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Writing Africa under the Cold War: Arrested Decolonisation and Geopolitical Integration

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In a 2000 interview in the Belgian newspaper *Vers L'Avenir*, Ivorian novelist Ahmadou Kourouma notes the ways in which, since the 1884 Berlin Conference parcelled it out to competing imperial powers, the African continent has always been positioned as a contested site for despoliation by forces external to it, a phenomenon which continues to the present day despite the so-called freedoms of formal independence:

the partition of Africa, in 1884, [...] was done without the input of Africans and against all common sense. Colonization maintained these boundaries. And independence came at the time of the Cold War. On one side were the pro-Western states, on the other, the socialist regimes. When the people wanted to revolt, the 'protecting' countries, France or Cuba for example, sent soldiers. Nobody wanted things to change.

The fall of the Berlin Wall unleashed a commotion that warlords profited from. Officially, they defended their ethnic communities, but in reality they exploited gold mining and diamonds. They therefore do not want to bring about a state, in the classical sense, that would hinder them in their trafficking.¹

Critically, for Kourouma, political independence, coinciding as it did with the Cold War and its attendant division of the world into a binary order based on East-West conflict, could do little – and indeed was designed to do little – to change the circumstances which had located the continent within the imperial world order. Instead, he argues, the Cold War exacerbated the [...] forms of dominance and violence done to Africa, maintaining its position as a place to be mastered, ripe for material exploitation. It is no coincidence that in these remarks Kourouma evokes many of the key themes which appear across a range of African literary writing produced during and after the Cold War. Most obviously, he makes plain both the submerged centrality of the African continent to its global landscapes and partitions and the paradoxical

¹ 'L'enfant, soldat obligé', *Vers L'Avenir*, *Samedi Plus* supplement, 16 September 2000. Consulted at l'Institut mémoires de l'édition contemporaine (IMEC), SEL 2409.3 (my translation).

status of the continent as **the** true loser in a conflict for which it was not responsible and within which its agency was systematically effaced. For Kourouma, the Cold War is notable for its strategic positioning of the newly-independent nations of Africa as allies and protected states of either the capitalist **First World** [...] or **the** socialist bloc [...], under what he characterises as a mutation of imperial control. With hopes for genuine independence, democracy and development superseded by its instrumentalisation by both sides in turn, the African continent [...] has suffered ever since, ‘abandoned’ after the fall of the Berlin Wall and left more vulnerable to the forces of financialisation which accompanied the rise of Bretton Woods institutions as global agents of power.²

In this **chapter**, I take Kourouma’s comments as something of a starting point for tracing the various articulations and registrations of the Cold War across a range of literary texts emanating from Anglophone and Francophone East, West and Central Africa, including Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People* (1966), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Caitani mũtharaba-Inĩ* (Devil on the Cross, 1980), Kourouma’s *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote, 1998) and Alain Mabanckou’s *Demain j’aurai vingt ans* (Tomorrow, I’ll Be Twenty, 2010). [...] I draw particular attention to the range of ways in which these texts enliven the tensions which accompany the intertwined relationship between arrested decolonisation, post-independence malaise and the subjugation of the continent within the binary matrix of the Cold War. While they bear many similarities in their rendering of the African continent **during the conflict**, the texts nonetheless adopt vastly different positions [...], moving through time and space to produce a topographical ordering in which the calibrations of the Cold War period shift across instrumental, epistemological and ontological levels of appearance. **In doing so, they** contribute more broadly to a variegated and networked conception of the African continent not as marginal to or in excess of the **geopolitical** order [...], but rather as simultaneously centralised and rendered illegible.

The role of the African continent as a site upon which Cold War anxieties and conflicts played out has attracted increasing critical attention in recent years. Proxy conflicts in West, East and Central Africa include the Congo crisis of 1960-65, the Shaba conflicts of 1977 and 1978 **and** the Guinea-Bissau War of Independence from 1963 **to** 1974, as well as numerous conflicts in the Horn of Africa, including the Eritrean War of Independence from 1961 to 1991, **the** Somali coup d’état **of 1969**, **the** Ethiopian Civil War of 1974-91, **the** Ogaden War from

² Ibid.

1977 to 1978 and the Ethiopia-Somali Border War of 1982.³ Scholarship has alternatively explored the extent to which Cold War entanglements served to shape the geopolitical landscape of the continent through the direct forms of influence sought by the superpowers. These included leveraging its strategic position as a source of mineral wealth and a gateway to the Middle East, engaging in competing conceptions of development and social welfare to maintain influence and participating in hot wars across the continent to further their interests.⁴ On the one hand, Western powers, particularly America, Britain and France, were in favour of the continued expansion of business interests and dollar earnings, realised through the maintenance of existing colonial and imperial economic relationships and an aversion to radical nationalist movements.⁵ On the other hand, the Eastern Bloc powers were generally more favourable to anti-imperialist and nationalist programmes which might participate more broadly in a world or internationalist socialist community.⁶ The dominant narrative of the Cold War in Africa has also emphasised the enduring legacies of East-West axial conflicts upon the continent, with significant ramifications for their present-day manifestations under programmes of austerity and structural adjustment. At the same time, and as Kourouma's comments above indicate, these [...] imaginaries cannot be seen in isolation; rather, the extent to which the competing superpowers [...] effected their influence on the African continent must be read as part of a longer historical durée in which the East-West topographies of the Cold War mark another mutation of the North-South topographies of the colonial encounter and, by

³ There is a further argument to be made about the extent to which the Nigerian-Biafran War from 1967 to 1970 was impacted by the competition for influence over the oil-rich state between the two Cold War superpowers.

⁴ See, for example, Khalid Mustafa Medani, 'The Horn of Africa in the Shadow of the Cold War: Understanding the Partition of Sudan from a Regional Perspective', *The Journal of North African Studies*, 17: 2 (2012), pp. 275-94; Klaus Petersen, 'The Early Cold War and the Western Welfare State', *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy*, 29: 3 (2013), pp. 226-40; Carla R. Stephens, 'Complementary Tools for Studying the Cold War in Africa', *Journal of Black Studies*, 43: 1 (2012), p. 96; and Vladimir Shubin, *The Hot 'Cold War': The USSR in Southern Africa* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), p. 2. [...]

