Guam, UN-Inc.; or Craig Santos Perez’s Transterritorial Challenge to American Studies as Usual

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There must be two Americas: one that sets the captive free, and one that takes a once-captive’s new freedom away from him and picks a quarrel with him with nothing to found it on; then kills him to get his land.

Mark Twain, To the Person Sitting in Darkness (1901)

Introduction

The poem maps (“poemaps”) of Chamorro poet Craig Santos Perez (b. 1980) interrogate configurations of US literary history from the perspective of insular cases rather than that of the continent, and from the Pacific island of Guam (Guåhan), in particular. In dramatizing in textual/visual ways that Guam has been excised, excerpted, or forgotten in US history—quite literally “unincorporated” into national memory and the body politic—Perez’s poetry shares the satirical sentiments of Mark Twain’s narrator in the epigraph above in invoking what counts as “the Business” under imperialism. Perez’s experimental poetry together with his academic scholarship and everyday activism on behalf of indigenous people disrupts business as usual for literary mapmaking in American Studies.

Even an otherwise quite daring anthology, Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors’s A New Literary History of America (Marcus and Sollors 2009), acknowledges the islands of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines gained from the Spanish-American War in America’s “new” history of literature, but conspiraciously forgets Guam. “Conspicuous absence,” it turns out, has defined Guam’s history. As spoils of that same war and vital to US Pacific frontier expansion, Guam and its Marianas archipelago played an outsized role in modern US history. Four hours after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, memorialized in President Roosevelt’s words as “a date that will live in infamy,” Guam’s bombing by the Japanese occurred—and yet it has been largely forgotten. Moreover, together with nearby Tinian and Saipan, Guam was “liberated” from
Japanese wartime occupation during the summer of 1944 by US forces only to become part of the military staging area in the Pacific from which the *Enola Gay* would take its atomic payload to Hiroshima from Tinian a year later. Most recently, in 2017, international media trained their sights on Guam after North Korea targeted it with bombastic claims of hitting the US with long-range nuclear missiles, leading mainland Americans to ask what and where is Guam. CNN interviews with University of Guam faculty and government officials in Guam patiently intoned the facts: Guam has been a US territory since 1898, except during wartime Japanese occupation; its Chamorro and Guamanian inhabitants are US citizens but do not have all the US Constitutional rights and protections granted to other citizens even though it patriotically contributes more of its population to the military than most states. That the US history of Guam should remain such a blind spot for Americans hardly bodes well for what US politicians like to call our new “Pacific century.” Chamorro poet Craig Santos Perez experiments with poetic forms to try to articulate the gaps and contradictions of Guam’s absent presence in US history, contesting its persistent exclusion from America’s narrative of itself. He mobilizes new insular modes of representation to unsettle the sedimentary layers of knowledge in the archives of America’s continental past.

To raise the question of Guam in its Pacific and archipelagic context means to reconsider the representational work that literary anthologies do; after all, one task that Perez sets for himself is to curate the unheard voices of diasporic Chamorros and Guamanians. Guam’s historical background and contemporary island life also serve as the topos for Perez’s series of poems *from unincorporated territory* (Perez 2008–2017), where “island” emerges as a theoretical and geopolitical concept beyond the geographical alone, challenging with irony the insularity of continental thinking. While we might wring our hands at how the inevitably bounded nationalist literary project that is “American Literary History” might better mind its transnational and world history linkages, Perez’s poetry enacts what he theorizes, which is the possibility of writing and thinking “transterritorially” and oceanically (Perez 2015, 620). His project goes beyond merely remapping national literature in ever “new” ways to aim, more radically, at steadily unmapping it; only by unmapping, his work suggests, will we recognize the préterrain of circulation routes, translation, and nodes of conflict and exchange that shore up just what the objects, and objectives, of a new archipelagic literary scholarship might be.

The deep strata of Guam’s archipelagic history

Guam’s archipelagic reality locates it 13 degrees north of the equator, the largest and southernmost island of the 15 islands in the Mariana Islands chain. Part of a larger arc of mountains and the world’s deepest trenches, including the Marianas Trench, Guam’s archipelago extends 500 miles north to south in Micronesia. Guam’s size, population, topography, and deep protected harbors have long made it a strategic landfall site in its part of the Pacific.

