indisputable is that the "People" took little or no part either in the decision to cleave the vanguard of the former liberation movement asunder or in adjudicating between the orthodoxy and the apostasy of the two opposing camps. Even a partisan assessment of the coup would be hard-pressed not to view it as the result of a power struggle at the top of the MPLA, the upshot of a process whereby particular factions within the movement, after securing power, went about purging those who threatened or openly challenged their ascendancy. In such a context, the "militant example" inscribed in the play's "exergue"[11] turns out to be charged with irony, an irony that the Cassandra-like protagonist of Pepetela's famed early novel about the war of liberation, *Mayombe*, seems to foretell with singular lucidity:

> Objetivamente, será necessário apertar-se a vigilância no interior do Partido, aumentar a disciplina, fazer limpezas . . . . Mas essas limpezas servirão de pretexto para que homens ambiciosos misturem contra-revolucionários com aqueles que criticam a sua ambição e os seus erros. Da vigilância necessária no seio do Partido passar-se-á ao ambiente policial dentro do Partido e toda a crítica será abafada no seu seio. O centralismo reforça-se, a democracia desaparece . . . . A contestação desaparecerá, pois . . . Os contestatários serão confundidos com os contra-revolucionários, a burocracia será dona e senhora, com ela o conformismo, o trabalho ordenado mas sem paixão, a

endeavor to provide detailed and meticulously documented accounts of "the bloodstained crisis of 1977" (Birmingham, "Angola" 153). As I mention above, several memoirs and histories of May 1977 have appeared in the last few decades. On November 17, 2018, Francisco Queiroz, Angola's Minister of Justice and Human Rights, finally breached the MPLA government's silence on the uprising and its blood-drenched aftermath. Queiroz characterized the MPLA's reaction to the attempted coup as "excessive," described some of its retaliatory actions as violations of human rights, and conceded that "there were arbitrary executions and imprisonments. All this has been forgotten a bit, but we need to remember it, so it doesn't happen again" ("Governo de Angola"). We can only hope that this apparent "opening" means that the moment is not too far off when the kind of research I am calling for here will begin in earnest.

[11] I use the term in Jacques Derrida's sense of *exergue* (or *parergon*, typically a footnote or endnote) as a "reference" or "gloss" that, although apparently subsidiary or marginal to the main argument (as footnotes and endnotes normally are) is actually of fundamental importance. Similarly, I aim to signal that what appears at first blush to be a *paratext* (a dedication whose relationship to the play seems either incidental or subordinate) is in effect of key significance to it.

> incapacidade de tudo se pôr em causa e reformular de novo. (121, 122)[12]

For whom or what, then, did Hélder Neto sacrifice himself? For the sake of the nation and its people, or that of a politically ambitious few who would go on to accumulate and egregiously misappropriate the country's resources and wealth? Concomitantly, were Nito Alves and the other alleged coup plotters purged in the interest of the revolution, or were they sacrificed on the altar of political machination and ambition? Were they counterrevolutionaries or were they scrupulously contesting corruption and abuse in the name of the revolution?

As the main character in Boaventura Cardoso's *Maio, mês de Maria* bursts out in exasperation, in the fraught sociopolitical backdrop of May 1977 (a context in which yesterday's nationalists are today "excomungados da sociedade [por] terem ideias diferentes": "que raio de independência é esta que só estabelece a divisão no povo?" (45). It is the rhetorical construction of the People—the privileged and legitimating agent of social and political change—that finally reveals itself to be irrevocably fissured, unmoored. The didactic ascription of agency and political legitimation to the People becomes, in this sense, slippery, apparently revocable whenever political expediency warrants it. The agency attributed to the People is thus beset, in the last instance, by a fatal aporia or indeterminacy.

