Anatomy of Kuduro: Articulating the Angolan Body Politic after the War

Marissa J. Moorman

Abstract: *Kuduro*, meaning "hard-ass" or "in a hard place," is a contemporary genre of music and dance produced and consumed in Angola, especially in Luanda. This article maps kuduro historically and assesses it in its current moment. While the dance is full of invention and the genre has thrived in the informal economy, this alternative expression and the infrastructure it produces cannot be considered politically or economically liberatory. But the international "os Kuduristas" campaign promoted by two of the Angolan president's children and companies they own shows the dangers of a culturally conservative discourse that dismisses kuduro as a vulgar popular phenomenon while hegemonic political and commercial forces embrace it.

Résumé: *Kuduro,* qui signifie "dur à cuire" ou "dans une passe difficile," est un genre contemporain de musique et de danse venant d'Angola, en particulier du Luanda. Cet article présente le Kuduro dans son évolution historique et évalue son impact actuel. Bien que la danse soit pleine d'invention et que le genre ait prospéré dans l'économie informelle, cette expression alternative et l'infrastructure qu'elle produit ne peut pas être considérée comme politiquement ou économiquement libératrice. En même temps, la campagne internationale "os Kuduristas" promue par deux des enfants du président angolais et les compagnies qu'ils possèdent, montre les dangers d'un discours culturellement conservateur qui rejette le Kuduro comme un vulgaire phénomène populaire tandis que des forces politiques et commerciales hégémoniques se l'approprient pour promouvoir leur discours.

Key Words: Music; postwar politics; dance; *kuduro*; reconstruction

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Marissa J. Moorman is an associate professor of African history at Indiana University. She is the author of *Intonations: A Social History of Music and Nation, Luanda, Angola, 1945–Recent Times* (Ohio University Press, 2008) and has published articles on Angolan cinema, dress, and music. She is a regular contributor to the blog "Africa Is a Country." She currently is working on a book about the intersections between radio technology and state power in post–Cold War southern Africa. E-mail: moorman@indiana.edu

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At the opening of a YouTube video uploaded in 2010 by the Angolan media outfit PowerHouse Productions (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bl_hSNppdtM), three children and a dog sit before a large-screened iMac in an empty studio. Two boys, pastel colored iPods in hand, signature white earpods dangling from their ears, direct the girl tapping the keyboard to hit "enter" to the command (in Portuguese) "send Windeck to all iPods." The echoey sound of the fast-paced music loop on the computer is muffled by the sound of her rapid keyboard strokes. It is a serene beginning for a piece of Angolan *kuduro* music that won its artist, Cabo Snoop, the award for the Best Lusophone Act at the MTV African Music Awards in Lagos, Nigeria, in December 2010. As the young girl clicks "enter," we slip into the music video itself: a scene in saturated tones with Cabo Snoop and his late producer, IVM. In skinny jeans and cartoon-emblazoned T-shirt, Cabo Snoop's elastic leg moves and pelvic pops accompany the speeded up synthesizer chord progressions of what becomes the song's chorus: "windeck, windeck, bah-bah-bah." The camera then cuts to him in front of a crowd of young men and women dancing. He turns to the camera and says in Angolan Portuguese: "DJ, DJ, DJ! Stop the music and let me explain! Windeck is a babe who, when she's heated up, only wants . . . windeck, windeck, windeck, bah-bah-bah." The next lyrical interlude finds Cabo Snoop explaining again: "Windeck are also those dudes who, when they see babes heated up, take advantage . . . windeck, windeck, windeck, bah-bah-bah." A third pause has the clip's executive producer, Hochi Fu, looking at an iPad through dark glasses, asking "Hey dude, but what does windeck mean?" Cabo Snoop responds: "If you don't understand it yet, let it be!"

Throughout the video, the question is met with an ironic smile from Cabo Snoop who, troupe in tow, breaks into dance each time it is posed. The playful, sexually suggestive lyrics and clip underscore the ambiguities of speech and gendered communication and have facilitated the song's promotion, as every Angolan interviewer questioning Cabo Snoop on television or for print obligingly asks, "now tell me, what does windeck mean?" But "windeck" can only connote, never denote: it floats unmoored. The song is sung in a Portuguese shot through with Angolan slang, but the video is otherwise unmarked geographically: shot in a studio in Luanda, the city itself never appears as the video plays repetitively, in scenes within the scene, on iPods and iPads and on the children's computer screen. It looks like an ad for an i-anything. This is hip and cool, anywhere. The space is wired, sleek—the urban designer's dream of pure functionality; infrastructure is invisible.

Contrast this to another video produced by Hochi Fu and his PowerHouse Productions for the song "Sobe" (Up) in 2008, by the group os Lambas (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQW1sSppdGM&feature=related). Filmed in the *musseque* Sambizanga (*musseques* are urban neighborhoods mostly outside the asphalted area of the city that range from shantytowns to more formal concrete block constructions), this is unmistakably Luanda to those who know it, and urban Africa to those who do not.

Saturated tones of red, green, and gold color the walls at a tight intersection where paths of uneven, cigarette-butt-studded ground meet; not in the usual order of red, gold, and green, the Rastafarian colors, taken from the Ethiopian flag, invoke diasporic unity in alterity. Against this canvas the band members and dancers pop, lock, and break, climb walls, lift each other up, flip each other over, and dance hanging from the roof by one arm. One dancer sucks in his cheeks and stomach, another draws his pants up from the waist to dance in place, a third mimes riding a bike while getting nowhere, suspended above the ground by a dancer behind him: dynamism in the maw of constraint. In this alleyway—where the band member Puto Amizade was shot dead (Manuel 2009)—the Lambas open with: "If the bullet doesn't kill you, he who shot it will. Up!" Neither dirge nor call to insurrection, "Sobe" anchors itself in the musseque, transforming it into a stage where the dramas of everyday life are recalled and surmounted. Only one set of white earphones appears tucked into a pocket, making us wonder if there is any iPod attached at all. Infrastructure is not just invisible; it is glaringly absent. A calico of zinc, wood, and wire frames the scene where the acrobatics and kinesthetics of kuduro dance and the brash sounds of Nagrelha's *bifes* (beefs, or verbal jousts) and the MC's shouts produce palpable tension. Nagrelha promises, "The Headquarters [of Sambizanga] will secure victory." Here he takes for his band the name of the country's highest military institution, claiming to protect and deliver victory for the city's most famous musseque. The Lambas claim to provide what the state does not.

