

Camilo Pessanha's Missing City: Race, Poetry, and Urban Writing in Portuguese Macau

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Introduction: Touring não-Macau

When from his hilltop perch Camilo Pessanha (1867–1926) scanned Macau's skyline, what did he see? In his 1924 essay 'Macau e a Gruta de Camões' [Macau and the Grotto of Camões] published in the Macanese journal *A Pátria*, the poet writes that in the city,

é fácil à imaginação exaltada pela nostalgia, em alguma nesga de pinhal, menos frequentada pela população chinesa, abstrair da visão dos prédios chineses, dos pagodes chineses, das sepulturas chinesas, das misteriosas inscrições chinesas [...] e criar-se, em certas épocas do ano e a certas horas do dia, a ilusão de terra portuguesa.¹

[in certain slivers of pine forest less frequented by the Chinese population, it is easy for the exaltedly nostalgic imagination to abstract from view the Chinese buildings, the Chinese pagodas, the Chinese tombs, the mysterious Chinese inscriptions [...] and create, at certain times of the year and certain hours of the day, the illusion of Portuguese territory.]

On first read, Pessanha's readiness to overlook Macau's magnificent physical and cultural geographies baffles the committed reader of his poetry, of which a central preoccupation is the acuity of vision. There are a number of possible explanations for his blindness. In another essay on his experience in China, Pessanha compares a lengthy stay in the Portuguese trade outpost to exile. Perhaps the imaginative retreat from Macau amounts to little more than an expression of homesickness? Was it an attempt to recover symbolically the love he had left behind in Portugal, with Ana de Castro Osório, who failed to requite the poet's feelings?² In unseeing Macau, did Pessanha hope to blot out

¹ Camilo Pessanha, *China: estudos e traduções*, ed. by Daniel Pires (Lisbon: Vega, 1993), pp. 120–21 (translations here and elsewhere are my own unless otherwise stated).

² 'Toda a minha intensa vida afectiva se sustenta [...] do amor de [...] pessoas com quem eu me encontro de anos a anos, e entre as quais [...] V. Exa. ocupa o primeiro lugar. Fora dessas poucas afeições [...] nada verdadeiramente e para mim tem realidade no mundo' [All my intense emotional life is sustained by the love of those I meet from time to time and among whom Your Excellency occupies first place. Besides these few affections, nothing truly holds any significance for me in this world], Camilo Pessanha, *Cartas a Alberto Osório de Castro, João Baptista de Castro e Ana de Castro Osório*,

his relationship with the native-Macanese mother of his children, to remove from sight his smouldering opium pipe and forget the poetic stagnation it induced?³ Then again, one could chalk up Pessanha's erasure of the city to his cultural baggage as a European writer living in Asia at the turn of the twentieth century. The poet might simply be engaging a colonial habit of mind, imaginatively abandoning the East for Portugal in much the same way that the French poet Pierre Jean Jouve reported travelling to *la Chine intérieure*,⁴ or that an opium-eating Álvaro de Campos set sail for the most easterly terrain of his literary imagination ('Um Oriente ao oriente do Oriente' [an East to the east of the East]).

Yet to end our inquiry into Pessanha's 'abstracted' Macau here would be to perform the poet's blindness — to avert our gaze from the singular qualities of his poetics as they are given to us at critical junctures in his poetry. In 1916,⁵ signalling his commitment to ontological negativism and affirming his lyrical output first and foremost as a poetry of place, Camilo Pessanha jotted down the following verses in dark blue ink, on a sheet of foolscap:

Eu vi a luz em um país perdido.
A minha alma é lânguida e inerme.
Oh! Quem pudesse deslizar sem ruído!
No chão sumir-se, como faz um verme...⁶

[I saw the light in a lost country.
My soul is languid and defenceless.
Oh! To slide away in silence!
And vanish into the ground, like a worm...]

These lines went on to open the 1920 edition of *Clepsydra*, the only book published during Pessanha's lifetime, appearing in that slim volume of poems under the title 'Inscrição'. The poem does not only 'inscribe' the emotional tenor of the twenty-nine poems that follow it; it also initiates a fugue, in both the musical and psychological senses of the term. This short composition marks the poet's first attempt to escape the real, to abstract himself from the reader's

ed. by Maria José de Lancastre (Lisbon: IN-CM, 1984), p. 78. For a nuanced discussion of Pessanha's emotional life in Macau, see K. David Jackson's introduction to Camilo Pessanha, *Clepsydra and Other Poems*, trans. by Adam Mahler (Dartmouth: Tagus Press at the University of Massachusetts, 2022), from which I have drawn the excerpted correspondence in this and the following footnote.

³ Of his lacklustre literary output in Macau, Pessanha writes: 'Vivia em um estado de exaltação convulsiva que não me deixava o repouso bastante para poder seguir com alguma curiosidade duas linhas fosse do que fosse' [I lived in a state of convulsive ecstasy that wouldn't let up long enough for me to pursue with curiosity so much as two lines of verse, no matter their theme], Camilo Pessanha, *Correspondência, dedicatórias e outros textos*, ed. by Daniel Pires (Lisbon: BNP, 2012), p. 130.

⁴ Natasha Lehrer, in Victor Segalen, *Journey to the Land of the Real*, trans. by Natasha Lehrer (London: Atlas Press, 2016), p. 11.

⁵ Though appearing in the autograph collection of poems dated 15 January 1916 (MS-E/BNL), the poem was first published in the 1920 edition of *Clepsydra*, as per the note in Camilo Pessanha, *Clepsydra*, ed. by Paulo Franchetti (Lisbon: Relógio d'Água, 1995), p. 145.

⁶ Camilo Pessanha, *Clepsydra and Other Poems*, pp. 20–21. I have adapted the translations from my edition to UK spelling standards.

field of vision, to leave behind only a well-wrought stanza that might reveal its ‘cores virtuais’ [virtual colours], to cite his celebrated poem ‘Final’.⁷ For lurking beneath any stanza’s language were the poet’s undreamt and uninterrupted dreams, a superabundance of yet-to-be-pronounced (‘sem ruído’) possibilities. Pessanha’s was an escape, then, into suspended or non-being. In his poetry, writes Stephen Reckert, the force of Pessanha’s self-abnegation can be felt even at the level of the phoneme. The profusion of nasal vowels in ‘Inscription’ — these being the phonetic signature of negation both in Portuguese and in certain East Asian languages with which Pessanha had daily contact — gestures towards a poetry that self-generates through nullification.⁸ However we might read the ambiguous and highly commented upon *país perdido* [lost country] — which could refer to Portugal or, just as easily, the failed colonial project in Portuguese Macau — Pessanha’s nationalism sooner bemoans the disintegration of overseas borders than it memorializes their founding in song.

