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“The Tahiti of the Northern Hemisphere”: Countertransference as Impediment to Transculturalism in Audrey Magee’s *The Colony*” (2022)

Abstract

Victor Turner suggests that travel is an intrinsically liminal experience, detaching the traveller from the structures of their normal lives and immersing them in an unfamiliar, perhaps even incomprehensible, environment. In theory, this suspension in unfamiliar spaces should invite a willingness to embrace the different perspectives one encounters, thus expanding one’s mind. The difficulty, as Georges Devereux argues, is that the observer rarely succeeds in adopting an objective gaze when confronted with an unfamiliar culture. Rather that gaze is structured by their own expectations, resulting in the imposition of meaning on what is observed, a process he describes as “countertransference”. This essay will analyze the difficulties identified by Devereux in constructing a genuinely transcultural perspective, using as a case study Audrey Magee’s novel *The Colony* (2022).

Keywords

Liminality, Countertransference, Colonialism, Hegemony

The Aran islands, a cluster of small settlements off the west coast of Ireland, represent in the minds of many visitors the opportunity to witness a traditional way of life, where the Irish language is still spoken and fishing, knitting and other crafts continue to be central to the life of the community. The islands thus constitute a kind of mirror, in which a more authentic Ireland can be reflected, a bastion of values and traditions long since eroded in the rest of Ireland by the dual processes of colonization and modernization. The ideal tourist will adopt what Nathan Suhr-

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Sytsma characterizes “the ethical stance of unknowingness”¹, allowing themselves to gaze through the mirror at cultural practices they do not understand without trying to impose their own meanings on them. The difficulty, as Georges Devereux argues, is that the observer rarely succeeds in adopting an objective gaze when confronted with an unfamiliar culture. Rather that gaze is structured by their own expectations, resulting in the imposition of meaning on what is observed, a process he describes as “countertransference”². This essay will analyze the difficulties identified by Devereux in constructing a genuinely transcultural perspective, using as a case study Audrey Magee’s novel *The Colony* (2022).

Travelling to different cultures has long been acknowledged as a means for the individual to expand their horizons, allowing for the development of what John McLeod calls: “new, dynamic ways of thinking about identity which go beyond older static models, such as national identity and the notion of ‘rootedness’”³. Victor Turner suggests that travel is an intrinsically liminal experience, detaching the traveller from the structures of their normal lives and immersing them in an unfamiliar, perhaps even incomprehensible, environment. In theory, this suspension in unfamiliar spaces should invite a willingness to embrace the different perspectives one encounters, thus expanding one’s mind⁴. *Communitas*, for Turner, is what occurs when those who cross into liminal spaces allow themselves to be transformed by the suspension of hierarchies and traditions that define such spaces. Benefitting from the exchange of ideas with others, liminal spaces become sites of significant resistance to authoritative narratives, and the new perspectives developed as a consequence of *communitas* are achieved through the accommodation of difference⁵. This willingness to develop new perspectives is particularly important in the contemporary world, in which as James Conroy notes, healthy debate is being stifled by an increasingly narrow conception of individualism based on the silencing of alternative perspectives: “The tendency to occlude the voice of the other is particularly apparent with respect to the increasingly hegemonic claims of a globalized economy”⁶. In other words,

¹ N. Suhr-Sytsma, “Haiku Aesthetics and Grassroots Internationalization: Japan in Irish Poetry”, *Éire-Ireland* 45-3-4, 2010, p. 267.

² G. Devereux, *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioural Sciences*, Paris, Mouton and Co., 1967 (2014), p., xvi.

³ J. McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000, p. 216.

⁴ V. Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1974, pp. 166-7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

⁶ J. Conroy, *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Imagination, Education and Democracy*, New York, Peter Lang, 2004, p. 24.

globalization tends to make everyone more similar and compliant to the dominant western culture rather than more diverse.

