

JAZZ AND MISE-EN-ABYME IN ANTONIO MUÑOZ MOLINA'S
EL INVIERNO EN LISBOA: A REPRESENTATION OF THE
POSTMODERN AESTHETIC

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One of the models parodied by Antonio Muñoz Molina in his novel *El invierno en Lisboa* (1987) is the improvisational nature of a jazz performance. The narrative discourse also integrates a *mise-en-abyme* structure to express its postmodern consciousness.¹ A prevalent lack of confidence in the ability to control one's destiny and to see the world as a harmonious, orderly cosmos has led to a newfound axiology that redefines the notion of an order through the affirmation of disorder and chaos. The former modernist belief in an authentic «self» and in the truth-telling value of a work of art has been replaced by a conception of man as a phantom figure whose identity is based on the infinite reproduction of images. As Frederic Jameson points out, the postmodern culture has become absorbed in the «ideology of the simulacrum». He attributes this mode of thinking to four major changes in our worldview: «The suspension of subjective inwardness, referential depth, historical time and coherent human expression» (54). The collapse of these modern values has transformed the artist's aesthetic vision into one that affirms meaning through portraying the absence of meaning. The narrative form is an expression of this absence, and the conglomeration of repeated images exemplifies

¹ I would like to make clear that in this essay I use the term «postmodern» to describe an aesthetic form. Although I will refer to some of the features of post-modern philosophy, I do not claim to define the movement in its entirety.

a *mise-en-abyme* formulation of narrative voices. As Diane Elam notes, the *mise-en-abyme* concept is a «representation in which the relation of part to whole is inverted: the 'whole' image is itself represented in part of the image [...] it thus opens a spiral of infinite regression in representation» (27). This aesthetic model of the self as a form of «synecdoche», or series of fragments each of which constitutes the whole, comes to light in *El invierno de Lisboa* in the repetition of jazz imagery.

The aesthetic origins of the *mise-en-abyme* concept correspond to Derrida's theory of deconstruction. Richard Kearney argues that the deconstruction of meaning is an aesthetic process whose core elements are repetition and parody. He uses the metaphor of the «looking glass» to describe the postmodern paradigm: «[It is] an interplay between multiple looking glasses which reflect each other interminably [...] [a] labyrinth of mirrors which extends infinitely in all directions» (253). On a different note, Linda Hutcheon's interpretation of the role of parody illuminates its function as a significant literary tool in the expression of a postmodern model of reality. In Hutcheon's view, parody works to reevaluate the established dynamic between representational models over time. She argues that the primary goal of parody is to bring to light the contradictory relationship between past and present representational forms as a means to express the divergent elements in all representational techniques (94-5). Hutcheon acknowledges the co-existing trend to find meaning in past aesthetic models but proceeds to argue against this phenomenon. The goal of this essay is to show how the narrative structure of *El invierno de Lisboa* parodies the open-ended structure of a jazz performance that is contingent upon the improvisation of the musicians and the resonance of the sounds they produce. The recycled images of the musician, the painting, and the cities, which are intermittently reintroduced in the text in various forms, resonate, as would the sounds of a jazz performance. In this way, the concept of *mise-en-abyme* illuminates how the narrative form of *El invierno en Lisboa* mimics and parodies the random stylistic pattern of jazz improvisation to figure forth the idea of a subjective reality that defines order through chaos. The rhetorical discourse of jazz improvisation represented *vis à vis* the first person interjections of Santiago Biralbo and Billy Swann contribute to the novel's technique as an intertextual game of semiotic referentiality that char-

acterizes its chaotic form. The text pokes fun at the myth of the jazz artist whose mystique derives from his belief in the sharpening of existential insights through music. The interpolated narrative perspectives of Santiago Biralbo and Billy Swann both function to parody the image of the jazz artist and the otherworldly reality that he evokes through performance.