If *não* is Pessanha’s poetic watchword, it is only natural that his imagination should put down roots in *não*-Macau — a non-city located at the nexus of an illusory Portuguese metropole and a vanished Chinese conurbation. The effacement of the Macanese landscape’s specificity is of a piece with Pessanha’s broader negativist poetics. In another possible reading of the passage with which I opened, Pessanha ironically reconstructs Macau, tracing, in the Derridean sense of the verb, an always-already-absent landscape that is Luso-Chinese, and thus defying the facile binaries of East and West, countryside and city. To sketch the city in its negative space was, perhaps, the best Pessanha could do: the various ethnic groups of Macau had lived in an uneasy state of physical separation since the seventeenth century, when fortified walls were erected between Chinese and Portuguese neighbourhoods. Towards the end of the following century, starting with the Patane neighbourhood, the colonial government would embark on a series of campaigns to expel Chinese residents from Portuguese settlements.⁹ If Pessanha overlooked the city, then partly it was because his view was obstructed.

Looking beyond his poems and the nostalgic reverie described in ‘Macau e a Gruta de Camões’, we see Pessanha acknowledge Macau’s impact on his biography and intellectual life in straightforward fashion. In his preface to Dr. Morais Palha’s *Estudo sobre a civilização chinesa* [On Chinese Civilization], Pessanha remarked that, while lacking relevant academic credentials, he could lay claim to a certain authority on all things Chinese as ‘one of the colony’s oldest residents’.¹⁰ Pessanha’s relationship with Macau indeed began only seven years after the signing, in 1887, of the Luso-Chinese Friendship and Commercial Treaty, which first acknowledged Macau as part of Overseas Portugal, following

⁷ Camilo Pessanha, *Clepsydra*, ed. by Franchetti, p. 136.

⁸ Stephen Reckert, ‘A Fono-Estilística de Camilo Pessanha’, *Colóquio Letras*, 129 (1993), 87–96 (p. 90).

⁹ José Luís Saldanha, ‘De São Paulo de Luanda a São Paulo de Maçau: fundação e consolidação de duas cidades quinhentistas no Ultramar Português’, *Cidades*, 18 (2018), 14–15.

¹⁰ Camilo Pessanha, *China: estudos e traduções*, p. 22.

years of ambiguous territorial demarcation and administration.¹¹ After a short-lived career as a lawyer, in Vimioso, Portugal, the Coimbra graduate applied for a teaching position at the Liceu de Macau. Arriving in the Chinese city aboard a Spanish steamship in 1894, Pessanha would end up spending much of his adult life in Macau, working there as a lecturer until he died, of tuberculosis, in 1926.¹² Although he arrived after the ratification of the 1887 treaty, the colonial ranks that Pessanha joined were thin: everywhere in the city, Chinese natives outnumbered the Portuguese colonial residents at least nine to one, even in the neighbourhoods where the majority of the European arrivals chose to live, such as Santo António and São Lázaro, according to the 1896 census, conducted only two years after Pessanha's arrival.¹³

After almost twenty years of 'obrigatório convívio' [forced cohabitation] with Macau's natives, Pessanha writes in his preface to Palha's study, he felt qualified to endorse his friend's treatise on Chinese social organization and characterology. The poet proceeds to lavish attention on the pervasiveness of bribery and the brutality of organized crime in Macau.¹⁴ Though he lambasts the Macanese for their social structure and juridical institutions, Pessanha makes good-faith intercultural overtures in other essays, such as in the introduction to *Oito Elegias Chinesas*, his octet of elegantly rendered translations of Ming Dynasty poetry from the Chinese. Pessanha had dedicated years of study to the language. A sonic sculptor of the Portuguese language, Pessanha was the first to admit that the imperial Chinese poetry in some ways surpassed even the best works of the European tradition, owing to the superior prosodic resources available to Chinese writers.¹⁵ In a different essay Pessanha urged fellow Portuguese residents of Macau to commit to learning the language, calling the acquisition of Chinese to be a source of 'inefável deleite espiritual' [indescribable spiritual delight].¹⁶ The poet drew no less pleasure from East Asian visual arts, donating to the Portuguese state his large if eclectic collection of calligraphic as well as decorative paintings, sculptures, and textiles (today housed at the Museu Nacional Machado de Castro).

A portrait emerges of a writer who was engaged with Chinese art but disenchanting with Chinese people; an essayist who was clear-eyed about (what he considered) the generalized rot of the Macanese society but wilfully blind to the vigorous particulars of Macau's skyline; a poet highly attuned to the various registers of the Chinese language but reluctant to allude to it, let alone to the

¹¹ Paula Morais, 'Macau's Urban Identity Question, 1557–1999/2009: Spatializing Territory', in *Macao: The Formation of a Global City*, ed. by C. X. George Wei (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 156–85 (p. 159).

¹² António Dias Miguel, *Camilo Pessanha: elementos para o estudo da sua biografia e da sua obra* (Lisbon: Ocidente, 1956), p. 117.

¹³ Alfredo Gomes Dias, 'Diáspora Macaense: Macau, Hong Kong, Zangai (1850–1952)' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Lisbon, 2011), p. 134.

¹⁴ Camilo Pessanha, *Estudos e traduções*, pp. 19, 21–23.

¹⁵ Camilo Pessanha, *Estudos e traduções*, pp. 76–78.

