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INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL
OF
DIGITAL HUMANITIES
AND
UBIQUITOUS SCHOLARSHIP

IJDUS

Special Issue – March 2025

ISSN: 3048-9113 (Online)

Navigating Hybridity and Alienation: An Exploration of Identity in Maryse Condé's *Heremakhonon*.

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Abstract

Maryse Condé's *Heremakhonon* explores the tensions of hybridity and alienation through the protagonist Veronica Mercier, a Caribbean woman educated in France who travels to Africa in search of her roots. This paper analyzes Veronica's fractured identity through the lens of postcolonial theory, particularly Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity and Frantz Fanon's theory of alienation. The novel presents Veronica as a postcolonial subject navigating the contradictions of her Caribbean heritage, European education, and African aspirations. However, rather than finding belonging, she experiences cultural dislocation, racial alienation, and gendered marginalization. Her relationships with African men and her political disillusionment further complicate her search for identity. This study highlights *Heremakhonon's* critical engagement with postcolonial identity, demonstrating how Condé challenges essentialist notions of belonging. Ultimately, the novel suggests that for individuals of hybrid backgrounds, identity is not a fixed destination but an ongoing negotiation of cultural and psychological dissonance.

***Keywords**: Postcolonial identity, Cultural hybridity, Alienation, Maryse Condé, Heremakhonon*

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Introduction

Maryse Condé's *Heremakhonon* (1976) is a complex narrative which explores racial, psychological and cultural dislocation experienced by individuals straddling multiple identities. Set in a postcolonial African country loosely modelled on Guinea, the novel follows Veronica Mercier, a Caribbean woman educated in France, as she embarks on a journey to Africa in search of her roots.

What she finds, however, is not the cultural connection or sense of belonging she had hoped for, but rather a profound sense of alienation. Torn between her Guadeloupean upbringing, African heritage and European education, Veronica embodies the fragmented postcolonial subject, caught in the tension between hybridity and alienation.

Maryse Condé, born in 1937 in Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe, is an acclaimed Francophone writer and one of the most prominent voices in Caribbean literature. Her works are notable for their exploration of postcolonial identity, cultural hybridity, and historical narratives, particularly through the lens of the African diaspora and the legacies of slavery and colonialism. Condé's literary works include a wide range of novels, essays, and plays, many of which interrogate the intersections of race, gender, and power in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Her works, such as *Segou* (1984) and *I, Tituba: Black Witch of Salem* (1986), blend historical fiction with African diasporic culture, offering a critical reimagining of marginalized figures in history. Condé's narrative style often weaves together elements of oral tradition, folklore, and magical realism, reflecting the complex cultural tapestries of the Caribbean and African histories.

As a scholar, Condé has also made significant contributions to Francophone literary studies, advocating for a deeper understanding of the Caribbean's multicultural legacies. Her works challenge traditional Western literary norms and emphasize the importance of multiple, often contradictory, perspectives in understanding identity and history. Condé has received numerous awards for her contributions, including the New Academy Prize in Literature in 2018, which cements her status as one of the leading figures in contemporary global literature. Condé's exploration of identity in *Heremakhonon* is shaped by her own experiences as a Caribbean woman navigating multiple worlds. Born in Guadeloupe, Condé spent much of her life in Europe and Africa. Like her protagonist Veronica, Condé wrestled with questions of belonging and identity. So, could her protagonist Veronica be seen as an attempt to find her true self –a black woman from Guadeloupe who grew up nestled in the cocoon of a rich family, who was educated in Paris and who spent some years in an African country in search of her origins? In *Heremakhonon*, addressing the concerns of identity in the

Special Issue – March 2025 ISSN: 3048-9113 (Online)

context of the postcolonial experience, Condé interrogates the notion of belonging and thus revealing the contradictions and tensions that define postcolonial subjectivity.

In this paper, I will first engage with the existing scholarship on *Heremakhonon* and postcolonial identity, before moving to a close textual analysis of the novel. By examining Veronica's life in Guadeloupe, Paris and an imagined African country, her romantic relationships, and her ultimate disillusionment, this paper will illustrate how *Heremakhonon* constructs a narrative of hybridity and alienation. The paper will conclude by reflecting on the broader implications of Condé's work for the understanding of identity in postcolonial literature.