Guam’s human history begins in the uncharted “before times” of Austronesian seafaring ancestors (*taotaomona*). Guam’s indigenous people are known as Chamorro (or Chamoru), now a *mestizo* people from the original Chamorro and Carolinian islanders in the region that mixed with the Spanish. Ferdinand Magellan landed on Guam in 1521, then Spain claimed Guam and the Philippines as its first Pacific colonies around 1564. One of the world’s longest continuously held colonies, Guam was successively occupied by Spain, the US, Japan, and then the US again. While Guam’s US history begins in 1898, it was the Insular Cases (1901–1922) that shaped America’s peculiar colonial clasp on Guam. In these cases, the US Supreme Court decided how to handle the new territories gained from the Spanish–American War, and whether or not a possession was on the “incorporated” path to statehood. The term
“insular” for these cases refers to a distant, unique island home that makes the indigenous people, like exotic fauna or flora, resistant to adaptation, cultivation, or education elsewhere; paradoxically, “insular” also proclaims these islands as fully “inside” the US fold, fully the nation’s own internal matter to do with as it wishes. The Insular Cases described the Chamorros as “natives” and “ primitives,” by definition foreclosing their assimilation—asserting, in effect, that Chamorros could never become Americans, and Guam as a colonial territory could never attain statehood.² Hsuan Hsu reminds us of the distinction historically drawn between Pacific Islanders and Asian Americans: unlike Asian Americans, treated as foreign nationals associated with immigrant countries, Pacific Islanders have long been separated as indigenous and exotic territorial natives, illegible and unsustainable outside of local island habitats (Hsu 2012, 281–283). In fact, just as they do for parks or endangered species, it is the Department of the Interior, Office of Insular Affairs, backed up by Navy and other military branches based on Guam that adjudicates the island’s federal affairs.

As the Cold War got underway and wars in Korea and Vietnam heated up, Guam’s fate, along with occupied Japan and Okinawa, was to become America’s military launch pad. The timing was right for Guam’s politicians to push back against the US and demand more as the island became more militarily important. Qualified progress arrived for the people of Guam with the 1950 Organic Act and their gain of US citizenship, but it came at a cost: continued territorial status, rejection as an “incorporated” part of the US, and non-voting representation in Congress. In an ironic repetition of Magellan’s disparaging term for Guam as the “Island of Thieves,” US law made its new US citizens ineligible to vote for US presidents, disenfranchising them as if they were convicted felons.

The Insular Cases overlap rhetorically with the post war Organic Act. While the language of “organic” suggests a natural, evolving unity, in reality, the US created a very particular “island” of its own out of Guam: now US land held by Guam’s citizens, it can be legally seized eminent domain fashion for US economic and national security interests at any time. Indeed, while the US granted citizenship and limited Constitutional rights to Guam’s people under the Organic Act with one hand, with the other it promptly took away some 36% of Guam’s land for the US military. It would take a poet to do justice to the absurd contortions the language and the law have gone through in order to deny Guam and its people their voice in US history, to capture their simultaneous belonging and alienation.

Remapping the “new” in American literary studies

As a chronological construction of the national history via “literature” in the broadest sense, Marcus and Sollors’ A New Literary History begins typically enough with America literally on the map and concludes with the radical silhouette art of Kara Walker’s response to Obama’s recent election. Rather than including Thoreau or Dickinson simply in their own words, as most anthologies and literary histories do, A New Literary History tasks contemporary writers, scholars, and artists to explicate these works’ significance, interpolating amidst their essays visual images and diverse texts of advertising, music, material and popular culture. It is as if the editors wanted to give readers a more dynamic lecture series as well as an alternative sensorium by which to experience history first hand. It is the oversight at 1898 on the anthology’s timeline that might give us pause.