¹⁶ Camilo Pessanha, *Estudos e traduções*, p. 61.

city in which it was spoken, in those poems he wrote abroad. This last fact in particular — the complete dearth of local references in poems Pessanha wrote in Macau — makes it somewhat difficult to claim a place for Pessanha in Macau and especially in the Portuguese-Macanese literary tradition. The scholar João Camilo, though addressing the broader lack of autobiographical reference in Pessanha's poetic works, notes with a hint of exasperation that Pessanha's verse privileges type over individual, and the universal over the particular.¹⁷ Pessanha's universalizing instinct notwithstanding, the absence of a single, unambiguous reference to Macau in his poetry is mystifying, with the poet failing to evoke, in the Camonian mode, the colonial enclave even in his poems celebrating Portuguese maritime exploits. Further complicating Pessanha's Macanese connection are the geographic circumstances, alluded to above, in which his poetic *œuvre* took shape. Approximately half of his poems were produced in Portugal,¹⁸ either before his initial departure or during his long, semiregular stays in the country, where the writer sought treatment for chronic health problems. On these journeys Pessanha perhaps attempted to remedy his ambivalence towards Macanese cultural life by reconnecting with long-time friends — in particular the young woman whom during his youth he had hoped to wed, and who would spearhead *Clepsydra's* publication, in 1920. Can we call a poet who wrote only sometimes in, and seldom on, Macau, a poet of Macau?¹⁹

A poetry teeming with *nãos* rarely says, *sim*, outright. In Pessanha the identification with Macau is always uneasy, often inconsistent, and never entirely dissociable from the signifying context of Portuguese imperialism. But the importance of the Chinese city to understanding Pessanha's poetic production is beyond question. As a symbol of both Portuguese colonial power

¹⁷ João Camilo, 'Realismo e simbolismo em Clepsidra', *Boletim de Filologia do Centro de Linguística da Universidade de Lisboa*, 24 (1984), 292–93, 305–18 (p. 306).

¹⁸ In his 2009 reedition of *Clepsydra*, Paulo Franchetti debunks the myth that Pessanha wrote all of his most important poems before moving to Macau: 'Já os cinco anos após a emigração — ou seja, os cinco primeiros que vive na China ou entre a China e Portugal — serão, do ponto de vista da escrita de poesia, os mais produtivos da sua vida, pois da meia centena de poemas de sua autoria hoje conhecidos, vinte foram escritos em Macau, entre 1895 e 1899; e foram ainda compostos nessa localidade, nos anos seguintes, outros seis' [The first five years after Pessanha emigrated — during which time he lived in China or else between China and Portugal — were the most poetically productive of his life. Of the fifty or so poems he is known to have written, twenty were composed in Macau, between 1895 and 1899, and in the following years he would write six more poems in the city], *Clepsydra*, ed. by Paulo Franchetti (São Paulo: Ateliê Editorial, 2009), p. 130.

¹⁹ A small but growing number of critics have problematized Pessanha's legacy within Luso-Macanese letters — and, more generally, the uncritical prurience and tendency towards romanticization that pervade the most influential biographical accounts of the writer's life. Serafina Martins traces these patterns of reception in 'Camilo Pessanha: o poeta e a sua personagem', in *Macau na Escrita, Escritas de Macau*, ed. by Ana Paula Laborinho and Marta Pacheco Pinto (Ribeirão: Húmus, 2010), pp. 93–106. In his *O Delta Literário de Macau* (Macau: Instituto Politécnico de Macau, 2015), José Carlos Seabra Pereira charts the cultural confluence of Chinese and Portuguese literary precepts, including in the work of Camilo Pessanha. Paulo Franchetti undertakes a rigorous analysis of Pessanha's 1924 essay in the 2008 conference paper, 'Pessanha e a gruta de Camões', online at <<https://dlcv.fflch.usp.br/node/36>>. See also *Macau: Novas Leituras*, ed. by Ana Paula Laborinho et al. (Lisbon: Tinta-da-china, 2020), an anthology of decolonial readings of Macanese literature in its diverse forms and languages.

and its weakness, Macau charges and troubles Pessanha's poetry at crucial moments. Somewhere between the poles of affirmation and rejection, *sim* and *não*, there lies a *talvez*, and for Pessanha the city of Macau was, like a book of poems, nothing if not a murmurous realm of possibility: personal, poetic, political. It is the goal of this article to explore those possibilities, to exhume a missing city — or are they several? — and bring what is 'abstraid[o] da visão' [abstracted from vision] into view. To that end, I will enact a simple inversion: rather than attempt to locate elements of Macau in Pessanha's poetry, I will situate Pessanha's broader poetics within his early twentieth-century Macanese context, especially as articulated in his critical writings on China.

Pessanha's Pastoral Metropolis

Though he wrote a plurality of his poems elsewhere, Pessanha decisively linked Macau to his work's reception — and to his understanding of Portuguese poetry more broadly — when he published 'Macau e a Gruta de Camões'. The short essay is the closest thing to an *ars poetica* that Pessanha would author. The ostensible subject of his critical meditation is the legacy of Luís Vaz de Camões, who likely spent little or no time in Macau, a fact Pessanha himself acknowledged: 'e provável é que o problema venha a decidir-se finalmente pela negativa' [it is likely that the question [of whether Camões resided in Macau] will once and for all be answered in the negative].²⁰ Unlike Fernando Pessoa in 'A nova poesia portuguesa socialmente considerada' [New Portuguese Poetry Socially Considered], in his essay Pessanha does not invoke Camões as a means of announcing his own candidacy to the status of canonical poet. The abnegation so typical of Pessanha's verses here manifests as authorial humility, with the colonial writer at no point making reference to the book published under his name just four years prior, in 1920. Though declining to promote his own poetry, Pessanha asserts himself as a critic, laying down his vision of what proper Portuguese verse entails — a vision that centres around, of all places, the Southeast Chinese city of Macau.

In his essay, Pessanha focuses on Camões's singular ability to overcome, with his radically Portuguese verses, the menace of deracination that overhung the colonial project. Ever the globe-trotter, Camões had drunk so deeply of the 'seiva que trouxera da pátria' [the sap that he had brought from the fatherland], writes Pessanha, that 'teve pujança bastante para triunfar dos meios mais adversos, para resistir aos mais implacáveis factores de perversão e de atrofia' [he had sufficient vigour to triumph over the most adverse elements, to resist implacable forces of perversion and atrophy].²¹ With his poetic imagination firmly planted in Portugal, Camões could set foot anywhere in the world and imprint on that very soil an unmistakably Lusophone affective quality. For Pessanha, Camões's verses did not only reinforce Portuguese territorial claims;

²⁰ Camilo Pessanha, *Estudos e traduções*, p. 119.