⁵ See Anne-Marie Angelo and Tom Adam Davies, "'American Business Can Assist [African] Hands": The Kennedy Administration, US Corporations, and the Cold War Struggle for Africa', *The Sixties*, 8: 2 (2015), pp. 157-8; John Kent, 'United States Reactions to Empire, Colonialism, and Cold War in Black Africa, 1949-57', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 33: 2 (2005), p. 198; and Elizabeth Schmidt, *Foreign Intervention in Africa: From the Cold War to the War on Terror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 7. [...]

⁶ See Schmidt, *Foreign Intervention*, p. 7; and Shubin, *Hot 'Cold War'*, p. 3.

extension, serve to mask the more complex negotiations and challenges which marked Africa's involvement in the conflict. As Carla Stephens argues,

Most historical accounts of the numerous violent outbreaks in the global South privilege the Northern actors and reify the myth of Southern actors as pawns or 'proxies' of the 'superpowers.' Such accounts betray the fact that throughout Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia, the Cold War was truly a series of hot, cataclysmic wars that altered the cultural and political landscape of these regions. They also deny both the heroic and tragic actions of Southern actors who were led by their own ideals, needs, and challenges.⁷

[...] There is certainly solid historical evidence that both sides in the Cold War manipulated and used the continent as a laboratory and training ground for the fostering of global influence, leveraging both soft and hard power through funding schemes, education and propaganda. Much has been written, for instance, about the ways in which the United States largely sided with the formal imperial powers of France and Great Britain, while the USSR deployed the image of US racism against African-Americans, in tandem with the fetishisation of African populations invited for university study, to garner sympathy and foster global anti-imperialist solidarities. Nevertheless, it is equally the case that these attempts were themselves received through complex and sometimes unpredictable means not always at one with their intended effect nor internally coherent.⁸

In the specific context of literary production, much has been made of the ways in which both Western and Eastern soft power undergirded the production of small magazines and other outlets through which African literary writing developed in the period of independence and decolonisation, with a particular focus on the activities of the CIA-funded, Paris-based Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) [...] and the Soviet funding of outfits including the Afro-Asian Writers' Association, publishers of *Lotus* magazine [...].⁹ Critics including Asha Rogers

⁷ Stephens, 'Complementary Tools', p. 96.

⁸ Marco Wyss's analysis of the failed Anglo-Nigerian Defence Agreement, for instance, demonstrates how competing desires for anti-communist schemes met with anti-colonial resistance (see Wyss, 'A Post-Imperial Cold War Paradox: The Anglo-Nigerian Defence Agreement 1958-62', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 44: 6 (2016), pp. 976-1000).

⁹ See, for instance, Asha Rogers, 'Black Orpheus and the African Magazines of the Congress for Cultural Freedom', in Giles Scott-Smith and Charlotte A. Lerg, eds, *Campaigning Culture and the Global Cold War: The*

and Peter Kalliney have highlighted the role played by the CCF in the funding of magazines such as the Nigeria-based *Black Orpheus* and Uganda-based *Transition*, as well as in landmark events in the shaping of African literature as an institution. These include the 1962 Conference of African Writers of English Expression held at Makerere University, widely considered today to be one of three significant touchpoints in the so-called ‘founding’ of African literature.¹⁰ In the 1960s, Rogers notes, ‘[t]he CCF channelled support to individual writers and artists, a major domestic publishing house, and a host of magazines through its African programme’.¹¹ Although the support ‘start[ed] as ad hoc grants during periods of financial difficulty’, [...] it developed into a more systematic project, with ‘archival evidence of the African programme, co-ordinated in the main by the South African exile Ezekiel (latterly Es’kia) Mphahlele, demonstrat[ing] the central role of the non-aligned world in CCF’s own thinking’ [...].¹²

The revelation in 1967-68 that the CCF, operating under the auspices of the Farfield Foundation, was an institution of the CIA has led to critical accusations that the organisation’s key role was to ‘regulate, sanitize, and co-opt the literature of decolonization’, morally compromising the writers and institutions with which it worked.¹³ As Kalliney points out, however, there is a strong argument to be made that the CCF’s ‘indirect patronage afforded a generation of African writers more rather than less autonomy, both politically and aesthetically’, its ideological or moral influence stymied by its need for secrecy.¹⁴ Indeed, this

Journals of the Congress for Cultural Freedom (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 243-59; Peter Kalliney, ‘Modernism, African Literature, and the Cold War’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 76: 3 (2015), pp. 333-68; Peter Benson, *Black Orpheus, Transition, and Modern Cultural Awakening in Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 1-16; Eric Bulson, *Little Magazine, World Form* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 189-228; and Hala Halim, ‘Lotus, the Afro-Asian Nexus, and Global South Comparativism’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 32: 3 (2012), pp. 563-83.

¹⁰ Broadly speaking, the founding of African literature as an institution of the global literary market has been attributed to three now nearly-mythical moments: the publication in 1958 of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, the institution in 1962 of the Heinemann African Writers Series and the Makerere conference. The legitimacy of these moments as points of origin for the existence of African literary writing is, of course, debatable (see, for instance, Madhu Krishnan, *Contingent Canons: African Literature and the Politics of Location* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 7-34).

¹¹ Rogers, ‘*Black Orpheus*’, p. 243.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 243, 244.

¹³ Andrew N. Rubin, *Archives of Authority: Empire, Culture, and the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 60.

¹⁴ Kalliney, ‘Modernism’, p. 340.

is precisely the argument made by figures including Mphahlele, [who believed, in Rogers's words, that](#) 'compromised funds did not necessarily mean compromised activity'.¹⁵ [...]. Implicit in these arguments, as in the broader body of scholarship [on literary patronage during](#) the Cold War, is the extent to which formal, aesthetic and editorial choices made cannot be simply reduced to their attendant vectors of funding. Instead, a more complex matrix emerges in which financial sponsorship, ideological aims and artistic choices coexist in an uneven field of production, dissemination and reception. At stake in these debates is the extent to which the African continent and the actors therein are imagined as mere proxies or dupes during the Cold War or as agents able to navigate and negotiate complex geopolitical systems for their own ends and [to bring into existence a more](#) Africa-centred mode of world-creation.

