# Globalization and African Studies: The Case for Pluralization

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper examines some of the positions taken by area studies scholars on the question of globalization and its relationships and relevance to the production of knowledge about Africa. It argues for a plurality of globalizations rather than a single globalization more or less taken to be synonymous with westernization and the movement of things from the North to the South. As a descriptive term for the movement of things, globalization represents multi-directional flows that contribute to the emergence of the "global village."*

African studies scholars have argued that globalization, like its many Eurocentric cousins, is an ideology "subject to contingency and contestation" (Zeleza 2003). It is a historical and social construct that "remains subject to countervailing social forces and struggles" whose "historical and ideological registers" and whose links with Africa must be differentiated (Zeleza 2003). Neither the strengths and rapacities of globalization nor the weaknesses and resistances of its supposed victims should be underestimated. Africanists are urged to produce "analyses that are not disabling, that do not stifle our rationality and imaginations" and that eschews "the totalizing pretensions and presentist periodization of globalization discourses" Zeleza likens globalization's "explanatory vision" to "a jetliner high in the clouds" from which "spatialities and temporalities on the ground are collapsed into fuzzy fragments and stripped of their complexities and specificities" (2003: vi).

This article argues that from a Southern studies perspective, it is just as important to globalize Africa as to Africanize globalization. Africanists should challenge and contest globalization both as an intellectual concept and an ideological construct to the extent that it purports to describe concrete conditions and prescribe particular futures. Its triumphalist pretentions should be challenged, and its inevitability contested because it "reinforces global economic inequalities, political disenfranchisement, and environmental degradation" (Zeleza 2003:1). For some scholars, "globalization is seen as a destructive phenomenon and a coercive ideology from the North that, despite its novelties, is only slightly different from

previous forms and phases of capitalist imperialism" (Zeleza 2003: 8). Globalization "is first and foremost a cultural project and then an economic and political one . . . which has meant structural adjustment programs which have derailed post-independence efforts and led to 'the third colonial occupation' distinguished by the downsizing of the postcolonial state and downgrading of democracy" (Zeleza 2003: 7).[1] It has also been suggested that globalization is yet another manifestation of the perennial "insufferable arrogance of the North to conflate its own model of society with the ideal state of being. . . it is the hierarchization of the world economically, politically, and culturally – and the crystallization of a domination constituted essentially by economic power" (Ake, quoted in Zeleza 2003: 9). For Africa, globalization "represents an old problem in new contexts: the overriding hegemony of northern processes, practices, and perspectives" that attempt to provincialize the non-western world and write non-western histories as merely transitional to modernity, "as histories of absence, of lack, of becoming" (Zeleza 2003: 11).

For some scholars, humanities and social science research in the United States, including African studies, is being challenged and eroded by "a new academic globalism" which threatens to "restrict critical examination of wider globalist ideologies, leaving more room for U.S. policy that is harmful to Africa" (Lowe 1997: 297). Lowe suggests that the positions of Africanist scholars like Robert Bates, Ron Kassimir, Pearl Robinson, Priscilla Stone and Jane Guyer that African Studies are too particularistic and insufficiently scientific and therefore cite the need for creative synergy and a shift towards globalism, while forceful and wise, may lead African studies scholars "to accept some changes as inevitable when we should instead fight to prevent or reshape them" (Lowe 1997: 298). While locally grounded and historically situated analyses are a source of strength in African studies, it is not true that Africanist research has been oblivious to global processes and relationships. On the contrary, "most Africa scholarship in the United States since the 1950s has been conducted under the rubric of globalizing frames of reference, including modernization theory, the African diaspora, articulation of modes of production, structural adjustment, theories of globalizing markets and democratization, and theories of postcoloniality," through which such issues as colonialism, decolonization, state formation and many other global phenomena have been addressed (Lowe 1997: 299).

[1] From this author's perspective, globalization could only marginally be blamed for "the downgrading of democracy in Africa." We must look primarily to the post-colonial state, and especially to failure by the African state to transform its people into a democracy-friendly society.

