


# The Making of the "Other" in Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe: The Birth of Master-Slave Relationship

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper discusses the Making of the "Other" in Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, or the birth of Slave-Master relationship in post-colonialist perspective. Defoe is among the Western imperialist writers whose colonial discourse enhances ideologies of the superiority of the Western race, religion and power. Defoe's Robinson Crusoe asserts the "backwardness" of the "Other" as "savage", brute and uncivilized through the image of "Friday". The novel has also venerated Christianity to enlighten the "Other" who cast away from European civilization and modernity. To unveil the disruptive process of power and hegemony, the intellectuals have to remedy some of its ills and raise cultural awareness among the people.

**Keywords:** Colonial Discourse, Hegemony, Slave-Master Relationship

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## المخلص

تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على قضايا الهيمنة والقوة الأوروبية في صناعة "الآخر" في رواية دانيال دوفو روبينسون كروسو نشأة علاقة السيد بالملوك من خلال نظرة ما بعد الاستعمار. فهيمنة الغرب على "الآخر" كانت فكرية ثقافية سبقت التدخل العسكري الاوربي، فلقد استعمل الكتاب والمفكرون الغربيون استراتيجيات لنشر هذه الافكار والايديولوجيات التي تتضمن التفوق العرقي والديني والثقافي في كتب الإمبرياليين مثل دوفو، الذي يمرر خطابا استعماريًا ازدرائيا تجاه "الآخر"، كتخلفه ووحشيته وبعده عن المدنية وحضارة الانسان الأوروبي، وبذلك فهو من خلال قصة كروسو فهو يؤسس لعلاقة السيد الأوروبي "بالآخر" المملوك، وللتصدي لهذا الخطاب السلي وجب تبياناه لنشر الوعي الثقافي في المجتمع.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ؛ الهيمنة الغربية، علاقة السيد بالملوك، الخطاب الاستعماري

## Introduction

Prior to engaging in fiction, Daniel Defoe's *The Shortest Way with Dissenters* (1702) a religious pamphlet led him to be fined and ultimately ended in Newgate prison for his Presbyterian tendencies. His life later was devoted to writing on various issues including politics, crime, geography, marriage, psychology and religion. It is due to the nature of his erudition, during his childhood at Morton's Academy of Dissenters, that one of the prevalent themes in *Robinson Crusoe* is God's Providence. The subsequent years were marked by a radical change of orientations towards more political and ideological preferences. For ten years or so, Defoe played delightfully the double role of a journalist writing under the cover of various pseudonyms as a state agent, consolidating both his personality traits and intellectual writing skills to be employed to serve the imperialist interests of the British Empire. Literarily speaking, both Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) mark the beginning of the novel as novelty in realistic fiction. The former is based on the eventful life of Alexander Selkirk, a Scottish sailor who voluntarily had ventured in an inhabited island for some years, while the latter is a satire commenting on human aspects as frailty, stupidity and pride, its protagonist returned back to England as a fully changed man.

In *Robinson Crusoe*, however, Defoe provides his readers with a fantastic plot-story while a closer glance at Defoe's narrative explicitly conveys an expansionist premise for the annexation of the "Other's" extended and unexploited territories even prior to holding the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 among the European powers to plan their domination known as the *scramble for Africa*. While reading the novel, one realizes that Defoe substantially establishes the supremacy of white man having recourse to the use of heavy machinery power to save the "Other" Friday and annihilate the "Other" indigenous inhabitants represented as

cannibals in totally paralyzed time and space. It is in this context that Defoe's protagonist serves as a prototype representative of the early organized European adventurers who led expeditions to explore the Americas, Asia and Africa. Besides, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* thematic element of God's Providence that could be categorized under the rubric of Eurocentric mainstream inciting European thinkers and intellectual to disseminate religious "progressive ideas" within a framework known as the *civilizing mission* to convert the pagans to the "light" and Grace of Christianity.