At present, very little criticism exists on *El invierno en Lisboa*. Among its few critics, Olympia González and Thomas Franz explore the significance of jazz in the novel. González bases her argument on the claim that the novel's protagonist, Santiago Biralbo, represents a parody of the Orpheus myth. She then proceeds to examine how the repetition of words and situations center on the themes of death, art and love, which lie at the heart of the Greek myth (44). Her essay illuminates lucidly how the technique of parody ties into the postmodern notion of the text as a simulacrum. In a different vein, Thomas Franz, convincingly shows how the intermittent and seemingly minor allusions to the American jazz greats Thelonious Monk, Louis Armstrong, Art Tatum, and others, in the characterization of the protagonists Biralbo and Swann, is an example of the fusion of content and form. Franz insightfully concludes that Muñoz Molina's evocative tribute to the «jazz experience» in *El invierno en Lisboa* is an affirmation of the free-floating nature of the creative process (157, 162). Gonzalo Navajas calls attention to the paradoxical nature of the postmodern paradigm and claims that in its efforts to express an absence of meaning and to infinitely negate the presence of truth, it also affirms itself as a means of expression, or an ideological construct. He supports his argument by showing how Biralbo and Billy Swann's alternative lifestyle represent them as reverted fallen heroes who still demonstrate faith in the attainment of a secure sense of self through their musical experience. His argument suggests that the text maintains an ambiguity with regard to its representation of Biralbo and Swann as impoverished examples of the Hegelian *Übermensch*. Navajas' point underscores how the fragmented discourses of Biralbo and Swann are a figurative example of man's suspension of belief in his ability to control and understand his existence. In this essay I am proposing a closer examination of how and why *mise-en-abyme* works as a legitimate aesthetic model to express the metaphysical discourse of the jazz artists, Biralbo and Swann.

The rhetorical framework of *El invierno en Lisboa* exploits the *mise-en-abyme* model to illustrate the futile and continuous pursuit of the recuperation of an image. Biralbo's quest to relive his love affair with Lucrecia is symbolic of the postmodern notion of the absence of the self represented as a simulacrum. The text utilizes and parodies a series of images that are taken from a range of sources, notably American film noir and the jazz scene. The interpolated viewpoints of the anonymous narrator, Biralbo, the jazz pianist, and Billy Swann, the trumpet player, constitute a trio of narrative voices that in their entirety represent a dialogical system of simulacrum that is self-referential. The arbitrariness of the narrative pattern mimics the musicians' variations of an improvised jazz melody. Although the jazz band plays at the same time, each of the musicians may follow a different beat and rhythm, as is common in «avant garde jazz». Such a rhythmic pattern tends to create dissonance rather than harmony. This dissonant tone is an articulation of Biralbo's state of paranoia and disorientation. The intercalated narrations and the repetition of images display a sporadic rhythm and dissonance that moves in a cyclical pattern that lacks a central focus. This lack of focus corresponds to the postmodern aesthetic that expresses the absence of absolute truth. As Kearney points out, the postmodern philosophy undercuts the humanist belief in the idea of an origin with a fixed meaning. He makes reference to the rise of the «textual revolution» and «inter-textual play» that has brought about the creation of this new aesthetic mode in the arts. The new textual mode is one where «The autonomous subject disappears into the anonymous operations of language. Truth is replaced by parody, and the diachronic pattern of narrative history (with a beginning, middle and end) by achronic patterns of repetition and recurrence» (253). The *mise-en-abyme* mode in *El invierno en Lisboa* resembles an improvised jazz performance in which the narrative discourse represents variations of a story where each character functions as an image that pursues another reproduced image. Let us now turn to an analysis of how these narrative perspectives of Biralbo and Billy Swann reflect the model of cyclical repetition as a means to parody the figure of the jazz artist.

While upon first reading it seems that the narrator's memories and conversation with Biralbo would allow him to acquire a deeper understanding of Biralbo's experiences as a musician and with

