

What Did the Victorians Do for Us?
Review of Marie-Luise Kohlke & Christian Gutleben (eds.),
Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing
After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering

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The last two decades have witnessed the rise in prominence of trauma theory and a subsequent boom in trauma literature, a fascination with repressed histories and silenced stories that spans perceived divides between popular fiction and academic theory. Neo-Victorian fiction, as a belated literary mode that returns to the nineteenth century with the knowledge conferred by hindsight, would seem to exemplify Freud's logic of *Nachträglichkeit*, in which, as Roger Luckhurst explains "an event can only be understood as traumatic *after* the fact, through the symptoms and flashbacks and delayed attempts at understanding that these signs of disturbance produce" (Luckhurst 2008: 5: original emphasis). However, whereas the traumatised subject is condemned to a repetition of the same set of pathological symptoms until released through narrativising the repressed event, neo-Victorian fiction can be read as a self-conscious investigation of these symptoms, appearing as both victim and analyst of its own traumatic traces. This reading of neo-Victorian fiction in terms of trauma has been explored in recent works such as Kate Mitchell's *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages* (2010) and Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham's edited volume, *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction* (2010), both reviewed previously in *Neo-Victorian Studies*, and this latest collection of essays offers fresh

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perspectives in terms of both theoretical approaches and the texts under consideration. The main body of the collection is divided into three sections: 'Poethics and Existential Extremity: Crises of Faith, Identity, and Sexuality', 'History's Victims and Victors: Crises of Truth and Memory', and 'Contesting Colonialism: Crises of Nationhood, Empire and Afterimages'. There does seem to be a certain overlap between the second and third sections, both of which focus primarily on the impact of colonial or racial trauma. This is only a minor drawback, as the individual essays provide a number of fascinating viewpoints on the fiction they consider, and a collection of this nature is by necessity diverse in terms of texts and approaches. Accordingly, this review will focus on each contribution in turn before closing with some reflections prompted by the collection as a whole.

The editors' introduction provides a comprehensive overview of key issues in trauma studies, which will be invaluable for those unfamiliar with the field. Their position, drawing on Dominick LaCapra, is that neo-Victorian fiction enacts the role of 'after-witness' that "testifies to and stands in for inadequate, missing, or impossible acts of primary witness-bearing to historical trauma" (p. 7). LaCapra has argued that trauma narratives should produce in their listener/reader "empathic unsettlement" in which the reader participates in the other's trauma and experiences its damaging or overwhelming affects. In contrast to this is a response of 'identification', in which trauma becomes commodified or fetishised: what Luckhurst has identified as "traumatophilia, taking a kind of perverse delight in the repetition or abject assumption of a collapsed trauma subjectivity" (Luckhurst 2008: 111). The risk here, as the editors note, is that historical fictions might become a "spectacle at a reassuring temporal remove", consigning neo-Victorian fiction to roles of either nostalgia or exploitation (p. 8). However, the editors offer a third possibility in which neo-Victorian fiction functions as a benign appropriation in its attempts to "fill a lacuna rather than seize an already occupied space of enunciation" (p. 7). The role of fiction in this instance is to give voice to precisely that which has been excluded from the historical record, to perform a necessary act of identification or appropriation in which historical others are retrospectively spoken for because they were unable to speak themselves. Neo-Victorian fiction is thus located "in the ghostly liminal space between memory and history" providing a space in which, in the absence of direct testimony, witnesses can be made to speak within a fictional world (p. 7).

There is a broader argument implicit in this discussion, taken up in Christian Gutleben and Julian Wolfrey's contribution, about the ethics of neo-Victorian fiction in its inhabiting of an uneasy space between witnessing, appropriating and exploiting past traumas. This is a persuasive way of negotiating these problems, and the introduction also reads as something of a manifesto for the ethical significance of the neo-Victorian as a way of recovering those narratives that "History writ large has *effaced* and consigned to the anonymous oblivion of non-representation" (p. 30). The broader question here is whether this might apply to other forms of historical fiction as well.

Christian Gutleben and Julian Wolfreys' contribution is also theoretically oriented, complementing the editors' introduction. Although beginning with an epigraph from Byatt's *Possession* ("Maybe we're symptomatic of whole flocks of exhausted scholars and theorists"), the focus here is not on fiction *per se* but on the implications of the return to the nineteenth century within the context of postmodernism. Byatt's fiction thus provides the catalyst for exploring neo-Victorian fiction's apparent desire for a return to a pre-theoretical point of innocence. Instead of an originary, single intrusive event, there is a different model of trauma at work here that focuses on a pervasive and gradual sense of loss. However, not all loss is inherently traumatic, although the authors argue, drawing on LaCapra, for a shift to a structural model of trauma, characterised by a "ubiquitous sense of deprivation" and a consequent shift away from the individual specificity of traumatic experience towards a model in which "trauma becomes collective, circumstantial and global" (p. 43). This casts the entire neo-Victorian enterprise as a species of trauma literature, returning to the past as a retreat from the incursions of postmodernity, in a search for the traces of authenticity and presence in the face of loss. However, in contrast to the consolations of nostalgia, they argue for "the return of an ethical concern for otherness" (p. 56), in which neo-Victorian fiction discovers it wasn't shattered by postmodernism, but was always already lost. Although this provides a cogent theoretical underpinning it still leaves unanswered the question of what prompts this delayed working through of the Victorian past in the present moment, that is, the 'trigger' event in trauma theory that releases previously repressed memories? This is a question prompted by several of the essays in the volume that leave open the question of why the present moment should see a return to the traumas of the nineteenth century.