Beyond these institutional entanglements, however, there are a far broader range of ways in which the anxieties and rhetoric of the Cold War might be perceived in the aesthetic fabric of the literary text itself. It is significant, for instance, that the establishment of West, East and Central African literatures as a category operating in the global literary market, generally dated as having occurred [from](#) the 1950s to [the](#) late 1970s, coincides with the height of the conflict. Significant writers from [these regions](#) publishing during that time include: Cameroon's Mongo Beti, Calixthe Beyala and Ferdinand Oyono; [Zaire's](#) (or present-day Democratic Republic of Congo's) Sony Lab'ou Tansi and Véronique Tadjo; Equatorial Guinea's María Nsue Angüe and Juan Balboa Boneke; Ghana's Ayi Kwei Armah, Ama Ata Aidoo, Kofi Awoonor and Kofi Anyidoho; Nigeria's J.P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta; Kenya's Meja Mwangi [and](#) Grace Ogot; Uganda's Austin Bukenya, Rajat Neogy, Okot p'Bitek and Taban Lo Liyong; and Senegal's Ousmane Sembène, Mariama Bâ, Aminata Sow Fall and Cheikh Hamidou Kane. Working across genres and forms [spanning](#) the novel, short story and poetry, these writers are notable both for their geographical diversity and for their centrality in the establishment of a certain vision of 'African literature' writ large, often seen as an entity separate from its [southern and northern](#) continental counterparts [and](#) marked by specific aesthetic traditions, themes and dispositions.

Monica Popescu argues that '[t]he rifts and cultural alliances created by the Iron Curtain have played a part in the aesthetic choices of postcolonial writers', acting 'as the developing substance that illuminates the political and ideological forces at work in postcolonial literature, the aesthetic choices facing African writers, and even the blind spots in postcolonial studies

¹⁵ Rogers, 'Black Orpheus', p. 255.

treating the works of these authors'.¹⁶ For Popescu, then, the Cold War, along 'with Third World intellectuals' attempts to dismantle or eschew the dichotomization of the world, is the indispensable background against which we are to reread African (and generally postcolonial) literature' and is registered in the literary text at the level of 'indexical markers', 'thematic concern with social transformation and revolution' and 'formal decisions in the crafting of the literary text'.¹⁷ My interest in this chapter is not to replicate these arguments around the ways in which the literary text has functioned as a staging ground for West, East and Central African experiences of the Cold War. Rather, [...] I extend these insights by thinking not only about the deliberate and contemporary articulations of the Cold War in African writing, but also about the ways in which the conflict and its legacies might be read as a key site of world-making in African writing to the present day, spanning instrumental, epistemological and ontological levels of expression. My particular interest in so doing is to think about the ways in which the Cold War context produces fault lines against which African writing enacts its imagination of the world and of Africa therein, enabling [...] new internationalisms and visions of liberation based on an Africa-centred topography and exposing a longer durée of domination and oppression predicated on a bifocal ordering of the world. As I will trace below, the ways in which writers and writing have engaged with the Cold War context [...] cannot be reduced to a singular narrative, trajectory or set of strategies; rather, the shifting engagements with the Cold War that are constituted within these texts speak to the interlayering and overlapping literary and intellectual landscapes within which African literary writing is positioned and against which it emerges as a category of world literatures. My contention is that writerly and literary engagements with the Cold War from an African perspective move beyond the mechanisms identified by extant scholarship to uncover a range of deeper calibrations through which the engagements can be seen as one facet of the writer's larger intervention into social thought. Following Wale Adebani, I view this not as an act of mirroring by the writer or author, but rather as an active moment of constitution in which the text can be conceived of as a site upon which the real can be re-imagined, re-theorised and re-thought through its explicit analytic activity.¹⁸ In short, faced with the complexities of the age, many writers turned to what

¹⁶ Monica Popescu, 'Aesthetic Solidarities: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and the Cold War', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 50: 4 (2014), p. 384.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 386-387. See also Monica Popescu, 'Cold War and Hot Translation', *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 8: 1 (2007), pp. 83-90.

¹⁸ Adebani, 'The Writer as Social Thinker', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 32: 4 (2014), p. 406.

Ato Quayson calls ‘that situated procedure of attempting to wrest something from the aesthetic domain for the analysis and better understanding of the social’.¹⁹

Reprinted in English as part of the Heinemann African Writers Series in 1982, Ngũgĩ’s *Devil on the Cross* [...] opens with a dedication that reads ‘[t]o all Kenyans struggling against the neo-colonial stage of imperialism’.²⁰ With this dedication, the novel explicitly situates itself as an effort to re-orient the real – here, neo-imperialism and global capitalist hegemony – via its imagination of another world or another episteme through which to render the truth of Africa’s place in the world.²¹ While Ngũgĩ’s writing, particularly his early English-language fiction, has often been categorised as social realism, [...] *Devil on the Cross* unfurls in an idiom that broadly resists any such simplistic categorisation, leveraging the surreal, the mythic and the oral in its fabrication of an extended analysis of corruption and violence in post-independence Kenya. This is perhaps of no surprise given the novel’s origins in an act of clandestine writing on toilet paper during Ngũgĩ’s incarceration in Kenya’s Kamĩĩ Maximum Security Prison. Describing his composition of ‘free thoughts on toilet paper’, Ngũgĩ’s recollection of the process emphasises how it ‘enabled [him] to defy daily the intended detention and imprisonment of [his] mind’, producing a space for another mode of thinking and perceiving the world to appear.²²

The novel’s most pressing insights come in its unflinching portrayal of modern-day Kenya as a space devastated by the structural hierarchies of exploitation and violence. The novel is told broadly in three parts: a description of a fateful matutu ride from Nairobi to Ilmorog in which the main characters – Warĩĩnga, Gatuĩria, Wangarĩ, Mũturi, Mwĩreri wa Mũkiraaĩ and Mwaũra – meet and share their stories; [...] an account of a feast arranged by the Organization for Modern Theft and Robbery in Ilmorog and a subsequent people’s rebellion; and a concluding section that recounts protagonist Warĩĩnga’s rebirth as an empowered worker in the rebellion’s aftermath. Throughout, the novel’s didactic and episodic structure

¹⁹ Quayson, *Calibrations: Reading for the Social* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. xv.