"Absolute Presidentialism" and Costa Andrade's No velho ninguém toca

This contradiction underpins Costa Andrade's "dramatic poem" *No velho ninguém toca*, published soon after the May 1977 coup. Resorting to a figural mode reminiscent of Europe's medieval allegories (Abrantes, *O teatro* 1: 88), Costa Andrade, who was at the time editor-in-chief of the *Jornal de Angola* (a paper that, under his stewardship, effectively became the MPLA's mouthpiece), seeks to construct a "dialectical materialist" legitimation not only of the ruling party's ruthless suppression of the Nitistas but, even more paradoxically, of Agostinho Neto's incontestable leadership. The play's tragic hero is Gilberto da Silva Teixeira, known by his nom de guerre Jika (the text's full subtitle is "poema dramático com Jika"). Jika was an MPLA commander slain in late 1975, during

[12] Originally written in 1970–71, while Pepetela was an MPLA guerrilla, the novel was published almost a decade later, in 1980.

the outbreak of the separatist insurgency in Angola's northern enclave of Cabinda (the Cabinda War). Aside from the allegorical embodiments of Time, Life, Love, Sorrow, and of the four elements (earth, air, fire, and water), the remaining dramatis personae comprise a chorus of twenty-one men divided into three groups. Far from an amorphous personification of Angola's national "community" (Boschi 71),[13] the age, demeanor, and attire of each "chorister" seem scrupulously to delineate distinct social positions and political roles. Thus, the first six men, led by a uniformed elder who is "sóbrio [e] sereno" ("Número 1, likely a portrayal of President Agostinho Neto, or the title's "Velho"), represent the MPLA's upper echelons (the movement's chairman and its top commanders). In effect, the play's title is quite likely a pointed rejoinder to the watchword that arguably epitomized Nito Alves's political vision: *o novo deve substituir o velho* (Tali 350).[14] The second and largest group of youths encompasses the movement's political and armed wings: half wear military fatigues, half civilian clothes. Also included in this group are two schoolchildren (*pioneiros*) who obviously symbolize the future. The third group, whose five members are dressed in suit and tie, would stand for the emerging national bourgeoisie.

Commander Jika, whose death the four female figures representing Love and Sorrow mourn in the opening *quadro* (scene), is therefore a posthumous member of the first group of MPLA cadres, as his stage entrance in the sixth scene ("sem destacar-se do seu grupo" [36]) clearly signals. For all their arguable medieval resonances, the four elements, along with Time and Life, also allegorize the Nation in Struggle. Hence, one of the crucial didactic functions of the three preambular scenes (2, 3, and 4) featuring these six allegorical figures is precisely to relate the extent and significance of Jika's role in the unfolding nationalist project. On the one hand, the six allegorical personae take turns reaffirming the metonymic exemplarity of Jika's militant trajectory. As Time proclaims, Jika signifies "o primeiro degrau da escalada / para o alvo / sendo alvo todo, unidade, / coesão" (20). Similarly, for Life, Jika's example endures beyond death (23). His indelible "mensagem" (23) effectively abrogates and transcends his physical disappearance

[13] Boschi's argument that the play represents a militant defense of African "tradition" stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of the political situation the play dramatizes, beginning with his incongruous suggestion that the title's "velho" refers to "traditional" culture or "the old ways."
[14] Tali cites a May 22, 1977, editorial penned by Ndunduma (Costa Andrade) published in the government daily *Jornal de Angola* significantly titled "No Velho ninguém toca." Tali also regards the title's "Velho" as a direct allusion to Agostinho Neto (347n87).

to be recuperated as the play progresses: "nova . . . Revolução / que dá e fertiliza / o tempo finalmente agora de viver" (21). On the other hand, as Basil Davidson remarks without irony, the play's call for the Angolan People to examine "o caminho que já percorreu e as razões porque conseguiu percorrê-lo . . . e o caminho que agora tem de ser percorrido" (preface 8, 9) occurs "no momento preciso" (8)—that is, in the wake of Nito Alves's aborted coup.