For Africanists, therefore, the problem is not a lack of global theory or perspective. It is the need to fight off "the reductionist and dehumanizing tendencies of global theory, which have repeatedly reenacted the deep historical propensity of 'Western' science and high culture to make flattened, dehumanized portrayals of Africans and African humaneness" (Lowe 1997: 299). The stereotype of the savage African still maintains an unhealthy presence in western societies. And the fact that U.S Africa scholars are centered in the North creates a problem of connection with the subjects of their research and poses the danger of "being sucked so far into the institutional criteria of the career at home as to lose sight of what justifies the effort" (Lowe 1997: 299). One can only hope that this does not happen among the many Western Africanists poring over summer archives in Accra and Dakar, among many other places.

**Africanizing Globalization**

The case has been made for the Africanization of globalization with the caveat that "how African things become new African things, and what African people are doing to make it all happen" must also be taken into consideration (Lowe 1997: 302). Zeleza and Lowe contend that globalization is simply a new name for an old phenomenon. A neo-capitalist, neocolonial ideology that exalts "market forces as all-knowing and all-beneficent" and "dogmatically and anti-intellectually rejects all historical and contemporary evidence that untrammeled market forces are humanly, socially, and ecologically destructive as well as economically unstable"; and that promotes "an imperialism of free trade" almost identical to that propagated by Britain during the heydays of British empire (Lowe 1997: 303-304). They thus cite the need to resist the temptation "simply to go along to get along." Africanists must engage "the challenges of the new global order by pursuing African Studies within a critical Global Studies" where "local and regional orientations" are "the place on which to put the fulcrum for our lever" (Lowe 1997: 305).

Carefully weighted, many proponents of the Africanization of globalization tend to reinforce the very claims of globalization they oppose. Most seem not to critically question the usefulness of globalization as an analytical category. And just like globalization, most tend to erase important historical, spatial, cultural, and epistemological specificities and processes that constitute key features of global society. Africanizing globalization assumes connections and continuities between past processes and present realities that simplify the

complex nature of the world historical record; and that grants legitimacy to Euro-centric configurations of contested geopolitical formations such as the nation-state.

The call for an Africanization of globalization pits a geopolitical formation – Africa, against an amorphous mass of mobility and process – Globalization. We may think of globalizing Africa, Asia, Europe, America, or any region or area of the world; or we may think Africanizing Europe or Asia, or America. But it is difficult to think how globalization can be Africanized or Asianized. By arguing for the "areanization" of globalization, scholars assume a defensive position that is practically untenable. They accept the proposition that there is only one single globalization, whose source is the West, with the Rest, as usual, on the receiving end of the process.

**The case for a synergy**

Pearl Robinson assumes a position that is slightly opposed to the kind of AfrIcanist discourse on globalization advocated by Zeleza and Lowe. She argues that an obvious synergy exists between the local and the global in the study of Africa that should be promoted through the joint efforts of African scholars on the continent and Africanist scholars in the North, particularly the United States. Robinson suggests the need to recognize that African studies started in historically black American colleges and universities long before the onset of the cold war. According to Robinson, the cold war paradigm has lost its power to explain global politics. Granted that funding priorities associated with the cold war for African and other area studies have sharply declined in the United States, the synergy between local and global spheres of knowledge production remain relevant. Robinson warns against the "widespread proclivity to devalue area studies as a narrow, parochial, and often atheoretical enterprise" (1997: 170). That kind of thinking, she argues, should be stood on its head "by calling attention to an eclectic mix of local/global linkages" that emphasize engagement rather than "talking past one another" (Robinson 1997: 170). The assumed dichotomy between area studies and global studies and the corresponding assumption that the triumph of global studies means the death of area studies has no basis in fact. The two are not mutually exclusive and could very well collaborate in the production of useful knowledge about Africa.

To buttress her arguments Robinson cites two projects in which she was directly involved as director of the International Relations Program at Tufts University and chair of the Joint

Committee on African Studies of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) from 1994. A collaborative effort between her program at Tufts, the SSRC, the ACLS, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University Abdou Moumouni in Niamey, the OAU's (now AU) Center for Research in Oral Tradition and the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) culminated in the convening of a conference in the Nigerien capital Niamey. The Niamey conference took place just four months after Colonel Ibrahim Bare Mainassara "seized power in a coup d'etat that was the first to topple a democratically elected African president in the post-Cold War era" (1997: 172). The Niamey conference, Robinson argues, was highly successful because it "culminated in a succession of local/global linkages that reached out to the Nigerien academic community, drew them into the SSRC's orbit, supported their budding efforts at institutional development, and led to an election study that is serving as the genesis of a larger CODESRIA project on electoral campaigns" in Africa (1997: 173).