Wolfgang Welsch coined the term “transcultural” to suggest an ideal global citizen, who interacts with and absorbs other cultural influences⁷. However, he cautions against mistaking an ability to travel to another culture with the open-mindedness needed to embrace new cultural practices. In fact he argues that “multiculturalism”, whereby a number of different – but not necessarily interacting – cultural groups coexist, often in a clear hierarchy, continues to be a more accurate reflection of many societies⁸. This is perhaps particularly apparent when the interaction is between a perceived dominant culture and a more marginal one, resulting in the unequal transfer of influence noted by Edward Said in his analysis of the hegemony of the western gaze: “Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient[...] a discourse [...] by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively”⁹. Said’s point is that as long as western travellers continue to view other countries as “foreign”, “exotic” and “other”, they are maintaining the balance of power that puts the west in the position of influence. Tourists go to experience foreign cultures but end up imposing their expectations on what they see rather than allowing their own worldview to be transformed.

The extent to which the tourist gaze conflates an “authentic” experience with the pre-constructed expectations formed by guidebooks and other representations is the source of much critical debate. John Urry defines the tourist gaze as a set of expectations that tourists impose on other cultures and people, particularly when they visit cultural or heritage sites in an attempt to experience what they perceive of as an “authentic” experience¹⁰. Moreover, he suggests that the tourist gaze is “constructed through difference”, so that instead of experiencing a foreign culture on its own terms, the tourist will tend to focus in on those aspects of culture that are different to their own, ensuring a clear binary between everyday life and their holiday. This enables the tourist to experience a break from routine, a clear departure from the spaces and practices of their everyday lives: “Such practices involve the notion of ‘departure’, of a limited breaking with established routines and practices of everyday

⁷ W. Welsch, “Transculturality: The Puzzling Forms of Cultures Today”, in M. Featherstone and S. Lash, eds, *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*, London, Sage, 1999, p. 199.

⁸ W. Berg and A. Ní Éigeartaigh, *Exploring Transculturalism: A Biographical Approach*, Wiesbaden, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010, p.10.

⁹ E. Said, *Orientalism*, London, Routledge, 1978, p. 11.

¹⁰ J. Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, London, SAGE Publications Ltd., 2002, pp.1-2.

life and allowing one's senses to engage with a set of stimuli that contrast with the everyday and the mundane"¹¹. What is unclear is whether these tourists undergo transformation as a result of their encounters with other cultures – or whether exposure to an unfamiliar culture merely affirms for the traveller the superiority of their own “normality”. Dean McCannell suggests that tourism is often interpreted as a quest for authenticity, likening the contemporary tourist to a pilgrim who seeks revelation in spaces and time periods that are outside ordinary life: “To be *alive*, as opposed to merely existing or ‘surviving’, it is necessary to be open to excitement, new prospects, to be attracted to difference, to break free of routines, to have an adventure, to change scenes and think new thoughts, to take a chance, and to have something new to say”¹². However, this potential to absorb new experiences is not always seized by the tourist, who may mistake the prepackaged and commodified images of culture for the culture itself and thus fail to ever emerge from “his own prison house of signs”¹³. In order for the tourist to undergo transformation as a consequence of encounters with another culture, they must be willing to encounter the other on equal terms: “Whether or not tourism... can ever be a ‘utopia of difference’, ultimately depends on its capacity to recognize and accept *otherness* as radically other. To me, this means the possibility of recognizing and attempting to enter into a dialogue, on an equal footing, with forms of intelligence absolutely different from my own”¹⁴. As Turner also emphasizes, *communitas* is predicated on acknowledging the differences between cultures in a respectful, egalitarian setting, with subjects willing to learn and transform their own perspectives as a result of their interactions with others.

Magee's novel *The Colony* is set on a small island off the west coast of Ireland in 1979. The island's population has been decimated due to lack of employment, emigration and decades of economic neglect, and comprises primarily of one family, which succinctly epitomizes the likely extinction of the island's traditional way of life: Bean Uí Néill speaks only Irish, her daughter Bean Uí Fhloinn and grand-daughter Mairéad speak primarily Irish but have some understanding of English, while her great-grandson James speaks both Irish and English fluently, prefers to use the English version of his name and is determined to escape his fate as a fisherman by leaving the island. The majority of island men have either emigrated, died (Mairéad's husband, brother and father drowned together during their work as fishermen) or live partly on the mainland,

¹¹ Ibid, p. 2.