While the May 27 coup is in a sense inscribed "outside" of Pepetela's *A corda*, in Costa Andrade's play the episode appears as a fundamental disruption in the radical temporality of the nation. If "o tempo de [4] Fevereiro [de 1961]" (the beginning of the armed struggle, according to the official MPLA national liberation narrative) affords a glimpse of "the future," "[27 de] Maio [de 1977 é] tempo desviado," the time signaling "a raiz do ódio" (Andrade 18, 21). Given the virulently anti-"factionalist" editorials that Costa Andrade penned for the *Jornal de Angola* in the months leading up to the coup,[15] such a political posture is of course far from surprising. The ensuing four scenes involving human characters "simultaneously" stage the tense and protracted debates that erupted within the MPLA at the height of the war of independence (in the early 1970s) and immediately after May 1977. Accordingly, Number 6 depicts the assembly staged in the fourth quadro—in which five of the uniformed members of Group 1 are seated at a rectangular table presided by Number 1, who faces the public—as ""[um] encontro semanal das decisões" (24). The meeting's objective, as Number 1 declares at the outset, is to understand "o processo / da História, / colocando-nos na história/ escrita pelo nosso povo" (24). More specifically, the assembled leaders will ventilate dissenting opinions (27), permit the open expression of discontent, even "o ódio e a mentira" (29), and strive to "reajustar o conhecimento / da nossa própria história," "[fazer] crescer verdade" (28), and, in the last instance (29), plot "o certo do caminho novo" (28).

In other words, as portrayed in Costa Andrade's play, the MPLA leadership displays precisely the capacity "to call everything into question and reformulate it anew" that Pepetela's Commander Sem-Medo foresees as gradually abating once it seizes power (*Mayombe* [1996] 94). It is in this context of tactical and ideological "readjustment" that the timeliness of Jika's dramatic parousia (or resurrection) resides. To quote Number 1 again, the assembly's (indeed, the play's) purpose is

[15] See, for example, Pawson, *In the Name of the People* (200–205) and Mateus and Mateus, *Purga* (76).

not to trace Jika's "biografia" (25) but to reclaim and actualize Jika's model of militancy, "o exemplo que se constitui em página da História, a história que importa aqui contar" (26). In contrast to Pepetela's encomiastic (and "exergual") evocation of Hélder Neto's "militant example" in *A corda*, then, Jika's exemplarity defines (i.e., is *constitutive* of) both the action of Costa Andrade's play and "the historical line" the nation must pursue in the wake of May 1977. Thus, Jika's resurrection arguably responds to a conjunctural necessity to reaffirm and retrace the correct path toward revolutionary nationhood. It is the leading role that Jika (or, Gilberto da Silva Teixeira) had played half a decade earlier in the MPLA's so-called Movimento de Reajustamento (Readjustment Movement, which Number 1 specifically references in the play [28, 36]) that defines the historical urgency and enduring relevance of his praxis.

This "ample Readjustment Movement" (36) was launched around 1972 in the increasingly isolated and disarrayed MPLA guerrilla bases in the northern and eastern fronts and spearheaded by militants newly arrived from training stints abroad (in China, especially). It sought to critically examine and widely debate the MPLA's direction and governance structure and propose a concrete plan of action, or blueprint for "readjustment." In Costa Andrade's play, Jika articulates the principal tenets of this transformative agenda in his lengthier monologues. Replying to the young *pioneiros*' fervent wish to "continuar a luta" (42), for example, Jika underscores the need "bater a intriga e a divisão tribal / . . . sepultar o racismo / . . . desarmar o oportunismo / . . . *organizar* / . . . [e] desenhar a estratégia" (42–43). These watchwords coincide broadly with Jika's posthumously published tract advocating an urgent and sweeping readjustment effort.[16] There he argues that the MPLA was undergoing "uma grave crise na continuidade," decries growing tribal and regional disputes (*diferendos*) among its ranks that "ameaçam mesmo a coesão e unidade internas do movimento"; he denounces pernicious, undeserving, and uncommitted militants who confer special privileges upon themselves and claim to represent "clientelas fantasmas," highlights significant "dificuldades . . . no quadro da organização política," and describes a precarious situation underpinned by "erros tácticos e estratégicos" (Jika 68, 70–71).

