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A Report from Olinda
scenes from the barricades

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A Report from Olinda

"Mud mixed with urine, excrement and other scraps which the tides bring, while not yet a crab, will soon become one. The crab is born in it, lives off it. It grows by eating mud, getting plump on its filth, making it into the bit of white meat in its legs and the greenish jelly of its sticky innards. On the other hand, the people there live to suck its meat, to eat and lick its shells until they're as clean as a glass. And with this meat made of mud, they make the meat of their bodies and the meat of the bodies of their children. There are a hundred thousand individuals, a hundred thousand citizens made of crab meat." -- Josué de Castro¹

In the *mangues* and *alagados* (mangrove swamps and marshes) of Olinda, Pernambuco, today a city of approximately 350,000 inhabitants, the living conditions of the poor and working classes have, if anything, deteriorated in the sixty-five years since Dr. de Castro linked man and crustacean. *Geografia da Fome* (The Geopolitics of Hunger), his 1946 magnum opus, typified Brazil as "an underdeveloped country, with economic characteristics of the colonial type, exclusively dependent on a few primary products for exportation, most notably coffee."² Fifty-six years later, Brasil exports everything from orange juice to airplanes, but hunger remains unabated with over 70 per cent of the population of the northeastern region earning less than \$200 a month.³

"Ô linda!"⁴ the Portuguese founder of *Nova Lusitânia*, Duarte Coelho, was reported to have exclaimed when he discovered the site late in the year 1536. The old city still boasts a

¹"A lama misturada com a urina, excremento e outros resíduos que a maré traz, quando ainda não é caranguejo, vai ser. O caranguejo nasce nela, vive dela. Cresce comendo lama, engordando com as porcarias dela, fazendo com a lama, a carinha branca de suas patas e a geléia esverdeada de suas vísceras pegajosas. Por outro lado, o povo daí vive de chupar-lhe as patas, comer e lambe os seus cascos até que fiquem limpos como um copo. E com a sua carne feita de lama, fazer a carne de seu corpo e carne do corpo de seus filhos. São cem mil indivíduos, cem mil cidadãos feitos de carne de caranguejo."

²"Brasil era então um País tipicamente subdesenvolvido, com suas características econômicas de tipo colonial, na exclusiva dependência de uns poucos produtos primários de exportação, entre os quais se destacava o café." Both de Castro citations are from *Fome: Uma (Re) Leitura de Josué de Castro* by Rosana Magalhães (Rio de Janeiro: FIOCRUZ, 1997), pp. 25, 52. Translations are mine.

³Statistics from the IBGE and PNAD, published in the *Anuário Dos Trabalhadores, 2000-2001, 5th Edition* from DIEESE (Departamento Intersindical De Estatística e Estudos Sócio-Econômicos), São Paulo: 2001.

⁴"Oh beautiful!" Coelho and his men entered New Lusitania (Pernambuco) by sailing up the estuary of the Santa Cruz River and spent more than a year in Igarau and the island of Itamaraca 'pacifying' the forest-dwelling Caeté tribes before advancing south to the hilltop settlement the Caetés called *Mirim*, which they expropriated for the Portuguese *el-rei*, Dom João III, who soon named Coelho Captain Major of New Lusitania and Count of Olinda.

picturesque aggregation of Portuguese baroque churches, a Benedictine monastery, the country's oldest law school and one of its most popular carnivals. Pastel *sobrados mouriscos* (moorish townhouses), some of them the workshops of painters, woodcarvers and ceramicists line the steep *ladeiras* leading to a hilltop Cathedral and the present version of Coelho's inspiring view of the Atlantic. According to 19th century poet Carlos Pena Filho "Olinda is just for the eyes/One cannot touch it, it's pure desire/Nobody says: it's there that I live/But rather: it's there that I see."⁵ But the ears, too, are assaulted and assuaged in Olinda. In the space of a day, the old city's verdant plazas can resound to high-decibel political propaganda or the drums and horns of the regional folkdances, *maracatú* and *frevo*. On Friday nights, throngs of serenaders sing classic *samba-canções*, strolling the cobblestone streets accompanied by guitar, bass drum and *cavaco*, Lusitanian sire of the *ukelele*. On Sundays, the *afoxé de Alafin* draws crowds to a seaside "cultural space" for hours of hypnotic Afro-Brazilian drumming, singing and dancing.