Lucrecia, they in fact lead him further away from understanding anything. The narrator's account contains a series of commentaries by Biralbo and Billy Swann that develop the theme of music, and more precisely, musical performance, as a highly esteemed form of artistic expression. Music is one of the repeated themes that Muñoz Molina uses to develop the narrative deconstruction of Biralbo's character. Biralbo states: «Un músico está siempre en el vacío. Su música deja de existir justo en el instante en que ha terminado de tocarla. Es el puro presente» (14-15). His words imply that the jazz musician is a ghost-like figure who exists only in the moments when he is playing his instrument. Man's existence, like a musical performance, consists only of an infinite present.² Unlike other types of music whose value is preserved in a recording, jazz and the jazz musician, like man, remain in a permanent state of indeterminacy that is represented through the constant replaying and retelling of tunes and experiences. The fact that Biralbo later listens to a recording of him and Billy playing and fails to remember this shared experience is suggestive of one's inability to relive a past experience, which fades into an eternal present. Biralbo's personal struggle to recuperate his past experiences with Swann, the narrator's desire to get to know Biralbo, and Biralbo's efforts to relive his moments with Lucrecia reflect a *mise-en-abyme* aesthetic that articulates the notion of an infinite quest for an unattainable image. The countless retelling of a past experience is therefore a fusion of both the real and false experience since each retold version contains the same false images. The blurring of lines between the real and the imaginary reinforces the literary aesthetic of simulacrum as a representation of the postmodern notion that Kearney refers to as a «cult of *death without life*», by which he alludes to the deconstruction of an invented image (345). The stylistic fusion of reality and fantasy that results from such an aesthetic mode calls into question the limitations of the imagination in formulating a transcendental reality (345). In line with Kearney's assertion, the technique of parody in *El invierno en Lisboa* functions to debunk the possibility of transcendence through musical expression.

² Critics have yet to study the treatment of time in *El invierno en Lisboa* as part of the postmodern aesthetic. While I will make some references to time in the novel, this is a topic for a future essay.

The next significant commentary that parodies jazz describes the effect it produces on our memory through its perpetual invocations of images. Upon listening to the recording, Biralbo's vague recollection of the word «Burma» permeates his thoughts, which suggests how one's memory of a single word conjures up multiple associations and feelings to create a personalized imagined reality. Again, the text mimics the *mise-en-abyme* style to underscore how a sign, to use Saussure's terms, contains an infinite number of signifieds that are recycled and reinterpreted:

en aquella música había persecución y había terror, y todas las cosas que yo vislumbraba en ella o en mí mismo estaban contenidas en esa sola palabra, *Burma*, y en la lentitud de augurio con que la pronunciaba Billy Swann: Burma o Birmania [...] una dura sonoridad o un conjuro de algo: yo repetía sus dos sílabas y encontraba en ellas, [...] otras palabras anteriores [...] palabras demasiado oscuras. (24)

Biralbo's words represent a sequence of reproduced associations that paradoxically lead him further away from making a logical connection between words and memory. He is listening to a recording of the song on disc, recalls the sound of the word «Burma», repeats the word twice and finds a subsequent series of indecipherable words. Muñoz Molina also uses parody through the mirroring of the repeated image of the jazz musician, a technique that underlines the concept of the void. Elam's interpretation of what Derrida calls the «*operation of the mise-en-abyme*» emphasizes the futility of creating representational models of a void: «The paradox of the *mise-en-abyme* [is that] the more you try to fill it up with representations, the emptier it becomes» (29). Similarly, Hutcheon refers to the postmodern parodic mode as the «empty realm of pastiche» (98). As is the case in a jazz performance, each musician's improvisations lack a clearly definable central melody and instead sporadically allude to it. Likewise, the narrative structure also adheres to a random insertion of recurring images among which prevails the deconstruction of the image of the jazz musician.

The text satirizes the figure of the jazz musician by demythifying the idea of music as a means of awakening the soul and providing transcendence into a higher level of cognition and insight. The jazz theme evokes the image of the jazz artist as a proud,

marginalized figure who is able to attain a higher level of understanding and introspection through his music.³ In *El invierno en Lisboa*, the jazz world is a simulacrum of life itself, and the artist represents a simulacrum of every-man. Like Billy Swann who perpetually repeats sounds in the moments of improvisation, man's perception of his existence is a continuous process of reinterpreting past experiences through the act of remembering words and images and then reformulating the event in his mind. When the music stops, we are reminded that all that remains is silence and the presence of the abyss. As González accurately suggests: «La música corresponde a una série de sonidos que en cada ejecución renuevan su sentido sin servir de pretexto para una aventura interior: es un sentido que nace y muere a cada instante» (50). The creative interpretation of a musical melody is similar to the reconstruction of the past through literary terms. Biralbo's affirmations of music as «una confesión siempre destinada a alguien, a Lucrecia, a él mismo [y ahora como] un método de adivinación» (63) negate themselves and resurface again *ad infinitum*.