Robinson's second example of a collaborative venture to demonstrate the synergy between the local and the global in the study of Africa was a "Jazz and International Relations" conference launched from Tufts University with exclusively U.S-based participants. According to Robinson, as a global phenomenon jazz, "an African American music born of resistance and struggle . . . constitutes a unique realm of cross-cultural creativity that transcends the boundaries of race and place to meld with the landscapes of group identity around the world (1997: 174). Robinson reports that "scholars of diverse backgrounds" (who by the way did not include a single African) "were invited to Tufts to explore the role of jazz in world events, its reception in disparate ethnoscapes, and its contribution to globalizing cultural currents that reach both within and beyond the state" (1997: 174). For Robinson therefore, the future of African studies lies in exploring synergisms, making connections, and venturing into somewhat different terrain: "Collaboration with partner institutions in Africa, research that addresses globalization processes from below, reconfiguration of the landscape to include African diaspora communities" she concludes, "are just a few of the possibilities that suggest a new vision of African studies" (1997: 175).

It could be argued that Robinson, like Zeleza and Lowe, proceeds from the premise that globalization is real and is taking place now. The question is not whether globalization is in fact merely a fad, whether its claims to universality are authentic, or whether the scholars and institutions she reaches out to in Africa share views on the currency of globalization.

Working as they do from institutional frameworks concerned with how area studies may profitably be incorporated into a new international studies, some scholars are understandably concerned with citing synergies and points of mutuality between the global and the local. This confirms the corporate position that things might be worked out to salvage at least fragments of the edifice of area studies being consumed by the new internationalism. They therefore insist that there was never a dichotomy between area and global studies, and that all the noise about the death of area studies is meaningless. Such a line of argument seems to validate the very homogenizing tendencies of globalization that it implicitly rejects in affirming the existence of particular areas of study.

More seriously perhaps, the fact that the Niamey conference took place only four months after Colonel Ibrahim Bare Mainassara overthrew an elected government in Niger lent legitimacy to one of the most intractable problems faced by Africans. It raises the question as to just how serious Africanist scholars take the plight of the people of Niger, and of Africa if they could hold such a conference within four months of a military coup in Niger. Promoting international networking among Africanist scholars in Africa and the diaspora is undeniably a valuable exercise. Doing so in ways that compound the problems of the African people smacks of surprising insensitivity. Suspending or relocating the conference would have been a powerful message against military coups, even though sad to say, they are often the only hope for any change of power.

Robinson's second collaborative venture organized around jazz music also raises questions. In the first place, it was odd that for a conference dealing with music rooted in African origins, none of the major participants were African. One of the conference participants discussed not how African American musicians acquire musical skills using African role models, but "how African musicians acquire musical skills using African American role models" (Robinson 1997: 175). This statement simply stands reality on its head. It merely represents the usual compulsive proclivity to decenter and place Africa on the receiving end of whatever there is to share.

**De-Marginalizing Africa**

The issue of Africa's marginality in the so-called new global order has also received considerable attention among Africanists. Some have argued that contrary to popular claims, Africa or its representations loom large in the western imagination. Considered "a degenerate

entity" on one hand, Africa represents "a source of regeneration" for the West on the other (Amselle 2003: 1). While the shadow of "the ancient curse of Noah" magnifies the image of Africa as a place of material and intellectual depravity, this same image of Africa as "primitive" and "feline" is crucial to the "charity business" in the West, "an enterprise that relies on mobilizing and instilling guilt in large portions of the European and North American population." Poverty in Africa results from the continent's marginalization from the world economy, and not from any Biblical curse or "culturized" corruption they argue. State corruption exists as much in Europe as it does in Africa and scholars should pay heed "to the transcultural nature of the forms of appropriation and redistribution of resources" that are not unique to Africa. Similarly, the idea of a tribal Africa should be placed alongside the idea of a tribal Europe. If tribalism caused genocide in Rwanda, it caused genocide in Nazi Germany and Bosnia (Amselle 2003: 1).