The forty square miles of modern Olinda contain one of the nation's most densely populated urban areas, rife with crime and misery and pockmarked with *mocambos*, squalid hives of hopelessness where the descendants of the 'crabmeat' people de Castro described live more like vultures, staving off chronic hunger by scavenging for food in the municipal garbage dump, the noisome *lixão*. Thirty-five years ago I lived and worked in the *mocambo* of Santa Teresinha, popularly known as Mosquito Island (*a Ilha do Maruim*). The *Ilha* squats next to the main Olinda-Recife road on reclaimed marshland and a strip of beach belonging to the Brazilian Navy. It is an 'island' only metaphorically; home to social outcasts (*marginais*), where *gente decente* (decent people) fear to tread. As a resident Peace Corps health and community development

⁵"Olinda é só para os olhos/Não se apalpa, é só desejo/Ninguém diz: é lá que eu moro/Diz somente: é lá que eu vejo."

worker from 1966-68, I was somewhat shielded by this pariah aspect from the constrictive world outside. Beginning with the coup of April 1, 1964 the country suffered through twenty-three years of brutal military rule. With all its problems and twice the population, Brazil today has hope.

On a recent visit⁶, I was surprised to find the Ilha's streets full of people at 11 P.M, an hour when, thirty years ago, everyone except the *mariposas*⁷, would have been asleep. Massive unemployment and a sizable criminal element associated with the drug trade have made it unwise to enter the *mocambo* alone and without a specific destination. I came with a former inhabitant to attend a night school literacy class for youth and adults which was held in a building owned and maintained by the local Baptist Church. They also run a daytime *creche* (childcare program) on the premises for working and impoverished mothers. Recent national legislation has made it illegal for school-age minors to hold jobs or work for the benefit of their families, so the *meninos da rua* (street kids) are being treated as truants and subjected to stringent control. I saw many children wandering barefoot and aimless, sniffing glue to anesthetize the pain of their lives.

I accompanied 26-year-old woman from the *sertão* of Paraíba, her eight-year-old daughter and six-year-old son to a night school Portuguese literacy class in another Olinda *mocambo*, called simply "V-8." The mother had gotten the teacher's permission to bring the kids because she was unable to afford childcare. While she struggled to read and write, her daughter, a bright second-grader, easily answered the questions the *educadora* wrote on the board. It was clear that the mother had ambiguous feelings about the child's abilities, which so far outstripped her own. After class, I visited their home: a patched wooden shack bordered by marshland at the far end of a maze of unlit paths. The children's father had attempted to raise the earthen floor near

⁶I spent the month of July, 2002 in Olinda and Recife on a grant from UCLA's Latin American Studies Center.

⁷In Portuguese, *mariposa* means 'moth', the most poetic and least denigrating term for a prostitute.

the doorways at either end to prevent the house from being inundated by the winter rains. The green, stagnant water in their tiny *quintal* (back yard) was a fetid mix of human and industrial waste no crab could have survived.

I was back in Olinda to conduct a pilot study at a Freire-inspired school for youth and adults: the CEJA (Educational Center for Youth and Adults) in the working class neighborhood of Peixinhos to which I had been led by friends while in Recife for a CLACSO conference⁸ in November, 1999. It was apparent that, in less than three years, the once vibrant school had vanished. Only a few of the original *educadores* remained, the science and computer labs had been stripped and abandoned and the toilets didn't work. In interviews with teachers and administrators, I began to piece together the story of CEJA's demise. The school, which belongs to the Olinda municipality, was founded during the Germano Coelho Prefecture by Secretary of Education João Francisco de Souza, now a full professor at the Federal University of Pernambuco and head of the Paulo Freire Center there. When the populist Coelho regime was defeated in the 1996 mayoral election by a rival party, CEJA was moved to an under-equipped social club in the neighborhood, causing most of the meticulously-trained faculty to disperse. The original site was turned into an elementary school, although the current PCB Olinda government has managed to restore EJA classes at night⁹.