This wide-ranging effort to reform and revitalize the MPLA ultimately failed, and its failure generated further cleavages within the movement, which persisted

[16] Costa Andrade authored the preface to the MPLA's 1976 edition of Jika's *Reflexões* under his nom de guerre (Ndunduma we Lépi).

into the postindependence period. As I mention above, one of the factions that emerged in the wake of this contentious readjustment phase was Daniel Chipenda's Revolta do Leste. Aside from the "loyalist" bloc, the other group to splinter from the Movement was the "Active Revolt" led by Mário Pinto de Andrade. Certainly, any synoptic account of these intricate ideological tensions and conflicts cannot but be reductive. What is nonetheless worth noting in the context of this discussion is that, by and large, all three factions coincided in the need to fight racism, tribalism, and regionalism as practices that obstructed the optimal implementation of the MPLA's plan of action (Jika 59–61). Where they diverged fundamentally was on the commitment to eradicate monocratic "presidentialism" from within the organization in favor of a collaborative mode of leadership. In essence, then, the two dissident factions (or "revolts") radically called into question Agostinho Neto's "presidency." By contrast, it is the inviolability (or "untouchable" character) of the "Velho's" (i.e., Neto's) leadership that Jika is in effect "resuscitated" to uphold: "Aqui só se não discute o Velho . . . . O Velho não deve ser chamado / a justificar o erro que cometo . . . . Ninguém toca no Velho" (*No velho*, 37, 38, 42). To borrow from the satirical lexicon of Pepetela's recent novel, one might designate this faction the "Associação dos Incondicionais do Chefe" ("Association of the Unconditional Supporters of the Leader") (*Sua Excelência* 172). The play implicitly traces a line of continuity between the dissension Commander Jika actively sought to combat in the early 1970s and the Nitista insurrection. The two cadres whom the stage directions indicate as abstaining from joining (38, 42)—or participating only "timidly" (44)—in the choral recitation of the title's behest ("No Velho ninguém toca") therefore either represent the past leaders of the dissenting wings or "revolts" (Chipenda and Pinto de Andrade, perhaps), or "anticipate" Nito Alves. In the latter case, Alves's role in backing Agostinho Neto against Daniel Chipenda's Revolta do Leste in 1974 would of course need to be willfully forgotten.

The historical line Jika embodies and seeks to vindicate (the reason he exemplifies "o alvo," as Time declares [20]) is thus ultimately reducible to what the dissenting factions of the Movement came to brand as the principle of "absolute presidentialism." In this context, as Earth asserts about May 1977 in the second quadro (18), to question (or dare "to touch upon") Neto's leadership is irrevocably to becloud "[a] clareza ideológica" (*No velho* 39), to diverge from the certainty of the true path (28). In the end, Jika's peremptory exclusion of the leadership

question ("Aqui só não se discute o Velho" [37]) from the incipient and ostensibly free and open debate (as opiniões devem ser ouvidas / está nisso a essência democrática" [27]) forecloses the possibility that "[a] história/ [será] escrita pelo nosso povo" (24). Instead of adhering to the "accepted" Marxian axiom (recited in unison by the cadres in the play) "partir das massas para regressar a elas"[17] (39), instead of preserving the "essência democrática" (27), ensuring that "ninguém impeça [nenhuma] voz de ouvir-se" (29) and "só o povo tem a decisão" (35), the historical trajectory charted in the play effectively inverts Marx's dictum: "O Velho é . . . / unânime e o princípio. / Ele é a união e a unidade / o Herói e a força / da causa total / vitoriosa. / O alvo a defender" (48). It is thus the Old Man's "consciousness in motion" ("conscience en mouvement"), rather than that of "the entire people" ("l'ensemble du peuple"), which emerges as "the living expression of the nation" ("l'expression vivante de la nation") (Fanon, *Les damnés* 191; *Wretched* 144).

It is as though the upended organic dialectic governing a liberation movement that is already turning sclerotic scarce years after its launching (according to an MPLA guerrilla fighter and one of the main characters in Pepetela's *Geração da Utopia*) reasserts itself with a vengeance in the initial years of single-party rule; instead of the old making way for the new, continuously renewing the party organism, the reverse principle holds: "quanto mais velho é o indivíduo melhor dirigente será. Os velhos nunca largam o poder, só à força" (Pepetela, *Geração* 137). By converting the Old Man into both the starting point (*princípio*) and the goal (*alvo*) of the journey to nationhood, the play tacitly reformulates the MPLA's "princípio aceite" (*No velho* 39) as follows: to proceed from the leader and return to the leader. The revolutionary task at hand, then, becomes essentially to mold a providential man, a national savior (Pepetela, *Sua Excelência* 218). Neto thus arises as the absolute exception to Fanon's tenet that "No leader, whatever his worth, can replace the will of the people" ("Aucun leader quelle que soit sa valeur ne peut se substituer à la volonté populaire" [*Wretched* 144; *Les damnés* 191]).

