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Cultural Primitivism: Wild White Fetish

Introduction

It may be suggested that the contacts made between Europeans and non-Europeans including the indigenous peoples as early as the 16th century has been a popular theme in western culture. There is no doubt that the encounter between western and non-western cultures have had a lasting impact on white or western social memories. Today, one may discover that the memories of meeting the Other are rekindled in an intellectually organized way through societies, literature as well as films.

The purpose of this paper then is to problematize such enthusiasm as perceived in Australian literature in the last decade. The central argument is that contemporary Australian literature has demonstrated a 'knack' for white primitivism. Primitivism is not necessarily about stepping into the boots of Crocodile Dundee, the stereotypical hero of the Australian Outback. In fact, to put it ironically, the white primitive is supposedly 'superior' than Mick Dundee because he is 'indigenised' as an Aborigine. In short, the white primitive has become 'almost' one of 'Them'. This is indeed an interesting phenomenon to be examined given especially the well-known attitude of white Australia towards the Aborigines as well as other people of colour like Asians and Arabs. The selected literary works indicate a distinct pattern of cultural primitivism. White Australian writers are apparently 'moving' white men deep into the frontier where they have no other choice but to helplessly 'surrender' to the dominant culture of the Other.

Cultural Primitivism as Discourse

Cultural primitivism is possibly the outcome of cultural immersion and has been a consistent subject of interest among white European intellectuals. The connection between cultural primitivism and literature cannot be denied especially in British, American, West Indian, Canadian, New Zealand and Australian literatures where cultural encounters between European and non-European, settler-invaders and native indigenes/aborigines/First Nations; coloniser and colonised; had occurred. The host native/indigenous/aboriginal culture, in its most general sense, seems to be an endless source of inspiration, theme or motif for, of course, western/white writers. According to John W. Griffiths (1995:147):

Most men, and many writers of literature, are primitivists in some moods, longing to escape from the complications, fever, anxieties, and alienation of modern civilisation into the elemental simplicities of a lost natural life. That life may be imagined as an individual's childhood, as the classical or medieval past, or as some primitive, carefree, faraway place on earth.

The Rousseauist cult of the Noble Savage, an influential Enlightenment idea on the virtuous innocence of the 'savage' peoples, is often embodied in the American Indian, and celebrated by writers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and James Fenimore Cooper. Rousseau's work *Discourses on the Origins of Inequality* denounces civilized society by "postulating the paradox of the superiority of the 'noble savage'" (Hutchinson's Encyclopedia 1991:717).

Cultural primitivism is simply "the preference of 'nature' over 'art' in any field of human culture and values" (in Griffiths 1995:146). Furthermore, "the cultural primitivist asserts that in the modern world, the life, activities and products of 'primitive' people - who are considered to live in a way more accordant to 'nature' because they are isolated from civilisation - are preferable to the life, activities, and products of people living in a highly developed society, especially in cities" (ibid.). Today, primitivism or its permutations such as nativism or Aboriginalism, stands in the grey area between being a movement of a particular motion or

simply a special vogue or cult or sub-culture (like the hippie movement in 1960's America) especially in heterogeneous (cosmopolitan) societies. Whichever it is, there must be reasons and some ways of explaining and understanding the phenomenon.

According to Zawiah Yahya (1994:41) "interest in primitive man was already sustained by travellers' tales, and from 1870s onwards by mass-produced 'ethnographic novels' brought to the Victorian drawing-room by improved publishing techniques". The Victorian period witnesses "the need to sensationalise aspects of primitive life" by combining "the paradox of romanticism and savagery" (ibid.). This popular pastime ensures that "the native stereotype [is] sustained and nurtured" in "the world of science and popular literature" (ibid.).

Perhaps, it is safe to implicate cultural primitivism is also the consequence of European colonialism. Cultural primitivism is hardly a justification for the invasion of indigenous lands. Christopher Columbus could not have been an anthropologist - if he knew he had mistaken the West Indies for India (and dark-skinned Indians), he would not have called the natives 'Red Indians', would he? The European colonisers were the first social engineers who had thought of creating the only man-made culture on this scale in the history of the human race. There has never been anything like it, nor will there be anything like it again. The Caribbean has always been the classic example in discussing the impact of initial encounter of cultures, colonial genocide and slavery, and cultural engineering.