Literature Review

Notable francophone authors such as Aimé Césaire and Edouard Glissant have contributed extensively to the postcolonial francophone discourse. Césaire's seminal poem *Return to My Native Land* (1968) presents hybrid identity through the lens of the Negritude. Césaire's work articulates a profound sense of displacement and cultural reclamation, emphasizing the importance of embracing one's African heritage as a response to colonial oppression. His exploration of identity is rooted in a deep awareness of historical trauma, and he calls for a radical awakening of self-consciousness among the colonized. Césaire's vision of hybrid identity is one of resistance and affirmation, where the reclamation of African roots becomes a means of transcending the limitations imposed by colonial narratives. Can Veronica find her Self in the Afrocentric vision of Self as posited by Césaire? Furthermore, Édouard Glissant's (1997) theory of *relation* in works such as *Poetics of Relation* expands the concept of hybrid identity further by emphasizing the interconnectedness of cultures. Glissant argues that identity is not a fixed essence but rather a dynamic process shaped by history, geography, and cultural exchange. His notion of *creolization* highlights how different cultures interact and influence one another, creating new forms of identity that reflect both multiplicity and unity. Glissant's approach is more communal, suggesting that hybrid identities emerge from collective experiences of diaspora and coloniality. That being said, will Veronica Mercier identify with the African community as well as its diaspora?

Heremakhonon has been read as a significant text in Francophone literature that illustrates the dislocation experienced by the post-colonial diaspora. Scholars have also studied Condé's protagonist

as an embodiment of the tensions of Caribbean diasporic identity. The autobiographical elements in *Heremakhonon* have also garnered attention from scholars like Françoise Lionnet (1989) who argues that Condé uses autobiographical voices to depict the protagonist's fractured identity. Abiola Irele (2001) situates *Heremakhonon* within the comprehensive context of African and diasporic literature, exploring how the novel reflects the conflicts faced by postcolonial individuals. Some scholars have analysed the role of place in the novel suggesting that Africa functions as both a physical and symbolic space that complicates Veronique's quest for identity.

While there is a substantial body of scholarship on *Heremakhonon,* much of it has focused on the themes of race and gender, with less attention paid to the specific tension between hybridity and alienation. This paper seeks to address this gap by offering a close reading of the novel through the lenses of postcolonial theory highlighting how Veronica's identity is shaped by both her hybrid cultural background and her profound sense of alienation. I propose to study how Maryse Condé's *Heremakhonon* explores the intersection of cultural hybridity and existential alienation, and what it reveals about the challenges of postcolonial identity formation in Veronica's quest for belonging. By addressing this question, the paper aims to study the ways in which the protagonist's hybrid identity, shaped by her Caribbean heritage, European upbringing, and African aspirations, reflects themes in postcolonial literature. This inquiry will also investigate the role of gender in Veronica's alienation, as her search for belonging is further complicated by patriarchal structures within both African and European contexts.

Methodology

This paper draws on postcolonial theory specifically focusing on Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity and Frantz Fanon's (1986) theory of alienation. Bhabha's notion of the Third Space is key to understanding how *Heremakhonon* navigates the tensions between African, Caribbean, and European influences on identity. Bhabha asserts that hybridity is an in-between space created through the negotiation of cultural differences, which opens possibilities for new forms of identity to emerge. However, this space is also one of instability and uncertainty, where subjects like Veronica may struggle to reconcile their fractured identities.

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Frantz Fanon's work on alienation, particularly in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), provides a critical lens through which Veronica's various levels of dislocation can be understood. Fanon argues that the colonized subject experiences a profound sense of alienation as they are unable to fully inhabit either the colonizer's world or their own native culture. This paper uses Fanon's framework to examine how Veronica's journey to Africa exacerbates her feelings of estrangement as she is neither fully accepted by the African society, she idealizes nor able to reconnect with her Caribbean heritage.