¹² D. McCannell, *The Tourist*, Berkeley, University of California Press. 2013, p.xxii.

¹³ Ibid, p. xxxiii.

¹⁴ Ibid.

running the boat service to the island. Additional income to survive the winter is generated through hosting tourists in the summer. In the period covered in the novel, the island community is joined by Mr Lloyd, an English artist and first-time visitor who has come to refresh his jaded imagination in the wilds of the island; and JP Masson, a French linguist and returning visitor who is in the final stages of a PhD in linguistics and has been tracing the evolution over a number of years of the Irish language on the island. Both men introduce significant disruption into the life of the islanders, as they vie to impose their own perspectives on the community they have joined. In their different ways, they exemplify a neo-colonial gaze, objectifying and exoticizing the islanders in order to suit their own purpose. Magee’s narrative is frequently interrupted by references to the violence in Northern Ireland, reminding the reader of the inevitably violent consequences of colonization. However, the wider historical legacy of Ireland’s troubled history is secondary in the novel to the gradual but seemingly unstoppable transformation of the lives of islanders as a consequence of the “disturbances” created by “the existence and observational activities of the observer”¹⁵.

Mr Lloyd, the English artist, insists on travelling to the island in a *currach* (small boat, traditionally made of animal skins), even though such vessels are no longer used by the island men. Thus, rather than embracing the different values of the islanders in a spirit of *communitas*, Mr Lloyd, like so many tourists, insists that his preconceived expectations are met. Right from the start, his determination to experience “authentic” island life is undermined by the constructed nature of his journey, with the islanders struggling to contend with a small boat they have lost the expertise to operate (and as the reader learns is now supplemented with a small engine they manage to hide from Mr Lloyd). He appears initially to be trying to embrace the kind of transcultural gaze suggested by Welsch, telling James that he is drawn to the island’s cliffs because: “They’re rugged here, wild...I like being on the edge, James. Away from London”¹⁶. This suggests that he is conscious of the limitations imposed by his logocentrism and is willing to immerse himself in the unnarrated, liminal spaces of the island. He acknowledges the limitations of his English education and even vocabulary, admitting that other languages and perspectives could broaden his ability to see: “he was confused by the gulls and terns, and by the array of black birds, for not all were cormorants. He looked up the guidebook and found images of shags but little else as it was a guide to birds in English gardens and on English cliffs”¹⁷.

¹⁵ G. Devereux, cit., p. xvii.

¹⁶ A. Magee, *The Colony*, London, Faber and Faber, 2022, p. 46.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 55-6.

Ultimately, however, he does little to embrace the “ethical stance of unknowingness” recommended by Suhr-Sytsma as necessary to cultivate a transcultural gaze, opting instead to reduce the complexity of what he sees to the hegemonic patterns and tropes he believes will make him a success in the art world.

My Lloyd has a strangely externalized sense of identity, seeing himself constantly as the subject of his own paintings: “*self-portrait: conversation with the boatman....self-portrait: becoming an island man....self-portrait: going native*”¹⁸. The irony is that he has no intention of “becoming” an island man, rather he is determined to rearrange what he encounters to fit into the image he has of a community he can only regard as inferior and primitive. He distains the food he is cooked, speaks only English (which he assumes most of the islanders are too ignorant to understand) and almost immediately breaks his promise that he will not paint the islanders, exemplifying the arrogant colonial presumption that they are resources for him to exploit:

You’ve been drawing the islanders.
I have. Going to mass.
You said you wouldn’t.
Did I? I forgot.¹⁹

With his gaze limited by his own cultural expectations, Mr Lloyd fails to really see the landscape in which he has immersed himself: “You’re not understanding the light at all, you have it sitting on the top of the sea, but it doesn’t do that, does it? No, it buries underneath, diving between the waves as a bird might”²⁰. Intrigued by the innate artistic understanding James has of his native landscape, Mr Lloyd takes him under his wing, proposing that he tutor the boy so that at the end of the summer, they would hold a joint exhibition of their paintings in London:

We’ll call our exhibition *The Islanders*.
But you’re not an islander, Mr Lloyd.
I am now.²¹

This exchange suggests that Mr Lloyd is going to try to adopt the values of *communitas*, defined by Turner as a willingness to share and exchange so that genuinely new and egalitarian perspectives can be forged, that deconstruct previous hierarchies: “ignore, reverse,

¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 7, 10.