It is perhaps a matter of time as to whether Neto will reach the deific apices of the Soviet bloc leaders caustically described by the protagonist of Pepetela's *O Planalto e a estepe*: "nossos líderes bem-amados, imortais, quase seres míticos

[17] To quote the Fanonian variant: "L'expression vivante de la nation c'est la conscience en mouvement de l'ensemble du people" (*Les damnés* 193) ("The collective consciousness in motion of the entire people" [Fanon, *Wretched* 144]).

anteriores à humanidade, do tempo em que os deuses faziam filhos. Alguns desses filhos sobraram, eram os nossos líderes" (43). To borrow Lara Pawson's felicitous précis of Costa Andrade's vitriolic, antifactionalist editorials, "it is hard to see how one could live up to [his] standards of loyalty" to the leader (202). It is instructive in this regard to measure the gulf separating Costa Andrade's Old Man from Mena Abrantes's Popular Leader (i.e., Patrice Lumumba) in *O grande circo autêntico*, "uma farsa tragicómica sobre o processo neo-colonial na ex-República do Zaíre" (*O teatro* 1: 10). The voice of Abrantes's Popular Leader recites off-stage a phrase from Lumumba's final letter to his wife Pauline that not only echoes Fanon's but sounds sharply contrapuntal to the catchword in the title of Costa Andrade's play: "morto, vivo, livre ou na prisão, não é a minha pessoa que conta . . . É A NOSSA TERRA, É A NOSSA POBRE GENTE, A QUEM TRANSFORMARAM A INDEPENDÊNCIA NUMA JAULA" (*Teatro* 1: 42; uppercase in the original).

Ultimately, the Angolan people will not succeed in "writing their own history" (24) in Costa Andrade's play. Rather, it is the once and future leader who forges the liberation struggle's (poetic) script. As a result, the people's "own history" becomes inevitably "mediated," or "improper," not-their-own, always-already written, prescripted, in the final analysis. Tellingly, in the play's closing quadro, Earth and Fire essentially "perform" one of Agostinho Neto's most recognizable lines, "a terra quente dos horizontes em fogo," from the 1961 poem "Para além da poesia" (67). The line arguably connotes a violent yet fervently awaited national renewal, and the play's final lines ratify this reading. Hence, Fire anoints Jika as "a labareda / e a manhã / a chuva e o germinar. / É [4 de] Fevereiro [de 1961] e é [11 de] Novembro [de 1975] [Angola's independence date] / . . . é o fogo / ardendo / sempre!" (51). In a similar vein, Boaventura Cardoso, Minister of Culture (2002–2010) under Agostinho Neto's long-serving successor, places the political struggle for independence resolutely under the sign of fire in his eponymous novel: "Para todos, o elemento determinante da mudança, do movimento e da acção, era o fogo . . . Para fecundar a terra era necessário lhe penetrar com o fogo seminal, lhe ignizar" 303).

What for Nito Alves, for instance, appeared as an antinomy that only the struggle itself could sublate ("Os que fazem a História/ Nem sempre podem escrevê-la" [46]) is neatly and definitively resolved in the play. Not only is the Old Man designated a priori as the authentic expression of the will of the people, but he emerges as the sole legitimate Author of their unfolding History. The history of

the people will always have been fashioned and scripted in their name by the "untouchable" Hero who embodies them essentially by decree. As Neto portends in a distinctly Messianic mode in another famous poem ("Adeus à hora da largada"),"Eu já não espero / *sou aquele por quem se espera*" (my italics) (35). The purportedly fallacious conclusions that the two dissenting cadres (Numbers 4 and 6) hastily reach in the fifth quadro ("Mas o Povo somos nós"; "O Povo será o que quisermos" [35]) come paradoxically to constitute the *conditio sine qua non* for the play's performative vindication of "absolute presidentialism." Only by becoming an empty signifier, only by assuming the signifying motility of a linguistic shifter, can the People remain commensurate with (or, substitutable for) the "untouchable" and indisputable Leader.