Discussion

Veronica is raised in a black bourgeois household. Her family tree, like that of many Antilleans, includes traces of white ancestry, but her dark-skinned family is not part of the privileged mulatto class who are "light-skinned with green eyes and the complexion of a young Oriental prince" (6). When she falls in love with the son of a wealthy and prominent mulatto family, both sets of parents object, leading to her being sent to France, ostensibly to pursue her education but, in reality, to avoid scandal. Veronica spends nine years in France without returning to Guadeloupe, assimilating into French culture, excelling in her studies, and entering into a relationship with Jean-Michel, a white Frenchman. She feels at ease in this environment until she overhears criticisms directed at Jean-Michel for dating her, which reignites the racial insecurities that had plagued her childhood. Disillusioned, she flees to Africa in search of a connection to her pre-slavery black ancestors.

Upon arriving in Africa, Veronica's situation becomes increasingly complex. She enters into a romantic relationship with Ibrahim Sory, a descendant of traditional African nobility and the Minister of Defence in an unnamed, newly independent West African nation. Simultaneously, she forms a friendship with Saliou, a leftist opposition leader and director of the school where she teaches. Despite her initial attempts to distance herself from the country's political unrest, her apathy is shattered when she discovers that Ibrahim is implicated in the arrest and likely death of one of her students. When Saliou is later arrested and the government claims he has committed suicide in his prison cell, Veronica sees through the lie. Unable to navigate the complex oppressive political landscape, she abandons her quest for identity and leaves Africa, returning to France.

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Hybridity and Cultural Fragmentation

Throughout *Heremakhonon*, Veronica's journey to Africa is characterized by her profound sense of fragmentation. To quote Arlette Smith (1988),

> She feels trapped by the three dimensions of her cultural heritage – Antillean, French and African – which co-exist in her psyche without being able to blend harmoniously; she feels them to be irreconcilable. Her ethnic African heritage, her Guadeloupean sociocultural background, and her French intellectual training have transformed her into a person who is neither totally African, nor Guadeloupean, nor French. (50)

Her hybrid identity, formed by her Caribbean heritage and European education, places her in a precarious Third Space where she belongs fully to neither world. In the opening chapters, Veronica expresses an idealized vision of Africa as a place where she can find her true roots. She says:

> Africa is very much the thing to do lately. Europeans and a good many others are writing volumes on the subject. Arts and crafts centres are opening all over the Left bank. Blondes are dying their lips with henna and running to the open market to the rue Mouffetard for their peppers and okra. (3)

Her decision to move to Africa is motivated by a desire to reconnect with her ancestral heritage, the proud Dark Continent as popularised by the Negritude movement, so that she could eventually escape from the dislocation she feels in Europe. However, given her ancestral heritage, she enters Africa not as a native but as a foreigner, one whose understanding of African culture is filtered through a European lens. When the officer at the immigration asks the purpose of her visit, she says that she is not a trader, not a missionary, perhaps a tourist but who is not searching out herself and not landscapes (3). She says,

> I am looking for what remains for the past. I am not interested in the present. Beyond that, I am seeking the Oba's palace, the carving on their masks and the songs of the griots. An absurd

> undertaking? No worse than a man crossing the Sahara who can't help imagining what it was like before its desertification. (51)

Such quest, according to Bhabha, has the potential to renew the past:

> It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia of living. (7)

One important aspect that needs to be taken into discussion in studying the quest of Veronica for her 'true' identity, to find her roots, is that she is discriminated for the colour of her skin not only in Europe but in Guadeloupe as well when she was young:

> What would have happened if I had been pregnant? Mme de Roseval said she would kill her son with her own hands rather than see him marry a Negress! (51)

This is so because in a pyramidal Guadeloupean society, the whites are at the top, followed by the mulattos who enjoy a privileged position, and lastly, the blacks. According to the narrator, the postcolonial black elites, the bourgeoisie that Veronica belongs to, will glorify race with their mouth but in their heart, they are terrified of their racial inferiority (48 & 49). Thus, the outward expressions of racial pride are undermined by a deeply ingrained sense of inferiority. Running to Africa from Europe in hopes of escaping the racial complexities ingrained in her subconscious since childhood and finding a "nigger with ancestors" who will solve her identity crisis seems almost too perfect. And, as it turns out, it is. Race alone does not define identity. Veronica must also reckon with the colonial legacies inherited by the colonized, her "nigger with ancestors" whose wealth is built on the suffering of his own people, the oppressive regime of the ruling elite who replaced the colonisers, and a society deeply entrenched in patriarchal structures.

