

An invisible common¹

a conversation with Olivier Marboeuf

Ateliers Médicis – Clichy-Montfermeil – France – Mai 2020

¹ We've chosen to translate the French title "un populaire invisible" by "an invisible common". In French the word "populaire" is an adjective, which the author here transforms into a noun to communicate the idea of cultural practices and forms of life generated by the working classes, but which have not yet been incorporated into cultural objects. The idea is to express at the same time forms of under-representation and of culture developed *by* a community *for* that community.

What is your practice?

That's an opening question that can seem simple and appropriate in terms of talking about a residency. I could answer in several ways. I'm choosing one among others here, one that calls for a few digressions. From the very beginning, I intuitively did not identify myself with the position or the imagination – and, I must add, the fantasy – of the artist or author. I can't really say why, but there was something there that didn't suit me, a means that I wasn't comfortable with, a perspective that I felt was subject to too many blind spots. I'll come back to this question of the desire to see at a later point. But in brief, I think that I had and still continue to have an interest in impure forms and transitional spaces, situations and practices that have no name, mangroves, as it were.² And so I didn't focus on delineated places or solid social identities, but rather on what existed between places and things and what is alive, which permits an establishing of relation – without necessarily resolving anything because the idea of relation as resolution annoys me as much as all the "do-gooder" readings of the Martinican thinker Edouard Glissant. I have a taste for maieutics, for a cumulative conversational practice that creates forms by means of successive layers, a composite space that moves, endlessly in transition – and this has something to do with the figure of the Creole storyteller which I will return to later.

I think in relation but I've understood over time that this relation must be stretched taut and armed, so that we are not depleted or consumed by it, so that there will always be the necessary separation, the space to breathe. Because a relation is always asymmetrical and it can also offer a way for certain bodies to absorb other bodies, as what I call the *Body of Reference* always tends to do, pulling into its space through contact with it anyone who tries to escape.³ In a certain manner, if I have a real interest for structures, I always examine them from the outside, from the perspective of what exists between the constituted spaces, in the margins and the outskirts. I bring my attention to that which doesn't yet exist – that which doesn't yet have a name – and which acquires form in the presence of other things. A sort of counter-form, a shadow form. This is what I call an oceanic approach, in other words a way of reading and feeling the world via the fluid parts of the map, the seas and oceans, rather than interpreting the world from the solid perspective – the continents and frontiers. This is the space of/for relation. I've inherited from my Caribbean origins a tendency to draw support from things that move – because we sometimes forget that behind all the stereotypes, Caribbean culture is anxious and restless, always seeking a definition of itself, a language, a place for expression, always in a form of violent flight. People from the Antilles have often held a separate and uncomfortable place in the contemporary history of France, caught in the spokes of systemic racism but always summoned to maintain a distance from Africans – and even frequently encouraged to despise their own Africanity. Free but never independent, in short, and steeped in a profound consciousness of their contingency with white power. Thus the descendants of slaves in the French-speaking Caribbean have always had this tendency to build themselves in relation to a gaze that is not their own. Recently I came across a clip

² The mangrove as labyrinthine space, whose base is composed of mangrove roots planted in water, was a shelter and ally for escaping slaves and for several resistance movements against colonialism in Africa and the Antilles. The underlying surface of the mangrove, its interlaced root system, is difficult to walk upon and thus can serve as both a literal and metaphorical place to imagine a moving space that breaks with authorities and obliges individuals to relearn how to stand together at the heart of a powerful vegetal expression made of entanglements and contingencies. For me it is also clearly a space of complexity that has not (yet) been forced into a form.

³ I explore this question of the *Body of Reference* in the text "Decolonial Variations". <https://olivier-marboeuf.com/2019/05/09/variations-decoloniales/>

on the Internet, an excerpt of a television interview with Joey Starr and Eric Zemmour.⁴ While Zemmour, in his habitual style, accused the NTM rapper of being responsible for the hatred of the police of an entire generation of working class people, Joey Starr more or less responded like this: but me, I don't live in the eye of the other. That's a very strong expression because escaping from the prescriptive eye of white power is always a challenge for a Caribbean person. It means fleeing the desire for respectability – and with it visibility and centrality – which is a powerful machine of voluntary servitude.

