

Proxy Special

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Proxy by nature - I do not want to name these people and thankfully I do not have to. Not addressing them by the names they were born with and especially not addressing them by the acts that they have committed. We might make the presumption that these people have already called themselves artists on their own volition, their own proxy, but that seems largely irrelevant in the face of a deepening chiasmus when we wish and demand that these people have extended great effort to precisely articulate things - or to illustrate the grotesque exclamation of what our democratic rights may be. It's nice to think of art as a legal aberration: a collective aberration of any understanding of inhabitation, of leaving, hiding and returning. Or of those many disorientating moments in transit when we pause to observe a dexterous play amongst others, or a perverse chilling torture, or hopefully a moment of pure simple diffusion only to be then violently punctuated by another ancient agonistic ritual returning us back to this dark chiasmus.

In our bizarre legal sphere, there are now animals as Internet users (some possibly better than us) and semi-cyborg manual labourers. Beautifully some species have been afforded their own legal rights to exemplify them from humanity's corporate grasp but watching these new forms of animals cannot save them from extinction, particularly by them becoming more like us and us, inadvertently more like them. These people I think are trying to avoid such deepening types of conceit and are wary of their fetishization. Proxy possesses this awful agency with very little emancipation, so please be kind to these rare creatures. No one asked to be here. They are condemned too, as amateurs of everything, except the singular name of the activity they do.



A Modest Proposal (after Jonathan Swift)

By Nathan Witt

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This text started as a result of a workshop in June 2013 called On the Politics of Silence and Speaking by the Danish artist Sidsel Nelund and philosopher Nikita Dhawan at 98 Weeks, Beirut, part of Ashkal Alwan's Homeworks 6.

The Other is a word issued with innate frequency, as humans busy themselves with the affairs of other people; seemingly not satisfied with maintaining and bettering their own communities, constantly looking outward to what other people are doing and constantly asking the overwhelming question of if the world is an equal place and how can we better represent other people and ourselves. Perceiving the other is a concept that is biologically entrenched into our being from early libido stage; from the development of our spatial perception, to formulating questions of how we are perceived, to how we move through the world and judge and contest what is our own personal space.

...From the outset, identification is ruthless; we devour the others we wish to be:

"Identification [...] behaves like a product of the first oral stage of libido organisation in which the organization, the coveted, treasured object was incorporated by eating and was annihilated as such in the process."[1]

Following that, the ethical and moral abstraction about looking at people as physical objects is often quickly replaced by prevailing social concepts of considering people as things to empathise with- often that is something that presupposes we are emotionally consistent beings with stable thoughts; that we are not prone to bouts of sociopathology, or cynicism, or depression, or a general exhaustion with a world we are at odds with. We understand ourselves to have some kind of claim to represent others through art and our perception of others is also indexed to proverbs and superstitions such as "we should do unto others as we do unto ourselves" - and that via altruism considering the other might possibly redeem us, or make us feel better about ourselves.

Additionally, there is the contested legitimacy of speaking for, or with, or about others within marginalised communities suggesting that speaking for others is arrogant, vain, unethical, and politically illegitimate.[2] As a type of discursive practice, speaking for others has come under increasing criticism, and in some communities it is being rejected by the marginalised people themselves[3]. Judgement covers a vast terrain; from how others perceive us, which in some instances can be perceived as vanity but in other cases, also as something extremely distressing for marginalised people who are not represented fairly. The question of speaking *for*, *of* or *with* people has become about contesting and defining legitimacy, of creating equal representation, even if we can not imagine everyone in the world, even if we cannot compute many algorithms and we cannot give everything a name, a character, a mass of their own, an identity. There is a terrifying abstraction when we think about the transgression of the act, say, of doing something natural and primal towards then moving onto an activity that can be considered immoral, illegal, illegitimate or unethical. Doing something as simple - and primal - as avoiding walking into people on the street, and how that transgresses into something that offends people; either by making depictions of certain Gods, or debasing a specific gender, is surely an existential complex, an ontological equivalent to an algorithm. We can, at many moments, distinguish between the actuality and the potentiality of the object - the thing itself - and we know that we cannot emotionally and critically maintain this position all the time. When we speak *for* others, the act of speaking implicates us and often our motives are called into question. We are also called to verify things, our knowledge is challenged and politics assumes a particular form.

