

‘Delirious Expenditure’: Post-Modern Ghost Dances and the Carnavalesque¹

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Many connections have already been made by scholars between religion and rave culture (ed. St. John, 2004), but such scholars, working largely out of a British/ European cultural paradigm, have failed to consider or even recognize rave’s American equivalent, the jam band grassroots underground, a network of live music subcultures, in their conversations. The Grateful Dead, the house band for Ken Kesey’s Acid Tests in the 60s, and their hippie fan base, the Deadheads, have served as catalysts and models for the subsequent jam band subcultures that have followed, which include Phish, Widespread Panic and, most recently, the bluegrass-dominated String Cheese Incident, and recent trance-fusion bands like the Disco Biscuits and Sound Tribe Sector Nine.² These subcultures have roughly similar value-systems in common, including disillusionment with a national culture firmly ensconced in notions of American Exceptionalism, a commitment to environmental and social projects, and – what is particularly pertinent here – a general engagement with neo-religious values associated with the New Age. Furthermore, as a peculiarly American phenomenon, the jam band grassroots underground has often turned to the Native American for spiritual inspiration, which is not surprising, considering white America’s long fascination with the Noble Savage.

I wish to remedy the dearth of scholarly work on the jam band grassroots underground by offering a critique that will seek to interrogate the reason why so many people, accused of being ‘lost in a (post)modern freefall’ (Deloria, 1996, p.7), are seeking their salvation in fantasies of a pre-industrial tribalism in the musical and social experience offered by these subcultures. I do not use the word salvation without acknowledging its

¹ From Stallybrass and White (1986, p.201).

² A new hybrid genre blending the band format and rave music.

religious connotations, for the flourishing of the jam band grassroots underground is a testament to the way certain marginal communities have responded to crises of national and ontological – indeed religious – identity in the U.S. for the past forty odd years. In this article, I wish to take issue with the religious claims underlying some of the jam band grassroots underground and, by extension, the New Age movement with which it intersects. Some, following on from recent discourses on rave, might contend that the jam band grassroots underground is involved in deeply-felt religious experiences that are millennial in outlook and thus diachronic. That is, the jam band grassroots underground, and other neo-tribal networks like it, have the potential to be socially transformative, both within their networks of operation and upon the dominant culture with which they are both at odds and complicit. However, I want to point out the extent to which such religious expressions, arrived at through the formation of ‘affective alliances’ with an imagined and idealized Native American (or other(ed) ethnic) subject, are exploitative. The jam band grassroots underground, comprised of white, middle-class drop-outs, may thus simply be another case of the bourgeoisie ‘rediscovering the carnivalesque as a radical source of transcendence’ (Stallybrass and White, 1986, p.201). At the conclusion of this article, however, I propose positioning the jam band grassroots underground as a radical performance culture some have termed the ‘other America’ in the context of recent globalization discourses as a way of moving beyond compartmentalizing the jam band grassroots underground as merely another instance of ‘white man playing Indian’. (Deloria, 1996).

Michel Maffesoli (1996), in his conception of the neo-tribes that populate Western post-modernity, suggests that Western civilization is involved in a cyclic pattern that alternates periods of cultural (religious) ‘effervescence’ with rigid institutionalization of culture by the state-form. Maffesoli posits the idea that post-modernity, which represents the widespread disillusionment with the ‘bourgeois class rule’ (1996, p.126) that

has ordered the past few hundred years of the West, must be thought of as a period of cultural revitalization, and positions the neo-tribe as one of the ways in which certain groups are making new and often revitalizing socio-cultural bonds. The emergence of neo-tribal networks like the underground psy-trance movement and also, I would add, the jam band grassroots underground, seems to affirm readings of post-modernity as a period of cultural ‘effervescence’ out of which new socio-cultural bonds are made and some reinvigorated.

I am not the first to make the connection between religion – specifically religious expression arising out of social or cultural crisis, known as millennialism – and certain New Age neo-tribes. Graham St. John explores psy-trance enclaves in his article, ‘Techno millennium: Dance, ecology and future primitives’, positing it as an ‘eco-millenarian dance movement rising out of global centres and marginal sites...communicated through the rituals and epochal events of new “tribal” formations emerging within a global technospiritual youth network’ (2004, p.214) . St. John even references the Grateful Dead in passing as important forebears in the creation of psy-trance religiousness (2004, p.225). He proposes thinking of rave collective members as ‘zippies’, in other words hippies who have evolved into technologically savvy millenarists. However, this celebration of zippy millenarism needs to be complicated by comparing it to what millennialism has traditionally meant, thereby revealing the stakes involved when a disillusioned segment of the Western middle-class aligns itself with the plight of the colonized Other.