In the beginning of the story, Robinson Crusoe set sail from Kinston upon Hull, England, against the wishes of his parents, the journey ends in a horrifying disaster, as the ship is wrecked in a storm, and its crew have been enslaved by pirates (the Moor) near Sallee. Two years later, he escapes from captivity with Xury whom he sells to the Portuguese captain to procure him a plantation in Brazil, and subsequently would be set free if he would convert to Christianity. Later on, Robinson joins an expedition to purchase slaves from Africa to Brazil, but shipwrecked again near the Venezuelan coast. However, Defoe's protagonist, now a merchant, who is involved in slave trading voyages, undergoes a further misfortune for a sudden shipwreck turned his life upside down as he eventually led a marooned life in a remote island he named "the Island of Despair" (Defoe. D, p 72) in which Robinson spent much of his life there. Despite the literary value and aesthetics of the story, the narrative led to heated debates among critics and scholars who questioned its underlying political and cultural meaning.

### **Discussion / Analysis**

European scholars as anthropologists, philosophers, writers and have devised a complex discourse to denigrate non-European people (Africans, Arabs, Aborigines, Orientals and others) considering them to be the "Other," attributing to them derogatory traits to be "savage", "primitive", brute, sub-humans

and so forth. In fact, the European domination or the extension of white man's hegemony over the "Other" was preceded by ideological and theoretical canons re-presenting non-European world to be the "Other". The American-Palestinian thinker and theoretician Edward. W Said alluded to this meaning in the "Introduction" of his seminal book *Orientalism* (1979) when deconstructing the European idea of the Orient to be the "Other" in the following disruptive image: "The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other." (Said. E, p 01) In fact, Said departs from the premise that Orientalism as a cultural and academic "discourse", is an integral part of French and British "cultural enterprise one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline" (Said. E, p 03). Therefore, the ambivalent nature of Orientalism and its multifaceted layers add more complexity to the already ambiguous term. In compliance with this notion, for Said the "Other" is an idea which may be interpreted as follows:

*Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient - dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, settling it, ruling over it: in short Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, reconstructing, and having authority over the Orient. (Said. E, Orientalism, p 03)*

It is from the above quotation that one might confer that the "Other" be it the Orient, or Africa is not only the object of study for scholars to be re-presented to fit along with Western intellectual and cultural standards, but also to procure a place and space upon which they might exert their power and hegemony. Therefore, the nature of *dominator / dominated* relationship would be based on what Said termed as "power of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony," (Said, E. *Orientalism*, p

05). In the narrowest strict Darwinian sense, for power and hegemony are two main strategies to subjugate and make of the "Other" subservient and loyal to the "Self".

Likewise, many critics and intellectuals have attempted to invest in the recurring term "hegemony" that is subjugating the "Other" in a more complex process, meaning that it is not only the well-known traditional domination, but rather a generating hegemony as Raymond Williams noted: "A lived hegemony is a process. It is not, except analytical, a system or a structure... In practice, that is hegemony can never be singular. Its internal structures are highly complex... It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended and modified." (Williams, R. *Marxism and Literature*, p 112) In his Marxist interpretation of power and hegemony, Williams prefers using more inclusive terms as "hegemonic" rather than "hegemony" and "dominant" rather than "domination" because the hegemonic process deliberately damages cultural and political insights and limits the potentialities of the dominated or colonized. In this context Edward Said explains further the relationship colonizer/colonized within the framework of hegemony as an "enterprise" in: "the former dominate; the latter must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power." (Said, E. *Orientalism*, p 36) In this line of the thought, the French thinker and theoretician, Michel Foucault discusses the means of power to further subjugating the "Other" through a complex process of exerting military power and political domination in: "they have been capable of the most stupefying violence ... They invented a great many different political forms ... They alone evolved a strange technology of power treating the vast majority of men as a flock with a few as shepherds,". (Foucault, M. p, 63) Another interesting point discussed by Said in the Introduction of *Culture and Empire* such hegemonic policy is adopted by the French and English artists when dealing with the "Other" as a

“subject,” a word interchanged with “inferior” in their artistic imperialist creation on indigenous peoples of Algeria and India in:

*One of the difficult truths I discovered in working on this book is how very few of the British or French artists whom I admire took issue with the notion of "subject" or "inferior" races so prevalent among officials who practiced those ideas as a matter of course in ruling India or Algeria. (Said, E. Culture and Imperialism, p xiv)*

It is evident that the European artists' subjugating discourse had been either preceded or escorted military expeditions towards the “Other's” land. In his book Said elaborated on assumptions formulated on the “Other” being “mysterious” or as “they” through the circulation of “notions about bringing civilization to primitive or barbaric peoples,” (Said. E, p xi).