The discovery of the Americas had inevitably caused European settlers to move westward, eventually settling, rather, penetrating, into tribal indigenous enclaves, which they arrogantly regarded as the American frontier to expand their realms. At the forefront of this westward movement were the so-called pathfinders or frontiersmen. Colonial encounters between the American Indians and the frontiersmen were crucial in the context of cultural hybridity. Due to trading, mingling, intermarrying as well as fighting with the indigenous tribes, they seemed to possess a unique quality. An expert on the American frontier, Mark A. Baker writes in *Sons of a Trackless Forest*¹:

The solitary woodsman of the colonial frontier who travelled beyond maps and into the deepest of a dark and deceptive wilderness is an image firmly rooted in American culture. In a variety of story lines found in both print and film, this linen-and-leather-clad individual passes freely between the European and Indian worlds, yet he stands squarely between the encroachment of the British powers and the untouched garden of the American Indian". As a hybrid frontiersman, who had come into and out of several cultures, he would have "judged the world through a myriad of codes, a complex blend of morality, and faced the challenges with a wide spectrum of wilderness talent.

James Fenimore Cooper's most famous novel *The Last of the Mohicans*, is an example of a Rousseauic admiration and lamentation of the wilderness and the civilization of, in this example, the American Indian. It romanticises the figure of the fearless and ever resourceful white frontiersman, as well as the stoic, wise, noble 'red man' and of course, the vast landscapes. It also breaks from the nineteenth century American literary convention by portraying for the first time, an interracial relationship between a European woman and an American Indian man. Such an unorthodox literary plot would have been regarded as 'dangerous' in terms of political correctness during that period of time when violent confrontations between white pathfinders and the indigenous peoples at the American frontier were common.

The myth of a man alone, away from society, in a wilderness, in a cave, is appealing and greatly romanticised. Craig Robertson (1980) states a variety of examples of such desire in human, ranging from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Edgar Rice Burrough's *Tarzan*, Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*, William Wordsworth's *Ode of Intimation*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and even Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek*. He claims that the notion of "man-alone-in-wilderness" is irresistible and "remains a powerful influence, for example, in the value placed on nature and our desired place in it permeates modern environmentalism" (ibid.). Interestingly enough, this has also been a popular notion that is country-specific. John Scheckter, in his article 'The lost child in Australian fiction' (1981:61) maintains, "the

narrative device of injecting an innocent or nearly defenseless character into an alien environment is common". This notion also carries political meaning, for Scheckter points out that in a sense "Australians have often seen themselves as the orphans or outcast children of Europe, given inheritances to which they must respond, for which they must pay, often without reason or reward" (ibid.:62).

Indeed, colonial encounters between Europeans and natives have contributed to a major literary tradition as demonstrated in many great novels such as *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, *Palace of the Peacock* by Wilson Harris and *Voss* by Patrick White. At the height of the British Empire, Victorian readers were preoccupied with the question of cultural degeneration - "would Europeans be able to maintain their cultural identities, or would they degenerate in a Kurtzian manner?" (Griffiths 1995:6). In *Resisting Colonialist Discourse* (1994:42) Zawiah Yahya argues that Conrad himself seemed to suggest that "European civilisation is merely a sophisticated facade for the savagery within". She explains that Conrad "was influenced by the forces of modernism as a result of Europe's encounter with other cultures which, among other things, saw the 'primitive' as expressive of the 'dark side' of civilised man" (ibid.).

Griffiths (1995:5) claims that Victorian science and travel literature were concerned with "the ability of people of one culture (particularly 'civilised' societies) to penetrate the thought of another society ('the primitive')". It is inevitable that *Remembering Babylon* will always be associated with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* because both reflect Victorian cultural anxiety of 'going native' or 'going back'. Kurtz, Conrad's hero, became a renegade by abandoning western civilised society to assume his new unspeakable identity in the dark forest of Belgian Congo. Conrad's narrator, Marlowe remarks:

Kurtz had apparently intended to return himself, the Station being by that time bare of goods and stores, but after coming three hundred miles, had suddenly decided to go back. They were at a loss for an adequate motive. As to me, I seemed to see Kurtz for the first time. It was a distinct glimpse:

the dugout, four paddling savages, and the lone white man turning his back suddenly on the headquarters, on relief, on thought of home—perhaps; setting his face towards the depths of the wilderness, towards his empty and desolate station (in Griffiths 1995:49).