²⁰ Ngũgĩ, *Devil on the Cross*, trans. by Ngũgĩ (1980; Harlow: Heinemann Educational Books, 1982), unpaginated.

²¹ Much has been written on Ngũgĩ’s decision to abandon English in favour of Gĩkũyũ as his literary language of choice, and I will not repeat these arguments here. It is, however, worth noting that the underlying driver behind this decision, one which Ngũgĩ describes in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) as being part of a larger effort to de-centre the locus of knowledge production, is relevant for the purposes of my argument (see Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Oxford: James Currey, 1986)).

²² Ngũgĩ, *Wrestling with the Devil: A Prison Memoir* (London: Vintage, 2018), p. 9.

foregrounds its analytic intervention into Kenya's position at the interstices of the East-West [...] struggle. In one scene midway through the novel, for instance, the master of ceremonies at the feast recounts a parable of a (white) master and his three (black) servants. Preparing for his impending departure from the servants' land, the master [...] imparts upon each servant a bequest: 'to one he gave capital amounting to 500,000 shillings, to another 200,000 shillings, and to another, 100,000 shillings'.²³ Returning some days later to the country 'through the back door, to check on the property he had left behind', the master meets his servants once again in order to discover what they have done with the gifts [...].²⁴ The first two, the master learns to his delight, report doubling their money through different forms of exploitation of the workers and peasants of the land. The third, however, incurs his former master's ire by announcing that, by burying his money in the ground, he has earned nothing and instead learned that true value comes from his own toil, not from the vacuity of capital. Shocked, the master replies,

'No! You black people are incapable of such rebellious thoughts! No! You black people are incapable of planning and working out ways of cutting the ropes that tie you to your masters. You must therefore have been misled by communists. You must have got these dangerous thoughts from the party of the workers and peasants. Yes, your mind is noisome with communist notions. Communism You have become a real threat to the peace and stability that used to exist in this country for me and my local representatives, the local guardians of my property. Now you are going to feel the heat of such a fire as will make you forget my real name forever. Arrest him, now, before he spreads these poisonous thoughts to other workers and peasants, and teaches them that the power of organized unity is stronger than all my bombs and armoured vehicles!'²⁵

In this moment, the novel clearly articulates a geopolitical and social order in which the East-West [...] conflict has been weaponised as an alibi for the continued greed and corruption of the ruling classes, at the expense of any vision of African autonomy or agency. Rather than view the servant's rebellion for what it is, the master can only comprehend his disobedience through the ideologies of the Cold War, conflating and occluding indigenous, self-directed protest with Soviet manipulation and intervention and, by so doing, foreclosing the possibility of African agency outside of the epistemic landscape of the [...] global order. Standing in for

²³ Ngũgĩ, *Devil on the Cross*, p. 83. [...]

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

the capitalist West, the white master fails to recognise the vitality of another way of being, thinking and seeing. This alternative is what Abiola Irele once referred to as ‘a distinctive African mode of thought, even a form of rationality’, anchored outside of the binary systems of the Cold War and contextually determined through a different kind of global mapping in which the Northern power – whether West or East – is displaced in favour of an Africa-centred vision of the social.²⁶ Misreading his former servant’s rebellion as another proxy for the conflict between Western capitalism and Eastern socialism, the master effectively cuts off the possibility of other dispositions, other knowledges and other forms of truth. [...]

Across the ceremonies and speeches of the feast, as thief after thief struggles to claim the crown of top robber, the continued exploitation of independent Kenya under the auspices of an internationalist neo-colonialism is made explicit. Most obviously, there is the presence of the [...] International Organisation of Thieves, headquartered in New York City, which is represented by delegates from America, Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Scandinavia and Japan. These leaders are portrayed as a homogenous group, differentiated only by their varying articulations of capital: the US leader is dressed in a suit of American dollars, the Englishman in pounds, the German in Deutschmarks, the Frenchman in francs, the Italian in lire, the Scandinavian in kroner and the Japanese in yen. United through their commitment to the agency of capital, the leaders stand in for an epistemic system in which submission and extraction become the only higher truths for their Kenyan counterparts. For these latter, by extension, freedom itself can only find its true expression through the same channels of domination and [...] the same orderings of knowledge. Tellingly, this is a disposition which repeats Frantz Fanon’s [...] assertions about the impotence of the so-called ‘national bourgeoisie’, who are stymied under a state of incomplete decolonisation at their own hands, productive of nothing and positioned as little more than middlemen for their (former) masters.²⁷ This condition, in turn, is emphasised in Ngũgĩ’s description of the thieves and robbers as ‘[...] sales manager, [...] personnel manager, [...] public relations manager’ capable of little but profiting from the ‘products of other people’s sweat’.²⁸

²⁶ Irele, ‘Introduction’, to Paulin J. Hountondji, ed., *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, trans. by Henri Evans (1976; London: Hutchinson University Library for Africa, 1983), p. 221.

²⁷ See Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Richard Philcox (1961; New York: Grove Press, 2004), pp. 97-144.

²⁸ Ngũgĩ, *Devil on the Cross*, pp. 167, 123.