Apart from that Western biased discourse, the colonial enterprise worked out or devised a colonial context as an appropriate pretext to dominate and subjugate the “Other” through “distributing familiar ideas about flogging or death or extensive punishment they required when “they” misbehaved or become rebellious, because “they” mainly understood force or violence best; “they” were not like “us,” and for that reason deserved to be ruled.” (Said. E, p xi). Such colonial ideology was dominant for it justified European presence and violence through intellectual and artistic canonical formulations devised by Western thinkers and imperialist, it is in this context that said comments: “they were widely accepted notions, and they helped fuel the imperial acquisition of territories in Africa,” (Said, E. *Culture and Imperialism*, p, xvi) In fact, the Western expeditions and military campaigns to Africa and Asia were conducive in this imperial process of dispossessing the “Other” of his land and later his “culture”.

In compliance with this sense, Said refers to this meaning considering the fratricide struggle amongst European empires is

over acquiring land in: "the main battle in imperialism is over land, of course, but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who plans its future." (Said, E. *Culture and Imperialism*, p, x). It is evident that the one who owns the land owns everything, for the land requires those who work on it, and plan its future. In literature, among the grand narratives that had an indelible mark on Western thought and culture and served better the colonialist discourse is Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* published in (1719) prior even to the major colonial expeditions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For the narrative draws on the main features of the "Other" having a "different" culture, a mysterious and darker color complex to serve as a historical pretext to the whiteman's intervention: "Western literature a standing in what was considered a lesser world, populated with lesser people of color, portrayed as open to the intervention of so many Robinson Crusoes," (Said, E. *Culture and Imperialism*, p, xvi). In Western literature, this colonialist inclination for the "Other's" land and personality is not uncommon. The notorious, Martiniquais psychiatrist, critic and thinker, Frantz Fanon points out to psychological internalization of such ideas in Western media, books and magazines, in his seminal book of Psychology entitled *Black Skin, White Masks*:

*The Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage are always symbolized by Negroes or Indians; since there is always identification with the victor, the little white boy, becomes an explorer, and adventurer, a missionary "who faces the danger of being eaten by the wicked Negroe. (Fanon. F, Black Skin, White Masks, p, 146)*

Indeed, in his episodic narrative *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe projects his protagonist in similar circumstances, for Robinson Crusoe finds himself in one of the remote islands in the other part of the earth cast away from the European civilized life or signs of modernity: "Defoe locates Crusoe on an unnamed island

somewhere in an outlying region” (Said, E. *Culture and Imperialism*, p, 75). Said comments on Defoe’s protagonist as being severed from the very vitals of life and projected in a sequestered region out of history: “In this view, the outlying regions of the world have no life, history, or culture to speak of no independence or integrity worth representing without the West.” (Said, E. *Culture and Imperialism*, p, xix) Defoe’s bold ideas on European expansionist ambition are both symbolic and ideological for it generated revolutionary cultural and political attitudes towards the “Other” as acquiring his possessions as well as his territories. In this context Said confirms the following:

*The colonial territories are realms of possibility, and they have always been associated with the realistic novel. Robinson Crusoe is virtually unthinkable without the colonizing mission that permits him to create a new world of his own in the distant reaches of Africa, Pacific, and Atlantic wilderness. But most of the nineteenth-century realistic novelists are less assertive about colonial rule and possessions than Defoe or late writers like Conrad and Kipling. (Said, E, Culture and Imperialism, p 64)*

In fact, Defoe’s colonizing ideological assumptions in inquiring distant territories are similar to other imperialist writers notably in Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* (1894) another imperialist project describing, through the metaphorical work representing, one of the natives and his interaction with animals in a purely Indian landscape.