The text parodies and deconstructs two myths about music that illuminate the process of *mise-en-abyme* at play. First, it debunks the notion of the musical experience as a means of achieving heightened spiritual awareness. The figure of Biralbo as a parodied representation of an enlightened jazz musician resonates in other key moments in the text, mainly through Billy Swann's character. The repetitive process of *mise-en-abyme* proves to be at work when Billy Swann says: «No le importamos a la música. No le importa el dolor o el entusiasmo que ponemos en ella cuando la tocamos o la oímos. Se sirve de nosotros, como una mujer de un amante que la deja fría» (82). Swann's comparison of music with a self-serving, heartless lover demonstrates his recognition of music as an idealized construct. Billy Swann's character represents the stereotype of the musician who exudes confidence in his talent and finds refuge in his music as the source of his inner strength and knowledge. Nonetheless, Swann's words contradict the very image that he represents when he affirms that music, as a representation of life, is a construct that serves only to confirm

³ Another notable example of the jazz artist is in Cortázar's «El perseguidor». Johnny, the protagonist, is an artist who perceives himself as superior to the average man who believes in the separation of the artistic and ordinary world.

the empty void within us. The struggle to search for existential meaning through music only intensifies our sense of indeterminacy. Billy Swann's role as a visionary whose musical imagination leads to knowledge is undercut by his critical awareness of music as an outlet for his feelings of inner despair. Swann also signifies, like Lucrecia, one of the mental images that are beyond Biralbo's reach and that lead him to obsessively refer back to them in his quest to achieve knowledge and happiness. Elam's interpretation of one aspect of the *mise-en-abyme* model clarifies how its applicability to *El invierno en Lisboa*: «[The subject] loses not merely its capacity to grasp the object but also its grasp on itself» (28). Biralbo's desire to be like Billy Swann and to find Lucrecia lead him further astray from the Borgesian notion of reaching the center of his own labyrinth.

The random moments when Biralbo and Billy Swann meditate on the powerful effect of music in their lives represent one example of how the nature of jazz improvisation relates to the intertextual game of mirroring images. The narrator's reference to Biralbo's perceptions of the world and of time as «un juego de correspondencias o de símbolos que se sostenían tan delicadamente entre sí [...] como los instrumentos de una banda de jazz» (96) underscores the theme of metafiction and mirrors the self-referential characteristic of the *mise-en-abyme* mode. In addition, the repeated resurfacing of the figure of the jazz artist highlights the postmodern condition of the indeterminacy of man and truth. The narrator, Biralbo, and Billy Swann all seem to be aware of the outcome of the situation with Lucrecia and the acquisition of the Cézanne landscape. Each character experiences his story as he recounts it. The metafictional process of reproducing a version of the same story within the story again evokes a mock jazz improvisation. In jazz, each musician has the freedom to improvise or invent a solo based on the random combination of chord changes that typically correspond to an original melody. In *El invierno en Lisboa*, part of the original theme, or melody, is Biralbo's quest to relive his love affair with Lucrecia.⁴ The text parodies the traditional structure of a jazz performance that begins with the introduction of a theme played by the entire band, proceeds to the

⁴ The other portion of the theme relates to the acquisition of the stolen Cézanne painting.

individual improvised solos, and concludes with the repetition of the theme. It also shows how the act of improvisation represents the variation of a theme that may be interpreted in a countless number of ways while always retaining specific sounds that recall portions of the melody. Improvising a performance serves a dual function in the novel. First, it reveals how the creative process develops from the continuous combination of old and new forms. Second, we may equate it with the retelling of the story since both forms rely on the element of repetition. Both are aesthetic formulations of reality that depend on the act of improvising and retelling respectively. Like the structure of a jazz concert, the narrative technique of *El invierno en Lisboa* lacks a definitive beginning and never reaches a conclusion or an end. Despite this stylistic similarity, a jazz performance still affirms the existence of an origin, or «original» theme from which the musicians base their improvisations. The narrative form parodies the jazz structure by denying the existence of a point of origin and uses the art of improvisation as the basis of its form.