Evolving in the art world forced me to build my own place, outside this authority and this gaze which endlessly, and sometimes in falsely friendly and familiar modes, returned to watch what I was doing or what it thought I was doing, and to tell me how I could do that well – in other words, in a space dominated by a certain gaze and social order. The incorporation of this violence in social and professional relations remains a fact that is difficult to examine in a society like that in France because the strategies of innocence and blindness are so deeply integrated into a certain climate.⁵ Like others, I had to patiently create a space where I could breathe and learn to dissimulate what I was doing or wanted to do behind certain masquerades – I mean a capacity to do *as if* and also a use of conversation as camouflage. In short, inventing an ecology at the heart of toxic relations. For me, this especially meant demanding a right to indifference, to a distance in regard to respectability and what is asked of us as a way to avoid the fatigue produced by anger. It is a form of retreat that is not a refusal to be in relation, but rather a way of giving this relation a potential space so that it can discover its form.

I believe there is an art of conversation and an art of critical relation. These are forms that have become a bit lost in a time where we mostly think in terms of controversies – and where we systematically search for the narcissistic wound because nothing is put into the common space, which belongs to no one and is a space of doubt and composition. I'm convinced that what is shared is not so much a space that we build and invest in, as it is a space from which we remove ourselves. This is the consequence of a cessation of desire for predation, extraction of value, and statement of ownership. Like kindness, what is shared or held in common is a climate that cannot be convoked. I also believe that the economy of affects – and in the first instance anger – has generated a surface form, which is loud and enjoyable but without depth, where everything becomes immediacy and intensity, which eventually wear off – everyone speaks loudly. A short-lived pleasure that consumes at a great rate, as we can see with the success of tribunes in the press or the hysterical climate of social media. To my eyes, it's a very clever political project, this idea of putting us in a permanent position of fatigue by way of the overbearing need to answer everything. Care is no longer given to the space in which meaning is created, not only between peers, but also with thoughts that disturb us. The absence of this space creates zones of consensus where we meet only to mutually validate each other, in a zone of affinities which produce other insecurities by ignoring them. It's a mob effect.

⁴ Eric Zemmour (b. 1958 in Montreuil, France) is a French political journalist, essayist and polemicist. He has become (in)famous for his ideas, which are close to those of the far right and white supremacists. Found guilty several times for inciting racial violence, he still continues to host a prime time political show on French television. Joey Starr is an actor and singer of Caribbean origin. He is one of the founding members of NTM, the pioneering French rap group.

⁵ I use the term innocence here in the sense of the Anglo-American expression "white innocence" to speak of the desire to not acknowledge the systemic violence – here racial violence in particular – which is at the base of Western societies and thereby to reduce racism to its interpersonal, affective and psychological dimensions.

To get back to speaking of my practice after this long detour... it's a practice of circulation within this potential space of relation, from a variety of different positions. Because it doesn't seem possible to me to create a political practice by remaining within stable social identities such as the identity of the artist – which is constructed from a gentle blend of exceptionalism and childishness. I've always had the impression that a persistent view of the artist makes of him/her someone who shouldn't/doesn't want to see. An irresponsible hero/heroine. I think one can't develop a true political practice in art without removing oneself from time to time from the strict sense of art, in order to take an interest in financial fluxes, in the violence often displaced at the margins of the scene, but which participates in the creation of an art work, and the *apparently* peaceful situation of culture. I have an interest in everything that creates the place, from the systemic dimensions, both visible and invisible, to those who clean it up in the shadows, far from any gaze. This space, which has a very toxic dimension, is one of the geographies my work explores. I consider observations and feelings of petty competitions, base strategies, ambition, cowardice, posing, contempt, lack of means, hunger, shame, humiliation, to be things within my practice. They function in the same way as the most fortuitous encounters, the texts, films, and images, the forms that emerge, in the space of a willing and available body that I'm trying to build – and which has affinities with the body of the errant storyteller who accumulates matter inside him/herself. *Someone* must see this, bear witness to this, recount this. It is both a practice and a responsibility. A sensitized attempt to testify to something, to be the narrator of stories, histories, lore that are not only mine, but which require that a body take them on and create a space for conversation which has a certain texture. As I've already written about, this requires a milieu – so that the sound of voices can be propagated – and a climate – so that we can breathe. The art of the spoken word and its modulations, its sounds and silences, its excesses, even sometimes its delirium... a milieu and a climate are all this. It is this articulation which makes up, for me, a political form in art, which I most absolutely do not confuse with the seizure of political questions as subjects of art, their reification in the form of morbid trophies, childish recitations and other recordings of forms of life which compose the aesthetics of a certain sector of today's *heroic* contemporary art. Any political form in art is a form that wants to see what is hidden, know what is hidden. But this *seeing* is not an unveiling – like the colonist who wants to see the face of an Algerian woman because he refuses the idea that anything could be withheld from the power of his gaze. This *seeing* and this *knowing*, they are not acts of usurpation committed from afar, they are done in close combat, they are an engagement in a relation, there where it exists, in a place that has not yet been recognized or known; what I call a mangrove.