Scholars originally adopted the term millennialism in order to describe new religious movements that arise among certain indigenous cultures following contact with the West. These revitalization movements generally anticipate some sort of apocalyptic event that has often manifested itself as the restoration of an idealized or imagined past (Wilson, 1975) and reinvigorate the weakened social and cultural bonds

of the present (Kehoe, 1989). Weston La Barre (1972) posits the term ‘crisis cult’ to describe such movements, emphasizing the calamitous environments of acculturation and colonization that serve as catalysts. The white agents’ infamously disproportionate response at Wounded Knee Creek in 1890 to the Great Ghost Dance of the Sioux, one of the most famous millennial religions, is telling of the way in which manifestations of religious zeal, particularly as performed by groups outside the purview of institutional religions and the state – especially savage, crazy redskins – can seem threatening.³ Shortly before the massacre, one agent at Pine Ridge wrote these words to the Bureau of Indian Affairs:

Your Department has been informed of the damage resulting from these dances and of the danger attending them of the crazy Indians doing serious damage to others ... the only remedy for this matter is the use of military and until this is done you need not expect any progress from these people on the other hand you will be made to realize that they are tearing down more in a day than the Government can build in a month. (quoted in Kehoe, 1989, p.19)

I am interested in the way in which jam band subcultures’ ‘dancing’ – not only actual but also social, political, and religious – has been similarly accused of ‘tearing down more in a day than the Government can build in a month’. The Ghost Dance may thus serve as a useful juxtaposition with the jam band grassroots underground’s millennial affectations, often achieved through a syncretic fusion of rituals and signifiers from appropriately exotic cultures like Native American tribes. Practitioners of the Ghost Dance faced real bodily threat from colonizing forces, while those in the jam band grassroots underground and the New Age project with which it is

³ The massacre at Wounded Knee Creek, where hundreds of Sioux, mostly women and children, were killed, marks the apotheosis of Native American opposition to the Euro-American colonization project, and in many ways the Ghost Dance served as a catalyst for this event.

implicated, are appropriating a neo-tribal and ethnicized identity in order to authenticate their millennial stance against perceived environmental and social/religious crises arising out of the post-industrial West.

An example of this professed millennialism is the String Cheese Incident's weekend-long festival every summer in Horning's Hideout, Oregon, which entails a marathon of 'religious' events, including the String Cheese Incident playing many different times over the course of the festival, and 'friends' of the band, including trance-fusion bands like Sound Tribe Sector Nine and drum-and-bass and psy-trance DJs, playing to alter(ed) states. Even away from the rave and event tents, the party-goers make their own music with the formation of drum circles and the blasting of personal sound-systems. All of these events purport to offer religious, spiritually transformative experiences achieved through the mixture of music, dancing and (often) psychedelics. But can we take these claims towards transcendence seriously?

The millennialism that I have so far described at this point might be usefully compared to the carnivalesque tradition in the festival cultures of Europe, of which the jam band grassroots underground is a descendant. As Stallybrass and White warn us, 'carnivalesque discourse' is merely 'bourgeois romanticism' that manifests in 'a powerful ritual or symbolic practice [...] a delirious expenditure of the symbolic capital accrued [...] in the successful struggle of bourgeois hegemony' (1986, p.201). Describing members of jam band subcultures as practising a bourgeois carnivalesque discourse seems appropriate, as most of the constituents are 60s and 70s hippies, or the children of hippies – in other words, first- or second-generation middle-class drop-outs seeking personal transcendence.

