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Geoff Baker

## Latin American Baroque: performance as a post-colonial act?

'Ah, Mr Francisco!  
'At your command, Mr Tomás!  
'Do we have all the instruments tuned up together?  
'Yes sir, you could well tell your lady  
That the dark-skinned folk are about to appear,  
Falling about with laughter and dying to start dancing.'

'A siolo flasiquiyo', Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla (1590–1664)

I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears ... Crying for joy, and singing for joy, were alike uncommon to me while in the jaws of slavery. The singing of a man cast away upon a desolate island might be as appropriately considered as evidence of contentment and happiness, as the singing of a slave.

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845)

'A siolo flasiquiyo', an example of the villancico sub-genre featuring 'African' characters known as the *negrilla* or *villancico de negros* by the Mexican composer Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla, has become a staple of the Latin American Baroque repertory, featuring, for example, on the best-selling recording *Missa Mexicana* by The Harp Consort and in the concert by the King's Singers and L'Arpeggiata at the 'Encounters' Early Music Weekend at the Southbank Centre, London, in September 2007.<sup>1</sup> Such *villancicos de negros* are widely seen as highlights of Latin American Baroque programmes: Ex Cathedra placed Juan de Araujo's 'Los coflades de la estleya' on their website as the only audio sample from their first Latin American CD, *New World Sympho-*

*nies*, and Andrew McGregor enthused about this track in his review for the BBC, describing it as 'a pre-rumba style call to come and have a night out at the manger, a celebration of black culture'.<sup>2</sup> This sense that the historical performance movement has unearthed a kind of long-lost, Afro-Latin 'world music' is often conveyed by performers, through both performance style (for example, the prominent use of percussion and strummed guitars) and programme notes. The San Antonio Vocal Arts Ensemble writes of the *negrito* 'Dame albricia mano Anton' by Gaspar Fernandes, *maestro de capilla* at Puebla Cathedral in the early 17th century: 'The delightfully infectious rhythms and "non-tonal" harmonies of this song bear the unmistakable stamp of the African people'.<sup>3</sup>

The language of both critic and performers is revealing: both frame this music in terms of a more-or-less direct encounter with African diasporic culture of the past. Indeed, the King's Singers' performance of 'A siolo flasiquiyo' took place in a festival entitled 'Encounters'. It is worth considering this term in a little more detail. What might modern audiences be encountering when they listen to performances of 17th-century *villancicos de negros* from Latin America? How might this relate to the historical encounter between European, indigenous and African populations that took place in Latin America from the end of the 15th century? And how is this historical encounter framed through 'historically informed' performances? There are contexts in which the idea of 'encounters between musical

cultures' seems very apposite, such as the meeting of Heinrich Schütz and Giovanni Gabrieli that was the subject of another concert in the same festival. But Latin America was a colonial territory marked by great imbalances of power between colonizers, colonized, and imported slaves, and by extremes of domination, suffering, deprivation and violence. Many musical developments in the New World thus took place in contexts that were far less neutral than the word 'encounter': this concept may usefully serve to describe certain kinds of cultural interaction, both past and present, but it should be used with caution in relation to colonial Latin America, since its implication of a meeting of equals risks obscuring or depoliticizing the continent's traumatic history.

My intention here is to explore some of the ways in which a greater mindfulness of the realities of colonialism might impact on performing and listening to colonial Baroque music. What sort of 21st-century values might reasonably be brought to bear on the performance of music from 17th-century Latin America? Is it desirable to reframe colonial processes in terms of modern ideas of encounter and multiculturalism and thus present Latin American Baroque music as early 'world music'? Or does attachment to the idea of Historically Informed Performance require us to be, well, a little more historically informed?