During Germano's administration, João Francisco had the money, power and support to dream a possible dream. He turned his graduate students at UFPE, the Federal University of Pernambuco, into a disciplined and enthusiastic corps of collaborator-researchers. Instead of writing about other teacher's classes, they experimented in their own, coming up with new ways

⁸*Conselho Latino Americano de Ciências Sociais*, the Latin American Council of Social Science

⁹PCB is the acronym for the Brazilian Communist Party while EJA stands for Youth & Adult Education.

to teach dialogically, submitting a detailed analysis of their experiments at the end of a two year course in youth and adult education. In 1999, no longer involved with the daily operations of the CEJA, João Francisco published a series of extraordinary workbooks, based on Freirian ideology and the daily praxis of his teachers. The books are produced by a special branch of the Federal University's Center of Education, NUPEP (the Nucleus of Instruction, Research and Extension in Youth and Adult and Popular Education) which he "created in November, 1988 with professors from the Departments of Social Services and Socio-Philosophical Foundations of Education in a Participative Action Research proposal to study the phenomena of youth and adult education and popular organization from the perspective of Popular Education."¹⁰ The books are divided into two modules: 1) "The Historicity of the Human Being" and 2) "The Sociability of the Human Being" and cover five subject areas: Portuguese Language; Mathematics; Natural Sciences; Social Sciences; Art & Culture.

The series is being used in municipal youth and adult schools throughout the state of Pernambuco. I was handed copies on three separate occasions while visiting local schools. In the Module I Portuguese Language workbook there are lyrics by well-known Brazilian composers: Chico Buarque ("Minha Infancia") and Pixinguinha ("Carinhoso"), verses by Jorge Luis Borges ("Instantes") and Bertold Brecht ("Elogio ao Aprendizado") and a short piece by Paulo Freire ("O Ato de Estudar") in which two men delivering a van full of cacao beans solve the problem of how to cross a flooded patch on their route.¹¹ There are also photographs and graphics from the

¹⁰ Criado em novembro de 1988 com professores dos Departamentos de Serviço Social e de Fundamentos Sócio-Filosóficos da Educação, para, através da proposta da Pesquisa-Ação Participante, estudar os fenômenos da educação de jovens e adultos e da organização popular na perspectiva da EDUCAÇÃO POPULAR." This declaration is printed, in boldface caps. on the inside cover of the entire NUPEP series of textbooks, starting with the original *Edição Experimental* of 1998. They are published by Educational Center at UFPE as a "Federal Public Service" and supported by a grants from the National Foundation for Educational Development.

¹¹ This story is part of the São Tomé e Príncipe section of Freire's *A Importância do Ato de Ler: em três artigos que se completam* (São Paulo: Cortez, 1983) and, in a special edition of *Harvard Educational Review* (February, 1981)

worlds of art and advertising and images of well-known characters from animated films. Readers are asked to engage in a series of interactive exercises based on these texts: making collages of images describing their reaction to a song or story, adding facts from their own lives in fill-in-the-blank *cloze* exercises, dividing words into syllables. As they are read by the teacher or sung, chanted, repeated, examined, and interpreted by members of the class, these texts represent what Freire termed "codifications: cognizable objects, challenges towards which the critical reflection of the decoders should be directed."¹² North American educators looking at such a sophisticated and eclectic collection, might be dubious about its value as a literacy primer for people who have grown to adolescence and adulthood without being able to read. On the other hand, USC professor Nelly Stromquist, in her critique of the São Paulo MOVA program, found that it "endorsed the philosophy of Paulo Freire, but did not mandate a set curriculum:

As several Brazilian educators have highlighted, there is an industry of cultural production which renders almost impossible the emergence of an autonomous culture of the oppressed classes...The existence of strong currents to maintain the dominant ideology raise a major challenge to those promoting literacy for citizenship: their task is not only to enable illiterates to have access to materials that will foster their progression to higher levels of literacy but also to enable them to read publications that will further expand their critical consciousness.¹³

This is what Professor de Souza has in mind. A recent article of his¹⁴ contains copious quotes from Freire's 1967 book, *Educação como prática da liberdade* on the need for an education which "goes to meet those people immersed in the urban centers...an education which ...has to be courageous, proposing to the people that they think about themselves, their times, their responsibilities, about their role in the new cultural climate of this transitional age."¹⁵

¹² *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000, trans: Myra Bergman Ramos) 115.