²¹ Camilo Pessanha, *Estudos e traduções*, pp. 122–23.

they inscribed onto the landscape a Portuguese mode of feeling and being in the world. The agrarian terms that appeared in the text translated above, *seiva* [sap] and *pujança* [vigour] — and which Pessanha's long-time critic Paulo Franchetti considers interpretive keys to his poetry²² — promote a markedly rustic vision of empire. Pessanha marvelled at how the tree of Camões's imperial language, the last branch of Portuguese splendour, managed to flourish as well in the Far East as it did in Portugal. That a transplant to Macau would home in on the metaphor of rootedness may strike us as a literary commonplace. Yet Pessanha pushes the metaphor further, writing that 'a inspiração poética é emotividade, educada, desde a infância e com profundas raízes, no húmus do solo natal. É por isso que os grandes poetas são em todos os países os supremos intérpretes do sentimento étnico. Toda a poesia é, em certo sentido, bucolismo; e bucolismo e regionalismo são tendências do espírito inseparáveis' [poetic inspiration is emotivity that has been *cultivated*, from its infancy, and *with deep roots*, in [the poet's] *native soil*. Therefore, the poets of every country are supreme interpreters of ethnic sentiment. All poetry is, in a sense, pastoral; pastoralism and regionalism are inextricably linked spiritual tendencies].²³ To Pessanha's way of thinking, poetry was necessarily an expression of goethnic sentiment; the ideal poem was a vessel for a region's *gôût de terroir*. We see Pessanha's privileging of the bucolic and 'ethnic'²⁴ elements of poetry on full display in the second half of his poem 'San Gabriel,' a diptych composed for the quadricentenary of the Portuguese discovery of the sea route to India, in 1498. Invoking the guardian angel in hopes of recovering the spirit of maritime exploration, the poem's speaker envisions

[...] as naus, as caravelas,
 Outra vez, pela noite, na ardentia,
 Avivada das quilhas. Dir-se-ia
 Irmos arando em um motão de estrelas.²⁵

[our carracks and caravels [sailing]
 Yet again through the night,
 Over waves set afire by our keels —
 As if tilling mounds of stars.]

²² See also Franchetti's discussion of Pessanha's 'educated emotivity' (pp. 21–25), in *Nostalgia, exílio e melancolia: leituras de Camilo Pessanha* (São Paulo: FAPESP, 2001): 'O que torna a emotividade, em princípio atributo de todos os homens, inspiração poética é justamente a sua *educação*. Essa educação, por sua vez, define-se por meio de uma imagem: a do enraizamento no húmus da terra natal. Ou seja: a educação se processa pela absorção da particularidade nacional ou regional' [What makes emotivity — in principle an attribute of all men — into poetic inspiration is precisely that it is *cultivated*. That process of cultivation, in turn, is defined by means of an image: that of rootedness in one's native soil. In other words: this cultivation takes place through the absorption of a nation or a region's particularity], p. 24.

²³ Camilo Pessanha, *Estudos e traduções*, p. 122 (emphasis mine).

²⁴ Pessanha's use of the word ethnic here is probably more rooted in ideas of nationalism than in those of race, as per the word's etymon ἔθνικός (ethnikós, of or for a nation), though, as we shall see below, an awareness of race and racism doubtless influenced Pessanha's experience of Macau.

²⁵ Camilo Pessanha, *Clepsydra and Other Poems*, pp. 108–09.

Pessanha's neatly mounded stars make for a rather tellurian reimagining of the maritime world order that Camões's Vasco da Gama had inaugurated. Portuguese naval and mercantile prowess, more typically associated with bustling port cities at a far remove, becomes in Pessanha's hands an extension of the Portuguese countryside — more starry agrocity than cosmopolis.

While Pessanha's French idols, particularly Baudelaire, drew inspiration from the urban street grid, Pessanha sooner tilled the semantic fields of the Portuguese countryside, his images arrayed like so many rows of crop or hillocks. Conceding that European prose writers Lafcadio Hearn, Wenceslau de Moraes and Pierre Loti had managed to capture in their writing the affective *frisson* of living abroad, the poet nonetheless deemed 'exotic' poems — a body of verse rooted in strange soil — something of a literary impossibility. Unlike their prose-writing counterparts, overseas poets, being the native sons that they were, had little choice but to 'cantar a pátria ausente' [sing of the absent fatherland].²⁶ Pessanha's urban and Chinese experiences were poetically relevant only inasmuch as they could convey a sense of place that was tribally Portuguese and quintessentially rural. In what way, then, could the Chinese trade outpost have stimulated Pessanha's geoethnic sentiment as a Portuguese poet?

In the early twentieth century, when Pessanha was absorbed in the city's daily life, Macau was distinct in character from the nearby Anglophone colonial enclave of Hong Kong, where Pessanha would have disembarked on his return journeys from Portugal, and to which he regularly travelled to procure art for his growing collection.²⁷ Judging by Pessanha's scattered comments on the city, Macau reproduced the slower-paced, provincial way of life that the poet associated with his time in Portugal and the Portuguese national character. In the preface to Palha's book Pessanha remarks that, at least during his first few years there, the city's aura chimed with his 'vibrátil emotividade de português' [Portuguese emotional resonance],²⁸ a description that could have just as easily issued out the mouth of a *saudosista* poet like Teixeira de Pascoaes, whose unique strain of nationalism spiritualized the yearning for Portugal's provincial past. In 'Macau e a Gruta de Camões', Pessanha attributes the city's ability to evoke the mainland to its relatively 'bucolic' urban setting. On many a morning, writes Pessanha, our poet would experience 'deambulando pelo passeio da Solidão, a ilusão, bem vívida apesar de pouco mais duradoira que um relâmpago, de caminhar ao longo de uma certa colina de Beira Alta, muito familiar à sua adolescência' [while sauntering along the pass of Solitude, the illusion — vivid though lasting little longer than a lightning strike — of walking along a certain hill in Beira Alta very familiar to his adolescence].²⁹

²⁶ Camilo Pessanha, *Estudos e traduções*, p. 122.

²⁷ Camilo Pessanha, *Correspondência*, ed. by Daniel Pires, pp. 97, 191.