Freud's use of the word *annihilate* refers to an old ritual; the Greek ritual of *ate*, of something literally consuming nothing, of moving beyond the consumer to the collectivized, rapacious and empty prosumer who is completely ambivalent about objects and objecthood beyond any immediate value. The prosumer is a homogenized and static other, possibly ambivalent about the other because a prosumer is well aware that what we identify with, either superficially or on a deeper level, is the thing that legitimises us and compounds us and, ultimately, make us a commodifiable and veritable partner.[4]

In Richard Linklater's *Through a Scanner Darkly* and *Waking World* the tone of despair and moral disintegration is palpably real. In one scene a character eloquently articulates his last will and testament to his friend as he walks down the street. He describes the emptiness of life as a participant, that his life has done nothing but confirm an animalistic savagery where all man is able to do is to control and master, subvert, and destroy. He then sets himself on fire in the middle of the street. He doesn't kill himself in the name of anything or what he might consider anything to be- and if anything the character displays a deep love for himself despite his admission of being an ineffectual being. To use another Greek term *Philautia* - self-love - there is a sense of responsibility towards the character's approach to his suicide, which is matter of fact, pragmatic and possibly not even sad.

There is, however, a marked difference between self-love and self-sacrifice where the latter is implicitly concerned with another other and such acts are not necessarily about martyrdom. Jacqueline Rose underlines that notion talking about the writer, David Grossman, and the reification of nationhood through an overarching desire for representation *after* the act has occurred. Grossman portrays a universal maternal strength that shows the masculine desire for violence, played out on the terrain of the feminine form

and rejected by his heroine, Maruysa:

“Maruysa dies when her dress catches fire in the kitchen. In a truly heroic moment, which looks forward to the vision of self-sacrificing [Zionist] motherhood, she locks her son outside of the door and, to avoid any temptation of fleeing and thereby endangering him, throws the keys from the window, barring all escape. In an extraordinary hallucinatory passage, the narrator – who claims he never dreams – responds to a strange request she had once made to him, that he should ‘dream me’. He re-lives her last moments, shedding their heroic content, entering into her tunnel of pain, where, we are now told, there was no time to think of her son, because pain is such ‘a terrible, nasty, completely insane thing’: Has it ever entered your head that “pain” is a repulsive, demeaning concept? It is the most passive suffering on earth, somehow servile: you mean nothing at all, no one asks you, someone’s mocking you’ (all pain is inflicted, even with no intent whatsoever behind it, it demeans).”[5]

This is a representative act of naming - of naming a pain that is demeaning to subjects, or others or victims. Both of the acts confirm what we already know to be either untrue (art) or fatal (ourselves) and Grossman explodes the semantic violence onto the terrain of the emergent Israeli State burdened by its many forms of representation.[6]

Nikita Dhawan addresses the oppressed speaker – or the silent other - a speaker who has nothing left to say as being a product of a liberal humanist model[7], the distinction draws us into a darker moral and ethical issue, particularly if speakers (or actors) are themselves compromised products of that model. She draws our attention to Foucault abandoning the collective and “abdicating responsibility with his post-representational vocabulary that hides an essentialist agenda.” Both Foucault abandoning the collective and deliberately distancing himself from questions of representation, accompanied by the act of someone in *Waking World* silently setting himself on fire; both can be construed as acts of responsibility, even though they are implicitly [post] representative of a liberal humanist model and embedded in a tradition of guilt and moral uncertainty.

Like Dahwan, Linda Alcoff discusses this increasing retreat from liberal humanist arguments, specifically in gay and feminist communities, as a motive for individuals to protect themselves from a variety of increasingly contested positions, that of the traumatic, semantic process of legitimisation and “without engaging in discursive imperialism.”[8] Alcoff shows that that occurrence is a retreat from the generalization of representative characterization and is the reduction of a person as the other and highlights political effectiveness. Maybe such exits were – as it was for Foucault - end-points of representation (for liberal humanists) because to define what is legitimate is an increasingly violent act that we know to exclude others. The question becomes who is reliant on representation and Dhawan omits the notion that representation is an interpretative crutch, which was also anticipated by conceptualist artists at the same time as Foucault.