The producer of both videos, Hochi Fu, is a big man with a quiet manner and an unrealized childhood dream of designing high tops. He is also a talent scout and rapper but is best known for producing acts like Cabo Snoop and the Lambas. He made both videos at PowerHouse Productions: a graffiti-spangled, Apple-outfitted, pit-bull-guarded studio at the end of a sandy alleyway in a neighborhood tucked away on a hill wedged between Luanda's downtown, the old Praia do Bispo (the Bishop's Beach) neighborhood, and the new Marginal—a four-lane highway lined with glass-façaded buildings overlooking the Atlantic, where former shack settlements once stood.

When I interviewed Hochi Fu in 2010 at his studio, he told me that upon his return to Angola in 2006, after living in Holland for many years, he wanted to make videos and promote musicians. He started working out of his car with a laptop designing CD covers before he got his first break producing a video for the rapper Big Nelo, for which he earned a slim $150.00. Although he grew up as the son of a diplomat in the tony neighborhood of Alvalade, the ghetto ingenuity of kuduro called to him. At a CD launching in a public park he watched hundreds of children trailing the signature bleach-haired Nagrelha and sensed the Lambas' potential. The downward mobility of immigrant life in Europe had stripped him of the airs of Angolan high society and Hochi Fu pursued the Lambas, a band so deeply imbued with the Sambizanga culture and associated with gangs and drugs that most producers kept their distance. He convinced them to let him produce their next CD and videos for their songs "Comboio" and "Sobe." Hochi Fu included scenes of the musseque in the videos and saturated them with an aura of fear, which he thought fit Angola's newly postwar state and tapped into a diasporic black rap aesthetic. Unlike "Windeck," these are densely situated clips, even as they gesture outward.

Kuduro, meaning "hard-ass" or "in a hard place," is a contemporary genre of music and dance produced and consumed in Angola, especially in Luanda's musseques and the city center. Emerging in the mid-1990s in a country mired in civil war, kuduro is the product of young urban Angolans expressing their world with ingenuity, grit, and humor. Unlike most other Angolan music, it has found audiences and been adapted in diverse locations around the globe, both within and without Portuguese-speaking circuits: as ethno-aerobics in Salvador de Bahia's *bairros populares*; as the cutting edge "progressive" sound of contemporary Lisbon through the band Buraka Som Sistema; as the "ghetto" darling of London techno houses; and on the Latin American and Lusophone dance scenes worldwide. Kuduro's transnational mobility exemplifies the border-crossing facilities of new technologies. This article, however, focuses on kuduro's local instantiation. By turns praised and damned in local discourse, played on the ubiquitous *candongueiros* (blue-and-white group taxis that transit the center city's asphalt avenues and the shape-shifting, unpaved streets of the musseques), and used in advertisements to promote Angola's hosting of the African Cup games in 2010, kuduro is the vibrant pulse of Luanda's youth. It is woven deeply into everyday urban life and contemporary history, even as its critics dismiss it as a rootless trend.

Kuduro's bones articulate into a coordinated body in the music: its muscles pump in its dance; technology (video clips; mobile phones; computers; candongueiros) is its blood, tongue (slang and riposte—or *bifes*), and heart; while *grife* (sartorial style) or *swague* (swag) seal it within a semiotically thick epiderm. This article uses the metaphor of anatomy to map kuduro historically and to assess the phenomenon in its current form. The metaphor operates at three levels. First, the figure carries historical resonance: volume 1 of John Marcum's landmark study of Angolan nationalism is entitled *The Angolan Revolution: Anatomy of an Explosion, 1952–1960*. Although Marcum does not develop the concept beyond the title, he uses it there to represent the dynamics at work in the revolution and the relationships among them, tracing the social and political forces then at work in the Portuguese colony of Angola when three distinct rebellions unleashed the anticolonial war in 1961. Today, by contrast, political discontent abounds in Angola, but kuduro is not a site of resistance politics; kuduro's dance aesthetics contain an explosive element, but containment is critical.

Second, anatomy implies a system, which is certainly characteristic of the kuduro production machine, even if it is largely informal, carried on in musseque-based studios and circulated on candongueiros, outside official radio stations and forms of promotion. (PowerHouse, for example, used Bluetooth to spread “Windeck”). This informality, however, is not necessarily politically radical or socially liberatory, as António Tomás (2013) has argued.

Third, the notion of anatomy can help us think specifically about the politics of the body and the body politic. Physical anatomy is the body’s infrastructure. Brian Larkin argues that infrastructures are forms of rule: “they are a mode of regulating society by publicly performing and thus constituting relations between the state and its citizenry” (2008:245). Informal systems arise in the absence of and because of the failures of infrastructure. I argue that kuduro creates alternative systems and infrastructures, addressing the state both through its production and promotion strategies and in the content of its performances. But thus far, these have not threatened postcolonial forms of rule. In fact, kuduro’s adoption by the MPLA in its 2012 election campaign and the international “os Kuduristas” campaign, spearheaded by one of President dos Santos’s sons, marked a troubling political filiation. This is nothing new. Christine Messiant described this process in the mid-1990s in a 2007 piece in which she argued that the president “sought to neutralise Angola’s autonomous civil society—the activities of which might by implication have exposed government failures—with an ambitious scheme to create his own ‘civil society’” in the José Eduardo dos Santos Foundation (FESA). The repertoire of businesses and organizations over the past twenty years has expanded to include companies owned by his children that enjoy privileged contracts with state and foreign media.