### Musicology and performance

For musicologists, one way of deepening our understanding of colonial music is to engage with the concepts of post-colonialism, treating the term 'colonial' as more than just a temporal marker and approaching the Baroque music repertory that fills Latin American cathedral archives as a colonialist product. We can examine how the functioning of colonial power depended on certain ways of seeing, hearing and thinking, perpetuated through cultural products; discuss not just the surviving notes but also the exclusions and silences in the colonial repertory; and analyse music notation itself as an example of 'the imperialism of Western literacy'.<sup>4</sup> Musicologists should also be drawn to ask: who performed *negrillas*? Black musicians? I very much doubt it. In most of the cathedrals in which these pieces are preserved, there were no African musicians (other than perhaps the odd brass-player): these pieces were almost always sung by white musicians, members

of the middle or upper strata of colonial society.<sup>5</sup> In which case, what sort of cultural encounter was going on? How 'multicultural' was the spectacle of white musicians imitating black musicians to a predominantly white audience? The *negrilla* minimized real encounter by substituting it with a fake one. This was the blackface minstrelsy of its time.

The dominance of the Europeans and their descendants allowed them both to enslave and to speak for African Others, to present them as 'typically African' (in other words, joyful and interested only in music and dance, as in the first lines of 'A siolo flasiquiyo'), and 'to mask their silence with words'.<sup>6</sup> The representation of non-Europeans reinforced the differences between Europe and its Others, and was thus part of the dual process of maintaining power over the colonized and creating consensus among the colonizers. The repeated, ironic citation of the 'deformed' language spoken by African slaves served to consolidate the power of those who wrote and spoke the hegemonic version of Spanish. The villancico repertory was one of the pillars of Ángel Rama's 'lettered city', which bolstered the power of the colonial élite and marginalized the indigenous and African populations, and it was forged out of the very stuff of colonialism.<sup>7</sup> Even if one disagrees with Walter Benjamin's sweeping statement that 'there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism'<sup>8</sup>—which would of course implicate the entire Latin American Baroque repertory along with that of the colonial metropolis, Spain—it is harder to refute this argument in the specific case of the *villancico de negros*, which is a document of the barbarity of slavery at the very same time that it obscures the realities of this historical condition.

Where does this leave the performer? Those who wish to sing this music must decide whether this repertory is inescapably linked to the often brutal historical context in which it was created or whether it can transcend its time. For all their aesthetic appeal—and *villancicos de negros* form part of most programmes today because they are among the most lively, vibrant pieces in the repertory—can these works be more than simply the tainted legacy of an ideology of racial superiority? And if we are to recuperate this music, how are we to approach its fake encounter in the context of the real encounter between performers

and audience in the modern concert hall? Arguably, once we have lost our innocence about colonialism, an ‘innocent’ performance of colonial music is ethically problematic. We should therefore consider how post-colonial thinking might inform the performance of colonial repertory. If we are attached to the idea of Historically Informed Performance, then we ought to investigate how we might present such works without simply erasing their historical functions and retain the very real aesthetic pleasures of this repertory without abdicating our moral responsibility.

This raises important questions about the limits of the notion of Historically Informed Performance. What does this term mean? Does it refer just to performance practice? What other sort of historical information should be brought to bear on performance? If the original history was a complex one of domination, resistance, negotiation and silencing, and the cultural product was thoroughly colonialist, should this history inform performance or should it be quietly put aside? Shifting the time-frame a little closer to ours, how would we feel if someone decided to put on a performance of blackface minstrelsy from the 1840s? It seems to me that a consideration of the performance of Latin American Baroque music underlines a tension between the urge to recapture performance practices of the past (the commonplace understanding of the term HIP) and the broader wish to be historically informed—which means, in our specific case, understanding how these same performance practices may have perpetuated social injustice.

With the performance of *villancicos de negros* today, there seems to be an unspoken consensus that we actually need to be historically *uninformed*—to blot out the music’s history—in order to be able to perform it and for audiences to enjoy it. Is there an alternative? Can we conceive of a performance of colonial repertory that would be enjoyable—I have no urge to advocate puritanism—yet also historically informed and informing? Could performers engage with history rather than pretending that it does not exist, could they dialogue with, critique or refuse colonialist messages rather than retransmit them? It may be that a historically informed performance would need to veer away from the usual concomitant idea of historical correctness towards

the idea of political correctness (without the negative connotations assigned by the political Right). To put it bluntly, a historically correct performance would be a racist performance. It may simply be that historical correctness and political correctness are incompatible, and that we have to make a choice.