Describing the 1938 Moscow Trials in the wake of the Second World War, Merleau-Ponty identifies "genuine tragedy" in the fate of the revolutionary "who is persuaded that the Revolution is moving in the wrong direction" (66). According to the French philosopher, this militant faces "the real tragedy [*un tragique véritable*] of historical contingency," committing to "a dialectic whose course is not entirely foreseeable [and which] can transform a man's [*sic*] intentions into their opposite" (64). Ironically, as Angola's current Minister of Social Communication admits to British investigative journalist Lara Pawson, after the May 1977 coup, the MPLA government "radicalised itself" (Pawson 219). As Pawson adduces, "despite quashing the uprising and executing its leaders, the regime proceeded to pursue the sort of leftist policies the *nitistas* had been asking for" (219). Like Hoederer, the proletarian party leader in Sartre's *Les mains sales* (*Dirty Hands*) who is assassinated for pursuing the very pragmatic policies that the party will adopt after his murder, Nito Alves was executed for advocating a radicalism that the MPLA would fully embrace after his death. Although it remains largely unexplored in Angolan drama, this was essentially the tragic paradox of the May 1977 factionalists.

The cruel absurdity of this ostensible reversal (which is, in the end, a repetition) calls to mind Raymond Williams's reference to a tragic revolutionary action whose result is "a commitment to revolution [that] can produce a kind of hardening which even ends by negating the revolutionary purpose" (106). What is more, and to borrow Adorno's scathing assessment of Brecht's 1930 *lehrstück* ("learning play") *Die Maßnahme* (*The Measures Taken*)—which the Frankfurt School philosopher uncharitably branded a justification *avant la lettre* of Stalin's

purge trials—Costa Andrade and Pepetela end up "falsify[ing] the very objectivity which [their] didactic drama laboured to distill" (185). In both the former's unreserved paean to the leader and the latter's aporetic ascription of revolutionary agency to the People "the political falsehood stains the aesthetic form" (Adorno 186). The fissures and divisions against which Pepetela's and Costa Andrade's plays strive to educate their audience (the People) are therefore as much external to the political pedagogics they seek to activate (i.e., arising from social, ethnic, and racial conflicts and rivalries) as they are immanent to, and indeed constitutive of these plays' "revolutionary" didactic structure.[18]

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[18] In an ironic coda to his dramatic vindication of Neto's leadership, a mere four years after the publication of *No velho ninguém toca*, Costa Andrade found himself on the wrong side of "absolute presidentialism." José Eduardo dos Santos, who took over as the president of Angola following Neto's death in 1979, ordered him arrested on December 21, 1982, for allegedly having "made incorrect use of [his] right to criticise" and having failed to adhere accurately to "the principles of democratic centralism" ("Angola" 38). In concrete terms, Costa Andrade's offense was to compose and produce a play "satirising various aspects of Angola's government [including Santos himself] and calling for a new Central Committee of its ruling party" ("Angola" 38). Not unlike Nito Alves, who ran afoul of Agostinho Neto's claim to uncontested leadership, Costa Andrade—formally charged with "factionalism and disrespect for the President" (Vidal 833)—also presumed "to touch" the New Man at the helm of Party and Nation. Although far less bloodstained than Neto's 1977 countercoup, the ruthless and sweeping purge that Santos unleashed five years later also aimed at asserting and consolidating his personal grip on power in the face of a strong challenge from the MPLA's progressive or socialist wing (Vidal 829). In his robust defense of Neto's "untouchable" leadership, Costa Andrade effectively drafted the political rationale for his own future indictment. In another ironic turn, it was Basil Davidson, who authored the preface to Costa Andrade's play, who penned the keynote article of the issue of *Index on Censorship* that reports the Angolan playwright's arrest. Although Davidson refers to both Mozambique and Angola in his prefatory piece, going so far as to suggest that the suppression of the short-lived Angolan journal *Mensagem* by colonial authorities was not entirely different from "the challenge in Africa now" ("The African Challenge" 2), he refrains from addressing Costa Andrade's situation.

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