The next section of the article looks at the genre’s development over time and its relationship to Angola’s political history. This is followed by a consideration of kuduro dance and the significance of its kinesthetic (and inherently nonverbal) qualities. The article’s third section analyzes recent moves by Da Banda and Semba Comunicações, companies owned by José Eduardo (“Coreon Dú”) Paulino dos Santos and Welwitchia (“Tchizé”) dos Santos, respectively, two of the president’s children, to rebrand kuduro in the international campaign “os Kuduristas,” and on Angolan National Television. I look at what Tomás (2014) calls their attempts at “curating” kuduro in the language of late capitalist spin. I want to think about what kuduro can tell us about the transition from war to peace in Angola, and specifically Luanda, where a twenty-seven-year civil war ended in 2002 and many Angolans still await the dividends of peace. War is not the only, or even necessarily the best, interpretive lens with which to read kuduro. At the same time, war’s moment was a long one—thirteen years of anticolonial war (1961–74) followed by twenty-seven of civil war (1975–2002). Although peace accords signed in Luena in 2002 between the Angolan government and UNITA ended the war and the state held elections in 2008 and 2012, Angola is still known in the international press for civil war, oil, and corruption. The ruling MPLA, and the Angolan executive in particular, would like other associations to come to mind.

Birth of Kuduro: Genealogies and Origins

Seemingly bearing the birthmark of the musseques, kuduro is in fact the authentic bastard of cross-class, urban-rural heartbreak in the larger romance of nation. As the Angolan president's son, the singer and producer Coreon Dú, stated at the Kuduro International Conference (Luanda, June 2012), "kuduro *is* Angola." Born of the dislocation and violence of war and the attendant forms of governance developed by the MPLA in the last, and most devastating, decade of the Angolan civil war, kuduro can wreak its own devastation. Kuduro music and dance are a kind of undoing. But kuduro also redoes what it undoes. Musicians break down and speed up beats (130–140 bpm); dancers break down the body in order to reconnect the parts; critics decry its inversion of values while some *kuduristas* (kuduro artists) praise it for saving them from the streets. It is one response to the Angolan neologism *desconseguir* (to not succeed; to be unable to do), which seemed to so neatly sum up much of life in the civil-war-torn, bureaucratically dense, infrastructurally hamstrung Angola of the 1980s and 1990s.

Today artists speak of three generations of kuduristas. In so doing, they manifest a sense of their own historicity, claim space and legitimacy relative to other musical practices, and impose genealogies that help contain the disputes that sometimes characterize interartist relations and the musseque-driven loyalties that fuel fan bases. Even as some prominent cultural figures thumb their civilized noses at kuduro, artists are interviewed in the media, and kuduro figures in quotidian conversation on street corners, in barbershops, within peer groups, and between young and old. Kuduro even has its own television show: *Sempre a subir!* (Always on the up and up!), hosted first by one of the genre's creators, Sebem, and now by the young duo Presidente Gasolina and Príncipe Ouro Negro (President Gasoline and Prince Black Gold)—a privileged visibility other musical genres do not enjoy.

Kuduro first appeared in the mid-1990s but gained prominence with the turn of the millennium. At the end of 2001, just months before the Angolan Armed Forces killed the rebel leader Jonas Savimbi and signed the Luena peace accords with the remaining leaders of UNITA, Virgilio Fire's hit "Kazakuta dança!" (with the refrain "sempre a subir") skyrocketed him to fame. Like Sebem's "Felicidades" (Happiness), "Kazakuta dança" manifested aggressive hope: hope nurtured in the fast beats of the music, asserting itself against reason, and claiming humanity in the face of the dehumanizing conditions of civil war and its aftermath. The song, particularly its refrain, encapsulated the creative means Angolans used to manage life in the conditions of post-1992, still civil-war-torn Angola, of which it was popularly said "cada um puxa a brasa para sua sardinha" (each one grabs a charcoal for his/her sardine). In a less ironic vein, the song captured the fresh hope generated by the Luena peace accords. In the documentary *Mãe Jú* (dirs. Kiluanje Liberdade and Inês Gonçalves, 2005), the popular second-generation artist DJ Znobia comments, "I feel I kill people's suffering." In a postcolonial twist on Frantz Fanon, Znobia combats the effects of violence with his aggressive clamor, sowing hope in place of suffering. Other artists also cultivate an aggressive staccato sound, tagging themselves accordingly: Gata Agresiva (Aggressive Cat/Aggressive Babe), Agre-G (Aggressive Gégé), Tuga Aggresiva (Aggressive Portuguese), to name a few (see Liberdade & Gonçalves 2007; Oliveira 2010).

Kuduro's visibility and durability have nurtured self-consciousness among artists and Angolans. Television interviews, print media, and artists themselves debate the origins (almost obsessively) and authenticity of the genre. An episode of the program *Sempre a subir!* in spring 2011 featured a young duo who discussed the history of kuduro. With a tongue-in-cheek tone and a satchel of doctored evidence (including a book from the late nineteenth century in which, they claim, kuduro is mentioned), they made a case for kuduro's rootedness in Angolan society. Inventing tradition before the audience's eyes, they insisted that kuduro and kuduristas be taken seriously.

Since at least 2001 the artists Sebem and Tony Amado have disputed kuduro's paternity more seriously. Young artists consistently acknowledge the foundational status of these two artists without taking sides in the debate. These days Sebem, in one breath, credits Amado with having created and named the genre, while pointing to his own role in spreading the music in the next. These disputes, and the *bifes* that pepper the music, are less intriguing than the origin story of the genre and the fact that disputes and rivalries are a part of the productive difference, the *décalage* theorized by Brent Hayes Edwards in *The Practice of Diaspora* (2003), that connects muscle, ligament, and bone in a joint that propels kuduro onward.