Griffiths (1995:3) comments that “the abandonment of one’s culture in favour of another may be seen on several levels. On the stereotypical levels of Victorian ‘denationalization’, or ‘going native’, Kurtz becomes a cultural renegade; on another level, he enacts the ostensible goal of much fieldwork anthropology - the goal of cultural immersion”.

Cultural Primitivism in Australian Literature

Australian writing often balances the sophisticated and the primitive. Australian writers appear to be preoccupied with concepts of land and territories. The Australian Outback remains mysterious, evoking a sense of terrifying space. Evidently, the novels of Patrick White, Australia’s Nobel Laureate, *The Tree of Man* and *Voss* explore the first act of British settlement and deal with two opposing cultures - the new settlers and the Aborigines. Even more interestingly, *A Fringe of Leaves* bears striking resemblance to the fateful shipwreck motif of David Malouf’s protagonist, Gemmy Fairley in *Remembering Babylon*. White’s protagonist, Ellen Roxburgh, was a shipwrecked English woman who was forced to live with the Aborigines until she escaped at the end of the novel. Ellen’s identification highlighted somewhat differently from Gemmy’s. Peter Knox-Shaw (1987:189) comments on Ellen’s cannibalism when she devoured a cooked thigh-bone of a murdered Aboriginal girl after a secretly-held feast. Although bewildered by the violence of her act Ellen instantly recognizes her fulfillment of ‘some darker need of the hungry spirit’. She realizes, in sum, that the rite holds a significance for her that goes beyond the fact of her having broken a taboo of her own culture. According to Knox-Shaw “White bases the cannibal feast in *A Fringe of Leaves* on a mortuary custom reported among the Aborigines - particularly in the South Queensland region which fits the setting” (ibid.:191).

Until recently, white Australia has never shown genuine interest in the Aborigines especially, their political and cultural aspirations. According to Sue Hosking (1992:12), "white Australian writers struggle to establish Aboriginal presence in Australian literary consciousness". In her examination of Katharine Susannah Prichard's play *Brumby Innes* she suggests that "the text can be read as seeking to establish a mythology for white Australians - a mythology which at best acknowledges the importance and power of Aboriginal myth by proposing something equivalent for white Australians, but at worst as appropriating and despoiling Aboriginal custom, and by implying that it is primitive".

However, as Ian Mclean (1998), the author of *White Aborigines* has argued, white Australia did show a positive attitude towards primitivism or nativism or more accurately, Aboriginalism (but not in Aboriginal culture) after the Second World War as a way of dissociating itself as the British colonial outpost in the East. Mclean also notes the contribution of Xavier Herbert in *Capricornia*, which speaks of biological fusion for the first time. The central character in *Capricornia* is Norman, a bastard half-caste who is "shocked to discover that he does indeed belong to both races; but then he comes to the realisation that he is their heir"². Mudrooroo Naroogin, an important Aboriginal writer-critic, states that "Herbert is not describing the replacement of Aboriginal culture and society by the stronger British 'civilisation'; but by a 'new society emerging from the amalgamation of the two" (ibid.). According to Mudrooroo, "the Aboriginalist opposition of primitivism and civilisation engages in an ironic dialectic, and the synthesis of the dialectic is the 'new' race" (ibid.). Mclean, however, claims that "the possibilities of convergence are only imagined [but not realised]; and when made into reality are like many biological hybrids, a tragic impotent affair". He maintains that "there is no redemptive moment" (ibid.).

Perhaps, it would be interesting to ponder at David English's recent observation of the mindset of non-indigenous Australians as he reviews Mudrooroo's novel, *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*. According to English (1998):

Until comparatively recently, a lot of white people made fun of the idea of sacred sites, as part of a deeper and wider ignorance of the spirituality and cosmology of indigenous Australians, but there is now massive historical and anthropological evidence, as well as a whole white mind-shift, that allows us to begin to understand the reality of indigenous spirituality in this place.