The intercalated perspectives of the narrator, Biralbo and Billy Swann develop a tension in the text that in musical terms we would call dissonance. Two definitions of dissonance are relevant, the first being, «[a] lack of agreement, consistency, or harmony; conflict,» and the second being a musical one, described as «A combination of tones contextually considered to suggest unrelieved tension and require resolution» (523). Biralbo's failed quest to grasp the images he has of Lucrecia and Billy Swann is a sign of the lack of consistency and irresolvable state of anxiety in which he finds himself. Biralbo and Billy Swann's meditations about music contradict the stereotype of the jazz artist that they represent and their words function to maintain textual tension and ambiguity. While Swann represents Biralbo's guide, or seer, who like a poet, perceives himself as superior to the average man due to his deepened awareness of the truths about existence, he also signifies Biralbo's model of emulation, a God-like figure, and Biralbo attributes his skills as a pianist to him. The narrator expresses Biralbo's aspirations to be like Billy: «[...] Ni él mismo pensaba que le fuera posible parecerse algún día a un verdadero músico, a Billy Swann» (84). He also refers to the life of a musician as the «real life»: «La otra vida, la verdadera, la que la música le anunció siempre como una prefiguración de algo» (84). Biralbo

uses the image of Swann to construct and validate his identity. As such, his character reinforces the *mise-en-abyme* model, showing us how the image of Swann is powerful enough to create Biralbo's false sense of reality. In this way, the narration presents an ironic perspective that randomly affirms and negates the image of the musician as a transcendental and marginalized figure who distinguishes himself as superior due to his existential insights.

The narrator's descriptions of Biralbo and Swann's words call attention to the text's use of narrative self-consciousness; their primary function is to demystify the image of the jazz artist. The narrator's opposing glorification and idolization of Billy Swann evokes the image of death, which come to light in the descriptions of his face: «Estaba tan oscuro que no podía ver la expresión de su rostro, y eso la hacía más hermética, una pálida oquedad de penumbra bajo el ala del sombrero» (173), and «Era una cara flaca y rígida y tan desconocida» (173). These allusions to death parody the figure of the jazz artist as a God-like figure. Rather than sharing a transcendental experience with Biralbo, Swann reminds him of the nihilism that lies beneath the series of reproduced images that he recreates and he is conscious of his existence as a simulacrum. Swann states: «Mírame, yo soy una sombra, yo soy un desterrado» (135). The narrator also describes Swann as a «parodia del hombre vivo a quien sostuvo» (134). The text further destabilizes Swann's image through the narrator's description of his fear of death: «Pero era Billy Swann quien tenía miedo aquella noche, miedo a morir o a que alguien viera cómo se moría o a no estar solo en las horas finales de la consumación» (137). Billy Swann's image as a parody of a God-like figure exposes a symptom of the postmodern aesthetic that Randolph Pope compares to a «chronic cancer» (116), which implies that man's existence consists of a perpetual and spontaneous reinterpretation of his experiences through the duplication of images. The same situation occurs when a jazz musician improvises; he produces sounds that, like storytelling are beyond his control and evolve in the moment. Artistic creation in jazz consists of the free and continuous reinterpretation of melodies that the text mimics in its narrative form. Let us now look at how Biralbo's words contribute to the structural parody of jazz performance and the jazz artist.

As we pointed out earlier, each narrative voice mirrors and contradicts the other. Biralbo's contradictory perceptions of Billy

Swann are a reflection of Swann's dual image as God and a ghost-like person. Similarly, Biralbo represents a parodied image of a musician who seeks to find meaning in his life through love and the pursuit of spiritual transcendence by playing and creating music. The narrative destabilizes Biralbo's image through the reiteration of contradictory statements. Biralbo's words reveal that he is both experiencing what he imagines love and music to be and, that he is also self-aware that his self-created identity as a jazz musician is a construct, made up of a conglomeration of fragmented parts. The reader is able to piece together Biralbo's identity through the references to Lucrecia, who evokes a romanticized love, and of Swann, a jazz artist who seeks truth through music.⁵ The narrator's description of Biralbo's contemplation of the paginated copy of the Cézanne painting exemplifies how the visual arts, in this case painting, also contributes to the novel's post-modern style of mirroring images:

Como algunas veces el amor y casi siempre la música, aquella pintura le hacía entender la posibilidad de una extraña e inflexible justicia, de un orden casi siempre secreto que modelaba el azar y volvía habitable el mundo y no era de este mundo. Algo sagrado y hermético y a la vez cotidiano y diluido en el aire, como la música de Billy Swann. (188)