There is also a regressive aspect of reifying *the other*, sometimes in order to understand it; sublimating ourselves or reifying the process itself because many are all too conscious of the fact that we are animating [reified] things- not just objects. Alfred Whitehead called reification the “Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness” which is a beautiful and beguiling expression that summarises perfectly the uneconomical nature of the process. The destiny of the object is never truly known and the fallacy intimately understands the politics of production, the internalization of the process and that crucial moment where and when things emerge. There have always been other economies; some feed off participation and others are ontological that, privately through hermeticism, can never satisfy many frustrating existential questions. My eyes are at their quietest when tired, when looking at things in private at home, when waking from the luxury of sleep, or of dreaming and amnesia; imagine if our waking lives were literally always awake, or we were capable of being 24/7 phenomena so as to be linked to the Internet. Imagine how jaded we would be.

The disappointment of turning to representation by Alcoff’s marginalised communities – and conceptual artists - has led to an indignation when, as Foucault suggests, people are capable of assuming responsibility for themselves; either by leaving or by silence... Some communities may not yet have done the same things as the “liberal-humanist model” and there is a hypocrisy about legitimacy, either ontologically, morally and legally, that is revealed through elitist speeches that ignore its hegemony. Listening silently and looking at a violent state emerging is equally revealing.

“Writing to Theodor Herzl in 1899, the French socialist Bernard Lazare complained that, because Herzl so wanted his people to be a perfect nation, modelled on the west, he could bear to admit, or include his vision, the abject, impoverished reality of the Eastern European Jew. For Lazare such idealization was a form of treachery for which the new nation state, if it ever came into being, would pay a heavy price. [David] Grossman does not, I suspect, share Lazare’s anarcho-revolutionary politics, but a century later, he carries something of his legacy in the spirit of truth-telling for which he makes his plea. ‘Your ultimate objective’, Lazare wrote to Herzl, ‘is “not to display our national shames”. But I am all for displaying them. We die from hiding our shames [...] We must educate our nation by showing it what it is.’ ‘We need to live a life’, writes Grossman, ‘that is not ideal, not demonic.’”[9]

Terrence McKenna’s notion of *The World is Not Your Friend* is a sharp rebuke to the notion of the epistemology of the other, which is not just ontologically uneconomical - or idealistic and demonic - but may just be illegitimate in terms of who everyone is; something that pends a disappointing political and economical fate that we simply cannot control. Furthermore, there is an equal difficulty in tempering any violence of speaking to ourselves so that we surely do not inflict it upon others, such as the stuffed tiger Hobbes, saying to Calvin: “I think the surest sign that intelligent life is out there, is that it has failed to contact us”. *Waking World* shows, much like the spirit of McKenna, that such an act shows a human being’s motives to be so ineffectual, that in seeking a truth,

beyond the cliché of death, there is a natural indifference within the communal world at large; that we cannot temper that ontological dependency, or personal misery, or despair. That we cannot change the world as much as we would like to.

In Scanner Darkly, Keanu Reeves is an almost dead being watching himself under surveillance. He wears a “scrambler suit” that reflects others and his legitimacy of speaking for others is constantly undermined by the artifice of who he appears to be, whilst constantly having a fatalistic conversation with himself. Reeves’ overly conscious and cynical internal-dialogue is moderated by his invisible bosses, his character is an automaton, much in the tradition of Blade Runner or ETA Hoffmann’s Der Sandman- with the exception that there is no love interest. Similarly there is an element of the PTSD suffering drone operator about Bob Arctor...

As Reeves addresses a positively fictive audience, a bodily mass that has today been reified by the pandemic of participation, representation is being aberrated by technology, by us, by the Internet entrenching us back into our eyes just at the moment when art was in many moments disappearing in its own examination of materiality. When the repetitive Nietzschean conflict of immateriality versus materiality was quieter; as was endless speculation of artworks consuming themselves in Freudian rituals of ate - referring to that overused image of *ouroboros*: the snake from the tree of knowledge eating its own tail.