Yet again, Guam appears to be erased from America’s story. At 1898 on the timeline in A New Literary History of America we find Amy Kaplan’s “Literature and Imperialism” discussing Stephen Crane’s war journalism in Cuba as a vehicle for re-examining US empire, educating readers on how Guantánamo came to be US territory (Kaplan 2009, 444). Her subject
matter—a military base on another country’s island become US territory—points to Guam, however unwittingly and indirectly. Perez himself has written about Kaplan’s work on Guantánamo, noting that she appears unaware that Guam was once considered for the role that Guantánamo would play post-9/11 (Kaplan 2009, 102). And in Guam’s neighboring archipelago, Palau has in fact become a relocation site for Muslim Uighur detainees freed from Guantánamo after years of mistaken imprisonment (Lim 2009). To her credit, when Kaplan opens her rhetorical aperture to a larger view of empire in her concluding section, claiming 1898 was a turning point not only in Cuba but also for widespread support of the violent US annexation of the Philippines and the bloody three-year war that ensued, her example of Twain’s Pacific turn in his anti-imperialism efforts wrenches our reading focus away from Cuba and toward the new Pacific frontier beyond the continental US. The US-Philippines War (1899–1902) serves as a startling reminder that the US acquisition from Spain of Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam in the 1898 Treaty of Paris was neither benevolent in intent nor welcomed by Pacific Islanders. Perez, who elsewhere borrows Vincente M. Díaz’s Austronesian seafaring terms for poetic and theoretical ends, might well call this kind of unexpected citing/sighting of Guam via the Philippines in Kaplan’s text about Cuba, a combination of etak and pookof:

...etak, or “moving islands,” [is] “a technique for calculating distance traveled, or position at sea by triangulating the speed of the islands of departure and destination with that of a reference island. This is accomplished, furthermore, by plotting these islands’ courses in the celestial sky.” Another important seafaring technique is pookof…. If you see a bird associated with a certain island, then you know that island is nearby—the island has figuratively expanded.

(Perez 2017, “Guam” 100–101)

The Philippines, together with Cuba, function to triangulate our path via Kaplan’s reference islands in the text and guide the reader to Guam, far beyond the ken of her essay. Guam’s submerged history breaches here, as our gaze turns toward the Pacific and the Philippine islands to which Guam has long been historically tied through Spanish conquest and modern immigration. Moving and expanding islands, in Perez’s formulation, help us to locate Guam at material and discursive points despite textual erasure, as the navigation tools he forges detect Guam’s absent presence in histories of the US and its literature.

Guam (dis)appears in US history at the interstices of the remapping of US history that Wai Chee Dimock calls “deep time,” a tangle of world roots and transnational routes of convergence and contact that gives the lie to constructed national histories on any anthology’s linear timeline (Dimock 2006). Although Dimock may skew her rhetoric towards continents in advocating transnational methodologies, her richly complicated model of a comparative praxis for world literary history joins forces with Gayatri Spivak’s notion of a planetary literature skeptical of national frames.3 Their work helps us see how insularity is sometimes negative, but not always about islands alone; certainly, it is just as characteristic of nations that place themselves at the center of the world map and world literary history, claiming universal provenance for English only, or self-made origin myths backed up by Providence, and futures propelled by Manifest Destiny. Perez’s poetry about Guam implements Dimock’s deep strata approach to world time and events, as it everywhere draws the cultural, linguistic, historical, submarine, subterranean, and aerial ligaments that imbricate Guam in the world’s “deep time,” past and present. For Perez, “no island is an island because any island is itself an archipelago” (Perez 2017, “Guam” 98). In their challenge to literary history anthologies, Brian
Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens’s *Archipelagic American Studies* collection decontinentalizes transnational studies in their archipelagic framing, and it is hardly surprising that one of their contributors is Craig Santos Perez. Moreover, Perez himself brings other Pacific Islander voices to world literature. His 2017 edited collection with Brandy Na`lani McDougall, *Home(is)lands: New Art and Writing from Guåhan & Hawai‘i*, published by his own ALA press, creates space for new writers and artists. These texts rock the boat of conventional stories told uni-directionally about the Pacific islands and their people “discovered” or erased on timelines of American literary history.

**Locating a moving island: Craig Santos Perez’s “poemaps”** of Guam

Throughout the four volumes of from unincorporated territory—[hacha] or Chamorran for “one”; [saina] or sakman, an outrigger canoe; [guma’] as “home”; and [lukao] for procession—Perez weaves together diverse poems to create an open container, a net (*talaya*) that captures in a temporal experience many voices from past and present, in multiple languages and across space and time. A quick glance at this series and one sees a collage of maps, definitions, and advertising slogans to present the modern story of Guåhan and its people’s lives and cultures.