It is no coincidence that, like Fanon's bourgeoisie, the **local elites described in** Ngũgĩ's satirical novel repeatedly **use** the language of liberation in order to maintain the very ideologies they purportedly **seek** to fight. Throughout the feast, these robbers and thieves leverage the binary-based epistemologies of the **Cold War** in order to promote a fanatical reverence for capital, seen for instance in **their** constant invocations of the threat of Chinese socialism. When ideals of liberation are invoked, it **is only as an expression of** their outrage that 'American, European and Japanese thieves and robbers steal from their own masses, and then go on to Africa, Asia and Latin America to rob the peoples there, and take their plunder back to their own granaries'.²⁹ **The complaint is** not intended to spark new ways of being, but rather to ensure that the spoils of such exploitation return to *homegrown* robbers and thieves. If there is any internationalism to be had, **any** gesture towards the non-aligned movement and the South-South solidarities raised in the spectre of Bandung, **then it is only found in [...]** the emptied rhetoric of a *Harambee* (the ethos of self-help and self-organisation) whose true aim is less an overthrow of the systems of despoliation, dominance and oppression of the many by the few and more [...] a transferral of the existing systems of power from white to black hands. Expressing a sentiment echoed decades later by Kourouma, **Ngũgĩ shows that the freedom sought by** the thieves is not freedom from the capitalist exploitation which has subjugated the continent for centuries, but **freedom to** return its profits to indigenous hands. **As one of them says,**

'Now, listen carefully. I am going to tell you a secret. All these years I, Mwĩreri wa Mũkĩraaĩ, have kept this very important secret to myself. It's a secret that could allow us to soar above Japanese, American, British, French, German, Italian and Danish thieves, the *whole of the capitalist Western world*, in the art of theft and robbery. It is [...] to build *true native capitalism*, free from *foreign ideologies*.'³⁰

Throughout *Devil on the Cross*, the avarice of Kenya's new ruling class is repeatedly emphasised, most dramatically through the formal structure of the feast of robbers and thieves itself. Organised as a **competition for the title of best robber and thief, the feast is configured around a** series of testimonies, followed by a series of rebuttals and debates **and punctuated by**

²⁹ Ibid., p. 165.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 170 (italics in original). **The original emphases here and elsewhere are so written to indicate words and phrases written in English or Swahili in the original Gikũyũ text.**

cries for homegrown exploitation and subjugation. The dialogic, oral structure of the event offers something of a communitarian choral calling for a retrenchment of Kenyan-based capitalism, which reaches its apex in calls to privatise blood and air as a means of wresting further control from the workers. Freedom, when it is invoked, is not freedom from the capitalist world order but a deeper absorption within it, an ability to centre Kenya in its cartographies without changing its larger locus of meaning, going so far as to rename itself as ‘the true African socialism ... Ujamaa wa Asili Kiafrika’.³¹ It is the belief in this vacuous notion of liberation in name only that allows the Kenyan thieves and robbers to make a claim for independence rooted in the precept of a freedom ‘that allows one to rob and to steal according to one’s abilities’, [...] placing themselves squarely within the bounds of ‘the *Free World*, a world where there are absolutely no barriers to stealing from others’ and where ‘*money rules the world*’.³² A hollow vision of decolonisation estranged from decoloniality, the claims to freedom made by the robbers and thieves remain firmly moored within an epistemic landscape in which only two options, two forces, exist and within which the only liberation for the self comes from the exploitation of others.

In this sense, the epistemological entrenchment of the Cold War shown in Ngũgĩ’s work marks a mutation of the modes of Cold War instrumentalisation depicted 15 years earlier in Achebe’s *A Man of the People*. Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi highlights the ways in which the Cold War permeates the novel’s plot, situating it within the larger context of anti-communist panic that engulfed Nigeria in the 1960s, as well as in the ‘circulating cold war discourses of containment, non-alignment, nuclear annihilation and the dreams of Marxist class revolt in the absence of a well-developed working-class formation’.³³ As Osinubi shows, the novel engages in a multi-layered social critique through its farcical take on Nigerian socialism through the characters of Max and Eunice and its satirical portrayal of [...] Soviet and American sponsors, whose financial incentives become ‘alternatives to routes established by British colonial rule’ for Achebe’s main characters.³⁴ [...] I emphasise Osinubi’s reading of the novel particularly for the ways in which it enables scope for a range of readings which allow the agency of Achebe’s characters to emerge, as each manipulates the various and competing sponsors [...]

³¹ Ibid., p. 86.

³² Ibid., p. 173.

³³ Osinubi, ‘Cold War Sponsorships: Chinua Achebe and the Dialectics of Collaboration’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 50: 4 (2014), p. 411.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 411.

for their own ends, and for the ways in which the shifting and non-scalar alignments between Africans themselves are emphasised as a way of ‘track[ing] sites of recalibration and translation through which global cold war rhetoric is re-scaled and retrofitted to local demands’.³⁵ Equally, I would extend these analyses to foreground the extent to which Achebe’s satire relies specifically on its evacuation of political content from its main characters’ motivations and machinations, relying not, as in Ngũgĩ, on an epistemic bifurcation of the world but rather on an individualist, affective and libidinal ordering in which the underlying fact of the world order is taken as a given. Critically, rather than engage in an ideological battle between [...] African Marxism, Nigerian socialism and free market capitalism, the rivalry developed between Odili, a young school teacher and failed intellectual, and Nanga, Odili’s former teacher who is now a prominent chief and politician in the newly-independent state, is repeatedly articulated through the idiom of sexual jealousy and the objectification and instrumentalisation of women, reducing the conflicts of the world order to mere opportunities for personal gain. [...]

All of this is made more emphatic through the novel’s first-person narration delivered by the radically unreliable Odili, whose own insecurity – in both his financial and social status – serves as the filter through which Achebe’s satire develops. Odili’s retrospective focalisation casts the narrative with a level of ironic remove in which any notion of ideological sincerity is structurally and narratologically refused. This extends from his early claims to privilege autonomy over status to his self-important musings on ‘the trouble with our new nation’, his criticisms of Nanga’s [...] anti-intellectualism (versus, it is supposed, his own status as an educated teacher), his outrage upon discovering that his new mentor has slept with his sometimes-lover, Elsie, and his determination to steal the former’s new wife-to-be, Edna, in revenge.³⁶ [...] In this context, Odili’s conflict with Nanga, though articulated through the language of Western versus Eastern Bloc sponsorship for their respective political parties, becomes little more than a petty sexual rivalry driven by an individualistic and ego-driven feud between men. The very notion of any kind of revolution under these conditions is effaced before it emerges, rendered as yet another hollow form of rhetoric, captured most aptly in Edna’s mother’s diagnosis of the political-sexual rivalry between the two men: “‘What is my share in that? They are both white man’s people. And they know what is what between themselves. What do we know?’”.³⁷

³⁵ Ibid., p. 412.