One might thus give an alternative reading of the String Cheese Incident's festival at Horning's Hideout that exposes its 'delirious expenditure'. One standard element to the String Cheese Incident's subculture is, in fact, the carnival. Floats, giant puppets and masquerading

feature prominently in the Horning's Hideout summer camp, both within and alongside the show. Along with the carnival, altars to various eastern deities, mass yoga and meditation sessions, and market stalls dispensing non-Western herbs and medicine dominate the festival site. Other rituals, often with political import, are performed:

One at a time, giant paper and wooden effigies representing some of our society's most pressing concerns, like War, Greed, and Hatred, were paraded around the stage of the amphitheater floor. When they reached the fire pit in the center of the stage, the participants burned the effigies, and the crowd trickled with delight. (Kaye, 2004, [n.p.])

This symbolic mummery seems essentially frivolous, like the cathartic exercises in petition-signing for a variety of causes, and the pamphleteering of various activists that are an essential part of any jam band – or indeed rave – festival. Such New Age celebrations of the exotic and their feel-good politics tends to undermine any serious claims these 'zippy millenarists' might make.

In *Playing Indian* (1996), Philip Deloria criticizes the 'Grateful Dead Indians', whom he sees as reducing an ethnic identity ('Indianness') to a mere cultural artifact, something to be appropriated and synthesized into a New Age mysticism made up of a syncretic 'melting pot' of eastern religious icons, neo-paganism, and everything Other that lies in between. Contemporary jam band subcultures follow in the Deadheads' New Age footsteps by a celebratory appropriation of modes of 'primitive spirituality' from non-Western sources as a way of creating an onto-theology opposed to 'mainstream' Western value-systems. The trance fusion band, Sound Tribe Sector Nine's, investment in this New Age spirituality highlights the cultural syncretism at play in the jam band grassroots underground. Sector Nine members take their band's name from the 9th Baktun of the Mayan calendar

and are self-proclaimed guides to the spiritual transcendence of their followers.⁴ Sector Nine's mission statement is as follows:

Sound Tribe Sector 9 is a family of musicians, artists, designers, engineers, and visionaries. We hold a collective attitude of cooperation and service ... to Mother Earth. We believe that a new understanding of vibration could usher in the next evolutionary step for this planet. New forms of science, technology, medicine, architecture and design, and a higher collective consciousness may all be realized through vibration and music. (1st Crystal, 2005, [n.p.])

Furthermore, the band arranges power crystals around the stage to channel the 'psychic' energy of the music, organizes its shows around spiritually significant dates, and proclaims December 21st 2012, the 'end of time' according to the Mayan calendar, as apocalyptic – or at least a day of reckoning for the post-industrial West.

Adjacent to Sector Nine's movement towards a 'higher collective consciousness' is the Planet Art Network (PAN), a New Age project seeking to replace the Gregorian Calendar, which PAN sees at the root of many of the world's problems (environmental destruction, exploitation of indigenous peoples, the cult of materialism and social atomization, to name but a few) with the Mayan 13 Moon Calendar, which 'is the only way to stop the moral atrocities and environmental abuse that are now being committed on behalf of nationalism and economic development' (Biographical Data, 1995, [n.p.]). PAN, comprised largely of disaffected white, middle-class Americans and originating in the 1960s counterculture, enjoys a following across the globe, and combines a pastiche of other suitably 'tribal' or 'primitive' spiritual traditions into its rhetoric. A seminal moment in the history of this organization was the Four Corners Boundary Dissolving Ceremony of June 26th 1996 when hundreds of supporters gathered at the Four Corners National Monument to protest symbolically the arbitrary state

⁴ A baktun is a period of 400 years. The 9th Baktun was around 40 AD.

boundaries imposed by the United States. There is no better way to contextualize this event than to read the following account:

At 5 AM ... Navajo Nation Monument Superintendent James Gorman ... opened the gates on an unprecedented conscious human act to change and repeal the course of history. Instead of the four state flags, as well as those of the United States and Navajo Nations, flying on the flag poles were two Banners of Peace, the flag of the Congress of Biospheric Rights, the flag of the Galactic Shield, and the flag of the Rainbow Nation. It was a new morning. As the sun rose on the spectacular and vast desert region of the Four Corners, more than five hundred people had surrounded the Monument platform. ('Four Corners', 1996, [n.p.]