¹³ *Literacy For Citizenship: Gender and Grassroots Dynamics in Brazil* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997) pp. 209-210

¹⁴ "O Pensamento de Paulo Freire e a Educação do Trabalhador e da Trabalhadora" in *A prática política e pedagógica da CUT no nordeste--um diálogo com as experiências* (Recife: Edições Bagaço, 2000) pp. 61-79

¹⁵ "Ir ao encontro desse povo emerso nos centros urbanos...uma educação que...haveria de ser corajosa, propondo ao povo a reflexão sobre si mesmo, sobre seu tempo, sobre suas responsabilidades, sobre seu papel no novo clima cultural da época de transição. (Freire, 1967, p.59)

NUPEP readers and workbooks are currently contributing to another viable program for youth and adults: the Scholastic Elevation Project for Informal and Rural Men and Women Workers¹⁶, sponsored by the Syndical Training School of the Northeastern CUT.¹⁷ The CUT reader, "...*Já sei ler, vou ler mais...*" ('I already know how to read, I'm going to read more') which bears the expanded subtitle: "The historicity and the spatiality of the human being: my history, our history, my city, my region" and is even more locally rooted than the CEJA series.¹⁸ This is concordant with the Freirian dictum "a leitura do mundo precede a leitura da palavra" (the reading of the world precedes the reading of the word) and with Freire's appreciation of Pernambucan culture.

As Freire remarks in the Mexican edition of his *Letters to Guinea-Bissau*:

Mi recifidad explica mi pernambucalidad, mi pernambucalidad explica mi nordestinidad, mi nordestinidad explica mi brasilidad, mi brasilidad explica mi latinoamericanidad, mi latinoamericanidad me hace ser ciudadano del mundo. De Recife en cuanto es el contexto de origen que me marcó, me marca y me marcará. Por eso digo que no me entienden si no entienden Recife, y no me aman si no aman Recife.¹⁹

Almost half the forty-three texts are from a single source, *A invenção do nordeste e outras artes* (The invention of the northeast and other arts) by Durval Muniz de Albuquerque, Jr.

Albuquerque's book was published by Editora Massangana, part of the Joaquim Nabuco Foundation, founded by Recife's other famous Freyre, Gilberto, author of *Casa-grande & Senzala* (The Masters and the Slaves), "the greatest of Brazilian books and most Brazilian essay ever

¹⁶ Projeto Elevação da Escolaridade de Trabalhadores e Trabalhadoras Informais e Rurais

¹⁷ Escola de Formação Sindical Da CUT no Nordeste. CUT is the acronym for *Central Única dos Trabalhadores*.

¹⁸ "A historicidade e a espacialidade do ser humano: minha história, nossa história, minha cidade, minha região."

¹⁹ *Cartas a Guinea-Bissau: apuntes de una experiencia pedagógica en proceso*, 7a edición. (México: Siglo xxi de España, 1986). The English translation lacks the musicality of the Spanish: "My Recifeness explains my Pernambuconess, etc...However, Recife is the context of the origin which marked me, marks me and will mark me. That is why I say that you can't understand me if you don't understand Recife, and you can't love me if you don't love Recife."

written", according to Darcy Ribeiro, by "such a petty reactionary on the political plane."²⁰ The *Fundação* houses conferences, libraries, bookstores, cinematheques. It is run by members of the Brazilian elite. Several of my friends in Olinda were treated less than well by Foundation staff when they went to ask to apply for grants for cultural and artistic projects. They describe it as an old boy's club of intellectuals whose doors remain closed to working-class people, no matter how talented. So it is an odd choice as the supplier of the majority of material for a worker's reader. The third text in the book is taken from *Casa-grande & Senzala*. Under the title "O Nordeste Construído Desde A Saudade, A Memória, O Passado" (The Northeast Constructed From Longing, Memory, The Past), João Francisco and co-creator Beatriz de Barros de Melo e Silva have chosen one of the opening paragraphs from Freyre's Fourth Chapter: "O Escravo Negro Na Vida Sexual E De Familia Do Brasileiro" (The Negro Slave in the Sexual Life of the Brazilian Family) which they call "O Berço Do Nordeste" (The Cradle of the Northeast):