Veronica reflects on her inability to blend in with the local African community. She says,

> I didn't find my ancestors. Three and a half centuries have separated me from them. They didn't recognize me any more than I recognized them. All I found was a man with

> ancestors who's guarding them jealously for himself and wouldn't dream of sharing them with me. (130)

Her external appearance – dark skin and Caribbean roots – suggests a connection to the African people, but her behaviour and mindset, shaped by her time in Europe, mark her as an outsider. This is where Veronica experiences the instability of hybrid identity. She is caught between various worlds. She adds:

> Life is a bitch with a bum leg. She smokes a pipe and sits on the doorstep of her hut, and when I'm within reach, she mutters wickedly. She has cast a spell on me and I cannot rid myself of it. That's why I'm wandering from one continent to another, looking for my identity. (59)

This passage exemplifies Bhabha's assertion that hybridity creates a space where new forms of identity can emerge but it is equally a space which generates uncertainty and dislocation, rendering it fraught with psychological conflict, thus destabilising the subject. Bhabha asserts:

> For the colonial hybrid is the articulation of the ambivalent space where the rite of power is enacted on the site of desire, making its objects at once disciplinary and disseminatory - or, in my mixed metaphor, a negative transparency. (112)

Veronica's interactions with African political leaders further complicate her pursuit of finding her ancestors. When she becomes romantically involved with Ibrahim Sory, a prominent political figure, she hopes that this relationship will anchor her to African culture. I will say that Sory is both an Afrocentric figure as well as Eurocentric. On one hand, he is an embodiment of Africa, taking pride in the blackness of his skin; on the other hand, he is the hypersexual black man. He is a proud black man whose blood is pure, who is of a noble birth. Despite his social standing, his influence and Veronica's expectation of him, Sory is reduced to a figure of disappointment in the eyes of Veronica by the end of the novel. Ibrahim's authoritarian attitude and his dismissive treatment of Veronica as a

foreigner reveal the superior complex Sory holds over Veronica. Despite her efforts to embrace African culture, she is repeatedly reminded that she does not truly belong. Sory tells Veronica:

> One piece of advice. Don't get mixed up taking sides. This country isn't yours. You don't understand anything. We have our methods. (58)

Veronica finds herself at a crossroad, unable to connect with the people she once believed to be her own, while they, in turn, do not see her as one of them. This dynamic underscores the instability of hybrid identity as attempts to reconcile her origins deepen her sense of alienation.

Alienation and Psychological Dislocation

Frantz Fanon's theory of alienation is particularly relevant to Veronica's experience in *Heremakhonon*. While she hoped that Africa would provide a sense of belonging, Veronica soon realizes that she remains an outsider. She grapples with an overwhelming sense of alienation and psychological dislocation internalized in her since her childhood; by birth, by the colour of her skin and by the awareness of the race and class divide in her home country. She says she is "an ambiguous animal, half fish, half bird, a new style of bat. A false sister. A false foreigner" (130). Rather than finding solace in her African heritage, Veronica feels increasingly isolated. She says:

> They smile at me. I never know on which leg to stand. Sometimes they smile and greet me with kindness. Sometimes with contempt and hatred. (. . .) As if they look at me through de-forming prisms that take no account of my real nature.

If Veronica was confused about her identity before her coming to Africa, she has been rendered even more so by the turbulent political uprisings in the country, the doubts implanted in her by the two opposing sides – Ibrahim Sory who says that he is "rebuilding a nation that colonialism has drained off his strength" (61) and Saliou who has it that "it was the blood of the people that got his family rich" (63).