With the ostensible intention of repealing 'the course of history', gatherers, and certainly the author of this account, seem oblivious to the way in which this event could be read as a dangerous act of cultural misappropriation. Of course, Four Corners National Monument symbolically marks the invisible borders demarcating four U.S. states, and at first glance it seems quite an appropriate site to protest U.S. hegemony. Yet this shrine to U.S. power sits in the heart of the Navajo Nation – a paradox in itself, considering North America's history of colonialism and genocide of Native American peoples and culture. To use the word history – much less claim to repeal it – to describe the relationship between the U.S. and the native populations is a further obfuscation of an on-going crisis, and the explication of an aspect of this crisis should put into perspective the bizarre events of the Boundary Dissolving Ceremony.

Churchill and LaDuke (1992) have drawn attention to the internal colonialism of American business interests, eager to exploit reservations for their resources as well as their cheap – and expendable – labor. Through a series of 'economic planning' initiatives organized by the U.S. government, designed to undermine the self-sufficiency of reservation economies, reservations became economically dependent on outside business interests.

One of the most insidious manifestations of this has been the uranium industry's exploitation of reservation lands and peoples, especially in the Four Corners Area (Churchill and LaDuke, 1992, p.249). The uranium industry has left in its wake a string of radioactive dumps, contaminated water supplies, birth-defects, and radiation-related cancers in mine workers and adjacent communities (Churchill and LaDuke, 1992, p. 248). But such industries avoid responsibility for cleaning up after themselves, according to LaDuke and Churchill, by the unique 'expendability' of the indigenous population and their inability to fight back. Furthermore, these initiatives have also undermined any effective political autonomy of the indigenous populations in America, given that 'tribal councils', in the face of the 'perpetual cycle of American Indian disease, malnutrition, and despair generated by neocolonialism' (Churchill and LaDuke, 1992, p.255), make short-term economic decisions complicit with U.S. industrial concerns, leaving little room to negotiate for real structural changes.

What exactly is going on, then, when hundreds of New Age protestors – the white, bourgeois drop-outs who comprise the majority of the PAN constituency –descend upon this site to 'return to the sacred ways of the Earth'? What is going on when protestors replace not only the U.S. and state flags, but also the Navajo Nations flags, symbols of the political movement to assert the Navajo as a distinct national entity (one of the only recourses left to indigenous cultures to extricate themselves from internal colonialism), with banners representing the protestors' neo-spiritual agenda that calls for the dissolution of all nations and a return to a pre-modern tribalism?

It is possible to read this ceremony as an entirely negative thing, acting out in cultural terms the same brand of internal colonialism of which the uranium industry is guilty. In *On Medicine Women and White Shameans*, Laura Donaldson posits the term 'postmodern neocolonialism' to

describe New Age Native Americanism (NANA), of which PAN is guilty, as another form of cultural theft:

[P]ostmodern because they deterritorialize and consume aboriginal spiritual traditions in particular ways and neocolonial because they reproduce historical spiritual traditions in particular ways and because they reproduce historical imperialism in ‘flexible combinations of the economic, the political...and the ideological’. (Donaldson, 2001, p.680)

As Donaldson helps us to realize, PAN’s appropriation of a variety of ‘native’ spiritual traditions, from ancient Mayan religion to pseudo-Indian tribalism, into a new spiritual movement symbolized by their flag of the ‘Rainbow Nation’, is indicative of Jameson’s formulation of post-modern pastiche. This tendency on the part of the New Age to borrow signifiers from various suitably tribal sources, thereby unhinging these signifiers’ meanings from the original cultural source – ‘whitewashing’ them, as Donaldson might say – is evident in the rest of the narrator’s account of the Ceremony:

By five-thirty, four drummers held the four cardinal points of the Monument platform beneath the flags of the galactic liberation front. Native Americans and elders sat on benches immediately around the Monument. [The] outer circle extended to the scattering of artisan booths near the monument ...The solemn heartbeat drumming continued ... A spectacular sixties-style tie dye peace banner was being held high on one of the artisan shack’s rooftops. A handful of media people used this backdrop for their television cameras. What did their cameras see?

A vision of humanity gathering and holding the sacred form of the Earthseal of the ancient spirit elders, for the purpose of initiating a return to the sacred ways of the Earth. At precisely seven o’clock, the four drummers were replaced by four conch blowers. As the conch sounds penetrated the desert dawn, the energy of the gathering was released into spirit. ‘We are peace, we are love, we are one’, these were the only words publicly spoken that closed the Ceremony. As the

form dissolved, several Rainbow Nation people were atop the monument singing a spontaneous song of peace. The crowd dissolved in a spirit of quiet joy. ('Four Corners', 1996, [n.p.]