Every Brazilian man, even those with fair skin and blond hair, carries in his soul, or in both body and soul, (...) the shade, or at least the trace, of the indian and the negro. (...) In the tenderness, the excessive affection, the catholicism which delights our senses, in our music, the way we walk, our speech, the lullabies we sing our little children, in all our sincere expressions of life, almost all of us bear the mark of negro influence. From the slave or nanny who rocked us to sleep. Who suckled us. Who fed us, first softening each bit of food with her hand. From the old black mammy who told us our first tales of ghosts and goblins. From the mulatta who plucked our first chigger and expertly scratched the itch. And who initiated us in physical love and transmitted to us, in the squeaking cot, the first complete feeling of manhood. From the little black boy who was our first playmate.²¹

²⁰ "*Casa-grande & Senzala* é o maior dos livros brasileiros e o mais brasileiro dos ensaios... Sempre me intrigou, e me intriga ainda, que Gilberto Freyre sendo tão tacanhamente reacionário no plano político... tenha podido escrever esse livro generoso, tolerante, forte e belo." From Ribeiro's Introduction in the 43rd edition (Rio de Janeiro/São Paulo: Editora Record, 2001)

²¹ Todo brasileiro, mesmo o alvo, de cabelo louro, traz na alma, quando não na alma e no corpo (...) a sombra, ou pelo menos a pinta, do indígena ou do negro. (...) Na ternura, na mímica excessiva, no catolicismo em que se deliciam nossos sentidos, na música, no andar, na fala, no canto de ninar menino pequeno, em tudo que é expressão sincera da vida, trazemos quase todos a marca da influência negra. Da escrava ou sinhama que nos embalou. Que nos deu de mamar. Que nos deu de comer, ela própria amolegando na mão o bolão de comida. Da negra velha que nos contou as primeiras histórias de bicho e de mal-assombrado. Da mulata que nos tirou o primeiro bicho-de-pé de uma coceira tão boa. Da que nos iniciou no amor físico e nos transmitiu, ao ranger da cama-de-vento, a primeira sensação completa de homem. Do muleque que foi o nosso primeiro companheiro de brinquedo. (op.cit., p. 343, my translation)

Freyre next conjectures about the psycho-sexual effects on the sons of the 'Big House' of having being suckled by black *mães de leite* (wetnurses) and, in the concupiscent style for which he is famous, describes a young man from a "well-known southern slave-owning family" who, in order to consummate his marriage to a woman of his class, must sniff the sweaty shift of his slave mistress which he sneaks into their boudoir. For the reader's sixth text, "A Convivência Do Branco Com O Negro" (The Coexistence of Whites and Blacks), João Francisco and Beatriz have chosen another patrician novelist, José Lins do Rego, whose 1932 classic *Menino de Engenho* (Sugarmill Boy) was the first of a trilogy²² celebrating plantation life around the time passage of the 1888 *Lei Aurea* (Golden Law) abolished slavery in Brazil. Although the tone is less prurient than that of *Casa-grande & Senzala*, the emphasis on the benevolence, docility and maternal qualities of the former female slaves is similar:

The old slave quarters still stood. Twenty rooms with the same porch in front. My grandfather's negresses, even after the abolition, all remained at the mill, they didn't leave the 'street', as they called the slave quarters. And when they were old, they all died there. I knew four of them: Fat Mary, Generous, Galdina and Romana.

My grandfather continued to feed them and clothe them. And they worked without pay, with the same joy as when they were slaves. Their two daughters and granddaughters followed them in service, with the same love for the master's household and the same passivity of good domestic animals. In the 'street', the children of the mill met their friends: the black boys, who were their playmates, and the negresses at whose breasts they had nursed; the good servants in whose arms they were raised. We all lived mixed together there, being scolded by the older negresses just like their own kids, sharing their affection and their scorn.²³

There is little possibility that such controversial material would be taught in public school literacy classes in the U.S., particularly in the South. To see how the CUT workbooks

²² With *Doidinho* (1933) and *Bangüê* (1934). The three novels were joined and published in this country as *Plantation Boy* (New York: Knopf, 1966)

²³ "Restava ainda a senzala dos tempos do cativo. Uns vinte quartos com o mesmo alpendre na frente. As negras do meu avô, mesmo depois da abolição, ficaram todas no engenho, não deixaram a rua, como elas chamavam a senzala. E ali foram morrendo de velhas. Conheci umas quatro: Maria Gorda, Generosa, Galdina e Romana.