³⁶ Achebe, *A Man of the People*, new edn (1966; London: Penguin, 2009), p. 15. [...]

³⁷ Ibid., p. 97.

If Ngũgĩ and Achebe suggest, in distinct ways, that the binary world order of the Cold War resulted in the denigration of African social forms and formations, necessitating a re-centring of indigeneity as an epistemology in the quest for social justice and socialist revolution, Kourouma's *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* presents a far bleaker picture of the continent as eternal victim of global power struggles. The novel takes the form of six vigils (sometimes referred to as five vigils in the original French, despite the inclusion of a sixth [...] in the text) which are sung by Bingo, a *sora*, accompanied by Tiécoura, his *koroduwa*, an apprentice tasked with playing 'the fool, the idiot, the loon'.³⁸ Together, the vigils form a sweeping tale in which the crimes and avarice of Koyaga, dictator of the République du Golfe (a fictionalised version of Togo), are set against the larger backdrop of the Republic's own subjugation under successive waves of (neo-)imperialist domination which span the colonial, the Cold War and the Bretton Woods eras. Beginning with the 'pacification' of the Paleongritic, or Paleo, people and quickly moving through the years of high colonialism, marked by the population's conscription into France's wars in Europe, Indochina and Algeria, the bulk of the vigils dwell on the period between formal independence and the end of the Cold War.

[...] The novel emphasises the entanglement of the East-West and North-South axes of domination which continually play against each other. The omnipresence of the former through its sponsorship of 'friends' and 'allies' becomes another mode of occluding the sheer scale of violence of the latter in a context where the 'French were quick to link the problems of communism with those of nationalism'.³⁹ As John Kent notes, '[p]olitical stability through cooperation with the colonial powers who were preparing colonial subjects for the modern world would also be the means to orientate the African people to the Western alliance, while the threat of communism would recede as economic and social progress were made'.⁴⁰ Far from serving as a benign act of power transferral, however, the granting of independence functioned as a calculated move intended to mire the [...] states of the African continent in an incomplete process of decolonisation and therefore retain their value as sites of extraction. The point is foregrounded in *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*:

A political genius, General de Gaulle managed to find a satisfactory solution to the problem [of independence]. De Gaulle succeeded in granting independence without decolonising.

³⁸ Kourouma, *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*, trans. by Frank Wynne (1998; London: Vintage, 2004), p. 2.

³⁹ Kent, 'United States', p. 202.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

He succeeded in this by inventing and supporting presidents of republics who referred to themselves as fathers of the nation, architects of the independence of their countries, when in fact they had done nothing to win independence for their republics and were not the real masters, the true leaders of their people.⁴¹

Critical here is Kourouma's reference to the historical events which accompanied the formal political decolonisation of French West Africa. Most pertinent are the ways in which the process of political decolonisation, under the guise of devolution, worked to fragment the blocs of West and Equatorial French Africa [...] and, following from this act of fragmentation, to rebind the soon-to-be independent nation states to the imperial metropole anew. The 1956 Reform Act (Loi Cadre), for instance, devolved [...] power to the territories of French Africa [...] but, rather than enabling access to new freedoms, began a process of decentralisation which would remove the threat of a united African bloc. More emphatically, the 1958 Referendum on joining the nascent Communauté française served as a watershed moment in the fabrication of the ostensibly independent nation states, ensuring the propagation of bilateral relations between France and its soon-to-be former colonies. This is explicitly referenced in the text as 'a French Community with these black leaders, acclimatised to the banks of the Seine and dreading their immediate and final return to their native lands'.⁴² Aware that the 'community' was devised to ensure France retained significant trading, monetary and military rights, Kourouma's depiction of the critical period before decolonisation foregrounds its impotence as a process of genuine liberation. Largely driven by French influence, the 'community' is shown to have been achieved by 'landslide victories in legislative elections and referendums which had been rigged in favour of the colonial candidates chosen by General de Gaulle, the candidates whose manifestos did not significantly clash with the colonial notion of the inferiority of the lazy, thieving Negro'.⁴³ The referendums would be rejected in only one state, Guinea, referred to in the novel as 'la République des Monts' and led by the Man in White with the totem of the hare, a fictionalised version of Sekou Touré.

⁴¹ Kourouma, *Waiting*, pp. 86-7.

⁴² Kourouma, *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998), p. 82 (my translation). Interestingly, Wynne's English translation renders 'la Communauté française' as 'a French commonwealth' (Kourouma, *Waiting*, p. 87). While this is a useful transposition for the Anglophone reader, it nonetheless fails as a direct cogent, given the vast differences in the functioning and governance of the French Community and the British Commonwealth.

⁴³ Kourouma, *Waiting*, p. 88.