But in contrast to Africa's image as a degenerate continent is an image of Africa as "a fountain of youth and a source of regeneration for all of humanity" (Amselle 2003: 1). This combination of decadence and renewal causes the "delicious fright" with which Europeans regard Africa, whose libidinal and virile image is in direct contradistinction to the image of Europe "as a sterilized, anemic, disembodied continent." The African's warm personality is in direct contrast to the westerner's and westernized African's "cold interactions" (Amselle 2003: 6-7). Unlike Europe, where Nietzsche had long declared God dead and Christ is now little more than a museum piece, Africa is a place of spiritual vitality where it is impossible to draw a line between the physical and the spiritual worlds. Africa's energy, virility, and masculinity are a source of awe and inspiration for a debilitated Europe. "As against an emasculated, deodorized Europe, Africa stands out as deliciously nauseating, peopled with Leopard-men who devour body and soul" (Amselle 2003: 8). The French writer Michel Houllebecq is reported as writing that "we (Europeans) envy and admire the Negroes because we wish to follow their example and become animals again, animals endowed with a large dick and a small reptilian brain" (Amselle 2003: 12). It is this persistent image of the African as a savage animal that threatens Europe, partly explains western racism and eugenics, and accounts for "governmental forms of surveillance and continuous tracking . . . a repressive apparatus destined to tame a reptilian libido welling up from the depths of the past" (Amselle 2003: 13). One can only wonder if Amselle is not himself victim to the tempting tendency to romanticize Africa as a continent of excessive virility exceptional in its animalistic difference from Europe.

It is an interesting paradox that the concept of globalization itself complicates the idea of marginality. The ubiquity of globalization precludes the possibility of exclusion. The division of the world into distinct geopolitical units is challenged by an "unprecedented volume of flows of capital, people, commodities, microbes, cultural images, technologies, religious and political ideologies, weapons, drugs, and pollution – all cutting across political and cultural borders" (Kassimir 1997: 155). According to Kassimir, some "facile constructions" of the phenomenon assume "that globalization is primarily a homogenizing process, producing isomorphism among local economies, polities, societies, and cultures" and "that the active agent of this process is an omniscient center imposing itself on a passive periphery" (1997: 155). The assumption of peripheral passivity suggests an absence of agency that does not measure up to the realities of life in the South.

**The case for pluralization**

Contrary to homogenizing constructions of the kind discussed above, globalization may be read as a multi-way process in which the universal local acts on the global even as the global acts upon the universal local. It is this mutually constitutive approach to global knowledges and phenomena that the SSRC sought to promote in its new program in the late nineties. The SSRC's position was that scholarly innovation requires "a comparative perspective and attention to transnational flows" and that "both global knowledge and local knowledge are necessary for contemporary scholarship" (Kassimir 1997: 156). The SSRC's new International Dissertation Research Fellowship emphasizes that while area-based knowledge is rooted in local specificities, it must be represented "in ways open to translocal interconnections and comparisons" even as translocal interconnections and comparisons must be represented in ways open to area-based knowledge (Kassimir 1997: 157).

Both Amselle and Kassimir propose that Africa holds a complex position in the global system. Marginal in one sense, it remains central to how the global system constitutes itself, "whether as a harbinger of doom . . . the moral focus of humanitarian concerns; a laboratory for peace-keeping, epidemiological, and environmental interventions; or the source of pride and commitment for diaspora communities" or even as the power behind debates on migration and multiculturalism (Kassimir 1997: 157) . For this reason, among others, Africa remains relevant to the SSRC's agenda for knowledge production. This explains why after the decommissioning of the Joint Area Studies Committees after the Cold War, the SSRC

moved to create the Regional Advisory Panels and Collaborative Research Networks which seek to nurture "an international scholarly community whose members can learn from each others' perspectives and experiences" including formerly excluded Africanists in Japan and India, so as to effectively "engage issues of international capacity building and research infrastructure more systematically than in the past" (Kassimir 1997: 159). According to Kassimir, the SSRC was aware that African studies is contested from within and that "much work is needed on all sides to create an equitable and fully international conversation about the substance of research on Africa and the way it is carried out" (1997: 160).