O meu avô continuava a dar-lhes de comer e vestir. E elas a trabalharem de graça, com a mesma alegria da escravidão. As duas filhas e netas iam-lhes sucedendo na servidão, com o mesmo amor à casa-grande e a mesma passividade de bons animais domésticos. Na rua a meninada do engenho encontrava os seus amigos: os moleques, que eram os companheiros, e as negras que lhes deram os peitos para mamar: as boas servas nos braços de quem se criaram. Ali vivíamos misturados com eles, levando carão das negras mais velhas, iguais aos seus filhos moleques, na partilha de seus carinhos e de suas zangas."

contextualize such material, we turn to the accompanying Livro de Atividades (Activity Book).

There, in an introductory page to the Social Sciences section, João Francisco proposes to restructure the order of three distinct "versions or visions" of the Brazilian northeast: the vision of the writer/intellectuals, the vision of politicians and entrepreneurs (large landowners, industrialists and businessmen) and the vision of artists. In words which might have come from Freire's pen, he argues for the supremacy of the "artists' vision" because it is an outgrowth of "popular organizing and the struggle for the transformation of northeastern society in accordance with the interests of the majority of the people: men and women who work in the fields and streets and factories of the cities, salaried and unemployed, as well as native Brazilians, intellectuals, politicians and artists who make common cause with them in the hope that they will have a better life."²⁴ Questions and instructions follow: 1) Which [of the three 'traditions'] seems most right?; 2) What can we do so that the understanding which seems most right spreads in our environment? Why?; 3) Synthesize in a word, a poem, a sentence, in music, a drawing, a painting or a written composition the rightest idea!²⁵ Student-readers are told to preserve their answers to these initial questions so they can compare them with the answers they give at the end of the course. Three verses from songs by three composers of color, Ataúlfo Alves, Dorival Caymmi and Gilberto Gil²⁶, are

²⁴ E temos um desejo, com ele sonhamos e por ele lutamos. Esse sonho desejado é que a terceira tradição seja vitoriosa. Uma tradição que vem surgindo a partir da organização popular e da luta pela transformação da sociedade nordestina de acordo com os interesses das maiorias: camponesas e camponeses, trabalhadoras e trabalhadores formais e informais, bem como indígenas, intelectuais, políticos e artistas que com eles se comprometem na esperança de que todos tenham uma vida melhor. --João Francisco de Souza ("*Já sei ler, vou ler mais...*", Livro de Atividades, p. 64)

²⁵ 01. QUAL DELAS PARECE MAIS ACERTADA? 02. QUE PODEMOS FAZER PARA QUE A COMPREENSÃO QUE PARECE MAIS ACERTADA SEJA ESPALHADA EM NOSSO MEIO? POR QUÊ? 03. SINTETIZE EM UMA PALAVRA, EM UM POEMA, EM UMA FRASE, EM UMA MÚSICA, EM UM DESENHO, NUMA PINTURA, OU EM UMA REDAÇÃO A IDÉIA MAIS ACERTADA! (ibid., author's caps.)

²⁶ In the selected segments, Alves hopes that slavery will return so he can 'buy' his impudent mulatta and keep her in his heart; Caymmi describes the little master (*sinhozinho*) seeking "the old lady with the warm bosom" to sing him to sleep; Gil sings of a disembodied "black hand" which spends its life cleaning up what the white man dirties: "washing the soiled clothes, scrubbing the floor/the black hand is always cleaning."

supplied as bases of comparison to the Freyre and Rego texts, shifting focus from linear print to the realm of music and from the literary reminiscences of privileged intellectuals to men of the people writing, with humor and irony, a samba cousin to the blues.

João Francisco and his NUPEP colleagues have risen to the challenge of providing consciousness-raising didactic materials for working-class youth and adult student-readers. If their readers struggle to understand the hegemonic language it will be because they are curious and inspired. In this election year, when the beleaguered Brazilian economy and associated political and ethical crises have made the nation seem particularly vulnerable and chaotic, committed intellectuals and thousands of working-class teachers remain true to their task. Public youth and adult literacy programs in states like Pernambuco are growing in size and scope, thanks to the continuous creation of appropriate tools for the mighty work ahead.

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