English is suggesting of a 'paradigm shift' in Australia that is moving towards 'indigenous spirituality'. This can be experienced through the reading of Aboriginal literature, to be precise here, that "offer non-indigenous people a plausible interiorised sense of an indigenous spirituality that experiences a living connection between place, people, belief and reality" (ibid.). But there is also a more advanced dimension to this yearning to capture 'indigenous spirituality' which demands our attention too. Aboriginal literature aside, mainstream Australian literature is significantly deploying non-indigenous protagonists into the interiority of indigenous culture, characteristically empowering them with indigeneity.

The incorporation of Aboriginality is important in the construction of the 'typical Australian man' - one who "sprung from the land itself" and carries "the distinctive 'bush' ethos, who "struggled to assimilate the brute facts of the Australian geography"³. Mclean called the bushmen (transplanted British convict and free settlers) "white aborigines" - "a 'rough copy' of the [Aborigines and] aboriginal way of life" (ibid.). Thus, Aboriginalism is advocated for the cause of Australian nationalism - is it possible that Australia's independence was redeemed by the Aborigines; an Aboriginal consciousness?

Mclean observes that artists and writers especially, continued to be 'informed' and 'influenced' by Aboriginalism. The Jindyworobak movement in 1940s established white Australia's attitude towards Aboriginalism. It must be said however, that during the Jindyworobak movement, though the Aborigines were named " 'true ancestors' of the country, they were in effect, reduced and appropriated to mere metaphors only - "metaphors which were confined to white texts" (Boehmer 1995:218). So, there was no real assimilation because white Australian did not want to allow proper Aboriginal representation - such 'indigenisation' was a method of borrowing for purposes of self-definition. Is there a difference

between an interest in Aboriginalism and that of Aboriginal political and cultural needs? According to Mclean, the energetic Aboriginalism's campaigner, anthropologist A. P. Elkin managed to change public attitude towards the Aborigines. Elkin successfully lobbied for the capitalising of the word 'Aborigine' so that the indigenes could "attain an ethnic status", rather than "'savage(s) in respect to culture', 'primitives'. 'simple' and 'unsophisticated'" (ibid.:3).

The momentum of the 'love-affair' with cultural primitivism has been sustained throughout the late 80s and 90s with the publications of novels that problematise the cultural encounter between white Australia and its Aboriginal people. The following discussion outlines, in chronological order, the summary of these works, which include Craig Robertson's *Buckley's Hope*, David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* and Rowena Ivers's *The Spotted Skin*.

Craig Robertson's *Buckley's Hope*

Craig Robertson's novel, *Buckley's Hope* is actually based on the true story of the English ex-convict, William Buckley, who was a member of the first batch of British convicts to arrive in Australia, the only British penal colony. Because he knew that he was falsely imprisoned for a crime he did not do, Buckley decided to escape from the white settlement and live as a refugee amidst the unchartered wilderness. The miraculous aspect of this novel is Buckley's capacity to defy his sense of despair and endure the overwhelming forces of nature and fear of the 'unknown' despite extreme hunger, thirst and exhaustion. It is as if he was born to be part of the landscape; destined to be part of the Aboriginal people and their culture. One may almost ask if he had reached the status as an Aborigine or was he still the 'black white man' in this account:

Buckley had completely resigned himself to this life, and was living in a state of perpetual astonishment. To his own amazement he was fairly contented. He felt at home in the daily life of his tribe. His old clothes were gone now and he lived as they lived; naked much of the time, wearing a skin rug when it was cold; sleeping on the ground in all weather and only occasionally suffering the slightest poor health. It was to him quite miraculous. He had not only gained his freedom

and survived; he had done it so well. He could laugh really, especially when he thought of the slavery of his shipmates or, worse, those still in England (ibid.:83).