Some scholars seem to be faced with the difficult task of both acknowledging the continued relevance of Africa and African studies while justifying the SSRC's agenda for the internationalization of area studies. Creating "an equitable and fully international conversation about the substance of research on Africa" will require that the autonomy of African studies is not diminished, that adequate funding is available to those who work on Africa, and that research agendas on Africa are driven by scholarly interests and academic relevance, not by deterministic institutional policies. Of course, all this can only happen in a perfect world. Perhaps in the realm of ideas at least, one may safely hope for that perfect world.

Studies on spatiality in a global world demonstrate how area studies are criticized for their "pervasive cultural essentialism" (Jackson 2003: 1). While post-structuralist theories tend to ignore the significance of spatiality and difference, "field research continues to reveal the persistence of fundamental forms of cultural difference under globalization" (Jackson 2003: 2). Contrary to poststructuralist claims, globalization does not entail cultural or intellectual hegemony and spatiality remains a domain of theoretically significant cultural and discursive differences. While we inhabit an increasingly globalized world, we must take into serious consideration the significant issues of locality and difference that exist in more or less bounded spaces. Studies or approaches that neglect or deny "the theoretical significance of geographically delimited cultural and discursive difference" risk falling hostage to "hegemonic accounts of global convergence and totalizing cultural encompassment" (Jackson 2003: 2). "Notions of locality and local cultural-discursive difference remain important because the systematic inequalities reproduced by globalization continue to have an intensely spatial character" (Jackson 2003: 21). One may add to this thesis that every discourse is spatially and temporally located. Proponents of globalization and the erasure of difference speak from particular locations that stand to benefit in one way or another from such

approaches to knowledge production. Similarly, those who seek to "provincialize Europe" and "areanize" globalization speak from locations that they wish were granted equal centrality wthin the knowledge production enterprise.

In their contributions to Neil Waters' *Beyond the Area Studies Wars*, John Agnew, Ravi Palat and Ian Barrow argue for a multilayered, multidisciplinary approach to area and international studies that would "establish a balance between the particular and the generalizable, the local and the global, empirical evidence and theory" (Palat 2000: 70). The contributors to this volume argue that a focus on globalization tends to obscure or erase real differences between cultures, languages, peoples, places and identities that nevertheless continue to vigorously assert themselves against homogenizing tendencies. In "Fragmented Visions", Palat links the origin of area studies to the rise of American market hegemony and ideological warfare in the post-World War Two era. He shows how the dwindling of U.S. strategic interests in many parts of the post-Cold War world threatens to erase differences between the specific and the general, the local and the global. At the same time, Palat argues, the "divisioning" or regional segmentation of the world into areas of study after 1945 was neither obvious nor natural because "it is not the inert physical features of cartography but the activities of human beings that structure regions as coherent units of analysis" (2000: 70). While too narrow a focus on differences and specificities might lead to intellectual parochialism, a blind generalization and "exoticization of non-western cultures inhibits a study of these experiences as essentially contested, historically contingent processes" (Palat 2000: 86-87). Palat suggests that the limitations and contradictions of and between area and international studies may be overcome "only if we can transcend the nineteenth-century fragmentation of knowledge into discreet disciplinary tributaries and reconceptualize our analytical categories in world-relational terms" (Palat 2000: 70).

Like Palat, Agnew warns against the dangers of obscuring cultural and political difference in favor of a predictable sameness posed by globalization and the new international studies as well as the Manichean view of constructionism versus realism which often breaks down in actual research and teaching. The importance of the global or international is "neither the dominant scale of world politics" as assumed by realist accounts, nor "purely an invention of textual authority" as assumed by constructionists (2000: 152). "The very intellectual basis to international studies itself," he suggests, "requires attention to the historical-geographical conditions and understandings that make it possible and perhaps, as under current conditions of globalization, call its sufficiency into question altogether" (2000: 152).