What are you creating here in Clichy-Montfermeil?

I came to Clichy-Montfermeil with a fairly simple question because I wanted most of the directions to be generated by a practice of space and encounter: is there an archive of the transformation of the *banlieue* contained within the body/ies of its inhabitants? I grew up in the Parisian *banlieue* and I've always thought that there was, despite the more or less successful architectural utopias found there, a rather singular principle of architecture in the working class neighbourhoods at the peripheries of Paris, which resulted in the city being unable to exist without the bodies of its inhabitants. And so there was a particular form of intimacy between the environs, felt and experienced from within the *banlieue* and the ways of living it – and

also of attaching oneself to it. A sort of secret transaction – and again something that has to do with the especially porous relation of the Creole storyteller with his environment, an *invagination*, to use Jacques Derrida's term, which acknowledges something from outside, inside. I became interested in the idea of incorporated landscapes and methods of archiving certain matters, situations or stories, based on forms of sociability – of performances⁶ – produced by sport, errancy, dance, the relation to geography in movement in public transport... And from there, something else took form during the residency, another question closely linked to the first: Is there something that we might name an “invisible common”?⁷ I say an “invisible” common as a way of going in another direction from what is routinely called popular culture today and which has become synonymous with *mainstream*, a form of hyper-visibility, hyper-exposition and hyper-expressivity, consistent with the image of what are dubbed urban cultures. Something that is stretched toward the exterior and toward forms of exhaustion like a performance of self for the benefit of the gaze of another. I wanted to try to experience and to permit others to experience another sort of “being-in-common”, a popular form of cultural sharing with low intensity, at the threshold of form and visibility, which would require a very particular attention. A space created *for* oneself and *by* oneself that would allow one to perceive, once outside noises were filtered out, this archive that interests me, an archive that occupies what I might call a particular frequency. This is one of the paths that led me to the idea of wakes. It obviously reverberates with the traditional storytelling vigil from the nocturnal time of slavery, this parcel of time torn from the living death of work days on the plantation, a time of reconstitution of self, of the invention of memory, transport, journey, future. It is a time without exteriority and it interests me at a moment in time when all cultures, even those from the most extreme minorities, find themselves swallowed up into the spectacular, the performative, and more or less violent forms of exposition and extraction. I was thinking of simple, basic popular forms, common to all cultures, where people tell each other stories around a fire, as a way to enter the night together, but also of communities that form protected spaces that encourage the emergence of certain fragile voices. I was thinking of the need to re-compose spaces for retreat. And from there, I began to imagine different modalities to create moments and situations where people could tell each other stories and to circulate them from the intimate to the personal – in other words a certain quality of commonality that I find in the regime of the contemporary *lore*, as form without specifically attributed author. And subsequently, each group will have to invent a way of caring for these stories.

I think that it was also for me a way of returning to the banlieue as the place of smooth-talkers, the unbelievable stories that inhabited my youth, stories that let us travel without a ticket to the most incredible Saturday nights, even as we remained stuck in our neighbourhoods or *zoned around* as a way to trump boredom. Smooth-talking as a necessary tool for survival, but also as a paradoxical form of *public*

⁶ The term *performance* is used here in reference to its use by the African American poet and theoretician Fred Moten, who speaks of “black performance”. With this expression he signifies certain necessities of movement and transaction of the Black subject/object – and I extend it here to the racialized post-colonial subject/object – between interiority and exteriority, between what s/he says and what s/he refrains from saying, between what s/he does and seems to do, in a practice of identity that cannot be thought of as a fixed and essentialized form, for it is always and also a quest for a future situated between the impossible re-composition of an interrupted history and the invention of a desirable future. See in particular: Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