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 40-1.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 146.

²¹ Ibid, p. 212.

cut across or occur outside of structural relationships"²². However, it quickly becomes evident that he is both unable and unwilling to cede representational control, exemplifying the hegemony of the western gaze in its encounters with the Other. This is reflected in his paintings of the islanders, whose individuality he ignores in favour of traditional symbols and tropes of island life. Louis DePaor has written about the prevalence of the "idealized peasant trope" in cultural representations of the west, in which: "The heroic endurance and social solidarity[...] appeared to confirm the exemplary values of traditional, rural, Irish-speaking, communities in the west of Ireland"²³. Such tropes were castigated by Máirtín Ó Cadhain, writer and native of the *Gaeltacht* (Irish-speaking area in the west of Ireland) as indicative of an outsider's perspective, employing rose-tinted lenses to exoticize the rural community and impede its ability to progress economically or socially²⁴. That Mr Lloyd's paintings represent this determination to romanticize the islanders as a means of control becomes evident to James when he views his own image and realizes he had never been considered an equal by the Englishman, only a subject that confirmed his own superiority: "An island boy with fish. No longer an artist, an apprentice....I'm an exhibit. A fisherman....It's me as you want me to be seen, Mr Lloyd. As you want me to be interpreted"²⁵.

To the island's other visitor, Frenchman Masson, Mr Lloyd's paintings of the islanders are a straightforward manifestation of his ingrained colonial superiority, which cannot overcome centuries of learned behaviour and see the Irish as anything other than inferior beings whose culture needs to be quashed: "That the English are deeply intolerant of the Irish language... That the English have done their best to portray Irish as the language of the poor, of the stupid"²⁶. However, Magee's portrait of Mr Lloyd is more nuanced than this, suggesting that the English colonial gaze is only one manifestation of a deeply ingrained western hegemony, which makes it impossible for him to see the islanders outside of its well-established conventions. Mr Lloyd's observation of the islanders is not only clouded by his English gaze, it also carries the weight of western art history and the canonical perspectives it promotes. This is most evident in a series of paintings Mr Lloyd does of Mairéad, James' mother, a young widow who finds herself trapped between the expectations of island life

²² V. Turner, cit., p. 274.

²³ L. De Paor, "Introducing Máirtín Ó Cadhain", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2008, p.10.

²⁴ R. Welch, *Changing States: Transformations in Modern Irish Writing*, London, Routledge, 1993, p.148.

²⁵ A. Magee, cit., pp. 347-6.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 354.

and a yearning to see more of the world, a dream that was taken from her when her young husband was drowned. When Mr Lloyd initially spots Mairéad, he is struck by her natural beauty:

hair
drifting
down
washes and ink
brown tones
simple lines
soft²⁷

However his paintings of Mairéad fail to capture anything of the reality of her constrained life, turning her instead into the conventional artist's muse. Criticizing the paintings, James points out that rather than trying to understand his mother's identity and role within the island community, Mr Lloyd has sacrificed her subjectivity to his innate need to contain her within a trope that serves only to exoticize and silence her:

You're painting as yourself. An Englishman on an Irish island.
What does that mean?
You're turning the island into something it isn't.
You've lost me, James.
Mam isn't the centre of things. She isn't top dog....A beautiful woman in the centre. Everything dotted around that. Painting done. Job done.
You're doing all that. Have been for centuries.²⁸

As James points out, the subjugation of beautiful women in art to the male gaze is a long-established critique in feminist art history, with Norma Broude citing the: "extent to which women as well as men in the twentieth century had come to accept the sexualized and possessive gaze of the male upon the body of the female as integral to the patriarchy's definition of high art and universal cultural greatness"²⁹. Magee makes the link between patriarchy and colonization even more explicit in Mr Lloyd's imagining himself as a contemporary Gauguin, travelling to the wilds of the west of Ireland to capture some of the primitive sensuality of the island women. Broude comments that Gauguin's representations of native women is indicative of the "unstable borders between colonialism and multiculturalism", with his claim to have em-

²⁷ Ibid, p. 23.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 336.