His emphasis on “from” in his series titles, as well as in recurrent subtitles threading across his books, recalls the language of departures, sorties, and migration as he describes his overall project in his first volume:

> These poems are “from unincorporated territory.” They have been incorporated from their origins (those “far flung territories”) to establish an “excerpted space” via the transient, processional, and migratory allowances of the page. Each poem carries the “from” and bears its weight and resultant incompleteness…

> In the ocean of English words, the Chamorro words in this collection remain insular, struggling to emerge within their own “excerpted space.” These poems are an attempt to begin re-territorializing the Chamorro language in relation to my own body, by way of the page.

*(Perez 2008, 12)*

Perez’s poems incorporate his personal story into Guam’s “excerpted” history, and “re-territorialize” the languages, life, and cultures of the Chamorro people in his text from multiple directions at once, with floating visual arrays of foreign words, graphic maps, diagrams, botanical renderings, and geographic survey sites. Just as Paul Lai richly explicates the “discontiguous” ways that Perez’s Guam belongs to the US while resignifying what insular world geography looks like, Perez himself refuses to bound Guam by its tiny island perimeter but renders it continuous—that is, archipelagic—with other islands in Oceania and their topotropes.

Never simply imagistic, Perez’s typography and layout evoke both movement and transience, as critics invariably note: lines of words across swaths of a page’s “oceanic” white space mimic the ebb and flow of tides, tugging at history as memories get shored up, then are submerged again. For an indigenous and diasporic people represented by the poet himself, writing from California or Hawai‘i, whose Chamorro language, culture, and history have been systematically destroyed when not eroded and lost over centuries, these lines trace half-remembered words and rituals. In one repeated thread, “from All with Ocean Views,” Perez juxtaposes often amusing travel copy of exotic tropical paradise Guam as one big resort that the Guam Visitors Bureau peddles to the world (“Where America’s Day Begins”) with a
footnote-like text offering sharp contrast to that paradise: beginning in boldface “guåhan is,”  
the gray-toned text fades out with news reports of paradise’s dark underbelly of toxic dump  
sites, unexploded military ordnance, buried canisters of mustard gas, and contaminated waters.  
Another refrain across his books exploits the inexhaustible humor of SPAM, whose “mystery  
meat” and acronym stand for everything Perez might cynically or hilariously conjure forth;  
what it always represents, though, are the long-term consequences of the US military’s  
reshaping of Guam’s culture and the very bodies of its people fed unhealthy processed foods.  
As incantatory in its mobile visual forms as in its lyrical lines, Perez’s extended poem  
to Guam in these four books incorporates a gentle and repeated return to the body and  
voice of his aging and ailing grandmother, a body marked by a long island life of sun  
and salt air on Guam, and a voice full of Guam’s and his own family’s stories as nothing  
less than Guam’s history itself. Her inevitable decline and impending loss raises the  
specter of the dwindling numbers of Chamorros, now no longer a majority on their  
homeland, displaced by what John Carlos Rowe describes as both the drastic and  
everyday forces of “settler colonialism” that “remove” and alienate native peoples from  
their own homelands (Rowe 2017, 214). As the grandson poet who has left Guam,  
Perez himself begs the question of Guam’s future, and mourns his ailing grandmother’s  
body as it links up to images of the island increasingly associated with extinction, loss,  
and abandonment (such as the achiote plant). Leaving Guam at 15 for school in Cali-  
fornia, Perez records by his last book of poems his own diasporic status as it continues  
now on Hawai’i, weakening further his day-to-day ties to his original home. In [lukao],  
he dedicates large amounts of dialogic space to his wife and his parents talking story,  
organizing the book overall around the birth of his daughter whose photo appears in  
collage on the cover. More explicitly autobiographical here, Perez writes Hawai’i into his  
paeon to Guam, weaving his extended family’s cross cultural domestic ties as archipelagic  
family roots; meanwhile, Guam shifts increasingly out of central focus in sharing textual  
terrain with Perez’s larger diasporic Pacific Islander politics, identities, and allegiances.  