The extent to which the Cold War enabled a continuation of imperial control in the territories of French Africa are dramatized [...] through a rivalry between the Man in White [...] and the ‘Man with the Fedora’, a fictionalised version of Côte d’Ivoire’s Félix Houphouët-Boigny [...]. The one is ‘a socialist [...] showered with praise, admiration and support by the East’ and the other is a ‘capitalist [who] had at his disposal the say-so of the West’.⁴⁴ Both men, Tiécoura tells us, are united in their singular quest for power: ‘this contrast in their apparent political thought had no effect whatever on the political organisation of the two regimes. The peoples of the two countries were equally consigned to the hands of corrupt leaders: monopolist, mendacious, one-party butchers of freedom’.⁴⁵ Describing the old Man in the Fedora’s early origins as a communist and nationalist, and his later turn from his people towards France due to a cunning thirst for power, the novel insists on the utter interchangeability of the two men simultaneously, highlighting the vacuity of the so-called ideological underpinnings of the East-West conflict and its intractability as governing ontology, with no space outside of its totalising horizons and no gesture towards the alternative truths articulated in Ngũgĩ. In the immediate post-referendum period, the new ‘fathers of the nation’ are ‘congratulate[d]’ by the leaders of France, Britain and the United States ‘on [their] vigilant anti-communism’, part and parcel of what ‘Cold War politics demanded’.⁴⁶ The four would-be leaders of the République du Golfe are quickly divided into ‘the liberal camp, the staunch supporters of the West’, made up of Koyaga and J.-L. Crunet, on the one hand, and the ‘progressive faction or camp, the supporters of international communism’, comprised of Tima and Ledjo, on the other.⁴⁷ With [...] ‘the France of the Cold War’ and ‘the West of the Cold War’ as the guiding forces leading Koyaga to power and, as he later learns on a tour to meet his fellow leaders of African states, the true sources of authority and governance in ostensibly independent Africa, the Cold War forms the governing logic and ontological base upon which the continent is constituted [...]. And yet the location of Africa at the centre of this constant struggle is never depicted as an ideological stance but rather as a secret to be held by those in the know, a secret with which to attain [...] power and riches previously unimaginable. The point is made by the novel’s fictionalised version of Zaire’s Mobutu, the man with leopard as

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 197.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 197.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 89.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 122.

totem, who upon being asked by Koyaga [...] why he might want to ‘drain his resources by getting involved in the global wars of the West’ offers the following response:

‘Shh! Whatever you do, don’t come out with such nonsense in front of [the French] Monsieur Maheu. Democracies will only help peoples who are anti-communist. Even if the Cold War, the struggle between the communists and the West, is just a friendly scuffle between white men, between the rich, we have to get involved. We Africans get involved so we can reap the fruits of victory!’⁴⁸

The world depicted by Kourouma is thus [...] the apotheosis of the ambitions once articulated by Ngũgĩ’s robbers and thieves, a true harnessing of the riches and thievery of the West, under the guise of the struggle with the East, by a new class of indigenous middlemen and happy satellites of power. Echoing the modes of instrumentalisation seen in *A Man of the People*, the world of *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* amplifies the scale of the earlier text’s critique of power. While it is possible to read its depiction of the Man in the Fedora’s story as another pacification of African leadership, consigned to existence as a mere proxy for European powers, [...] it is equally possible to read his manoeuvring as the emergence of a certain form of agency, based on self-interest and the desire for wealth and power. Through this narrativisation of post-independence stagnation under arrested decolonisation, the novel makes visible the fault lines which Africa’s entanglement with the Cold War constituted.

These same fault lines and contradictory moments of agency and subjugation make their fullest appearance in the contemporary period, as seen in Alain Mabanckou’s *Tomorrow, I’ll Be Twenty*, where the [...] ideological battle between East and West is most explicitly positioned as another avenue for maintaining systems of domination, although also utterly evacuated of ideological meaning [...]. The novel emphasises its effects through the playful – and yet radically unreliable – focalisation of its child narrator, ten-year-old Michel, for whom the Cold War conflict rarely registers in explicit terms but nonetheless serves as a key axis along which his experience and knowledge of the world is organised. Michel’s belief that the communist world is all that is good and capitalism all that is bad is driven by the didactic teachings of his uncle and de facto family head:

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 286-7.

My uncle says he's a communist. Usually communists are simple people, they don't have television, telephone, or electricity, hot water or air conditioning, and they don't change cars every six months like Uncle René. So now I know you can also be communist and rich.

I think the reason my uncle is tough with us is because the communists are strict about how things should be done, because of the capitalists stealing all the goods of the poor wretched of the Earth, including their means of production.⁴⁹

Describing his discomfort at meals spent at his uncle's table, under the watchful eyes of Lenin, Marx and Engels, or at least their portraits, Michel's childhood education is [...] articulated through the rhetoric of international socialism and the dream of a communist utopia. The world of his childhood, by extension, is one in which 'there are two big classes at odds with each other, engaged in a ruthless struggle: the bourgeoisie and the proletariats'.⁵⁰ These classes are 'easy to tell [...] apart in the street: the bourgeois have big bellies because they eat what the proletarians produce and the proletarians or the starving masses are all skinny because the bourgeois only leave them crumbs to eat, just enough so they can come to work the next day'.⁵¹

At first reading, Michel, like Kourouma's corrupt leaders, appears to be ensconced in an ontological worldview, taken as a given, in which the capitalism-communism conflict is all that there is. Yet, taken at its formal level, the novel enables a reading which exposes the paucity of this [...] form of ordering. Told through the perspective of a child narrator, [...] *Tomorrow, I'll Be Twenty* [...] exposes the gap between narrative and text, allowing a deeper critique of its own discourse to emerge. Young Michel's worldview remains in formation throughout the novel, subject to a series of humorous misunderstandings and misappropriations of the ideology which defines his experience of life. For instance, when Michel sees his impoverished mother, who has been robbed of her inheritance by Uncle René, travel to the market where she sells peanuts collectively with the other women of their *quartier*, he mistakingly attributes the women's engagement with subsistence trading as a form of anti-capitalist rebellion, remarking that 'you won't find a capitalist doing that'.⁵² Elsewhere in the novel, Michel's understanding of his country's governance similarly relies upon an inability to grasp political complexities. This is clearly apparent when he fails to identify the gap between

⁴⁹ Mabanckou, *Tomorrow I'll Be Twenty*, trans. by Helen Stevenson (2010; London: Serpent's Tail, 2013), p. 2.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

the realities of continued impoverishment in the country and the rhetoric of ‘the Revolution’, which promises to expel ‘the capitalists’ and ensure that ‘the means of production at last belong to the wretched of the Earth, to the starving masses who struggle night and day’ [chasser les capitalistes [après que] les moyens de productions vont appartenir enfin aux condamnés de la Terre, aux forces de la faim qui luttent nuit et jour à cause de cette histoire des classes de Karl Marx et d’Engels].⁵³ Playing on the distance between Michel’s focalisation and the text itself, the novel enlivens this vacuous instrumentalisation of the socialist rhetoric espoused by the ruling classes. For example, Uncle René is able to reject ‘the exploitation of man by his fellow man’ in one breath while leveraging arguments against the ‘typical capitalist point of view’ as an alibi for stealing the family’s inheritance in the next, both with utter earnestness.⁵⁴