A significant factor that captures Veronica's further alienation is her relationship with the African servant whose deference to her as a foreigner underscores the power dynamics at play. Although

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Veronica is of African descent, her European education and status as a foreigner place her in a position of power over the servant. This relationship reflects Fanon's assertion that colonialism creates a fundamental divide between the colonizer and the colonized. Even when the colonized subject returns to their homeland, they carry with them the psychological baggage of colonialism which prevents them from fully reintegrating into their native culture. If Sory occupies a superior position over Veronica by virtue of his ancestors rooted always in Africa without having had to be 'lost' to the Caribbean as those of Veronica, Veronica in turn occupies a superior position to that of the servant for the very fact that she is western educated. Here lies a fundamental complexity of hierarchy wherein within the same race lies various levels of social order.

Veronica's romantic relationships with African men further exacerbate her alienation. In her relationship with Ibrahim Sory, Veronica is both attracted to and repelled by his authoritarian demeanour. While she wishes for a sense of belonging, Ibrahim's controlling behaviour mirrors the patriarchal structures upon which African societies are build. Their relationship highlights the power relation between a man and a woman in a traditional African society. Despite her desire to reconnect with African culture, she is repeatedly marginalized and objectified as a woman which further complicates her search for her origins. Thus, the alienation that Veronica experiences is not solely the result of her hybrid identity; it is also deeply gendered. As a single woman in the midst of men in a patriarchal society, Veronica is subjected to the power imbalance that define her relationship with African men. Moreover, Ibrahim's political power and his patronizing attitude toward Veronica underscore the ways in which gender contributes to rendering a woman invisible thus further dislocating her from a place she already feels alienated.

When Veronica confides in Sory that she has come to Africa because she wanted to escape her family, the bourgeoisie which glorifies their race but is convicted of its inferiority, Sory acknowledges mockingly that what she has is an identity problem. He adds that there was also an American girl who has the same problem and he says that she ended up plating her hair like the other African women. Just as she cannot find in her lover someone who understands the need and depth of her quest, she finds that her friendship with Saliou is no better. Saliou remarks that her

incomprehension of the country's situation is 'heart breaking'. Running away from her family in France to Africa in order to find a cure for her identity crisis seems rather futile because just as she is alienated in France, she is alienated in Africa as well. The colour of her skin alone is not and cannot be the factor that unifies her and the rest of the African people. She is disengaged from the three worlds she seemingly belongs to. She is dislocated from her past as well as her present as she cannot relocate herself to the present Africa. She is caught up in the political polarisation of the country, making friends with the opposing ideologies. This mirrors her being lost in the turmoil of her own search for her roots, her home and her identity. Just as political reconciliation is impossible in the country, her quest seems to be equally futile.

Veronica herself becomes subjected to derogatory slurs when she is labelled a "whore" by her students. She finds herself in a society in which young male students brazenly insult their female teacher without fear of any consequences.

> On the blackboard in red chalk spelled out in capitals: WE SHALL DESTROY THE MINISTERS, THEIR MERCEDES AND THEIR WHORES. (. . .) The sponge is big, square, and green like a nun wholesome piece of seaweed. It wets my hand. I wipe off the board. Minister's whore? What right have they to judge me? Are they going to shave my head? Will they hang me from the branches of a tree? My body will rot amid the blossoms of the flame tree. (64)

The male students perceived 'right' to pass judgment on their female teacher is enabled by a patriarchal society that perpetuates a power imbalance between men and women. To the readers' dismay, this is not the only instance she is called a whore. Ibrahim Sory, the very man she is in a relationship with states that he believes "only whores should deal with white men" (145), fully aware that Veronica had a white partner while in France. His remark implicitly suggests that he does not regard Veronica as a woman of value, reducing her instead to the derogatory label of a "whore." This brazen name-calling and callous passing remarks are 'normalized' more often than not in a society where women are seen as objects of desire and men possess the unchecked authority to judge and label women as they please. Veronica faces not only racial discrimination but also gender-based

oppression. The Africa she once believed would be her home is instead alienating and displacing her on different aspects. She finds an alienated environment and in her alienated 'deficient' state, Veronica is insignificant, she is impoverished in her relation to others and to herself (Jaeggi, 5).