Interrogating the question of agency in the New World History, Barrow argues that the discipline of history itself is grounded in area studies. However, in the post-Cold War world, there is a noticeable effort on the part of world history to swallow area-specific histories, a trend that threatens to obliterate distinctions and cultural differences. The mistrust and hostility between world history and area specific histories are needless because both approaches share a belief in the human and institutional capacity for change and adaptation (Agnew 2000: 191-192). At the same time, world historians' and area studies scholars' tendency "to measure the significance of change in terms of the alteration of the constituent elements" rather than "in terms of how people themselves manipulate economic, political, or social conditions" lead to their creation of disembodied agents rather than coherent historical knowledge and or theory (Agnew 2000: 208). Barrow suggests that an alternative way forward is the construction of "a complex agency located in people and recognized as being amenable to reification" that might "enable world and area studies historians to speak a more common language" and allow them "to work beyond categorical boundaries and to create new histories of the world and its areas" (Agnew 2000: 208-209).

But asserting the relevance of the local and the specific in the face of the threatening monster of global discourse is probably only the beginning of the end of the area studies wars. Sharing beliefs in human and institutional capacities for change and adaptation is one thing; being actually willing and able to bring about change and adaptation in the way we carry out the production and dissemination of knowledge is quite another. It is well and good to cite the need to work beyond categorical imperatives and create new people-based histories of the world and its peoples. But at the risk of sounding needlessly pessimistic, there is always the question of interest and relevance to those who hold the purse strings to research funding. The problem of the ubiquitous institutional framework within which scholars must maneuver need to be practically addressed. How this can be done is anybody's and nobody's guess.

It is my contention that as a description of the movement of ideas and artifacts in the world, globalization should be pluralized. We should be talking of globalizations, rather than globalization because ideas and artifacts from all parts of the world move into and reside in all other parts of the world. Africanist scholars should revisit the world historical record and identify the many ways in which things African have been globalized over the centuries.

There was the globalization of African labor during the slave trades which led to the growth of many African Diasporas in all parts of the world.[2]

There was the globalization of African raw materials during the so-called legitimate trade and during the era of formal colonialism. There was the globalization of African military capital during the first and second world wars. And there was the globalization of African cultural artifacts – wood carvings, bronze and golden statues, etc. - that today represent some of the most priced displays in western museums. With romantic fervor, Edward Scobie reports that Artemis, the Greek goddess of chastity was black and that the Roman Catholic Church has had three black Popes (Scobie 1994). Today, there is the globalization of African intellectual capital in the form of books written by African scholars that are widely used in the western academy. The works of African writers and scholars such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Mariama Ba, Wole Soyinka, Alex La Guma among many others are priced items on African studies syllabi around the world. Hundreds of African professors teach and conduct research in the greatest western universities and research centers. Former Senegalese president Leopold Senghor sat on the French Academy. Today, a man partly of African descent is president of the United States. In any country in the western world, shops and boutiques selling African products and services such as hair braiding could be found. The same processes of dispersal can be discerned regarding all non-western parts of the world. Most tellingly, key western domestic and foreign policy decisions are today determined by perceived terrorist threats and oil supplies from the Middle East and Africa. A disruption in oil production in Saudi Arabia or Nigeria might raise the price of oil in Omaha, Nebraska. As far as globalization in African studies is concerned then, there is much to commend a pluralizing approach: the dispersal of socio-economic and cultural artifacts represented by globalization flows to and from all parts of the world.

## Conclusion

Three main approaches seem to exit for the study of globalization in Africanist scholarship. One view holds that globalization needs to be Africanized. Another view contends that the perceived dichotomy between global and area studies are an illusion and that an approach that privileges synergy should be adopted. These approaches, however, tend to commit the same crime of essentialization for which they criticize much globalization discourse. Any discourse

[2] It is tempting to talk merely of the Atlantic Slave Trade. There were also the Trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean slave trades that planted African Diasporas in Asia, the Middle East and parts of Europe.

on globalization that does not critically examine the basic assumptions of the term as an analytical category runs the risk of circularity. It takes globalization as a generally acceptable given that might be dressed in different garbs under different conditions, but that nevertheless points unfailingly to a unidirectional movement of ideas and artifacts from North to South. Critically examined however, it could be hardly doubted that ideas and artifacts move from all parts of the world to all other parts of the world. Just as "foreign" ideas and artifacts are found in the South, so are "foreign" ideas and artifacts found in the North. This is true of both intra-south and intra-north spatialities. Thus, globalization might more usefully be studied as a diverse mass of constant multi-directional mobility of ideas and artifacts than the unidirectional movement of things from North to South generally associated with the term.

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