Ultimately, the novel functions through an overlaying of the interlocking systems of epistemic, ontological and instrumental modes through which the Cold War is manifested in the novel, highlighting the very contingency through which it is felt and articulated and leveraging its formal considerations to undermine the systems thinking propagated under Cold War ontology, the very systems thinking that shapes Michel’s own outlook. By so doing, it offers something of a redress to the quagmire described by Kourouma with which I began this chapter, enabling [...] an alternative vision through which the seemingly intractable position of the African continent in the world might be reordered. Certainly, *Tomorrow, I’ll Be Twenty* offers no easy solutions. It does, however, continue in the work of thinking otherwise begun decades earlier in Ngũgĩ’s *Devil on the Cross*. Through its exposition of the contingent manner in which the Cold War is evoked, thought, felt and known by its characters, [...] the novel opens new spaces through which to perceive the agency of African actors under global conflict. Indeed, African agency also comes to the fore in the closing pages of *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*, which recount Koyaga’s eventual fall from power following the end of the Cold War and the rise of Bretton Woods financialisation. Faced with a people’s revolt and a loss of favour from his one-time patrons and sponsors, however, Koyaga does not capitulate but returns at the end of his six vigils with a new plan to harness the structures of democracy [...], accompanying by the wild beasts to the voting box if needed and continuing to shape the world of the Republic in his own image.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 5. [original French translation from Alain Mabanckou, *Demain j’aurai vingt ans* (Paris : Gallimard, 2010, p. 22)]

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 4, 106.

Returning to *Devil on the Cross*, for all of its commentary on the vacuity of freedom as **conceived** by Kenya's ruling classes, another vision of freedom, and with it another vision of liberation, appears in the novel. Late in its pages, protagonist Warĩnga hears a voice, the same voice which once propelled her to the feast of thieves and robbers and which she heard in the novel's opening pages: 'Kĩmeendeeri will show them only two worlds, that of the eater and that of the eaten. So the workers will never learn of the existence of a third world, the world of revolutionary overthrow of the system of eating and being eaten. They will always assume that the two worlds of the eater and the eaten are eternal'.⁵⁵ The notion that the world is cut in two, **divided between** the eater and the eaten, transcends any intractable ordering of the world along an East/West axis. Instead, this perspective intersects and overlaps with a range of concomitant bifurcations and divisions in a 'naturalization of certain ways of thinking and producing knowledge', to use **Walter** Mignolo's terms.⁵⁶ By so doing, Ngũgĩ's text simultaneously universalises itself while effacing and disqualifying other modes of ordering. By enlivening the possibility of a third way, a third vision of truth, *Devil on the Cross* makes present that which the (neo-)colonial episteme of the Cold War renders absent, constituting the beginnings of something utterly different, based on precepts of knowledge and understanding utterly beyond the normative ordering of the Cold War and its attendant world order. It is only when the people – the students [...], workers, peasants and petty traders [...] – join together to battle the thieves and robbers that this alternative comes into view, freed from the machinations of the global superpowers and the binary world order.⁵⁷ Critically, this is a vision of African liberation rendered through a horizontal, indigenous socialism rooted in the commons, [...] not in Eastern sponsorship **or** in the statist internationalism of Bandung and its legacies. **Such liberation is** encapsulated in the novel's vision of Warĩnga, reborn two years on from the night of the feast as a worker, a mechanical engineer **who specialises** in motor vehicles **and who, as a consequence, ensures that** 'her thighs are hers, her brain is hers, her hands are hers, and her body is hers'.⁵⁸ Self-possessed and self-reliant, recipient of respect from her colleagues and able physically **to** defend herself from lecherous customers, Warĩnga becomes a symbol of the possibilities of a new Kenya. **This** is metonymically represented in the workers' collective to which she belongs, a collective in which 'the fruits of each worker's labour went into his (*sic*)

⁵⁵ Ngũgĩ, *Devil on the Cross*, p. 188.

⁵⁶ Mignolo, 'Foreword: Yes We Can', in Hamid Dabashi, *Can Non-Europeans Think?* (London: Zed, 2015), p. x.

⁵⁷ See Ngũgĩ, *Devil on the Cross*, p. 203.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

own pocket’, but within which ‘each worker would contribute a fixed sum to a common pool’, both to cover common expenses and as a safety net for any worker in need.⁵⁹ This is a collective in which ‘no one [...] lived on the sweat of another’ and in which ‘everyone received according to his ability, his reputation and the quickness of his hands’.⁶⁰

Here, then, is a vision of liberation articulated through a socialism which hearkens less to the centralised and institutionalised models of the East/West conflict and more towards pre-colonial and indigenous notions of community-based responsibility and collective reliance, a realisation of the third way beyond the world of the eater and the eaten thought to be the only possible path. Through this call for a third way, Ngũgĩ enables an incisive critique of the perversions of power and despoliation which have come into being through the trajectory across colonialism and arrested decolonization under the Cold War identified by Kourouma. In addressing these issues, the authors and texts under discussion here attest to the diversity of forms through which the Cold War has been felt and registered in writing from the period and its aftermaths. Whether through the legacy of the European and American assisted overthrow of Lumumba in Central Africa; the ongoing entrenchment of resource-extraction and its attendant violence in West Africa; or the ramifications of structural adjustment and the deterioration of democracy in Eastern Africa, these texts illustrate the range of strategies through which writers have attempted to re-centre Africa as a key site through which the Cold War functioned. In this sense, they join works such as Sembène’s *Xala* (1973), Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) and Tansi’s *The Antipeople* (1988) in exposing the lived and felt experience of the Cold War in a postcolony whose own alleged marginalisation to that conflict can only serve as a cover for its deeper centrality therein.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 222.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 222.

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