In Amado's telling, the dance (his own contribution) preceded the music. In the early 1990s in Malange province (400 km from Luanda), Amado, according to a video interview with Frederic Galliano (2007), found inspiration in the Jean Claude Van Damme film *Kickboxer* (a 1989 U.S.-produced action film), in local *carnaval* dances and rhythms, and in funk and house music. In one film sequence to which Amado refers, Van Damme, semi-inebriated, dances to some jukebox-generated soul music, tossing his hips from side to side, charming two young Asian women in a bar, and showing his enemies how to have a good time. In the video interview Amado caricatures the dance while improvising beats on a keyboard and spitting out the skeletal lyrics "*dança, dança,* Van Damme *dança.*"

Van Damme may seem an odd dance icon only at first glance (Ambler 2002; Burns 2002; Moorman 2001). He is a heroic figure, initially getting his ass kicked in a foreign land, who, after serious practice, becomes a hard-ass and agile kickboxer. In the dance scene in "Kickboxer" he is outnumbered by his enemies, a foreigner alone, an underdog—even if an overly muscled one. In the course of the scene he uses acrobatic kicks, punches, and head butts to level seven aggressors in a minute, including one man who approaches him on the dance floor from behind, certain that the dancing is distracting. Van Damme takes him out in a flash; dance, after all, is not superfluous ostentation or dissolution, but the result of intense investments in the physical body. His appeal to a young man in Malange is understandable,[1] as was Amado's eventual relocation to Luanda.

In the 1990s Malange was a province wracked by civil war, at the center of battles between the MPLA and UNITA, yet linked to international media and foreign aid, as the presence of the film and foreign music attest. The destructiveness of the war in Malange fueled emigration to Luanda, where flight from war and the changes introduced in the Angolan political economy in the late 1980s made it, in the early 1990s, a city in transition (see Hodges 2001). Throughout the country young people had grown up with war and its effects: some with the anticolonial war and the civil war, and for those born at independence or after, with the civil war and its Cold War amplification. Young men were drafted into mandatory military service, traveling to parts of the country previously unknown to them. Schools held classes irregularly. The emergency shortages of the late 1970s had turned into the permanent shortages, bread lines, and state-store rationing of the 1980s. But particularly in Luanda, as a result of the access of the privileged few to rare imported goods and the huge demand for such products, a parallel market emerged in the back streets and shadows of the state stores and eventually on the city's outskirts, alongside and on top of the main garbage dump: the enormous outdoor market Roque Santeiro, named for a Brazilian telenovela (see Lopes 2007; Tomás 2012). By the early 1990s an uncertain hope circulated. The ruling party shed some letters from its acronym (from MPLA-Workers Party to MPLA) and some Marxism-Leninism from its ideology (Malaquias 2007). The MPLA and UNITA signed the Bicesse Accords, disarmed (more or less), and set elections for 1992. But hope foundered again when Savimbi accused the MPLA of having rigged the elections and, disdainful of his election loss, took the country back to war.

As long as Angolan DJs have spun vinyl—since at least the 1950s—they have fed and nurtured cosmopolitan musical tastes in urban audiences. In the 1980s young urban residents danced to Michael Jackson, Kassav, and U2, and young Angolans able to travel abroad returned with the latest music, including house and techno. In the 1990s, amidst the breadlines and curfews, threats of forced recruitment, and continued fighting, young people created spaces for entertainment and pleasure by throwing all-night parties animated by DJs who played *kizomba*, mellifluous dance music from the 1980s inspired by Caribbean *zouk* and in large part by the Martinican band Kassav. Produced with a few instruments and synthesizers, kizomba was a departure from the acoustic *semba* music of the 1960s and 1970s. The downtown nightclubs Pandemónio and Mathieu were the nerve centers of this movement. When Pandemónio closed in 1994, the recreational center Banca (owned by the National Bank and available for nightly rental) emerged at the center of Luanda's youth-propelled nightlife. Some of the first rap artists and groups began to appear here (Big Nelo, SSP, 'NSexLove). Dances like *açucar* (sugar), *ke-breko* (break), and *gato preto* (black cat) dominated the night in a style known as *batidas* (beats) when Tony Amado hit the scene at Banca with his new dance, as yet unnamed (see Fortunato 2010; Weza 2007). Batidas were DJ-driven music: techno mixed with Latin beats. Amado's dance style and its name, kuduro, stuck. Luís Esteves (DJ, producer, and small business owner), hoping to solidify the scene, proposed to Bruno de Castro, a DJ with his own equipment, that they produce a CD of kuduro on the new RMS label, owned by Esteves, his brother, and Marcus Pandemonium, the owner of Pandemónio (interview with Esteves, 2011; personal communication with Pandemonium, Oct. 26, 2011). Sebem began hosting "raves" and giving kuduro lots of play. A new music and dance was born from the constrained conditions of urban living and the wits of young artists and entrepreneurs operating in the interstices of an economy that was just beginning to change. While Amado and Sebem continue to dispute their own roles, kuduro developed from a set of conditions and the actions of a number of young people, not the genius or talent of any one person.

Kuduro Dance: Bodies without Bones

Popular Angolan musical and dance genres from the late nineteenth-century *rebita* (danced in a circle to live music), to semba and kizomba, and to the 1990s and early 2000s *tarraxinha*, are intimately related and mutually constitutive. But Kuduro is distinctive. Unlike the other genres, it is not a partnered social dance, though it is a social event with spontaneous *desafios* (challenges) between dancers that usually draw a crowd. It is danced in the streets by children and young adults, in middle-class homes during parties, and at the weddings and public birthday celebrations of political elites. Despite its origins in downtown discos, today its creative soul is in the musseque, home to the majority of studios and kuduristas.

Angolans aver that kuduro dance predates kuduro music, as Amado's origins story contends. Certainly its name (i.e., meaning "hard-ass") describes the dance more than the music's hard-driving sound. But the dance itself is less about anatomy than it is about the "hard" conditions in Luanda and the fact that one must be tough to get by there. According to the writer and artist Albano Cardoso, this meaning of kuduro has existed since the late 1970s when "*ah, eu aqui, sempre cuduro*!" (ah, here I am, moving forward despite the hurdles; always tough) was a common refrain in conversation (personal communication, Luanda, April 15, 2010).