Likewise, the realistic power of the novel or what Said termed as the “power of narration” is unquestionable in presenting the “Other” in what one might term as “double colonial duality”, for he is represented in a demeaning position looking desperately for the European help, and serving the Western political interests. It is in this context that the creation of novel literature served much the colonial enterprise. In the light of this that Said says it is “not



surprising that France and England and (especially) England have an unbroken tradition of novel-writing, unparalleled elsewhere..." (Said, E. *Culture and Imperialism*, p, xxii). Said draws our attention to what he called the "institutional character" in re-presenting the bourgeois society's thought and worldview, the novel in a way played a primordial role in Europe's conquest of Africa, Said reflects *Robinson Crusoe's* main objectives in the following:

*The novel is inaugurated in England by Robinson Crusoe, a work whose protagonist is the founder of a new world, which he rules and reclaims for Christianity and England. True, whereas Crusoe is explicitly enabled by an ideology of overseas expansion –directly connected in style and form to the narratives sixteenth and seventeenth-century exploration voyage laid the foundations of the great colonial empires... (Said, E, Culture and Imperialism, p 70)*

In Said's perception of "culture" in its narrow colonial meaning is typically ideological, "it means all those practices, like the art of description, communication, and representation [...] that often exist in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aims is pleasure," (Said, E. *Culture and Imperialism*, p, xii) however, the novel's enormous function in this context is "the formation of attitudes, references and experiences" on and of the "Other". (Said, E. *Culture and Imperialism*, p, xii) Therefore, the creation of the novel as powerful ideological and historical form of narration serves as a norm for the colonized people with which they might assert and identify their own culture.

In his deconstruction of the "Other", Bruce Janz identifies the dichotomy the "Self" / the "Other" as discursive or ambivalent formulation in different tropes presented as follows: *fascination* an attitude seeing the "Other" as exotic or idle curiosity; *repulsion* the "Other" is formulated and presented as "leper" or "outcast" to be avoided and left out; *dependence* a state of realization as the Otherness of God that the person is not, but makes his existence; *Smugness* means the "Other" is to be taken as the "primitive" or

the “savage” with no culture of his own; *appropriation/subsumption* process in which the “Other” can be absorbed or assimilated to the “Self,” it is workable only if the “Other” gives up his own being, personality and culture; *marginalization* is the approach of interpretation, understanding and consideration of the center, the “Other” must be the periphery; *domination* in terms of alterity is the power over the “Other” as the position of Friday to Crusoe in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* that is the relationship dominator/dominated; *mirror* through which the alien becomes familiar with and vice versa, or a standard for self-indentification and self-recognition; *foil* or a measurement against which the “Other” test himself; and last not least as a *body* in which the “Other” is an integral part of the “Self”.

So for the sake of length and concision, let’s shed light on some of the aforementioned dichotomies enlisted by Janz in the deconstruction of alterity in *Robinson Crusoe*. Defoe exemplifies the nature of dominator / dominated relationship between Robinson and Friday. After passing some years alone, Robinson succeeds to survive on the island showing deftly his skills and abilities to master the unwelcoming environment as sowing crops, and taming some animals. However later on, he notices the footprints of strangers on the shores, Robinson suspiciously declares: “I fancied it must be the Devil. [...] For how should any other thing I human shape came into the place?” (Defoe, D. p, 153) Besides, Defoe’s derogatory language is put forth in Robinson’s inference: “It must be some more dangerous creatures, viz., that it must be some of the savages of the mainland over against me...” (Defoe, D. p, 153/4) Robinson’s feelings of apprehension and awe turned into revulsion or to use Janz term *repulsion* when he discovers the cannibalistic nature of the natives: “I entertained such an abhorrence of the savage wretches that I have been speaking of, and of the wretched, inhuman custom of their devouring and eating one another up...” (Defoe, D. p, 164) In fact, this attitude is highly biased from the part of the novelist for very few of the

autochthonous inhabitants of the distant islands have recourse for cannibalism which shows one of the darkest ideological assumptions enclosed in the novel.