²⁸ Camilo Pessanha, *Estudos e traduções*, p. 31.

²⁹ Camilo Pessanha, *Estudos e traduções*, p. 121.

These solitary treks through the city transported Pessanha, if only briefly, to the stark highlands of north-central Portugal; to scale the hills of Macau was to attain to the summit of a poetically productive nostalgia.

Heightening the sense of familiarity between Macau and metropole, Pessanha goes on to note, was the Chinese city's temperate climate, perfectly synchronized with the change of the seasons back on the mainland, coinciding 'com o alvoroço da primavera — Páscoa florida com a alegria das aves novas ensaiando os seus primeiros voos' [with the spring awakening — flower-adorned Easter and the joy of fledglings taking their first flights].³⁰ If poetry cannot enroot in foreign soil, then Macau could serve as a poetic interlocutor thanks to its uncanny ability to simulate the *solo natal*. With birdsong filling the cool spring air, the flow of the *seiva da pátria* could continue uninterrupted.

Pessanha was not alone in conceiving of the Chinese port city as conducive to the sort of tranquil contemplation essential to the production of poetry. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Pessanha was living in Macau, the city was a world apart from the sprawling metropolises that had begun to flourish under British imperial rule. Manuel da Silva Mendes, an associate of Pessanha's who had come to Macau as a journalist, remarked that, while the material quality of life in British Hong Kong was undoubtedly higher, residents of Macau could achieve a measure of 'tranquilidade' [tranquillity] within the Macanese city centre.³¹ The provincial character of the Portuguese enclave, at least as Pessanha experienced it, seems to have provoked the kind of affective response that Georg Simmel describes in his discussion of smaller cities, in 'The Metropolis and Mental Life'. Better protected from the cultural headwinds of capitalism, these cities exhibited the 'slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory-mental phase of small town and rural existence'.³² If the brusquer rhythms of urban life in large cities gave rise to blasé or bohemian literary attitudes and the frenetic lyric of *flâneurs* (and later the modernists), then in Macau, with its moderate climate and less heavily urbanized landscape, Pessanha could avoid what he considered the pitfalls of cosmopolitan life. While Baudelaire's 'perfect idler' revelled in the crowd, 'away from home and yet feel[ing] at home anywhere',³³ Pessanha rarely strayed from the *passeio da Solidão*. On his self-described solitary journeys through Macau, the poet dodges the crowd not merely in an act of racialized flight, but rather so that he might enjoy an imaginatively fecund calm, seeding his verses in alien but amenable soil rather like his idealized Camões. Pessanha's way of thinking was broadly aligned with the vogue in Luso-Hispanic colonialism for

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Fernando Ulisses Mendonça Serafim, 'Sendas de Macau: Camilo Pessanha e a paisagem do Oriente', *Revista Desassossego*, 10 (2013), 19–27 (p. 20).

³² Georg Simmel, 'Chapter 1', in *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing), p. 12.

³³ Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life', in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. by P. E. Charvet (New York: Viking, 1972), p. 4.

Lamarckian rather than Mendelian theories of race. The former largely avoided Mendel's rhetoric around eugenics and genetic purity, positing instead that social and physical climates colluded in civilization building, amalgamating distinct populations, including through interracial unions and a common language.³⁴

Pessanha's uneasy poetic identification with Macau may have had as much to do with the discontents of urban life as it did with the city's racial and cultural alterity. According to his own poetic ideal, as a pastoral poet of the city, Pessanha could afford to eschew local reference — in *Clepsydra* he equally fails to mention any city of the Portuguese mainland — since his poem was, *a priori*, a site for geoethnic reflection, produced on affectively Portuguese soil. If there can be no authentic voice without a sense of place, then his poems were themselves the local reference, taking root in the emotional terrain of Pessanha's native landscape and encoding its singular qualities. Pessanha was a poet of Macau insofar as Macau was, legally and climactically, a part of Portugal — and insofar as poetic language could flourish in the colonial enclave mythically in the person of Camões, or, extrapolating, in the form of Pessanha's *œuvre*, no matter where he ultimately produced the autograph versions of his poems.

Pessanha, a poet of Macau? *Sim*. Pessanha, a poet of the city? *Não*.

Fatherland, Mother City, Literary Surrogate: Racialized Macau and Purebred Poetry

'Macau e a Gruta de Camões' is replete with references to the fatherland. It was the *seiva de pátria*, after all, that Portugal's epic poet enviably discharged in his seminal *Os Lusíadas*. While characterizing poetry written abroad, Pessanha remarks that, 'Os poucos que vagueiam e se definham por longínquas regiões, se acaso escrevem em verso, é sempre para cantar a pátria ausente, para se enternecerem [os portugueses] ante as ruínas da antiga grandeza da pátria' [the few who wander distant regions, if they happen to write verse, only do so to sing of the absent fatherland, growing tender before the ruins of the fatherland's bygone grandeur].³⁵ If the fatherland's far-flung poets wept like orphaned children, their emotional 'tenderness' synonymous with poetic receptivity, then we might ask: what role did women play in Pessanha's literary family?

Although Pessanha's essay is centred on the fatherland — unsurprisingly, given Camões's status as Portuguese poetry's progenitor — there is an important feminine role sketched out for the *metrópole*, a term used during the colonial period to refer to continental Portugal and etymologically derived from the Greek μητρόπολις (*mētrópolis*), or mother city. The masculine, maritime spirit

³⁴ Nancy Leys Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 63–66.