### Possible solutions

Some solutions to this dilemma already exist, though they may not have been conceived as such, in the ways that Latin American Baroque music is performed today. My aim is to suggest a reconceptualization of this music and its performance practices, to stimulate greater thoughtfulness rather than a radical revolution.

A lot of present-day performances of colonial church music are influenced by the idea of ‘mestizo Baroque’, one that I find problematic from the point of view of historical correctness. What did Latin American church music sound like? For most of the colonial period in Latin America, formal musical interactions between colonizers and colonized were limited in scope: the latter were often brought in to play the instruments in churches (to do the manual work, like the bowlers in cricket during the days of the Empire), but creative interactions, in the true sense of the word, were virtually non-existent in the field of elite culture. The cultural transfer occurred in one direction only in this realm. Spaniards taught native Americans (and more rarely Africans) to sound like Spaniards, and it was in the interest of the latter groups to comply because Hispanic institutions provided paid work and benefits like tax exemption, and because European music was the sound of high social status.

If today there is a tendency to fetishize stylistic difference, in the colonial period it was sameness that was prized: the highest praise that could be bestowed on a group of Latin American musicians was that they were indistinguishable from a European cathedral choir. I suspect that most professional musicians in 17th-century Latin America were trying to achieve the opposite of their counterparts today. Spanish professional musicians were not interested in creating fusions of European and indigenous music—they wanted to sound like Spaniards, even in the occasional piece in which they parodied Africans (hardly the same as cultural exchange). Adhesion to

élite European cultural norms, whether directly or through the mockery of alternatives, was an instrument of power, distinction and identity formation, a self-defence mechanism in the hands of a colonial élite which sought to reinforce the social hierarchy. The concept of fusion, on the other hand, is closely related to that of mixing or *mestizaje*—one that was anathema to élite Spaniards after the first decades of the colonial period. The ‘mestizo’ in ‘mestizo Baroque’ is a positive term today, reflecting the shift towards the valorization of race mixture which now informs the cultural politics of many post-colonial Latin American nations, but it was a much more negative label 400 years ago and one that whiter-skinned Latin Americans sought to avoid if at all possible. The idea that colonial-period cathedral music—the music of the white élite—embodied this concept in aesthetic terms is simply nonsensical. This disjunction between modern political imperatives and colonial realities is evident in the efforts of a writer like José Quezada Macchiavello to characterize the repertory of colonial Cuzco as the legacy of a ‘mestizo musical culture’ despite his simultaneous admission that an exhaustive study revealed no evidence of such a hybrid culture in the written music (or indeed anywhere else).<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, the idea that *villancicos de negros* ‘celebrate’ or were ‘influenced’ by African culture is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship between Spaniards and Africans and their respective cultures in colonial Latin America. Furthermore, there has been no serious consideration of what the ‘stamp of the African people’ on the music of the *villancico de negros* might be, but rather a vague assumption that since it is funky, it must be African. I suspect that African influences do exist, but that they are to be found across the full range of the Hispanic villancico repertory, not just in the *negrillas*, having made their way in from North Africa via the Spanish popular music of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. I am yet to be convinced that there are musical features of the *villancico de negros* that cannot be found in other, ‘Hispanic’ villancicos.

All the evidence suggests to me that fusion between different musical cultures, so beloved of 21st-century listeners, simply did not take place in élite spheres in colonial Latin America, for all that the story in popular music was quite the reverse. It could be argued, however, that the very lack of historical accuracy in

the ‘mestizo Baroque’ aesthetic provides a solution to the performance dilemma since it embodies a post-colonial position rather than a colonial one (the valorization rather than denigration of *mestizaje*). A post-colonial performance would entail creating something new, something that takes account of today’s aesthetic and political sensibilities rather than reproducing those of an earlier period: the emphasis would be not on how these works originally sounded but on how we would want them to have sounded. Performance would be not a way of *uncovering* the indigenous or African influence in colonial music (which is invariably absent, since parody hardly constitutes ‘influence’) but rather of *inventing* it—and this is indeed what many groups are doing, though, as defenders of the ethos of HIP, they are rather more coy about admitting it. The ‘authenticity’ of the post-colonial performance would thus lie in the realm of politics rather than that of historical accuracy: responsibility would lie with the performer to reinvent the music via an a-historical performance style, presenting these works *as if* they were the fruits of modern-day cultural encounter rather than of exclusion and thus undermining the colonialism of the text. In a sense, then, what is required is not so much a change in performance style as a more self-reflexive attitude, a greater openness between performers and audience, a laying-bare of both historical functions and modern-day reinventions.