The question of art’s materiality, of how diffuse it could become, is a recent communal conceptual desire expressed by artists and writers like Lucy Lippard, Baldessari, Art and Language, Hamish Fulton, amongst others, but did they envisage that through that diffuse materiality they themselves, their ideas and work would be indexed to their finances, their personal information and their present location? Did they envisage themselves to be tapped into so violently and communally exploited? These judgements have militarised communities around the world and any conceptual, material-based, objective desire has been disingenuously shoved into the Internet. Are western liberal humanists able to shed their dogma in order to consider in what ways conceptualists were trying to help us, not specific others, to relieve ourselves of the tyranny of the eye?

Many conceptual artists were all too conscious of the fact that morality and ethics were absent in the world and those two things could not inform all objects and things; that certain conceptual gestures, objects and things reach a point where morality and ethics are weakened, undermined or superfluous- or where morality and ethics may need to be removed from the work. It is interesting to think of where was art going before the Internet and before that moment when we all had to re-appraise how we spoke to the other, which has understandably completely undermined many conceptual artists life’s work and in other cases completely vindicated any desire for the immaterial. We might think art is challenged to challenge everything and fortunately we don’t have to explain ourselves to everyone all of the time, despite our culture of the comment, or reply. The other is rampant, it assumes a psychic tyranny through the peer pressure and emotional blackmail of sharing, it constantly jeopardises the notion of friendship and allows real arseholes and racists to operate with impunity and like the military: we are advancing through violation.

Looking at Arctor addressing the audience, like a jury, there is a depressing notion of each audience member being the representative of the sum of the question of *who is sufficiently represented*: maybe via a statistic, or questionnaire, or maybe via a consensus (assuming a country has one), or maybe through an odious notion of democracy (assuming a country has one).

Arctor, Reeves, the audience, the Jury, *everyone*, is assigned the role to that of an actor[10] or a protagonist. A proto-agoniste being *the first actor*, specifically placed in direct relation to the concept of agonism - or even *the first [actor] in agony*. Speaking to the others in the audience, Reeves’ dialogue moderator struggles to control the actor’s language, trying to remove and aid judgements. “Is everyone else getting asked these questions?” But Arctor’s audience is not the increasingly cloying, demanding, militant, sanctimonious, participatory and paranoid social sphere we now inhabit; a world that is a million miles away from hermetic, iconoclastic, ontological and romantic methods of making art - and a world moving towards something unappealingly more connected, more aligned with technological and private information as economy and prosumer. Reeves rejects being told what he owes to the fictive and muted audience by a morally ambivalent hierarchy that is directing him to an inevitably unsatisfying end and it naturally furthers his cynicism and contempt for others for what they/ *for what we* represent.

The notion of responsibility through collectivisation, for some reason, seems to be assumed by others as if responsibility, morality or ethics were not worth reminding people about because we should all be moral, responsible and ethical creatures. How can we argue against such a thing? Firstly, as a presumption, responsibility can be construed as an intrusion in that we have to continually remind others of what our rights may or may not be, which is not just uneconomical; it also infringes upon many legally Protected Characteristics; the thing many are trying to redress but are not subject to the same laws. The law on the Internet is operated in the spirit of a military lawyer who chillingly states that *military law advances through violation*. Twitter is the drone of the other and the military must dream for an autonomous drone that is not hampered by the perpetual administrative bug, the virus of Arctor’s Liberal-Humanist Augustinian guilt. There is a social network of demarcated law, which due to the exposure and recurrence of government leaks, surveillance, data-mining, phone hacking and online violence is constantly being called to be regulated. A literal inverted representation of verbal “truth” prevails; the equivalent to speaking on the street without the violent repercussions, where not caring that you don’t believe in what you are saying is a starting point. Arctor is not able to trust himself to make judgements about himself, let alone Others and any form of [struggled] development he makes only serves to further entrench his [mental] instability. He is a psychically and socially compromised other to add to the list of Protected Characteristics.

Art too advances through violation[11] and as a form of revenge, or a threat, or a fable of our stupidity. From the bumbblings of Voltaire’s Candide to the misanthropy of Moliere’s Le Tartuffe ou l’Imposteur, or the actor Michael Gambon who espouses the virtues of lying...to Virginia Woolf, TS Eliot and finally, Jonathan Swift’s satire: A Modest Proposal where he sets out that the Irish

can solve their population crisis and famine problems by simply eating their children. Strangely, I grew up near a folly where Byron, Pope and Swift regularly met, which I only found out a few years ago. As I have passed it every week over the last two years I wonder if they talked of such misanthropy.