Stefanie Alisch and Nadine Siegert (2011) identify three types of moves in the kuduro repertoire: (1) "popping and locking, break-dance, headspins and power moves from hip hop"; (2) "traditional Angolan and carnival dance movements"; and (3) "graphic theatrical movements such as crawling on the ground as if in a battle, dancing on the thighs as if the legs were amputated, dancing with legs turned inwards as if on crutches, dancing on crutches, with missing limbs or mimicking media images of 'starved Africans.'" Here kuduru is indeed *cuduro* as an attitude, a way of being, a disposition in the face of difficulty and constraint. More commonly, observers describe kuduro dancers as looking like “they have no bones” (see comment by Ana Clara Guerra Marques in Jorge António’s film *Fogo no Museke* [2007]). As a result of war and mismanagement Luanda’s material conditions—dilapidated buildings, insufficient or improperly maintained infrastructure, disease, poor sanitation, high unemployment—are bone crushingly grim. So better to have no bones than to have them crushed.

During the civil war the bodies of young people, particularly young men, were the site of violence—perpetrated by the MPLA-controlled state as it raided Luanda’s musseques at night to collect youths to send to the front lines and by UNITA rebels who forcibly recruited them into their military operations in the provinces (Human Rights Watch 2003). The last years of the war produced waves of displaced populations from rural to urban areas and particularly to Luanda. Many of these newly arrived youths survived by means of employment in the informal economy as ambulant vendors, drivers and money collectors on candongueiros, sellers of food, and sex workers. They used their bodies to transport and peddle their wares, earn a living and, often, flee from the police. In Luanda, then, the body is ground zero of economic and physical survival and the locus of material and psychic investments. Filip de Boeck and Marie-Françoise Plissart make this point when reflecting on young men’s body-building activities in makeshift open-air gyms in neighboring Kinshasa: “Next to the body of the tree, the main infrastructural unit or building block is the human body.” At the same time, they point out, the body is the site not only of such marginalization, but also of the reaffirmation of humanity in the face of dehumanizing political and economic relations: “It always produces a surplus and offers a road to something else, an extra, an elusive aesthetics that the harshness of the city and its infrastructures of decay do not offer otherwise” (2004:236, 238). When Angolan youths from the musseques dance kuduro they remake themselves corporeally and perform their survival, literally making a living as they enliven the body and produce a novel aesthetics.

Just as goods and services in Luanda and other African cities are broken down into their smallest saleable units—a plastic bag of clean water; a cigarette; one stick of gum; a ketchup packet of whiskey; a tomato paste tin filled with peanuts; a ride on someone’s back across a flooded street—so too do kuduro dancers subdivide the body.[2] They finesse the smallest movements and control the tiniest muscular shifts and facial expressions, turning them into acrobatic flourishes that dramatize the ways in which they are buffeted by outside forces and struck by invisible blows but always manage to bear up against them. The speed and lightness of the movements demonstrate a mastery over the gravity of conditions. Bodily contortions—sucked-in cheeks and stomachs, lunatic looks, and dramatic drops to the ground—showcase the violence done to the body and the creativity that survival under such circumstances demands.

Kuduro dancers turn their dire material conditions into cultural raw materials. Dancers who are missing limbs—from land mind explosions, war, and other tragedies of life—turn their physical liabilities into performance boons.[3] Dance choreography moves dancers deeper into their circumstances and produces an excess, a margin of maneuverability. Rather than escape their circumstances, or erase the history and memory of war, kuduro dancers re-member (put back together differently, reunite, or articulate) their bodies and their world through dance. Yet kuduro dance is not mnemonic or memorializing. Instead, it uses the body to push back against the forces of history and contemporary life, writing a story of triumph against circumstance, including the mud and dilapidation of the musseques, and creating corporeal virtuosity and pleasure.

Kuduro dance performs contemporary history in, on, and through the body. A good performance is one that produces *carga* (power; see Alisch 2014), in which the dancing body looks like it has no bones, is all suppleness at high velocity, knees bent, limbs jutting in and out from a tight core, and a generally steely mien. This is still relatively new on Luanda's dance scene, where the aesthetics of semba and kizomba are structured by swaying hips, two-and three-step foot patterning, and smooth transitions punctuated by pauses and masked under a distant gaze. But kuduro dance does not seem so novel if we step outside of Luanda's dance halls and consider that kuduro dance folds diasporic influences (e.g., hip hop and swag) into continental practices. Thanks particularly to Hochi Fu and PowerHouse productions' early video clips and CDs for the Lambas, these hip hop borrowings are now easily detectable: the ghetto, the bling, the menace.

But it is also necessary to consider what the dancer and dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz calls "corporeal orature," the "actionable assertions" posed to us in kuduro by black dancing bodies (2004:66,67). Similar moves and aesthetics, like the ones that inspired Amado, are found in *carnaval* dances and the dances associated with Angola's provinces. Some forty years ago Robert Farris Thompson noted the fundamental synergies of hot physical movements and cool demeanor in "An Aesthetic of the Cool" (1973) and his longer analysis of sub-Saharan aesthetic practices in *African Art in Motion* (1979). Reading Thompson's book recently, I was struck by a comment about dance virtuosity he recorded in the 1970s in West and Central Africa: "Africans refer to a priceless cultural resource, the suppleness of their dancers, by comparing them to beings who have no bones" (1974:10). Such dance movements are found among two Angolan ethnolinguistic groups, the Tchokwe and the Bakongo; the latter is the third largest ethnolinguistic group in Angola and a significant part of the population in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Congo Republic—Angola's neighbors, historical enemies, and allies; sites of exile and refuge, the origin of refugees and returnees.