Feminist scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) have critiqued postcolonial discourse for its tendency to overlook the specific challenges faced by women in negotiating their identities. Veronica's experience in *Heremakhonon* highlights the need for an intersectional approach to postcolonial identity, one that takes into account not only the legacy of colonialism but also the patriarchal structures that further marginalize women. In this sense, Veronica's alienation is both racial and gendered, as she struggles to navigate the gendered realities. Veronica's alienation is borne of her position as a woman in a male-dominated society. Thus, as posited by Mohanty, gender should be considered in the race, class and cultural junctures in the life of the subject for in its absence, Veronica is silenced, her voice is not heard, only her sexuality matters and eventually, the search for her identity doesn't matter anymore. She is silenced in her own story. She is subjugated and reduced to an object of desire.

In the case of Veronica, hybridity is a site of conflict and possibility. The analysis of Veronica's hybrid identity in the preceding sections reveals both the potential and the pitfalls of hybridity in postcolonial identity formation. Bhabha's concept of the Third Space suggests that hybridity can be a site of creativity and possibility, where new identities are forged through the negotiation of cultural differences. In Veronica's case, however, this space is marked by conflict and instability. Her hybrid identity places her in a liminal position, where she is neither fully African nor fully European. Thus, we establish that Veronica's relationship with Africa exemplifies the ambivalence of hybrid identity. On one hand, she longs to embrace her African heritage and find a sense of belonging. On the other hand, her European education and upbringing prevent her from fully integrating into African society. Veronica finds herself in the Third Space, a site of negotiation as well as a space of uncertainty. Her experience reflects this duality, as she is both empowered and alienated by her hybrid identity. While hybridity offers the potential for new forms of identity, alienation – racial, cultural and psychological – remains a persistent reality for postcolonial subjects like Veronica. Despite her attempts to

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reconnect with her African roots, Veronica remains estranged from both African and European cultures.

Veronica's alienation can be understood as a microcosm of the wider postcolonial condition. Like many postcolonial subjects, Veronica is caught between the worlds of the colonizer and the colonized, unable to fully inhabit either. Fanon's assertion that colonialism fractures the psyche of the colonized is borne out in Veronica's experience, as she grapples with feelings of inferiority and dislocation. Her journey to Africa, rather than providing a sense of resolution, only deepens her sense of alienation as she realizes that she cannot escape the legacies of colonialism. Underscoring her futile attempt, the identity she searches cannot be essentialised. She is left invisible and she goes back to France invisible.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Veronica's hybrid identity, influenced by her African-Caribbean heritage and European education, places her in a liminal space where she is never fully accepted by any culture nor does she feel belong to one particular country. Her efforts to reconnect with her African roots, while sincere, only deepen her sense of estrangement as she confronts the unfriendly realities of being considered as the Other. Veronica's quest for identity is emblematic of a struggle faced by individuals belonging and not-belonging at the same time to a specific place. Alternative modes of belonging can be envisioned for a woman in a society shaped by patriarchy and the legacy of colonialism. It invites us to explore new theoretical frameworks that move beyond the binary of inclusion and exclusion, location and dislocation, seeking instead to understand how postcolonial subjects can construct meaningful identities in the face of ongoing dislocation.

In capturing the tensions faced by Veronica whose identity is shaped by multiple conflicting affiliations, the novel expresses equally the disenchantment she faces with the Africa she once believed would be a cure for her identity malady, her disappointment in a man she thought would be the answer to her racial-cultural-psychological complication. '*Heremakhonon*', a Malinke word meaning 'waiting for happiness', is the residence of Ibrahim Sory. It is a place of encounter between Veronica and Sory. Contrary to its name, the residence fails to give Veronica happiness nor comfort nor a sense of belonging. The palatial residence is the concretization of the unbearable sense of

Special Issue – March 2025 **ISSN: 3048-9113 (Online)**

dejection she feels at the end of the novel. If for Vladimir and Estragon, Godot will not turn up, Veronica will not find Godot either even if she goes from continent to continent in search of it and definitely not in '*Heremakhonon*'.

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