Lying, mockery and satire are concepts of *being*, before making art and they seem infinitely more preferable than being told what to do by a morally ambivalent other who tells us what we should be making or how to behave. Arctor's finalistic "That's it" is a lament to a life that the actor can not know, a humanity that never existed, or is simply unattainable because of the life he is doomed to live. His "fuck you" to the 1% is capitulation through manipulation, limited to a technical type of history.

Like the character setting himself on fire in *Waking World*, art is not indebted to notions of responsibility, its history clearly shows that; from the multitude of dead, suicidal, despondent others, where art - and specifically representation - could not save them. There is a clear end point; from holistic and cathartic approaches only being so helpful; production and *being* as only being existentially rewarding up to a certain point. This great expectancy and social demand of the other; we are witnessing it now through collectivisation in art and sectarianism in religion and there are others advocating adopting religious ideals without religion, others who are not indebted to the collective...

Dhawan's (and Alcoff's) arguments are of an overriding moral and ethical importance. They are referring to the abused and materially worthless commodities people are complaining of being sick of *being*, sick of complaining *of* and sick of working *for*. They are referring to victims of foreign wars, colonial expansion and coups, of bias in news agendas; they are referring to the mass migration away from corporate news reporting to controlled social networks. And they are ignoring social networks, that Zizek-y transhorizon; where like Bob Arctor, we dream of leaving the other and the clamour of our didactic internal dialogue. It is not just a survival technique and it doesn't make it easy on a person who is supposed to be talking for you as an other when you are not always present, that you are planning to be somewhere else, specifically away from them. That you would prefer to be an exile.

[1] Sigmund Freud, *Mass Psychology and Other Writings*, London, Penguin Modern Classics, 2004. P 57-8

[2] *The Problem of Speaking for Others*, Author(s): Linda Alcoff. *Cultural Critique*, No.20 (Winter, 1991-1992). P6

[3] *Ibid*. P17

[4] *Curatorial Business*, Pedro Neves, ...*Ment*, Issue 3, 2012. P44

[5] Jacqueline Rose, *The Last Resistance*, Verso Books 2007. P107.

[6] "In 1993, as he [Grossman] travels across a bare-topped piece of countryside where there is neither a Jewish nor Arab village to be seen, 'I had a strange urge to peel this land of its names and designations and descriptions and dates, Israel, Palestine, Zion, 1897, 1929, 1936, 1948, 1967, 1987, the Jewish State, the Promised Land, the Holy Land, the Land of Splendour, the Zionist Entity, Palestine.' Could there be a little piece of earth that is 'still free of meaning?' What would remain? In this brief, euphoric moment in 1993, Grossman strips the land of its overburdened significance. Like Virginia Woolf, who once famously said 'I hate meaning', he recognises that only dictators control the world of signs (in *Be My Knife*, Yair reads Woolf in the army). Too much naming, too much conviction, can kill."

[7] Nikita Dhawan, *Hegemonic Listening and Subversive Silences*. P51

[8] *The Problem of Speaking for Others*, Author(s): Linda Alcoff. *Cultural Critique*, No. 20 (Winter, 1991-1992). P17

[9] Jacqueline Rose, *The Last Resistance*, Verso Books. P113

[10] See STL trial currently underway in The Hague that presents the different parties that play the main roles in proceedings as actors. These are the Judges, the Prosecutor, the Defence, the Registry, the Accused and the representatives of the victims. Also see Obama's recent reference to the people of the US as actors all with a part to play.

<https://www.stl-tsl.org/en/1-glossary/90-main-actors-proceedings>

[11] Cultural export and some interesting cultural attitudes towards representation, explained by The British Council Director Andrea Rose. Also see recent British Government stance on art, changed to being labeled "soft culture" and something that conflicts with the older model of art that is being culturally exported:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQmL57Pqe4&list=PLezYJgDpnW6F5ozVZrYdJuJFWqOAUd9Ke&index=1>

LAURA DURAN (b.Bogotá) completed her BA at University of Florida/New World School of the Arts (BA Hons, Fine Art 2008-2010) and is currently pursuing her MA at Goldsmiths College, University of London (MFA 2011-2014). Recent selected exhibitions include Cliffhanger at Milken and Palmer, Berlin, Collections with The End/Spring Break at BasFischer Invitational, Miami and Take at Fabbrica del Vapore, Via Farini, Milan. She's currently based in London.