In the “poemaps,” or poem-maps designed together with Donovan Kūhiō Colleps that  
open from unincorporated territory [lukao] (Perez 2017), computer-generated images appear  
above short texts about, for instance, Guam as the hub for the concentration of undersea  
telematiccations and internet cables crisscrossing the Pacific. Perez riffs here on Marshall  
McLuhan’s well-known point that the medium is the message, and not only for his poetry in  
the diverse discursive forms it assumes but also for Guam, whose invisibility is ironically  
defined by vital coordinates that bring the world’s people together via telecommunications  
and air travel relays through Guam.

Perez’s second volume, from unincorporated territory [saina] (Perez 2010) is particularly  
multilingual and multi-voiced, suggesting that ignorance of languages and cultures maps history  
as surely as do world literature anthologies written only in English. [saina] drifts through the  
languages of Chamorro, Spanish, English, and Japanese, the languages of the colonizers and  
colonized, all swirling in a history where their referents sometimes anchor them and some-  
times find no translatable equivalent. At times, neither author nor grandmother know or  
perhaps ever knew the Chamorro words, and this loss too is recorded in Perez’s texts as  
undefined entries, bracketed terms left open on one side. Everywhere, loss haunts these  
poems. The stranded driftwood of some lines are set apart, evoking extinction and aban-  
donment, with others gently moving left to right and right to left in a tug of tides. Loss serves  
as both ballast and buoy for a resurgent spirit, as hints of Chamoru nationalism challenge US  
hegemonic culture and political power but also create divisions among Guamanian migrants  
and immigrant communities on island for generations now.
Interpolated statistics, charts, data, and news accounts document the ravages of modernization, industrialization, and militarization on Guam’s traditional indigenous culture, which sharpens Perez’s poetry and lends credence to his activism in the face of neo-colonial policies regarding Guam as a modern-day colony. In 2008, Perez went to the UN Special Political and Decolonization Committee in New York to testify on behalf of the Chamorro people’s desire for self-determination. His and others’ testimonies appear as the running footnote to one poetic thread in all the books of from unincorporated territory, the words typographically struck through with a single line as if unheard, as if testimony redacted by a Sovereign’s hand.

In an era when colonial possessions and territories should be non-existent in accord with UN condemnation and global decolonization movements following World War II, 17 such cases including the US territory of Guam still exist worldwide. This contradicts insistent US rhetoric of democratic self-determination and anti-imperialism. Even the conservative military historian Robert F. Rogers points out this untenable contradiction at the end of his history of Guam, Destiny’s Landfall. At the very least, Guam serves to dramatize the military expansion of US bases in the Pacific and across the globe as a process of creating pockets, or islands, of extraterritorial jurisdiction on other peoples’ lands. As East Asia historian Chalmers Johnson stresses in his Blowback trilogy (Johnson 2000), US bases in foreign countries constitute a dramatic form of modern US imperialism, an expansionism that requires the making of new “islands.” Pacific neo-Cold War geopolitics continues to articulate the region’s geography, as the US competes with other nations to dominate the oceans and seas, building up military “islands” on islands whose expanded littoral boundaries 200 miles out into the sea ultimately blur the lines between topography and tropes.

Neo-Cold War thinking contributes to a perverted US “archipelagic.” In such a logic, chains of US bases serve as extraterritorial “islands” on islands, as in the case of massive bases on Guam and Cuba, linked to landlocked island bases in foreign countries such as Okinawa and Japan. US bases expand US territory all over the globe while challenging the sovereignty of the nations whose land and laws they usurp in the name of the world’s security. The military archipelagic requires these islands as mobile and shape-shifting “geostategic necessities,” with little concern for how the political economies of bases wreak havoc on the societies and cultures around them.4 Chalmers Johnson derides US expansionism via its military bases as an insidious form of twenty-first-century American Empire, proclaiming Okinawa as “Asia’s Last Colony” (Johnson 2000, 34). Guam, however, is America’s colony, shares the Asia Pacific, and has more than a little in common with Okinawa these days. After all, Okinawa too was once its own Ryukyuan Kingdom before being annexed by Japan; now, it shoulders the burden of some 75% of all of Japan’s US bases on a land mass less than 1% that of Japan as a whole. Guam and Okinawa have a shared plight: geopolitical exploitation of their vulnerable island status and limited resources by the massive political economies and military interests of Japan and the US.