While official state infrastructure projects fail the residents of the musseques and urban youth, often creating further displacement and hardship in the name of national reconstruction, kuduro performs this trauma and breakdown of the nation and the city but also offers “actionable assertions,” alternative forms of reconstruction. Jayna Brown argues (though not without opposition, as we will see) for the utopic *energeia* of kuduro (and the Congo’s *konono*), drawing our attention to them as “bodily utopias, the rehabilitation of the body as a site of joy and exultation” and to forms of dance music that circulate and create connections not limited by the borders or imaginations of nation-states (2010:129). In the language of kuduristas, dancing like you have no bones is the mark of virtuosity. This is not the same as having no bones. Instead, kuduro dancers enact a microcorporeal mastery, asserting sovereignty over their bodies and spirits. As dancers reshape their bodies to do their own bidding, they produce intimate and alternative infrastructures.

In contrast to Cabo Snoop’s *Windek* video (with its glitzy, but decontextualized, urban coolness) and the os Lambos video (in which the overtly threatening lyrics and innovative acrobatics portray the toughness of life in the musseques and the capacity of the band to “represent”), a 2012 clip produced by the Swedish group Stocktown called “Xé! Falaste o que?” (“Hey! What did you say?”) and featuring MC Sacerdote, DJ Neli-T, and Dama Linda (www.youtube.com/watch?v=M110x-d3xgc) warrants a more political reading. The camera captures, several times, a green water tank with the red, black, and yellow of a tattered Angolan flag (the same colors of the ruling MPLA party) waving above it. These ubiquitous symbols in Luanda’s visual landscape mark the failure of urban infrastructure to deliver basic services (each house requires its own water reserve) and the omnipresence of the state’s ideological project, even if the socialist values are fraying at the edges. Here too is (in)visible evidence of the lack of infrastructure, the need for private generators and water storage systems: of what Larkin (2008:244) calls the “link between technologies and political order” and Mbembe, in a slightly different context, calls “private indirect government” (2001:67;77–89) (though his concern is coercion, the phrase could apply to service delivery infrastructure).

Nevertheless, the clip also emphasizes the alternative infrastructures emerging in and around this deprivation. Like youth in many places, these musicians celebrate the optimistic horizontal ethics of new technologies and international cross-border collaborations (e.g., Angolan musicians, Swedish producers) that Jayna Brown signals. We see Stocktown’s logo on cardboard or on a flag being carried down narrow Sambizanga alleyways as dancers move in front of musseque walls painted with commercialized splashes of the phrase “It’s Angola.” The dancers stop crawling traffic on a busy Sambizanga street corner, dancing on truck beds and cabs and on candongueiro roofs, doing handstands on the hood of a Cadillac four-by-four, literally creating space for this new dynamic to emerge. These kuduristas call their kuduro “conscious kuduro,” and as MC Sacerdote says in the opening salvo of the song, they build networks with young people across borders and oceans, “do circuito fechado para o mundo”—from “a closed circuit” (*circuito fechado* being the name of their studio in Sambizanga) to the world.

Values and Value: Rebranding Kuduro

But how liberatory can this really be? For the most radical, politically engaged youth in Luanda today, the kinds of transnational connections and global technological flows celebrated and embraced in the wake of the Arab spring (and gestured to in the MC Sacerdote video) have had limited success, and a high cost. Calls to mobilize against the president's dictatorship by the Movimento Revolucionário (Revolutionary Movement) in March 2011, March 2012, and before elections in August 2012, and for veterans' benefits by former veterans in May 2012, were met with extreme violence, disappearances, and repression. Revelations in November 2013 exposed a police hit list that included the names of outspoken activist musicians such as Luaty Beirão (Mata Frakuz), Carbono Casimiro, and Brigadier 10 Pacotes. Significantly, kuduro artists have not been a part of this movement—and here, perhaps, we encounter the limits of the alternatives that kuduro offers. One can't say that it was co-opted by the establishment—since it was never outside it in the first place. Kuduro is purely internal to the system, a form that might best be thought of as a "culture of repair" (Larkin 2008:235) with bling; a kind of aspirational survivalism.

In addition, while kuduro catches the attention of just about anyone who sees it, including the press, it tends to be seen as a lively cultural manifestation in the midst of the extremes of wealth and poverty that serve as the boilerplate of foreign representations of life in contemporary Angola. Both the local and foreign press share an interest in the local roots and global reach of this art form, featuring titles like "Kuduro: The New 'Ambassador' of Angolan Music?", "Kuduro: The Angolan Beat That's Shaking the World," and "Kuduro from the Roots" (Manuel 2010; Bartolo 2008). This focus, however, shifts attention from political and economic issues to social and cultural matters. One music critic, for instance, describing the context of kuduro's emergence, points to the "inversion of values and the breakdown of the ethic and morals of families" caused by thirty years of war (Fortunato 2010:35). Another prominent journalist decries official support for kuduro, which he deems a disposable form of music that valorizes indiscriminate consumerism and fails the test of representing the nation (Mateus 2010). In 2010–11 the president, state institutions, party youth organizations (of the MPLA and UNITA), and churches inaugurated an informal campaign to rescue "values," targeting the family as the locus of intervention.[4] Taking a skeptical view of this emerging discussion, the journalist Reginaldo Silva (2010a) pointed out on his blog, "Morro Da Maianga," that there is a crucial distinction between "values and interests" and discussed the ironies inherent in a roundtable sponsored by the MPLA Provincial Committee of Luanda, titled "Rescue of Ethical, Moral, Civic and Cultural Values," which focused on the bottom of the social pyramid to the exclusion of the top. "There will only be a clear and sustained inversion of this tendency [the crisis in values]," he said, "when Angolans are better served at the table of an ever-growing GDP that has been slow to be divided *per capita* in the most just and equitable way" (2010b). But the campaign for values eschews questions of distribution for a therapeutics of talk.