²⁹ N. Broude, *Gauguin's Challenge: New Perspectives After Postmodernism*, New York, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018, p. 1.

braced the culture of the Other and expanded his imagination beyond the confines of his education increasingly rejected in favour of perspectives that see his paintings as exploitative: “a misguided and insufficiently informed translation of indigenous cultures that were not his own, a cross-cultural appropriation and commodification that failed to enrich the cultural content or to respect the point of view of its traditional sources”³⁰. When Mr Lloyd’s sojourn on the island comes to an end, he leaves with a portfolio of paintings he is sure will make him the toast of the London art world:

extols me on the opening night as the Gauguin of the northern hemisphere, as the existentialist of British art who lived on a remote Irish island for almost four months, alone, isolated, a hermit in a hut, without electricity, without running water, on a diet of fish and potatoes....By his natural capacity to see as an artist, to interpret as an artist....Lloyd, this great British artist, is unpicking all of those assumptions and habits in our ways of seeing and returning us to the more egalitarian roots of the naive period.³¹

This comical insight into Mr Lloyd’s self-delusion not only highlights the paternalism which masks significant acts of colonial aggression, but also indicates his failure to learn from the perspectives of the islanders. Having spent a summer in their midst, he has refused to allow any modification of his gaze, insisting that the reflection he sees in the mirror reinforces his hegemonic western assumptions.

The island’s second visitor, Frenchman JP Masson, is adamant from the start that he will respect the customs of the islanders and resist imposing his own practices on them. He is an annual visitor and is in the final stages of his PhD thesis entitled “Evolution or Demise? The linguistic patterns in the Irish language over four generations. A five-year comparative study of one island family”³². Based on interviews with members of the multi-generational Uí Néill family and linguistic analysis of their speech patterns, Masson’s study aims to trace the gradual erosion of Irish as even remote communities are swallowed up by the globalized English-speaking world. He is horrified that the natural evolution of their language practice is likely to be tainted by the presence of Mr Lloyd, whose own monolingualism forces the islanders to use whatever English they know to communicate with him.

Some of Masson’s interventions are logical and well-intentioned. For example, he chides the islanders for switching to English at dinner-time

³⁰ Ibid, p. 3.

³¹ A. Magee, cit., pp. 330-2.

³² Ibid, p. 119.

to accommodate Mr Lloyd, who makes no concession for their language preferences: “I’m sorry, Lloyd, but we have to speak Irish....This is an Irish-speaking house”³³. He is very sensitive to the cultural richness of the Irish language and its function as a repository of Irish traditions and values: “It carries their history, their thinking, their being”³⁴. When Mr Lloyd dismisses his concerns and suggests that most young islanders will opt for the convenience of the English language, Masson succinctly criticizes linguistic hegemony which since colonial times has coerced the Irish into speaking English if they want to access education or the means to earn a living:

Languages die, said Lloyd, because the speakers give up on them.
That can be a contributing factor, yes.
Isn’t that then the speakers’ choice? The freedom of their will?
That choice, that freedom is often more curtailed and complicated than you might think.³⁵

Masson’s research into the evolution of the language allows Magee to remind the reader of centuries of English colonial repression of the Irish language and the detrimental impact this cultural dispossession had on the Irish people. However it becomes apparent that in his own way, Masson is just as determined as Mr Lloyd to impose his views on the island. This is evident in the many arguments he has with the islanders about what he perceives as their lack of sufficient care for the Irish language. He frequently criticizes James for using the English version of his name:

What are you up to, Séamus?
My name is James. And you know that.
Your Irish name is Séamus.
I use my English name.
I prefer the Irish.
It’s not your choice, JP.³⁶

This exchange, which is repeated several times, suggests that Masson is not content to observe the evolution of language on the island, but is rather determined to halt the progression of English entirely. His refusal to allow James the right to name himself is ironically indicative of the same colonial mentality illustrated by Lloyd and suggests that

³³ Ibid, p. 143.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 145.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 79.