The idea of invention can also be brought to bear on the issue of repertory. The voices of subaltern groups have been lost because most of their music was not notated but was transmitted orally. A focus on élite, notated music perpetuates Western musical imperialism. By bringing lost popular music traditions back to life, by turning to reinvention and improvisation, performers may reinsert excluded cultures where they have been written out or have vanished from texts. The musicologist may identify notation as an example of the imperialism of Western literacy, but the performer has the possibility of doing something about it, as Christina Pluhar’s L’Arpeggiata did so effectively in their Southbank Centre concert with The King’s Singers. Certainly, the risk here is that, with relevant historical sources so scarce, improvisation may be misapplied: but it could be argued that the principle of inclusion is more important than the detail. Another form of

writing back in those who were written out of the colonial script, and a challenge from within the Early Music world to the Eurocentricity of the Latin American canon, has emerged in the performances of this repertory by Latin American groups such as *Ars Longa de la Habana* and the *Camerata de Caracas*, bringing the African and indigenous population into the picture as subject rather than object of the music, speaking rather than spoken for. It is in performances by such groups that one truly starts to hear 'the unmistakable stamp of the African people'. Where does this leave European musicians? Taking the *negrilla* as an example, this genre was not influenced by African music but rather caricatured Africans through music. A modern, historically informed performance would therefore involve the performer imitating a 17th-century Spaniard imitating an African. Does this double distancing allow for an ironic take that undercuts the power dynamic of the original? The King's Singers' performance of 'A siolo flasiquiyo' suggested just such a possibility.

At the heart of the matter is the simple fact that directors and performers need not be passive servants of the colonial text: they can probe for questioning as well as endorsement of dominant attitudes, taking performance decisions that highlight any tensions that emerge or undermine messages that are unpalatable today. There are lessons that might be learnt from debates surrounding the performance of 19th- and 20th-century opera. In his discussion of *Madama Butterfly*, Roger Parker argues for an interventionist attitude in order to deal with problematic questions of race: 'Pieces that are realised through performance are constantly modified over time, so there's no reason we shouldn't alter one like this to suit our changing views on such matters as racism'. Indeed, he insists that 'to offer an uninflected performance, to let the work "speak for itself", isn't enough'. He discusses a 1984 ENO production of this opera in which the director, Graham Vick, 'undercut some of the most famous musical moments with fierce scenic counter-arguments ... by arguing with the music, by refusing to passively accept Puccini's musical articulation of this sad tale'.<sup>9</sup> Other directors should take account of the greater modern sensitivity towards racism and have the courage to create a modern production through cuts and changes, argues Parker.<sup>10</sup> An extreme, and courageous, exam-

ple of such intervention was the Hamburg State Opera's production of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in November 2002:

Until the final scene, [the production] had proceeded without comment. Everyone was primed to applaud the hymn to 'holy German art' that brings Richard Wagner's four-hour pageant to a climax. Then came the bombshell. Midway through Hans Sachs's monologue about honouring German masters over 'foreign vanities', the music came to an abrupt halt. Suddenly one of the mastersingers started speaking: 'Have you actually thought about what you are singing?' he asked. No one had experienced anything like it in an opera house. There followed a lively stage discussion—some of it shouted down by outraged members of the audience—about Wagner's anti-Semitism in the context of 19th and 20th century German nationalism ... Peter Konwitschny's staging had a simple but provocative message: given all we know about Wagner's ideology and the way it guided Hitler to the Final Solution, can we really allow Hans Sachs's call for racial purity to pass without comment?<sup>11</sup>