Buckley's inception into the Aboriginal tribe was accidental, even comic. Because the indigenes found him holding a spear by a grave, they thought he was a spirit of the dead tribesman. Because of this, they did not kill him, rather they honoured his right as a spirit of the Dreaming, which had returned to live with and protect them. Buckley was transformed as 'Murrangurk' or the Soul of the Dead. He lost his English tongue and his sense of time. He acquired the language of the people, understood the Dreaming mythology and enjoyed the diet of his new society. He had broken the Western taboo of 'going native' by having fallen to the level of the 'brutish savage' even if that was the way of life that he was comfortable with. Having said that, he still found it difficult to accept the frequent intertribal bloodshed, though he kept it to himself out of his respect for their culture. Joy Murphy, a Wurundjeri elder wrote in his preface to the novel, that:

Buckley was a true witness of the occupation and so-called civilisation of this country. He lived within two worlds, one of which he deserted and the other in which he became lost and confused. He came to know the Aborigine, but he no longer knew the white man. He tried to bring them together, in harmony, but he underestimated the power of the occupier (ibid.:viii).

It is important to realise that the role assigned to the 'indigenised' Buckley is political. He was supposed to launch a kind of a 'New World Order' amidst the cultural and political encounters between the Aboriginal people and European settlers. In the preface to his book, Robertson argues that, "the importance of William Buckley, especially today, is that he was a man who, for a brief, fleeting, moment in our history, stood for reconciliation between two societies by their simply living together. Then, as now, he demonstrated that there was something to be found in the idea of 'the best of both worlds'" (ibid.:xii). The questions are, as quite rightly posed by Murphy himself in a pessimistic tone - "How could

two completely different cultures live together in harmony, with different languages, different practices, different customs? What place was there in the new order for the indigenous people, and for a William Buckley?" (ibid.:viii).

David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*

David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*, which is the novel used in this comparative study, starts in the middle of the nineteenth century, when a young English boy named Gemmy Fairley was thrown overboard off the Queensland's coast. He was found by a group of Aborigines who later absorbed him into their Aboriginal ways. During his relatively short years in his native England, he worked for a sadistic London rat-catcher named Willet, hence he was known as "Willet's Boy" (1993:147).

He set fire to his master's house and ran away to become a cabin boy of a London ship for two years. This ex-child labourer of the Industrial Revolution lived with the Aborigines, who took him in after being abandoned by the ship, for sixteen years. Consequently, Gemmy had forgotten virtually all that he used to know and grew up with as an English boy - he had been indigenised as an (white) Aborigine, and it made him an outcast. One day, the twenty-eight year old Gemmy suddenly appeared at the edge of white European civilisation, six hundred miles from Brisbane to become 'the centre of attraction/attention' among the local farming folks, who were immigrants from Scotland and England. He was adopted by the McIvor family, and their children Meg, Janet and their cousin Lachlan Beattie - the children who 'caught' Gemmy during their mock hunting. As expected, the relationship between the McIvors and their neighbours was severed as the settlers ostracised those who showed kindness towards the "poor savage" (ibid.:13).

Malouf writes that "the settlers, precariously rooted in this new and strange land, must come to terms with whatever his presence among them represents" (ibid.). Gemmy is partly Aboriginal by nurture and partly European by nature, and it is precisely his hybridity that shakes the white settlers to their roots - by "the mixture of monstrous strangeness and unwelcome likeness" (ibid.:43) that Gemmy represents. Actually, they became hysterically fearful against what he actually represents - that in such a hostile and strange

environment, they could degenerate by becoming savages like the Aborigines. They were also curiously terrified as to whether or not he was in league with the Aborigines, an infiltrator, or even a spy. They believed that the Aborigines would slaughter them if they dropped their guard for a moment. The only comfortable thing that still belonged to the settlers was their superiority over the Aborigines whose land they had dispossessed.