The painting's evocation of the existence of an otherworldly, hidden order repeats the idea of false transcendence that the jazz musician hopes to experience while playing. As a whole, the narrative arrangement of the images of Lucrecia, Billy Swann, and the painting again call to mind jazz improvisation. Each one reflects a part of the *mise-en-abyme* model that reiterates Biralbo's futile and infinite search for truth and meaning through the recycling of images from one's past. One representation only leads to another. The narrative technique of *El invierno en Lisboa* continuously calls attention to itself as a simulacrum, or semiotic puzzle, whose unstable pieces randomly combine and change without a conclusive outcome. Biralbo's faith in the possibility of an ethereal concealed order is undercut by the statements: «La sensación de no descifrar el sentido de la música [...] sino de ser en-

⁵ Bruce Malcolm, Touissants Morton, and the Cézanne painting all represent other repeated images that contribute to the deconstruction of Biralbo's character.

tendido y aceptado por ellos» (188) and his reference to the abyss: «Perfiles alineados de un sereno abismo donde únicamente Billy Swann [...] se atrevía a asomarse» (213). Biralbo acknowledges that music does not provide him with a solution to his existential suffering but nonetheless it offers him a sense of temporary fulfillment and gratification. His struggle between believing in the existence of a higher order that is beyond visible cognition and embracing the void brings to light the universal and contradictory feelings of hope and disillusionment that Muñoz Molina develops through the archetype of the jazz musician. The above citations also tell us that Biralbo is aware of his role as both an observer and a participant in the labyrinthine game of images reflecting images. Biralbo's final epiphany reveals a darkened vision of the spiritual void that he knows he is unable to fill: «La explicación de todo, de lo que no entendería nunca [...] la oscura certidumbre de algo [...] que los contenía indesciframente» (214), accentuates the nihilistic form of the postmodern aesthetic.

The interplay between silence and resonance in the text is also a part of the technique of parody. Biralbo makes repeated references to the importance of resonance in jazz that is a metaphor of the endless process of the displacement of images that represent life. Resonance is equated with life, and silence with death. If we recall our earlier reference to Kearney's description of the postmodern imagination as a «cult of *death without life*,» we see how the act of retelling a story exemplifies man's only means of affirming his lack of selfhood through a constant cycle of death and rebirth. Similarly, in jazz music, the act of improvisation produces a resonating sound that only exists in the moment. The contrast between Billy Swann's playing the trumpet and the moments that he sings the song *Burma* illuminates the dual image he represents. The resonating sound of his trumpet evokes the narrative consciousness of life as the perpetual play of simulacrum in an infinite present. Contrary to his playing, Swann's voice is associated with the side of Biralbo that searches hopelessly for knowledge and happiness and, which also esteems Swann as a prophet-life figure. Biralbo describes his voice:

Burma, Burma, Burma, repetía como un augurio o un salmo la voz lóbrega de Billy Swann, y luego el sonido lento y agudo de su trompeta se prolongaba hasta quebrarse en cru-

das notas que desataban al mismo tiempo el terror y el desorden (23) [y] Le pareció entonces que escuchaba el susurro de una voz imposible. (213)

The horror that Biralbo feels upon to listening to the word «Burma» and to the sound of Swann's trumpet unveils a deepened awareness of the void. The opposing images of Swann are repeated in a cyclical pattern of representation. Biralbo's allusion to Swann's insights about music: «Lo que importa en la música no es la maestría, sino la resonancia: en un espacio vacío[...] ¿No es eso, una pura resonancia, un instinto de tiempo y de adivinación [?]"» (96-7) is a commentary about the construction of the self through the metaphor of a creative jazz improvisation.

In short, the intertextual play of images in *El invierno en Lisboa* is an aesthetic expression of the postmodern notion of the self as simulacrum that perpetuates itself through the repetition of images. The text invokes a *mise-en-abyme* model of representation to parody the art of jazz improvisation. The intercalated perspectives of the narrator, Biralbo, and Billy Swann function to bring to light the random pattern of repeated imagery associated with love, music, art, and film, as a metaphor of the contingency of reality and identity. Finally, the contradictory depictions of Biralbo and Billy Swann discredit the image of the jazz artist as having oracular insights into metaphysical truths and elucidate the spiritual void that lies at the center of the continual cycle of death and rebirth that characterizes our existence.

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