⁷ The objective here is not to develop this important point, but we could also speak of an *unspeakable common* – in other words, forms of life that have not yet been captured as objects, with the double meaning of “comprendre” in French of caught and understood. See note 1 about the choice we made to translate the French expression “un populaire invisible”.

dissimulation, of discourse that is also a way of not saying, of not confessing – and here again comes into play a relation to justice, to the police, and to the foundations of truth in an asymmetrical society that fantasizes its universality.

Who have you been meeting with ?

In Clichy-sous-Bois, I have different sorts of encounters, some of them on a regular basis with already constituted groups such as the members of the Maison des Sages, or with groups specifically set up for this occasion, like the group of young writers assembled by the author Sakina Bahri, who works at the Ateliers Médicis. Other groups have been and will be more ephemeral, or accidental. Each time, the encounter presupposes the construction of a place and this place has its own form, duration and ecology. It can be a mobile place... a conversation while walking. It's a way of establishing a distance from the recognized place, dedicated to culture, but this distance is not just a principle, a posture, it must find, each time it occurs, its new form and necessity for existing. It can be very narrow or quite vast. The way in which the place is created must also permit it to dissolve itself, to escape from capture. I find it important and indeed normal that there be a certain distrust in regard to cultural propositions such as those of the Ateliers Médicis in the context of somewhere like Clichy-Monfermeil which, in many respects, has become a place over-saturated with symbolism since the riots of 2005. For me, this symbolism is a surface whose economy precludes entry to complex and contradictory forms of memory, and subsequently of the present. You have to accept the right of everyone to enter into the place of the conversation, maybe only to cross through it, to feel if its modalities suit them and to establish certain conditions so that the space that emerges doesn't lead back by the pure and simple extraction of a symbolic and emotional capital – which here takes the form of affects of both desire and fear, as in any principle of projection. Because Clichy-Monfermeil symbolically concentrates something of a spectral feeling, the bad conscience of a French society that is going to try to erase it from its national history. When, on the contrary, these affects should perhaps be placed at a distance while we invent ways of interpreting a truly political history imprinted like the text of a law into the deepest folds of the body of the banlieue, in its function as colonial space, answer and echo to the colony, after the colony. This is what the working class banlieue is. It is not only this, but it is *also* this. What is difficult is that we have become used to thinking of methods of colonization as exterior conquests of national territory. We should rather adopt another perspective in order to understand how the space of large European metropolises is administered and conceived of in a movement of expansion from the centre toward the periphery – which often presupposes the persistence of an idea of *terra nullius*. To a certain extent, we need to learn to *peripherize centres* rather than extending them. To invent a form of vital separation within an interior empire. This would require a re-evaluation of forms of life and practices in working class banlieues beyond the image of relegation and dependence. This, for me, is the true decolonial process.

I had the good fortune in July 2019 to be able to invite the members of The Living and The Dead Ensemble, a collective I've participated in for several years, made up of Mackenson Bijou, Rossi Jacques Casimir, Dieuvela Cherestal, James Desiris, Louis Henderson, Léonard Jean Baptiste, Cynthia Maignan, Sophonie

Maignan, Mimétik Nèg and myself.⁸ We organized several wakes, some of them held outside, around a barbecue, a fire, a meal... Afterwards we crossed through the city of Clichy, arriving at Chêne Pointu where, at the entrance to certain buildings, we shared Haitian cuisine prepared by a woman from the diaspora. The presence of the Ensemble allowed us to experiment with new and different spaces. It's a rather delicate endeavour because, without instrumentalizing this collective body, you can nevertheless feel other things that aren't accessible for our individual bodies. I think that a place, a community, is composed from bodies that are informed by other bodies. And yet I always try to make sure that this collective body not be organized around a particular body. The place that interests me has no centre and no *Body of Reference*.