³⁵ Camilo Pessanha, *Estudos e traduções*, p. 122.

of the *pátria*, as figured by Camões's *seiva* or free-flowing poetic genius, finds its mate in the intrinsically nutritive *metrópole* — the port city to the poetic vessel. Through his writings, as we shall see, Pessanha suggests that the 'properly' Portuguese poem marks the consummation of the relationship between these differently sexed elements within the national character. The journey abroad marks not only the severance of physical ties with the fatherland; it is also an exile from material and emotional comforts of the mother city. Though a colonial poet, at least in principle, carried within him the *seiva da pátria* [sap of the fatherland], he could not so easily reconstitute the missing mother. From his descriptions of the difficulties of versifying abroad we conclude that most consort-cities did not meet Pessanha's standards. When positing the poetic inadequacy of then-current and former Portuguese territorial possessions other than Macau, Pessanha wrote that these locales either lacked a hospitable climate or were out of cycle, so to speak, with the mother city's seasons. The disturbance of the seasonal patterns resulted in a creative hysteria:

Mas a terrível acção depressiva do clima e do ambiente físico e social dos países tropicais, se não tiveram poder contra a assombrosa vitalidade criadora do poeta máximo, têm-no, todavia, não só para esterilizar em cada um de nós outros, os pigmeus que a quatro séculos de distância o contemplamos, o pouco de aptidão versificadora que algum tivesse, mas ainda para destruir, mesmo nos melhor dotados, a comezinha parcela de imaginação de que é indispensável dispor quem intente evocar a estatura do gigante, o seu esbelto perfil e a sua figura augusta.³⁶

[But the terrible, depressive action of the climate and the physical and social environment of tropical countries, if they were no match for the dazzling poetic vitality of the greatest poet [i.e., Camões], do have power, nevertheless, against us pygmies who contemplate him four centuries later, not only to sterilize what little talent for versifying one might have, but also to destroy, even in the most talented, that meagre portion of the imagination which is indispensable to those who wish to evoke that giant's stature, his svelte profile and his august figure.]

By Pessanha's own account, the dewy, imperious she-city of the tropics emasculates male writers, snipping away at their Portuguese poetic prowess — their Camonian imaginative inheritance. The language of climactically induced sterility and impotence, as Nancy Leys Stepan explains, was typical of the Lamarckian theory embraced by Iberian colonial thinkers, who believed 'that race and climate [...] combined to produce degraded and backward nations'.³⁷ It was a belief derived in part from Renaissance Europe's legacy of geohumoralist thinking, associating extreme heat with sexual intemperance and intense cold with effeminacy.³⁸

³⁶ Camilo Pessanha, *Estudos e traduções*, pp. 121–23.

³⁷ Nancy Leys Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics*, p. 89.

³⁸ For a comprehensive overview of the origins and trajectory of racialized climate-thinking in the West, though with a particular emphasis on early modern England, see 'The Ghost of Hippocrates:

Owing to 'a fatalidade do determinismo histórico' [the fatality of historical determinism], Macau had the distinction of being the 'a única terra do ultramar português em que as estações são as mesmas da Metrópole e sincrónicas com estas' [the only land in overseas Portugal in which the seasons are the same ones of the Metropole and synchronous with these].³⁹ The Chinese city, with its feminine periodicity and mild weather, was amenable to the poet's creative metabolism, but nonetheless fell short of the woman he had hoped for. She produces in him, after all, only the *illusion* of being in Portugal, providing feminine comforts that pale in comparison with those afforded him by the mother city. Concupiscible, submissive, poetically fertile — a suitable concubine. Within Pessanha's theoretical framework for the writing of poetry abroad, the Portuguese poet himself contained the vital sap necessary for versification. In Macau he could find a viable substitute for the mother city, a poetic *barriga de alaguel*, so to speak, a literary surrogate.

Why, despite its climactic similarities, did surrogate Macau fail to measure up to the mother city? Although we saw that Pessanha's resistance to Macau stemmed at least in part from his distaste for urban life, nonetheless we must examine the second-class status that Pessanha assigned to Macau for its racial and gendered valencies. We stand to gain by reading Pessanha in light of Toni Morrison's 1992 *Playing in the Dark*, which develops the concept of literary surrogacy through the lens of race. Writing on the presence of black characters in the works of white American authors, Morrison explores the extent to which certain white writers staged the imaginative encounter with a racialized other to affirm and 'think about themselves', particularly when probing character traits they found most shameful in their own person.⁴⁰ Playing opposite the centred, white perspective, as Morrison explains, the racialized 'surrogate' furnishes the means by which the white speaking subject affirms his or her selfhood as 'not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less but historical'.⁴¹ To what extent did Macau's perceived 'defects' bolster the supremacy of Pessanha's ailing mother city?

Despite being an exceptional poet and critic who expressed deep respect for the Chinese arts, Pessanha was uncritically conformist in his views on race in China. Pessanha's poetic self-image possibly relied on a racist and masculinist performance of literary surrogacy. His introduction to Palha's *Estudo sobre a Civilização Chinesa* reads as a racist compendium of Chinese characterological defects, with the author — normally a reined-in prose stylist — on several occasions veering into a logorrheic mode: 'Ignorância, boçalidade, superstição, deslealdade, covardia, avareza' [ignorance, idiocy, superstition, disloyalty,

Geohumoral History in the West', in Mary Floyd-Wilson's *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 23–47.

³⁹ Camilo Pessanha, *Estudos e traduções*, p. 121.

⁴⁰ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 49–55.

⁴¹ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, p. 52.

cowardice, avarice].⁴² Together these comprise not even half of the epithets levelled by Pessanha against the Chinese citizens of Macau. Appalled by rampant gang violence and critical of what he (a jurist by training) considered a nepotistic justice system, Pessanha all but wrote off the entirety of China as a bureaucratically incompetent and morally barbarous realm. Could such an indictment of Chinese character be little more than a cynical reflection of Pessanha's insecurities over the health of Portuguese Empire, well on the wane not long after it was effectively established in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries?

If Pessanha was bent on cynical reflection, then Macau proved the perfect place for him to reflect cynically. The city was, as Catarina Nunes de Almeida puts it, 'that space outside the Metropole which would best *conserve the Metropole's image*'.⁴³ A mirror that protected its beholder, as Almeida suggests, the surrogate city helped colonial poets save face, projecting the imperfections of the colonial countenance onto another's image. In Macau Pessanha could safely contend with those blemishes on Portugal's record as well as on his own. In the poem 'Desejos' [Desires], Pessanha engages in racialized mirroring, writing:

Eu quisera também, adormecido
 Dos fantasmas da febre ver o mar,
 [...]
 Como os ébrios chineses delirantes
 Aspiram, já dormindo, o fumo quieto
 Que o seu longo cachimbo predileto
 No ambiente espalhava pouco antes.⁴⁴

[So I long to doze by her side,
 To glimpse the sea through fever dreams,
 [...]
 Just as the raving Chinese inebriate,
 Though fast asleep, inhales the smoke
 That issued from his favourite pipe
 Mere moments ago, still thick in the air.]