The problems surrounding the performance of Wagner's music have been in evidence since it was written, as have interventionist approaches. Lawrence Kramer discusses the long history of contesting the anti-Semitism in Wagner's *Lohengrin* Prelude by figures ranging from Liszt to W. E. B. Dubois to Charlie Chaplin, writing of 'a series of appropriations of the *Lohengrin* Prelude that are inconsistent with the cultural and political values of the opera and its composer-ecumenical messages that, for Liszt and Chaplin, are also specifically anti-Semitic'.<sup>12</sup> Kramer argues that with the application of a little intelligence, it has been possible 'to contest or override "original" meanings without in the least effacing them', leading to 'a proliferating series of dialectical or dialogical relationships between the sonorous and semantic dimensions of the music'.<sup>13</sup> Discussions, performances, and reuses of this piece have led to its widespread reception as rejection of or liberation from the composer's ideology. Is there not something here for performers of colonial Latin American music to reflect on?

Although I have focused on the role of the performer, the listener also has a key role to play. It is worth drawing parallels with literature studies, the post-colonial discipline *par excellence*, in which critical responsibility lies primarily with the reader. Post-colonial scholars continue to read and appreciate colonial literature, but they explore fissures, tensions, cracks in the surface.<sup>14</sup> Colonial literary texts are perceived not simply as reflecting dominant



attitudes to black people expressed in *negrillas* are still to be found, to a greater or lesser degree, in most parts of the region today. The reduction or limitation of black people to particular activities (music, dance, sport) and forms of expressivity (joy, physicality) is still widespread in Western culture: simply to re-present the historical roots of these kinds of stereotype without question is to reinforce a centuries-old strategy of social containment in the present. It is a problem, it exists, and it results from the ways that white people have been talking, writing and, yes, even singing about black people for five centuries.

Wherever one stands on Wagner's anti-Semitism, few today would deny the reality of the issue or the validity of debating the question. As Andrew Clark writes: 'Call it anti-Semitism, call it political incorrectness—you can't pretend it doesn't exist in Wagner. What we need to do is find ways of confronting it. The most interesting Wagner productions today are those, like the Hamburg *Meistersinger*, that address the difficult ideological issues inherent in the works.'<sup>20</sup> So how is it that we've been pretending the problem doesn't exist in the world of Latin American Baroque performance? The answer is no doubt partly that there are very few black people in Early Music (or indeed classical music) audiences in Europe and North America.<sup>21</sup> Rather than the problem being non-existent, it may simply be that there is no one present with a personal involvement in the question to raise it. Since Jewish performers, audiences and musicologists have played a central role in the history of Romantic and post-Romantic music, the issue of anti-Semitism has been continually foregrounded: witness the banning of Wagner's music in Israel or the hissing of Jewish audience members at performances of certain of his works.

The result is that directors and critics of opera seem more open to discussing such issues and to contemplating the notion that drawing them out through performance decisions not only is a moral responsibility but actually adds to the value of the work, rather than detracting from it. Is the message from the HIP movement really to be that we need not worry

ourselves about such questions? Arguably, the issue is in fact doubly important for performers of Latin American Baroque music. The unproblematized presentation of this repertory as 'early world music' does not just entail the erasure of its history but also opens up performers to the kinds of critiques that are made of the world music industry, such as charges of complicity in papering over the hugely conflicted sphere of contemporary geopolitics with an artificially harmonious global imaginary. For some, this may all be a non-existent problem: others, I hope, will understand that 'a willingness to connect that which, in the interests of not disturbing a more convenient imagining of the way things are, has been left unconnected' is a response to very real ethical questions.<sup>22</sup>

We need to be able to appreciate the beauty of works like 'A siolo flasiquiyo' without being beguiled into losing our critical awareness. Richard Leppert, one of the most incisive scholars of music and imperialism, makes some highly pertinent points in his discussion of colonial Indian visual art, which, he states, 'masks the image of *realpolitik* by erasing all evidence of that which has been subdued and of how the defeat was accomplished'. It 'demands to be read as Harmony, Unity, Order and (by association) Peace', thereby justifying the domination of the colonial power. He concludes that 'music and art provide evidence of the very power which their presence serves to mask. In the process ... they aid the hegemonic drive of imperialistic politics.'<sup>23</sup> The fact that the artwork is so attractive, seamless and unprovocative reveals its power to mediate and distort the social and political realities of colonialism. To accept the harmoniousness and attractiveness of the artwork at face value—and to deny its political dimension—is to be seduced by its colonialist message, to see only the mask rather than the power behind it, to accept its erasure of other voices and histories. It is the role of musicologists to bring these voices and histories back into the picture, embodying Philip Bohlman's description of musicology as a political act.<sup>24</sup> But it falls to performers to bring them back to life and thereby to transform performance into a post-colonial act.