In the current situation, the act of thinking while consciously decentralizing from this *Body of Reference* is important for bodies that were denigrated and humiliated yesterday – racialized men and women, queers, trans, marginals of all sorts... People who lived under the violent and normative law of this Body and who only existed in relation to it are now courted today in their desire for autonomy by a narcissistic trap – they are flattered, they are adored, but only if they maintain a certain position, a certain function, in/at a place they have not chosen themselves. They become extensions of this dominant *Body*, do everything it cannot do, and are all that it cannot be. They are the new territories of a relational empire. What these minority bodies do, they therefore do not do for themselves but in service of careers that cannibalize them. In a context such as Clichy-sous-Bois, this is clearly a fundamental question that cannot be ignored. In the service of what *Bodies* do we produce value?

To get back to the question of groups, I spent many mornings with a group called the Sages, older residents of immigrant origin, at the Maison de Sages in Clichy-sous-Bois, but also in their small workers' gardens, on a plot of land at the edge of the Seine-et-Marne. There is a practice of listening with the Sages. Fine-tuned listening and patience, a different temporality. It is both a routine and an errancy. Immigrants frequently suffered in France and they continue to suffer today, being treated as lots – oftentimes as problematic lots. The immigrant has no singularity, he is always the diffuse element of a mass. The difficulty of attaining singularity sometimes unconsciously repeats the schema of colonization, where the sole singular role, the only one who has a name, is the White Master, the civilizing colonial. He is the *Body of Reference*, the standard of the singular. The being confronting a mass of non-beings. Hailing from a large working class family, I know the humiliation of being indiscernible. This humiliation is a way of breaking the capacity for defence, of protection of the clan, by making the family a source of shame. Matthieu Renault, in his book about Frantz Fanon clearly shows how, for the Martinican psychiatrist, the Black – in both the West and in the colony – can only “rise in civilization” by distancing himself from his family.⁹ For him, society is not a projection of the rules and authority of the family, but a negation of them. To be *indiscernible* – which is a category of the unnameable¹⁰ – can then be seen as a form of punishment of the number, the sanction for an absence of civilization that clearly targets the wombs of women, wants to control those wombs and in that way control

⁸ <https://thelivingandthedeadensemble.com/>

⁹ Matthieu Renault, *Frantz Fanon, de l'anticolonialisme à la critique postcoloniale* (Paris, Editions Amsterdam, 2011)

¹⁰ Here again, “unnameable” functions with a double meaning, both as that which is at the limit of bestiality, in the margins of humanity, a space of waste, but also as a refuge for that which evades the capacity to be named, discerned, classified, that which resists capture.

the competing – and imaginary – virility of racialized men.¹¹ It's for this reason that I try to distance myself from the trajectory of the immigrant as a standard form and rather to explore the details of stories and manners of living them, to speak them or not to speak them, spaces of singularity. From the moment toward the end of the 1980s when French public powers realized that aging immigrant workers would definitively not return to their countries of origin (at retirement), that they would remain in this life between two worlds and, for those of them who had not brought their families to France, in this *double absence* (as the Algerian sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad calls it),¹² a vast narrative machine was set in place to deal with this particular memory, as if the state didn't really know what to do with the national annals of two countries, strangely brought together by the intersections composed of the lives of these workers in France.

I tried not to insert myself into this path by shifting my interest from the trajectories of these lives to specific moments from them and examining them in great detail. This work on the scales, motifs and sensations of a precise episode tends to give a strange texture to the story. I try to avoid the most expected naturalism and rather move toward the form of the narrative. The memories of the Sages are rather remarkable in this regard and they allow us to see how, as decades pass, fragments emerge – places, names and feelings – whether pleasant or unpleasant. At the Maison des Sages there is a great diversity of geographic origins, levels of French fluency and education in the country of origin. There is also the presence of women. All of this contributes to creating a very rich environment. This must be taken into account in the treatment of these questions. The method of open conversation and debates, which are often quite animated and full of contradictions, is conducive to the possibility of “subjects arising”, which reveal topics that I will later explore in individual conversations. I also work from and toward orality, in a process of repetition and variation of the same story. If some texts are set down in a written form, this is always done with the objective of returning to the oral, to the *telling*. Because there is an ensemble of physical particularities with/in orality, a whole *soundscape* independent of meaning. And this *soundscape* – intonations, breath, rhythm, accents... – is a thing that resists reproduction or any form of recording. It is the residue and echo of an unspeakable story imprinted in the body. This is the story that interests me. But I also maintain an attachment to this need for stories and fables as a matrix of a particular memory, not institutional, but not quite intimate, a shared place that is not fixed in space. The possibility of also spending time together in the workers' gardens is very precious. It opens us up to yet another sort of memory. As a young child I lived in the Seine-et-Marne and from my father I've inherited the memory of gardening as an echo of the home country, of subsistence agriculture, but also as an act done for and toward oneself, which is what the garden represents at the heart of large-scale agricultural work, as the Creole garden of the slave is the first step in a reinvented memory of the slave on the plantation.