Like all imperialist writers, Defoe in *Robinson Crusoe* uses history and religion so as to consolidate some Western colonialist ideologies. He describes the process of a civilized European "master" who manages to save Friday's life through a prevailing demonstration of the white man's invincible power when he ruthlessly "exterminated all the brutes" to borrow Kurtz's expression in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Then in one of the most symbolical instances, Defoe pictures the first intercourse with the nameless "Other":

*I could then perceive that he stood trembling, as if he had been taken prisoner, and had just been to be killed, as his two enemies were; I beckoned him again to come to me ... He came nearer and nearer, kneeled down every ten or twelve steps in token of acknowledgement for my saving his life; I smiled at him and looked pleasantly ... He kneeled down again, kissed the ground, and laid his head upon the ground, and taking me by the foot, set my foot upon his head: this, it seems, was in token of wearing to be my slave forever." (Defoe. D, p 199-200)*

Indeed, Defoe's in this instance describes Friday's sincere acknowledgment and unmatched gratitude for saving him from the cannibals' firm grip. However, the irony is that, apart from Friday's humiliating and clumsy moves as a response to his emancipation, for Friday has over thanked Robinson for rescuing his like; however, Friday doesn't realize that he gets rid of the cannibals' hands to fall slave at the hand of the Western white man. It is in such ambivalent circumstances that Defoe establishes slave-master relationship in his narrative creating the tradition of the superiority of the white race over the other races. The subsequent quote demonstrates the prevalence of the Western paradigms of thought, education, and culture to be the etiquette or

the norm to be emulated by the “Other,” which serves as *mirror* through which the alien becomes familiar with; Robinson explains:

*I began to speak to him and teach him to speak to me; and first, I made him know his name should be Friday, which is the day I saved his life... I likewise taught him to say “Master,” and then let him know that was to be my name; I likewise taught him to say “yes” and “no” and to know the meaning of them; I gave him some milk in an earthen pot and let him see me drink it before him and sop my bread in it ... (Defoe, D. p, 203)*

It is unequivocal that Defoe’s purpose here is to expound the superiority of European culture over the “Other” to be squarely solid frames of thought through this demeaning and abject master-slave relationship. Besides, Defoe’s religious tendencies have been displayed as one of the thematic elements in the novel. Even before he sets sail in his first voyage abroad,

Robinson’s father’s disobedience in declining his educational wishes and preferences to stay home and study law served as a catalyzing motive behind his miserable life. Robinson’s father’s pronouncement, at the opening of the novel goes in this sense when his father declares one day to his wife: “ “That boy might be happy if he would stay at home, but if he goes abroad, he will be the most miserable wretch that was ever born;” (Defoe, D. p, 203) Here appear Defoe’s overzealous religious tendencies in his life, for the would-be Presbyterian minister turned to be a hosiery merchant before turning to journalism and writing. Later on the island, the remorseful Robinson starts to realize God’s Providence in: “I never had so much as one thought of it being the hand of God, or that it was a just punishment for my sins ,” (Defoe. D, p 90) that is an overlapping idea which reflects his sharp sense of guilt for committing a mortal sin in Christianity, that is disobeying his father and declining his wish.