It is interesting that 'elders' of the 'galactic liberation front' are seated beside the few Native Americans in attendance – as if being in close proximity to a real Indian endows the elders with greater authority. Other than the Native Americans enthroned beside the elders – Native Americans who seem, like the flags above them and the tribal lands beneath their feet, merely props, objects, creating a suitably 'tribal' atmosphere – Native Americans seem conspicuously absent from the ceremony. What remain are artisan 'shacks', seemingly unoccupied, and useful only as pedestals upon which to hang a 'sixties style peace banner'. It seems fitting that the artisan 'shacks' are present in this account, since it is where souvenirs like turquoise and dream catchers are sold to tourists – and probably to many of the PAN protestors gathered. These are suitably 'authentic' and 'tribal' commodities to be woven into PAN's New Age panoply of 'native' signifiers, but these commodities are indelibly haunted by the other unmentioned and unnoticed radio-active commodities polluting these same reservation lands.

This 'tribal gathering' seems to be drawing power from the Native Americans surrounding them and then, in the end, like the uranium industry, disenfranchizing them. As Donaldson so eloquently puts it, 'One could argue that NANA [or in this case PAN, though the distinction seems irrelevant] is but the Indian version of whites having taken our blues (or drums) and gone. In their relentless search for alternative spiritual models, non-Natives participate in an ideological structure of white supremacy' (2001, p. 680). Through their pseudo-tribal ceremony, and their branding of the site by their various tribal banners, the protestors seem to be asserting their claim to an authentic spirituality that supersedes the Native Americans that they have used as mere fetishes. What seems to be the subtext here is

that only this New Age Rainbow Nation can show the Native American how to be properly 'tribal'.

Though not present at this ceremony – where the only music played was with drums and conch shells – Sector Nine's 'tribal gatherings' and their use of Mayan rituals and names deserves close scrutiny. As one review put it, 'with their transcendent, improvisational jams and Mayan-inspired sense of a higher, metaphysical purpose, [Sector Nine's] music delivers a spiritual sustenance that has earned them a very devoted core following' (Schwartz, 2002, [n.p.]). But what are these five white boys from the American South doing performing as Mayan shamans? Why is it so important for Sector Nine – and the subculture that follows them – to infuse their shows with a New Age 'spiritual' rhetoric that can only ever be problematic?

The troubling acts of cultural appropriation committed by Sector Nine are hardly new developments in a music underground that has historically, since the Deadheads and the 60s counterculture, wished to distance itself from, or at least rewrite, national cultural and historical narratives by borrowing (or stealing) a Native American identity. Deloria traces the origins of this urge among white Americans to 'play Indian' as a way of seeking a national identity – or an identity outside the nation – back as far as the Boston Tea Party. In their efforts to form an 'authentic' community, Grateful Dead Indians 'turned to Indianness as the sign of all that was authentic and aboriginal, everything that could be true about America' (Deloria, 1996, p.180).

The Grateful Dead and Deadheads, manifestations of the 60s counterculture, were involved in eschewing what Theodore Roszak termed the 'technocracy' and sentimental notions of American Exceptionalism. One of the main battlefields upon which the Grateful Dead waged its symbolic war with the dominant culture was upon the territory of American national myths, particularly – and not surprisingly – the myth of the Frontier. The

cowboy, present in so many Grateful Dead songs, is central to Deadhead mythology as an anti-authoritarian nomadic figure, but the cowboy, who must always ride into the sunset alone, becomes insufficient for the Deadhead's community project, an insufficiency that can be read as a comment on the cult of American Individualism. Deadheads must, like so many white Americans before them, use raced bodies as conduits through which to achieve authenticity as a community – or in this case as a tribe. As Slotkin, describing the 60s counterculture, elucidates:

The iconography of beads and headbands, the adoption of 'tribal' life-styles as a form of communalism untainted by political association with communism, the rationalization of drug use as a form of mystic religiosity, the linkage of political and ecological concerns, the withdrawal to wilderness refuges and the adoption of an outlaw or 'renegade' stance toward the larger society ... The point of repeating the Frontier Myth in that form was to suggest that our history embodied a fatal mistake, which could be corrected by symbolically re-enacting the past – only this time, we would live the Frontier Myth as 'Indians' not as 'Cowboys'. (Slotkin, 1985, p.17)

I take issue with one aspect of Slotkin's description, for Deadheads as well as their jam band descendants insist on reliving the Frontier Myth as *both* 'Cowboys' and 'Indians', or anything else they want to be, dissolving (or perhaps through such an attempt simply reinforcing) such dichotomies altogether. Jam band subcultures, like the NANA of which, in many ways, they are near relation, are, to quote Donaldson, 'rummaging through [...] imagined histories [...] to envision a different life for oneself' (2001, p. 683).