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- 1 The Harp Consort, *Missa Mexicana* (Harmonia Mundi HMU 907293). The translation of the text is taken from the liner notes of this recording.
- 2 Ex Cathedra, *New World Symphonies* (Hyperion CDA67380). Review by Andrew McGregor, 19 May 2003 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/music/release/rqrg/>).
- 3 This appears on the group's CD *Native Angels* (<http://www.savae.org/native.html>).
- 4 R. Middleton, *Studying popular music* (Milton Keynes, 1990), p.111.
- 5 There are, of course, variations across the vast expanse of the New World: but most *villancicos de negros* survive in the archives of cathedrals in which Africans had little to no presence either among the musicians or in the congregation, and there are no accounts, to my knowledge, of Africans performing these pieces.
- 6 M. Moraña, 'Poder, raza y lengua: la construcción étnica del Otro en los villancicos de Sor Juana', *Colonial Latin American Review*, iv/2 (1995), p.149.
- 7 A. Rama, *The lettered city*, ed. and trans. J. C. Chasteen (Durham, 1996).
- 8 J. Quezada Macchiavello, *El legado musical del Cusco barroco. Estudio y*

*catálogo de los manuscritos de música del seminario San Antonio Abad del Cusco* (Lima, 2004).

- 9 R. Parker, 'One fine obscenity', *The Guardian*, 13 February 2007 (<http://music.guardian.co.uk/classical/operalivereviews/story/0,,2011840,00.html>).
- 10 A. Iggulden, 'Opera expert says Puccini's Butterfly is "racist"', *The Telegraph*, 14 February 2007 (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/02/14/nopera14.xml>).
- 11 A. Clark, 'Tainted by purity', *The Financial Times*, 1 April 2005 ([http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/8cfob7c8-a0e0-11d9-95e5-00000e2511c8.html?nclick\\_check=1](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/8cfob7c8-a0e0-11d9-95e5-00000e2511c8.html?nclick_check=1)).
- 12 L. Kramer, 'Contesting Wagner: the 'Lohengrin' Prelude and anti-anti-Semitism', *19th-Century Music*, xxv/2-3 (2001), pp.190-211.
- 13 Kramer, 'Contesting Wagner', p.191.
- 14 A. Loomba, *Colonialism/postcolonialism* (London, 1998).
- 15 E. Said, *Culture and imperialism* (London, 1994).
- 16 Kramer, 'Contesting Wagner', p.210.

- 17 Kramer, 'Contesting Wagner', p.209.
- 18 Of course, the issues of (neo)colonialism, imbalances of power, misrepresentation, and so on are hardly absent from 'world music', as many writers have argued.
- 19 R. Lawrence, 'Reviews: South Bank Early Music weekend', *Early Music Today*, xv/5 (October–November 2007), p.26.
- 20 Clark, 'Tainted by purity'.
- 21 C. Allen, 'All white on the night?', *The Guardian*, 5 March 2008 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/mar/05/race.classicalmusic>).
- 22 D. Clarke, 'Beyond the global imaginary: decoding BBC Radio 3's *Late Junction*', *Radical Musicology*, ii (2007) (<http://www.radical-musicology.org.uk/2007/Clarke.htm>).
- 23 R. Leppert, 'Music, domestic life and cultural chauvinism: images of British subjects at home in India', in *Music and society: the politics of composition, performance and reception*, ed. R. Leppert and S. McClary (Cambridge, 1987), pp.68, 102.
- 24 P. Bohlman, 'Musicology as a political act', *Journal of Musicology*, xi (1993), pp.411-36.

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