I also work, as I mentioned earlier, with the form of a regular gathering with a group of young authors created by Sakina Bahri. We organize wakes where orality is at the centre of a process of spoken word writing, based on the expansion of the story through successive repetitions – a form of dispersion or staggering – of the story by accumulation which is the essence of the Creole story. Individual memory is

¹¹ On this subject, see: Françoise Vergès, *Le ventre des femmes* (Paris, Albin Michel, 2017); *The Wombs of Women*, trans. Kaima Glover (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

¹² Abdelmalek Sayad, *La double absence. Des illusions de l'émigré aux souffrances de l'immigré* (Paris, Le Seuil, 1999)

taken out of the archive of private space to become the matter of collective memory. Here too, we work with sensations, motifs and scales, based on an assemblage of dates, paths and portraits. This research leads us to the construction of a choral form of storytelling, composed of the interlacing of several tales, several trajectories. This allows us to address questions relative to the body, the family, separation, mourning, violence, love, sexuality.

And finally, I'd like to develop a new direction for the work, around the idea of racialized masculinities in the banlieue and memory linked to sport and dance, which are both highly publicized popular forms, but also vectors of invisible memories. Forms of male presence in the banlieue, and a whole ensemble of homo-sociabilities, serve certain stereotypes and I would even say they maintain a permanent transaction with their own stereotypes.¹³ These are ways of living in the street that create a more composite environment than at first appears. Masculine and popular body practices are modes of archiving that are difficult to penetrate. As I mentioned earlier, it's a question of a production of the self turned and stretched toward the outside, a twisting of the self toward the gaze of another. And I think in this regard it is a French inheritance, with all the violence this can imply. It's something that interests me because, again, it's an invisible part of popular culture and the difficult thing is to find ways to let it be felt in our perceptions of places, without making it visible or explicitly stated, without transforming it into a value, but rather into a form that always evades value and is part of another world. What also interests me is that you cannot pretend to talk about soccer, for example, or dance, it's a question of body knowledge that one can only acquire by an actual physical practice. As I like to say, it's a body that knows even if it doesn't always know how it knows.

What question would you like to ask the Ateliers Médicis?

I don't really have questions as much as remarks. First of all, we have to recognize that the situation and the work are very difficult and delicate, for all the reasons I've mentioned above. I think there is an ecology of diversity of cultural practices and experiences that must be appreciated and cared for. And to a certain extent, it goes against the grain of this idea of institutional cultural practices as they've been conceived of and practiced since André Malraux, with the "grandes maisons", the "great houses" of culture, as they are called in the milieu of the performing arts in France. And also in the way these institutional practices have continued, with the idea of cultural democratization, preserving a certain heritage dating back to the Enlightenment. There is a form of attention, of decentring and dissolution that must be learned; these are not ideas that are already in place, or established. They will find form through doing, through experience. The cultural venue to-come must therefore learn to be less hard, more fluid and to divest itself of its own definition, as a snake sheds old skin. What is required is experimentation, a willingness to take the risk of becoming lost, without always wanting to produce a capital. This is valid for artists. It is also valid for the people who accompany them. The cultural venue must find a way to emerge from a feeling of fear, a fear which is the consequence of a

¹³ And notably by the confusion between masculinity, virility and patriarchy, which is the result of dominant sexist and racist strategies which only offer to formerly dominated males a very narrow passage toward (re)gaining the status of men, notably at the expense of racialized women. This question was aptly examined by the radical thinker bell hooks in the context of the United States. See: bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: Southend Press, 1987).

desire for centrality. There's a long road ahead, but the place and the moment are perfect for taking the first steps on it.

Translated from French by Liz Young / edited by Shela Sheikh

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