The immense wealth and grinding poverty that assault the eyes of visitors to Luanda remain as evident as ever. The national economy of Angola is booming, despite the repercussions of the global economic crisis (see Almeida 2011). The value of Angolan oil on the international market and the value of the Angolan economy (OSISA 2012) are "*sempre a subir!*" (always on the up and up!), to quote the refrain from Faia's song "Kazacuta Dança." But the average Angolan is no better off financially than he or she was at the end of the war. More goods and services are available, but they remain inaccessible to most. The daily hum, buzz, and rattle of generators, the sight of children and women ascending apartment building staircases with bright red-capped containers dripping water on their heads, and of water trucks with thick hoses filling cisterns and plastic tanks, demonstrate the failures of state service infrastructure to keep pace with the urban population's needs for electricity and water (Bulfin 2009). Traffic is so bad that office workers no longer return home for lunch and those who live in the new developments of Luanda Sul hit the road by 5:00 a.m. to travel a mere 25 kilometers to their places of work in the downtown. Luandans bemoan the waste of time and the congestion of urban space, but even more, the lack of civility and solidarity. In the late 1990s, when I started doing research in Luanda, residents told stories of the breadlines in the 1970s and 1980s to underscore the scarcity of the decades that followed independence. In the present people recount these stories to make a different point. Today the emphasis is on the kind of human relations that pertained: it used to be that you could put a rock on the ground to hold your place in line and everyone respected it because everyone suffered together. But gone are the days when "everyone" sacrificed for the new nation and when socialist values of solidarity were the rule of the day.

And so the question bears repeating: How liberatory is Kuduro? Where does kuduro fit in to all of these developments? Alisch and Siegert (2012) argue for the ways that kuduro music and dance do the work of managing war trauma, explicitly if un-self-consciously, in a country that despite its twenty-seven years of civil war does not have a program for national reconciliation. National reconciliation is a value worth cultivating, but the days of collective social projects have receded along with state regulation of the economy and collective empathy. Kuduro, therefore, offers a different social value: that of generational ritual. But whereas Jayna Brown (2010), as we have seen, locates a liberatory potential in kuduro, António Tomás (2014) insists that the art form—drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's idea of a "body without organs," empty of meaning—is more a medium or tool for the performance of social visibility than it is a message. Unlike Brown, in other words, he reads it as a nonsubversive genre whose value exists in its capacity to claim social visibility for the participants.

Kiluanje Liberdade and Ines Goncalves's film *Luanda: Fábrica da Música* (2009) shows how producing a kuduro track has become a rite of passage in certain Luanda musseques. For other youth, kuduro produces street "cred," and many are the tales of the relations between musseque gangs and kuduro artists.[5] Weekly CD launchings, new videos, and the media profiles of some young artists indicate that whether as one-hit wonders or as more durable artists, at least some kuduristas translate the so-called breakdown and inversion of values into economic profit. One extreme example is Sebem, who in a 2010 interview bragged about spending a minimum of $2,500 every weekend (Bento 2010). The biographies of kuduristas like the popular Bruno M testify to the fact that kuduro can be a vector of personal development and social mobility, out of criminality and into the spotlight (Miranda 2010). The singer Puto Português transitioned from kuduro artist to celebrated semba singer, prompting some to describe kuduro as "children's music" (*música infantil*), a stepping-stone to "real" music. And Tomás argues, convincingly, that by producing social visibility kuduro also produces mobility, through complex developments in the informal market of kuduro and nodes of political appropriation, as exemplified by os Lambas's lead singer, Nagrelha, in the MPLA's 2012 election campaign.

Critics who are wed to a mode of politics and representation derived from the domination and resistance politics of anticolonial struggle perhaps ask kuduro to bear the burden of representing the nation while missing the other networks artists and fans forge and the new complexities of postcolonial cultural politics (see Mbembe 2001). By and large, criticisms derive from members of the intelligentsia—journalists, writers, academics—who worry that kuduro is not a dignified cultural product. A few critics occupy positions in the lower echelons of government ministries, but one of the most prominent fans of the genre, as we have seen, is one of the president's sons, José Eduardo "Coreon Dú" Paulino dos Santos. A self-proclaimed child of the kuduro generation and himself a musician, he is one of kuduro'a biggest promoters via his "multi-entertainment" company, Da Banda, and Semba Comunicações (owned by his sister, Welwitchia "Tchizé" dos Santos), which produces programs for TPA2, the national television station's second channel. In 2012 and 2013 the "os Kuduristas" festival with its "Angolan kuduro music, dance, fashion and cultural life-style multimedia events" (www.oskuduristas.com) traveled to Europe and the U.S. This festival, started by Semba Comunicações and Da Banda, later signed a New York marketing company, Thought Bubble + Cunning Concepts, to the project.

We must consider, once again, that the Angolan civil war ended in 2002 and that reconstruction is palpable. Frenzied construction in Luanda and throughout the country announces financial liquidity in a vertical idiom. The Luanda skyline pushes upward with new high-rises and construction cranes; billboards emblazoned with bright curlicues and shiny surfaces project a promising future over trenches dug deep—teeming with water just below the city's surface—and around the condemned buildings of the colonial period and the socialist republic that followed independence. The Minister of Culture, formerly the director of the Historical Archive, took a building off the historic registry so that it could be razed and a skyscraper built in its footprint. Her logic: "The historical reasons that once existed no longer pertain" (*Diário da República* 2012). Scanning the city, the eye moves away from the historied Atlantic horizon to the sky from which investment drops like a BRIC. In the socialist period every state ministry had a Cuban advisor; now they have a Brazilian consultant. Russian mining interests and Indian bilateral projects in railroad infrastructure and consumer imports are steady but small next to trenchant and multisector Chinese investment and credit lines. The Angolan state and business interests busy themselves marketing the country as Dubai on the Atlantic.