Unmapping into the Préterrain: Guam’s (sub)aerial roots

With a PhD from the University of California, Berkeley, in Comparative Ethnic Studies, and now Associate Professor of English at the University of Hawai’i, Manoa, Perez alludes as readily to Charles Olson or Ezra Pound and critical theorists as to folk culture in his poe-maps. The ethnographer’s eye, though, unsettles his vision when he is both subject and object of that gaze. James Clifford’s concept of préterrain, as the “fore-field” of material and other conditions that allows ethnographers access to an object of study, appears throughout
Perez weighs carefully how he gains his access to this subject matter and his right to speak for and of Guam.

Tongan writer and social anthropologist epeli hau’ofa articulates an oceanic préterrain in his essay “our sea of islands.” He argues against the colonial perspective that the pacific islands are small, tiny, remote, isolated, poor, dependent, deficient, or confined—a perspective based on imperial desires to see only extent land surfaces, only the closed insular island. Hau’ofa draws our attention to an oceania, preoceania, and transoceania surrounding islands, below the waves, and in the sky—a deeper geography and mythology. 

(Perez 2010, 63–64)

Here Perez stresses the “deep time” of archipelagic thinking, as his poetics unmaps continental bias into its oceanic préterrain. In recent critical essays, he has taken this a step further, speculating about transterritoriality as an alternative to transnationalism. Transterritoriality radically reclaims all land equally for all life on our small island planet, a terrape-lago co-opted too long by imperial nation states. Finally refusing the divide between the political and the aesthetic—indeed, defining himself as a Chamorro poet that makes that impossible—Perez explicitly unmaps the préterrain that makes space for his poetic and critical voice when so many others remain unheard, their languages languishing or extinct.

For Perez, Guam is not simply a victim of the US, Japan’s, and Spain’s colonial predations and its future is not defined by that past; rather, as Perez’s joint projects in poetry and activism suggest, a new generation on Guam is organizing to resist the military build up coming with Japan’s base realignments and troop movements from Okinawa and elsewhere to Guam. More educated, activist, and diasporic, this new generation’s ties are conceptualized in Perez’s figure of the banyan tree, that ancient home of the taotaomona and duende (ancestral ghosts of Chamoru folk culture). Revising Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of submerged rhizomes, Perez’s “(sub)aerial roots” forge archipelagic ties from Guam to California to Hawaii to Okinawa. Perez’s poetry lays bare an oceanic préterrain that unmaps Guam and the poet’s relation to it, exposing its neocolonial neo-“island” reality and his own diasporic displacements. In doing so, US hypernaturalization of Guam’s “insular,” “organic,” and “primitive” island ontology and obfuscation of the militarized “island” base that it is creating of Guam for its own ends come into view. Such exposure may enable Chamorros and Guamanians alike to join Perez in re-imagining their own i/land identities as well as moving the topotropic island’s coordinates to a new place in not only political discourse but in US literary history.

Notes

1 Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used this term, while President Barack Obama memorably referred to the “pivot to Asia.”
2 See Jessica Warheit’s documentary film, The Insular Empire: America in the Mariana Islands (2010), which features interviews with former Guam politicians as well as activists on all sides of the politic debates for Guam’s status quo or change to commonwealth, statehood, or independent status.
3 Brian Russell Roberts, for one, cautions against a rhetorical bias against continents in transnational studies discourse, and against islands with some uses of “insular.” See Roberts (2015,130).
4 This term belongs to Colleen Lye, cited in Hsu (2012, 282). This is part of Lye’s analysis of how East becomes a new West, or frontier, in US history. See Lye (2004, 10).
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I am grateful to University of Guam Professor of History and Chamorro Studies, Anne Perez Hattori, for discussions by email about energized activism and political organizing on Guam to resist the military buildup. “We Are Guåhan” emerged, during the build-up hearings, as the most formidable, organized, vocal resistance group. At Michael Bevacqua’s “Famoksaiyan” blog, one finds “Hita Guåhan,” the UN Testimonies by Chamorros in more recent years. Most of the pieces were written by younger activists, including Perez (See http://famoksaiyan.blogspot.com/). Bevacqua also forges links to Okinawan activists.

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