³⁶ Ibid, pp. 119-20.

in spite of his professed desire to respect the views of the islanders, he is equally guilty of forcing his agenda on them. Masson’s insistence that the island retain its status as repository of a romantic, Gaelic Ireland, predicated on its retention of linguistic purity, is indicative of a widespread romanticization of the culture and language of the west, a policy that treats the language as an historical artefact to be preserved rather than a living language to be supported. The consequence, as Bríona Nic Dhiarmada observes, is that: “The Gaeltacht, the living repository of the ancestral language, thus became a fossilized, idealised embodiment of what had been lost, imagined now through a haze of romantic nostalgia”³⁷. The islanders are astute enough to understand that Masson’s activism on behalf of the Irish language would require them to remain frozen in time, limited to traditional customs and ways of earning a living, and impeded from embracing the opportunities of the contemporary world:

This island should be protected from English speakers.
Micheál laughed.
Like a museum, JP?
More a conservation project.
A zoo then?
An Irish-speaking island is a precious thing, Micheál.
You can’t lock people onto the island because they speak Irish, JP.
You can if it saves the language.³⁸

Masson is a fascinating character to study in the light of Devereux’s theories. Devereux identified what he viewed as a significant flaw in behavioural science research, namely the difficulty for the researcher in maintaining an objective perspective. Although the ideal observer would constitute a kind of invisible presence akin to a machine, the reality is that most social science research is somewhat autobiographical, as the observer cannot help but impose their own reactions on what they see. This has two significant consequences for the research. The presence of the observer introduces “disturbances” into the lives of the subjects being observed. In other words, they cannot avoid changing their behaviour under the lens of observation. Secondly, the observer will in the very act of observing transform what they actually see, because their own biases and needs will inevitably result in the attribution of meaning³⁹. Masson’s inability to mutely observe is evident to Mr

³⁷ B. Nic Dhiarmada, “Utopia, Anti-Utopia, Nostalgia and Ó Cadhain”, *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, vol 34, no 1, 2008, p. 54.

³⁸ Magee, cit., p. 143.

³⁹ G. Devereux, cit., pp. xvii-xix.

Lloyd, who accuses him of breaching the responsibilities of a researcher and trying to sway the data he is gathering:

Are you a linguist?

I am.

I thought the job of a linguist was to observe, said Lloyd.

I am observing.

You're not. You're influencing. Campaigning.

The language is dying in front of us. Of course I am campaigning to save it.

But that's not your job, said Lloyd. That's not the job of a linguist.⁴⁰

Ironically given their summer-long feud, Masson leaves the island in almost identical circumstances to Mr Lloyd, carrying his portfolio of interviews and observations, and anticipating the dividends his months of work will bring him:

the great French linguist who lived in primitive conditions on the edge of Europe for five years, no electricity, no water, a diet of fish and potatoes, and he should be honoured, dear readers, dear listeners, dear viewers, by the President with the Légion d'honneur for services to culture for his commitment to this dying language, this ancient beauty.⁴¹

The striking similarities in Masson and Mr Lloyd's assessment of the fruits of their work on the island suggest that neither of them really saw the islanders as anything other than a commodity to be exploited. Both men reduce the complexities of the islanders to familiar, hegemonic tropes of the idealized, primitive yet culturally rich communities that inhabit marginal spaces just outside the civilized world. Neither man undergoes any transformation as a consequence of their interactions with the islanders, and they both return to their careers having reinforced their own sense of themselves as the benign recorders, even saviours, of a community too wedded to their own ways to prosper in the contemporary world. Rather than cultivating a truly transcultural perspective, Mr Lloyd and Masson gazed at the mirror and could see only what they, and generations of western visitors, artists and researchers before them, wanted to see: "The Tahiti of the northern hemisphere"⁴².

⁴⁰ A. Magee, p. 144.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 226.

⁴² Ibid, p. 355.

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