While reading the novel, one progressively senses Robinson's profound religious repentance and progressive return to Christianity. For Defoe's protagonist experiences a sort of religious conversion saying: "I did what I never had done before in all my life: I kneeled down and prayed to God to fulfill the promise to me, that if I called upon Him in the day of trouble, He would deliver me," (Defoe, D. p, 96) Robinson's religious inclinations and preferences manifested themselves clearly when he attempts to Christianize his slave Friday. Again, here Defoe is formulating implicitly his commitment to the European *civilizing mission* to the non-civilized "Other", notably when he engages in the process to convert Friday to Christianity saying: "I began to instruct him in the knowledge of the true God. I told him that the great Maker of all things lived up there, pointing up towards Heaven. [...] That He was omnipotent could do everything for us, give everything to us, take everything from us..." (Defoe. D, p 213) After three years, Robinson affirms the accomplishment of his mission in converting his "savage" slave to Christianity: "The conversion which employed the hours between Friday and I was such as made three years which we lived there together perfectly and completely happy [...] The savage was now a good Christian, much better than I..." (Defoe, D. p, 217) At this stage of development in Defoe's narrative, the novel concludes on the full conversion of Robinson who masters the English languages and becomes a good Christian, even better than his master, and both return triumphantly safe home.

### **Conclusion**

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is among the grand narratives that had an enormous impact on English literature, for its early publication in 1719 coincided with major political and economic upheavals. The novel served as framework for Western authors and intellectuals to formulate a well-devised discourse based on Eurocentric cosmic view. Such discriminatory discourse served as means of hegemonic practice that was instrumental in the process

of deprecating and subjugating the “Other”. At first sight, the work seems to be exciting and highly adventuresome, but at a closer glance one senses that it entails malignant and vicious intention to “educate” or indoctrinate the “Other” along the Western standards and paradigms of thought. For Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* aim’s is to perpetuate the culture of servitude of the “Other” along the Calibanistic trait in William Shakespeare’s famous tragedy *The Tempest* (1610/11). Though, Shakespeare’s Caliban character in *The Tempest* has a less subversive effect than Defoe’s Robinson in the realistic novel *Robinson Crusoe*.

Besides, the early publication of *Robinson Crusoe* in (1719) historically came at the climax of the flourishing Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade between Europe - Africa to Brazil and America in the mid-seventeenth century. Defoe’s colonialist discourse is explicitly demonstrated through Robinson’s experience in a remote island where he succeeds to survive rendering his environment favorable for life. In fact, the white European explorer manages to save one of the natives “Friday” from the cannibals who were about to devour him. Again, Defoe employs the white man’s military superiority to defeat the “Other” represented as “savages” having a “primitive” language and lifestyle. After saving Friday’s life, Robinson baptized him on the day he saved his life and enslaves him for life. Though Friday’s flagrant bondage at the hand of Robinson, most readers do not realize Defoe’s expansionist idea revolving around a European settler who, after much suffering and struggle with the harsh environment, does not only come to master the sequestered island but also place himself as a master of the “Other”.

In compliance with this sense, Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* could be classified under the rubric of Eurocentric discourse displaying the superiority and the progress of the West over the rest of the world through the establishment of slave-master relationship in Western literature. It is in this sense that Defoe’s grand narrative constitutes the fountainhead that inspired other fellow imperialist

writers as Rudyard Kipling in his metaphorical works *The Jungle Book* (1894), *Kim* (1901) and notorious imperialist poem "The White Man's Burden: The United States and The Philippine Islands" (1899); and the Polish-British Joseph Conrad in his controversial narrative *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Unsurprisingly, the common trait between those writers is that they projected their fictional representatives as the naïve, brute, "savage", "primitive" "Other" who is fit to be dominated, enlightened and saved from his "horrid ways".

To conclude, the idea of Western hegemony and domination over the "Other" has been well elaborated in through the colonialist discourse included in the works of Defoe, Kipling or even Conrad. The derogatory discourses towards the "Other" are among the salient features of such as Defoe's fiction even before successive waves of European expeditions rushing in movements known as the *scramble for Africa*. The Western military campaigns did not only exert brutal power in the practice of conquering the "Other's" land, but also the whole colonizing process was pursued by a religious pretext to enlighten and civilize the pagan people of darker skins in what they called the *civilizing mission*. After an arduous long process of decolonization in Africa, Asia and the Americas many theoreticians, intellectuals questioned and challenged the heavy legacy of colonialism in their writings aiming to raise the cultural, social awareness of the colonized populations and prepare them for more resistance.

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