Like the city and country, then, kuduro is being remade and rebranded. In this context, the "os Kuduristas" campaign may be just the kind of project that kuduro artists need. Kuduro's transnational travel has been limited so far to YouTube videos, immigrant networks, and foreign interest (namely by the French producer Frederic Galliano and MIA via Portugal's Buraka Som Sistema) sparked by the videos and online samples of the music. Very few artists have performed internationally and no artists boast international careers. Da Banda's "os Kuduristas" takes Angolan artists and promotes kuduro around the world: Paris, Berlin, and Luanda in 2011; Paris, Amsterdam, Stockholm, New York, and Washington, D.C., in 2012; Ibiza in September 2013; and Rio in October 2013, where, with Bro Produções of Portugal, the company launched a film entitled *I Love Kuduro* (dir. Mário Patrocinio, 2014). These performances take kuduro and the *quintal* (backyard) out of the musseque (and the dust out of the quintal) and place them on an international stage. Da Banda puts kuduro on display to rebrand Angola as about something other than war, conflict, oil, and corruption: to effectively and affectively brand kuduro and Angola, to make them lovable internationally.

So when the Angolan intelligentsia and the independent Angolan media criticize kuduro, and when they ignore an event like the Kuduro International Conference held in Luanda in May 2012 (only the state press and TPA2 covered it, thanks to Da Banda and Semba Comunicações), they do so at their own peril. Suckered into a conservative discourse about cultural values and morals, they miss the matter at hand: interests are at play. Semba Comunicações and Da Banda have been given the state contract to promote Angola's image worldwide, including running ads on the U.S. Cable News Network (CNN). While Coréon Dú's intellectual and emotional investments in kuduro are sincere (his recently completed M.A. thesis is on quintal parties), they are also financial investments (the video that accompanied the thesis was underwritten by the Ministry of Petroleum). In a twenty-four-second promotional video for the "I Love Kuduro Festival" called "My name is Coréon Dú and I love kuduro," he proclaims his love for kuduro and asks us not to accept substitutes for the real thing—look for the "I Love Kuduro" logo, he says. Here the discourse of authenticity slips into that of copyright. Underneath the clip are links to Da Banda, Semba Comunicações, and the Government of Angola. Coréon Dú's business interests are vested interests. And the colors of that vest are unmistakable to Angolans: red, black, and yellow, the colors of the Angolan flag and of the MPLA. The "os Kuduristas" campaign, in branding kuduro, offers a hip, one-party-politics version of Angolan culture.

Still, the politics of kuduro are difficult to fix. The illusion of the body without bones allows for constant realignments. Kuduro of the late war years broke down and reconstructed the body, valorizing what state and opposition militaries treated as disposable. Kuduro of the early 2000s created an aesthetics located in and inspired by the musseques—tough but agile, facing conditions with humor—while kuduro of the second decade of the millennium often sports a tamer, more colorful, and more highly produced aesthetic. Like Cabo Snoop's *Windeck* video, this kuduro is more slick than gritty, more studio than musseque.

Kuduro is often seen as an avenue of social mobility, a way to traverse the class divide. Kudurista is now a potential professional category for young people, a path to individual progress as much as an artistic or creative endeavor. While most kuduro production begins in the informal economy—in musseque studios, circulated and promoted on candongueiros, passed via Bluetooth on mobile phones—established artists often finance new CDs by signing on with the production behemoth LS-Republicano Produções, an outfit that is tight with the president, or they hope to be discovered by well-known radio DJs from the National Radio Station (Radio Nacional de Angola). Surely many now aspire to get a gig with the "os Kuduristas" campaign, switching channels from the informal to the formal economy, from musseque to downtown, and from margin to center.

Sometimes dancers recover bodies for their own ends, reconcile war traumas and challenge the constraints on young lives with somatic invention. At other times dancers and musicians play dress-up with the accoutrements of power. Taking the name for the directing body of the military and other state institutions, the Lambas refer to themselves as the "Estado Maior" (the name of the highest military institution of the state) of Sambizanga, claiming control of the area. The young duo President Gasolina and Príncipe Ouro Negro, who have toured with "os Kuduristas," embrace the titles of executive and royal power and the names of the hydrocarbon resources and products from which the Angolan regime's wealth derives. They have their own manner of speech and dress. In speech they stretch certain vowels and pinch others—rearranging the bones of language as kuduro dancers do with their bodies. As Presidente Gasolina put it, "we have a certain way of speaking, a certain way of dressing, because kuduro exists and so does the kudurista. . . . The way of dressing is a brand, the kind of self-presentation is a brand" (*Janela Aberta* 2009). This is less about seeing themselves as products in the free market than it is about the symbolics of power in a highly controlled political economy where the informal is never unmarked by the formal workings of power.

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Notes

1. Stefanie Alisch and Nadine Siegert (2012:7–8) argue that kuduro music, dance, and videos emphasize Angolans' nonvictim status and even construct heroes—and that Van Damme is "an icon of the potent warrior and action hero."
2. See Fortunato (2010) on Amado's "deconstructionist choreography."
3. The much watched video by Tchiriri is a good example: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmL1HrWM0PE&feature=PlayList&p=92C690DCBC2AC552&playnext_from=PL&i. The video makes a claim for the dance's ubiquity and showcases it in a number of countries in Europe, Africa, and the African diaspora. This dance is an adaptation of "the electric slide." See Alisch and Siegert (2012) for a compelling reading of the video.
4. An unsurprising rhetorical move. See the president's end-of-the-year speech, December 28, 2010: http://www.portalangop.co.ao/motix/pt_pt/portal/discursos-dos-presidentes/discursos/2010/11/52/Mensagem-fim-do-ano-Presidente-Republica,5edee6ea-9be0-4902-a0a8-d8776a222f50.html. See also *Jornal de Angola* (2011).
5. See *O Independente* (2006) and *Angolense* (2007). Sebem spent much of 2011 in trouble with the police and did jail time in 2012 for his disrespectful attitude to their authority. Nagrelha, of os Lambas, was arrested for stealing a motorcycle and for cocaine possession. *Angonotícias* reported on February 11, 2011, that Nagrelha, of Os Lambas, had been sentenced to forty-five days in prison for possession of one gram of cocaine. An earlier charge of motor vehicle theft in 2009 had been dismissed.