Scholars – and ravers themselves – would certainly like to suggest that their millenarian stance and global networks have potentially radically subversive consequences for the nation-states that seek to contain them, a claim that can also be attributed to rave's American cousin, the jam band grassroots underground. But Stallybrass and White would argue that these

neo-tribes, rather than being part of a ‘transgressive future’ that Foucault has anticipated and that recent discourses on globalization would contend, are merely repackaged and slicker 21st century manifestations of the carnivalesque that operates merely to reinscribe the hegemony of ‘bourgeois class rule’(1986, p.200). Carnavalesque discourse allows bourgeois subjects to ‘excitedly discover their own pleasures and desires under the sign of the Other’ (Stallybrass and White, 1986, p.201), and this seems to account for the problematic tendency of the jam band underground to ‘play Indian’. Furthermore, Deloria can ultimately find nothing to salvage from ‘playing Indian’, and is particularly derisive of the Grateful Dead Indians. White America has defined the Native American as Other, and the appropriation of Indianness and the celebration of the Noble Savage is merely a white fantasy, enabling white Americans to continue to define themselves as the ‘rightful’ inheritors of the Frontier from the native peoples, whose downfall has been conveniently passed off as tragic but inevitable. As Deloria puts it:

The self-defining pairing of American truth with American freedom rests on the ability to wield power against Indians – social, military, economic, and political – while simultaneously drawing power from them. Indianness may have existed primarily as a cultural artifact in American society, but it has helped *create* these other forms of power, which have then been turned back on native people. (1996, p.191)

So can the religiousness, deeply felt by many circulating within the jam band grassroots underground, not be considered ‘real’ even if it is exploitative? Indeed, what religion is not guilty of exploitation? Criticizing jam band subcultures’ and New Age’s appropriative gestures is necessary, but salvaging something from such a critique may indeed be the more fruitful task.

The jam band grassroots underground challenges the category of bourgeois ‘delirious expenditure’ as delineated by Stallybrass and White in ways that need to be further explored in the context of globalization

discourse. I have chosen the rather unwieldy label, ‘grassroots underground’, to describe jam band subcultures’ diverse, but distinctly American, musical milieu: ‘grassroots’ to reinforce its kinship with the acceptable sociality of the American county fair-type event (a descendant of the European market carnival), and ‘underground’ to invoke the Othered nature of the festival/ ‘parking lot’ experience, in which drugs and trance-dancing, as well as the dissemination of alternative information at shows and on the internet, help to create a radical space outside the ideological and juridical control of the American nation-state.⁵ Smolin has dubbed this the ‘other America’ (2005, [n.p.]); an apt description, given the jam band grassroots underground’s desire to draw upon what they see as mainstream American mythico-ideological discourses. I use the phrase ‘draw upon’ to suggest a metaphor here: the act of tracing, drawing upon an image, always changes the original image in some way. The word ‘trace’ also suggests the leaving behind of something barely discernable or – given this article’s emphasis on the ‘spiritual’ – spectral. While Deadheads and other jam band subcultures utilize the familiar template of the popular American imaginary, the way in which they trace themselves into, out of, and against this template creates another ‘uncanny’ America. The radical politics and technological savvy – the ‘zippy millenarism’ – that has allowed the scene to flourish in America largely unhindered by the state, may in fact position this ‘other America’ to take advantage of an increasingly techno-globalized world, offering enclaves of resistance – at least ontological resistance – against the encroachment of global corporate conformism. This seems like good news even if these post-modern Ghost Dances, like most things in the West, are inspired by a bourgeois fascination with the Other.

⁵ See Smolin (2005). He gestures towards jam band’s imbrication with what he terms the ‘American grassroots underground’.

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