Pessanha — who was himself a notorious eater of opium — implicitly positions his poetically productive, masculinely pitched fever-dream as a foil to the Chinese addict's wordless delirium, contrasting Portuguese oneiric prowess with Chinese imaginative stupor. As the Portuguese writer exhales, producing his poetic utterance, his Chinese surrogate takes deep, mute drafts of his pipe. The comparison is, to the colonial poet, flattering; conversely, the poem may be read as an instance of identification with the indolent patron. Yet again we encounter Macau fulfilling its dual function as spectre and muse, as both

⁴² Camilo Pessanha, *Estudos e traduções*, p. 25.

⁴³ Catarina Nunes de Almeida, 'Do olhar português sobre Macau: algumas representações poéticas contemporâneas', *Matraga*, 25.45 (2018), 566–78 (p. 567), emphasis mine.

⁴⁴ Camilo Pessanha, *Clepsydra and Other Poems*, pp. 88–89.

reminder and launderer of the Portuguese poet's — and perhaps Portugal's — moral decadence.

Forged out of Pessanha's now-familiar alloy of rejection and embrace, 'Macau e a Gruta de Camões' is not devoid of racialized thinking. Pessanha's ideal poem takes root in 'sentimento étnico' [ethnic sentiment] — already something of a euphemism for a Portuguese man's 'feel' for poetry, his colonial good taste. Moreover, meditating on Camões's literary genius, Pessanha defines the poetic enterprise as an expenditure of racial energy: 'As suas composições são datadas [...] dos mais diversos pontos [...] da África e da Ásia por onde [...] se despendia a exuberante energia da raça portuguesa' [His compositions are undersigned from the most distant points of Africa and Asia, across which the Portuguese race expended its tremendous energy].⁴⁵ Poem and realm extend wherever a racialized 'exuberance' asserts itself — wherever the *seiva da pátria* fertilizes a minimally viable feminine host. From the union of white 'patriot' poet and the differently, dangerously complexed surrogate city had issued Pessanha's poetics.

We are witnesses to the uneasy union of poet and surrogate on a second reading of 'Inscrição', in which the newborn poet does not so much weep as whimper. Pessanha 'saw the light' ('Eu vi a luz em um país perdido') — a periphrastic construction for being born, as in the idiom *abrir os olhos à luz*⁴⁶ — in a lost country, alternately decadent Portugal or morally bankrupt China. The poem is, perhaps, the bastard child of Father Camões and surrogate Macau. If from the surrogate city Pessanha inherited his spiritual 'languor' and impotency, in 'Inscrição' he nonetheless performs a poetic muscularity. In order to scan as a proper decasyllable, virtually all the conventional crases (*em um, a minha alma é*) in the first two lines must be suppressed. The unusual scansion of the second line 'A / mi/nha / al/ma / é / lãn/gui/da e in/er/mãe' [My soul is languid and defenceless] is especially significant. Despite the inversion of noun and pronoun, the line corresponds metrically and rhetorically to the opening of Camões's celebrated sonnet '*Alma minha gentil, que te partiste*' [My gentle soul who departed]. The poet shrinks, like a worm, amidst the moral decay of the surrogate city, hoping to slip away unheard. Still, the masculine poetic impulse takes over; the Camonian voice, stentorian and sonically expansive, will not be silenced. Pessanha's poetic 'birth' strikes us as an assertion of Portuguese poetical prowess predicated on Macanese characterological infirmity. It is a performance of literary surrogacy: the purebred poet, emissary of the *pátria ausente*, emerges only in contraposition with an otherized *país perdido*.

The conflicted nature of Pessanha's verses — which, it bears repeating, 'inscribe' the rest of *Clepsydra* in its signifying context — suggests his broader discomfort with having discovered himself in a *país perdido*. Where there is not racial 'exuberance' or political hegemony, he seems to say in 'Macau e a Gruta

⁴⁵ Camilo Pessanha, *Estudos e traduções*, p. 123.

⁴⁶ Stephen Reckert, 'A Fono-Estilística de Camilo Pessanha', p. 90.

de Camões', there cannot be a pure, hegemonic poem — only the *illusion* of one. And what might have Pessanha seen when he turned and faced the mirror? A participant in a failing Portuguese colonial project; the illegitimate son of Francisco António de Almeida Pessanha and his domestic servant; and the father, with purchased concubine Lei Ngoi Long, of João Manuel.⁴⁷ Vacillating between silence and speech, 'Inscrição' seems to wrestle with the legitimacy of versification that takes place on strange soil, and of hybridized poetic vision more broadly. So did their author, unable to break free from colonial social mores and colonial notions of good taste.

Pessanha, a poet of Macau? *Sim*. Proud of it? *Talvez não*.

Parlour Talk: Cityscape as Soundscape

The only thing that Pessanha loved unambiguously and unapologetically about his many years in Macau was the opportunity they afforded him to study Chinese — Cantonese, the regional language of daily life in the city, as well as the literary idiom from which Pessanha made his quietly accomplished translations. As a symbolist poet whose work embodied the Verlainian mantra of *la musique avant toute chose*, Pessanha no doubt revelled in the tonal range of the Chinese language, 'em que há sabiamente aproveitados recursos prosódicos de que as línguas europeias não dispõem' [in which there are ingenious prosodic resources not available to European languages],⁴⁸ and in the visual music of Chinese characters, produced by a carefully choreographed sequence of brushstrokes.⁴⁹

In his pioneering *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977), Yi-Fu Tuan addresses the various ways in which music transforms our perceptions of physical location and temporal duration, attenuating or amplifying one's sense of belonging along the way. Rhythm imputes to the passage of time both an evocative power and an affective quality; the subjective experience of music 'can negate a person's awareness of directional time and space'.⁵⁰ Perhaps more than anything else, the awareness of directional time and space imperilled Pessanha's poetic enterprise. Temporal duration was the indomitable constraint on the poetic process. The poet requires time and space to think — Wordsworth's emotion recollected in tranquillity — yet lacks finite temporal resources. In the very title *Clepsydra* we see the poet quietly acknowledge this threat. The water clock, with its endless murmuring, vocalizes the passage of time; the flow of water threatens to drown out the poet's song. In his collection's final poem,

⁴⁷ António Dias Miguel, *Elementos*, p. 11, and Gilda Santos and Izabela Leal, *Camilo Pessanha em dois tempos* (Rio de Janeiro: 7Letras, 2007), p. 18.