When he 'returned' to the cradle of civilisation (the settlement), he had all but lost his native English, but was determined to show that "all that separated him from them was ground that could be covered" (ibid.33). He tried hard to recover what he had lost but he could only remember a few words. Because he could not return to who he originally was - an English man - he rejoined 'his' people. Gemmy stayed at the settlement for about a year during which he had met with a botanist minister, Mr. Frazer, who learnt much from him in the ways to live in harmony with the land; a young and oversensitive schoolmaster, George Abbot, who 'kept' substantial notes of his life as an "in-between" (ibid.:28); and Mrs. Hutchence, an old lady who took him in upon the advice of Mr. Frazer's wife, after he was beaten by angry, paranoid settlers. Gemmy had left enormous impact especially on Janet and Lachlan because they were the first ones who saw him perching on the fence bordering yet separating two worlds, before he stumbled down and stammered the famous phrase - "Do not shoot. I am a B-b-british object" (ibid.:3) - at the opening of the novel. Significantly at the end of the novel, fifty years later during the First World War, they found themselves still reacting to it in order to make sense of the experience. It seems their encounter with Gemmy had become a sacred memory. Lachlan, an important government minister told Janet, who became Sister Monica, a nun and a natural scientist on German bees, "that Gemmy escaped white oppression and ran away back to the Aborigines, where he was killed by a party of marauding settlers during an attempt to extend the colony" (in Coad 1994:880).

Rowena Ivers's *The Spotted Skin*

Rowena Ivers's well-researched novel, *The Spotted Skin* examines the treatment of those suffering from leprosy or Hansen's disease in Australia. The story is set during the

Second World War in a Darwin leper colony, which is populated by the Aborigines. According to James Bradley (1998), the substance of Iver's novel lies in her placing "a young white girl who is banished from Darwin to live among the almost exclusively Aboriginal inhabitants of the [leper] colony". Culturally speaking, this bears a substantial implication because this white girl is alienated - an outcast against white Australian society - and transplanted onto the land of the Aborigines, who are 'placed' at the bottom of the Australian cultural hierarchy.

Ivers's research indicated that historically, in the 1940s, the patients of Hansen's disease were "treated so abominably, not just by the population but by the authorities" (ibid.). They were scorned as unhygienic, just like the white girl; they were denied basic freedom and needs during their detention in remote places. Thus, both the rejected white girl and her Aboriginal 'parents' were shunned by white Australians who see them as the 'different', flawed, unclean Other. In Bradley's words, "the leper colony becomes a microcosm, not just of Australian race relation but of Australia" (ibid.). Although the Aborigines have been subjected to all sorts of racial discrimination, it is arguably another rare moment in which they are sharing this humiliating experience with a white Australian girl. Or should it be rephrased as this - a white Australian girl experiences the subordination or marginalisation of the Aborigines at the hands of dominant white Australians. One must however, not forget too, the other implication that this story was also written by a white Australian.

Theoretical Implications

Australian literature works have witnessed the placing of primitive white 'rejects' such as an escaped convict living in the bush with the Aborigines in *Buckley's Hope*; a leprosy sufferer on leper colony on an island inhabited by Aborigines in *The Spotted Skin*; and finally the focus of this study, a retarded child in the care of a Queensland Aboriginal tribe in *Remembering Babylon*. Perhaps, what is even more interesting is the fact that the authors of the novels are *not* writing about the Aborigines, but about white Europeans. According to Hodge and Mishra (1996:74), the novels have become "a

reading regime that is organised through what we have called 'Aboriginalism'. Aboriginalism insists that the Aborigines as the Other cannot be allowed to represent themselves, cannot know whether they are the subject or object of cultural discourse.

This means that the indigenized white primitives, although implicated with inferiority – intellectually, morally and biologically - have now become the representative of the Other. Is it not ironic that a novel that attempts to 'represent' the colonial encounter between European settlers and the Aborigines has turned out to be a blatant, one-way eurocentric story that almost completely denies Aboriginal points of view? This is not what tolerance and fairness are about. In addition, to stretch this point to a more critical interpretation, such act of 'silencing' can also be seen as a **strategic** move by white Australia not only to displace the Aborigines, but more significantly, to represent them as a race that is **almost** extinct. This view is supported by Ian Anderson who argues that the notion of extinction may serve a particular purpose pursued by white Australia, that is, it signifies the land as empty of Aborigines. Theoretically, by constructing the Aborigines as extinct, white Australia is able to make the most powerful claim arguably in the entire history of European colonialism - that if the Aborigines did not exist, there would not be Aboriginal land rights claim. In short, no Aborigines, no land rights and no claim.

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Notes

- 1 <http://www.mohicanpress.com/mol0017.html> [01/05/2000]
- 2 Mclean, I. <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/Archive/IssueMay-1998/mclean.html> [01/05/2000]
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