DANIEL LICHTMAN (b.Philadelphia) is an artist based in London and New York. Solo exhibitions include the Woodmill GP, London, National University of Colombia and LA Galeria, Bogota. Recent and upcoming group exhibitions include ICA, Gloucester Cathedral, The Tetley and Flat Time House, all in the UK and the Drawing Center, Jack Chiles Gallery, Bronx Museum of Art, Exit Art, and Scaramouche, in New York. He recently held residencies at the Bronx Museum of Art, New York, Flat Time House, London and the National University of Colombia, Bogota. Daniel completed an MFA at Goldsmiths in 2011.

LAURA MORRISON (b.London) is based in London. Recent exhibitions include solo show Vivian, Cape Town at CANAL and Furnished Space in London, group project How To Read World Literature, Public School, New York and a residency with the IMS Project at Flat Time House, London - all 2013. Forthcoming projects include Concerning The Bodyguard at The Tetley in Leeds and the Open Sessions Residency at the Drawing Center in New York. She has an MFA in Fine Art from Goldsmiths College 2012.

CIARÁN Ó DOCHARTAIGH (b.Derry) obtained an MFA at Goldsmiths College, London, 2010-2012 . He recently received an individual artist award for the City of Culture Derry 2013. Most recent exhibitions include The Cosmic Artisan, at Andreas Siegfried and 'Instances of Agreement' at KAO YUAN ART CENTER, Taiwan, and Young London V22 London, 2012 . Past screenings include Chisenhale's 21st Century Program. He is a member of the curatorial committee and has served on the board at Void Gallery, Derry.

BENJAMIN ORLOW (b.Finland) graduated from Goldsmiths in 2012. Recent shows include Kunstahlle Roveredo at MJ galley, Geneve and Motto Press, Berlin, Ein Abend von Noele Ody at Ve.Sch. Vienna, The forgotten memory guide Kunsthalle Munster, How to read world literature at The Public School, New York and Slina i gwiedzny at AS Gallery, Krakow (all 2013). He recently completed a large scale, permanent, public sculpture in Jakobstad, and his solo show; A long time ago, but somehow in the future, just finished at Sinne, Helsinki. Benjamin lives and works in London but is currently completing his military training in Finland.

ELAINE REYNOLDS (b.Dublin) is an Irish artist based in London. She has exhibited widely throughout Ireland and in Europe. Recent presentations include exhibitions at the Botkyrka Kunsthall; Stockholm, Douglas Hyde Gallery; Dublin, Fabbrica del Vapore; Milan and Vulpes Vulpes, London. Having graduated from the National College of Art and Design, Dublin (2007) she is currently completing an MFA in Fine Art at Goldsmiths College, London. Upcoming events include MFA Graduate Show, Goldsmiths College and as well as group shows in Wyspa Institute, Gdansk, Poland and ICA, Moscow.

EOGHAN RYAN (b.Dublin) Eoghan completed his MFA at Goldsmiths College in 2012. He received the 2012 Nina Stewart Artist Award and residency with South London Gallery/SPACE. This culminated in a solo show and artist's publication entitled Oh wicked flesh! at the South London Gallery last year. He has contributed to a number of screening's, exhibitions and performances throughout the UK and Ireland. Upcoming exhibitions include Science Fiction:New Death at Fact, Liverpool, opening at the end of March 2014.

NATHAN WITT (b.London) is a British artist and writer. A graduate from the Royal College of Art in 2003, Witt has worked with Delfina Foundation; Art School Palestine; [SPACE] Studios; Al Mahatta Gallery, Ramallah; 98 Weeks, Beirut and Hospitalfield Arts in Arbroath. Over the last two years Witt has been working in Palestine and Lebanon and is currently attending Ashkal Alwan's Home Workspace Programme in Beirut. Witt writes for Through Europe and sometimes under the pseudonym JK Rowling; his first book NOOO was commissioned by [SPACE] Studios with Federico Campagna, edited by Lucy Mercer.

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PROXY SPECIAL

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