⁴⁸ Camilo Pessanha, *Estudos e traduções*, p. 77.

⁴⁹ Gérard M. M. Siary, 'Portrait de l'artiste en sinologue: Camilo Pessanha (1867–1926) et la Chine', *Studia Litterarum*, 1.3 (2016), 174–83 (p. 180).

⁵⁰ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p. 128.

the poet grapples openly with time as figured by the water clock. Addressing himself to his poetic failures — the poems he was not able to carry to term ('abortos') — the poet instructs these lyrical miscarriages to tune out the water clock, to wade out from its taunting rhythms ('o abismo não sondeis').⁵¹ As a poetic anthology *Clepsydra* perfectly countered the ceaseless horology its title inscribed. Though the poet's ink may flow onto the page only once, his poem can be read nonlinearly and reread, its music playing on repeat, silently, in the reader's mind, or audibly, on her lips. In contrast with the water clock, which could only flow forward, so to speak, the book of musically achieved poems registered more humanely the ebbs and flow of a poet's affective life.

If music can negate or at least defer our experience of time, how might it alter our perception of place? Intuitively, by rendering it timeless. Music helped to establish a location beyond the normative temporal flux. The musical city was removed from the rhythms of capitalism, the conversion of time to money, and thus more akin to the 'rural' city sketched by Simmel. Moreover, in the tonal inflections of the Chinese language Pessanha seems to have found a countervailing melody to the droning on of *fin-de-siècle* life in China. As Pessanha saw it, although Chinese civil society had not withstood the test of time, having fallen into a state of spiritual decay and usuriousness, the eurythmic Chinese language had acquired a sort of atemporal lustre — what he called, in the introduction to his book of translations, the 'testemunha viva dessas idades remotas' [living witness to those remote ages].⁵² Simultaneously evoking past and present, the language marked the passage of time in much the same way as the symbolist anthology sketched above. When describing Macau itself, Pessanha employs similar terminology, referring to the Chinese city as a *padrão vivo* [living monument] — just like the poem he revered, *Os Lusíadas*. Camões's epic, writes the translator Richard Zenith, was the 'poetic apotheosis of empire — not by virtue of the imperialistic voyage it ambiguously memorializes but because the memorial itself is sublimely universal and enduring'.⁵³ By the time Camões was writing, the footprint of the Portuguese empire had already diminished, yet the soundscape of Portugal's empire had never before been more expansive, nor its sonic skyline more imposing. In Macanese music and imperial poetry — both Camões's and the Ming Dynasty poetry he translated — Pessanha found the remedy to what he considered systemic cultural decline.

By virtue of the languages spoken there, Macau was, for Pessanha, a site of musical and emotional delight. There he overheard a timeless creole, forged of Camonian and Cantonese idioms, that could upend his sense of time and fuel his poetry. In the poem 'Viola Chinesa' we see the poet at work as an aural

⁵¹ Pessanha, *Clepsydra*, ed. by Franchetti, p. 136.

⁵² Camilo Pessanha, *Estudos e traduções*, p. 56.

⁵³ Luís de Camões, *Sonnets and Other Poems*, trans. by Richard Zenith (Dartmouth: Tagus Press at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, 2008), p. 11.

flâneur, on the prowl for melodies in a musical city. The rondel commences in a minor key, within the guitar-filled confines of a Chinese parlour. The poem's speaker establishes a productive contrast between the plaintive guitar and the *lenga-lenga fastidiosa*, the poet's wildly onomatopoeic term for the tedious parlour talk. Perhaps the sound of the conversation filling the parlour was not sufficiently removed from the stultifying cacophony of everyday affairs, with Portuguese lawyers or Chinese merchants looking back over the workday as they drank and smoked.

Yet in much the same way that the poet drowns out the water clock in 'Final', the lyrical *I* tunes out the soporific small talk filling the room. There is something about the Chinese music that keeps poet awake, or, more likely, tinges his dream:

Ao longo da viola morosa
 Vai adormecendo a parlenda
 Sem que amadornado eu atenda
 A lenga-lenga fastidiosa.

Sem que o meu coração se prenda,
 Enquanto nasal, minuciosa,
 Ao longo da viola morosa,
 Vai adormecendo a parlenda.

Mas que cicatriz melindrosa
 Há nele que essa viola ofenda
 E faz que as asitas distenda
 Numa agitação dolorosa?

Ao longo da viola, morosa...⁵⁴

[To the sound of the slow guitar,
 The crowd's chatter drifts asleep,
 And I, in my languor, disregard
 Every word tediously uttered.

Nor does my heart falter
 While the shrill, irksome
 Chatter of the crowd drifts asleep,
 To the sound of the slow guitar.

And yet what tender scar
 Does that guitar offend,
 Making those tiny wings
 Unfurl in a burst of pain?

Slowly, to the guitar...]

The adjective qualifying the song's titular guitar does not only mark one of the few concrete references to China in Pessanha's poetic work; significantly, it

⁵⁴ Camilo Pessanha, *Clepsydra and Other Poems*, pp. 110–11.

establishes an affecting Chinese interlocutor well placed to counteract the non-poetic speech that fills the room — the sense of *ennui* that the other patrons vocalize. The Sinophone instrument tugs at the Portuguese-speaking poet's heartstrings, prompting a poetic duet or some kind of bilingual conversation. Macau's smoke parlours and the timeless music which it hosted detain the poet's heart indefinitely as the second stanza riffs on the first and the refrain echoes on. With its additional comma and ellipsis, the poem's final twist on the refrain brings time nearly to a standstill, as a Macanese urban space transforms into a haunted soundscape. In Macau, listening to Chinese music, the poet could modulate his experience of time and bask in enduring lyric rather than 'sound the abyss,' as he put it memorably in 'Final'. The strong caesura in the roundel's final line — as well as the indeterminacy of its punctuation — gesture towards a timeless, Luso-Chinese prosody.

Pessanha, a poet of Macau? *Sim*; but most of all when the city seemed to sing.

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