Of course, as the authors acknowledge, if neo-Victorian fiction explores the blind spots of the nineteenth century, revealing that which the Victorians could not understand about themselves, so neo-Victorian fiction itself may also be driven by our own contemporary blind spots. Neo-Victorian fiction thus comes to appear as double-faced, at once a self-conscious investigation into historical trauma, aware of its own theoretical strategies in the act of witnessing, but equally itself symptomatic of that which it investigates.

The next two essays turn to the anxieties caused by the impact of Darwinian science. In his essay, 'Trauma by Proxy in the "Age of Testimony": Paradoxes of Darwinism in the Neo-Victorian Novel', Georges Letissier asks whether this return provides an 'alibi' for working through current concerns about developments in biology – the "by proxy" of the essay's title – in which neo-Victorian fiction transfers contemporary anxieties to the past rather than acting as a form of belated witnessing. This does seem to stretch the concept of trauma: it is difficult to pin down exactly what the traumatic event of evolution might be. While the cause cannot easily be identified within this model of trauma, its symptoms result in a psychic splitting analogous to that of the traumatised subject, in which the implications of Darwin's theories cannot be matched with daily experience, and the obsessive return to Darwinian themes in fiction itself is suggestive of a traumatic structure. Letissier argues that this split is often dramatised as a clash between evolutionists and creative theories where scientific or epistemological ideas are translated into psychological terms, and he explores the voices that have been excluded from "the general roar of approval for Darwin" (p. 82). In Roger McDonald's *Mr Darwin's Shooter* (1998) and Harry Thompson's *This Thing of Darkness* (2006), he explores those characters who have unwillingly been made part of the process of scientific discovery during the Beagle voyage: one might say here that they are innocent bystanders traumatised by witnessing Darwin's challenges to religion. In Byatt's 'Morpho Eugenia' (1992) and Swift's *Ever After* (1992), this clash of ideas is confined within the family sphere, as Letissier explores how the central traumatic scene in *Ever After* is absent and can only be reconstructed through its erratic textual traces, linking this to the 'not telling' of traumatic experience theorised in relation to the Holocaust by Dori Laub, in which the traces of trauma can only be discerned through its absences, that which cannot be remembered, and yet which must be, if the past is to be witnessed. Letissier concludes the essay by focusing on

anxieties provoked by questioning the origin of life in Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* (2000) and Sebastian Faulks's *Human Traces* (2005). The focus here shifts to a postcolonial frame, anticipating the focus of many of the later essays in this volume, in which Kneale portrays a cacophony of voices previously excluded from the historical record that signals both a crisis of witnessing and a challenge to the march of progress that the Darwinian narrative might be taken to imply. The number of novels explored here does tend to leave unanswered the question of how they might address *our* anxieties about the role of science and religion today, leaving open for further investigation what might be the triggers for this displaced working through of contemporary concerns by proxy.

The ways in which the concerns of the present might be addressed through fictional treatment of the science of the past is also explored by Catherine Pessó-Miquel's essay which focuses primarily on post-Darwinian anxiety and loss of faith in *Ever After* (1992) and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). This essay focuses more on the way in which the texts position the reader, arguing that Swift invites identification and empathy, while Fowles distances the reader through postmodern framing. She explores how neo-Victorian novelists foreground the ways in which Darwin has been mis-represented and simplified, and stresses how treating the topic in a comic and playful manner can restore those voices that have been excluded in the interests of a coherent evolutionary narrative, so that we arrive at a position where "evolution is not necessarily synonymous with progress" (p. 130). For Pessó-Miquel one of the key dilemmas faced by both authors is how to represent the personal and public nature of trauma, and she explores this via an inventive analysis of tropes of falling in *Ever After*. The essay ends with some suggestive reflections on the differences between Fowles and Swift in terms of the contexts in which they are writing. Fowles writes from "the secure standpoint of the sixties", whereas Swift is writing in a context in which "the opposition between science and religion has come to overstep the limits of fiction and leak into our present-day reality" (p. 131). As with Letissier's piece, there is a suggestive argument that there isn't space to fully explore within the confines of the essay, namely that these novels respond to contemporary shifts in attitude towards science and religion. Both essays certainly prompt interesting questions about the current relationship between science and faith (exemplified most obviously in the on-going polemics of 'new-atheists' such as Richard Dawkins), and

about the relationship between popular science and literature, following Patricia Waugh's argument that "biology seems to be moving imperialistically into the arena of human value, human behaviour and human consciousness, (in other words) the traditional domain of the novel" (Waugh 2005: 70). Perhaps there is a further aspect of trauma here in which neo-Victorian fiction, much like the reactions of the characters described in both essays, could be read as a challenge to the incursions of neo-Darwinian writers in the present, although such questions move beyond the scope of the essay.

In contrast to these extensions of the trauma paradigm, Mark Llewellyn's contribution returns to more familiar traumatic terrain, that of incest in A.S. Byatt's *The Children's Book* (2009), 'Morpho Eugenia' (1992) and Sarah Waters' *Affinity* (1999). Rather than focusing solely on the portrayal of incest in terms of individual traumatic symptoms, it becomes a "structural and conceptual triangulation between ethics, aesthetics, and psychoanalysis" and a "structured artistic device or trope" (p. 135). At issue here is the question of how a legal and/or moral concept might be translated into literary form, as he suggests that the very idea of the neo-Victorian may itself be incestuous: an earlier generation appears to dominate a later, raising "questions around maternity, paternity and origins" (p. 137). This allows Llewellyn to move beyond literal depictions of sexual incest to focus on how the structure of desire more broadly conceived might be regarded as incestuous. He convincingly argues that there is a repressed father-daughter relationship within Waters's novel, in which Margaret longs for "the structural support of a paternal sphere" (p. 154), and that this is reflected in her traumatic treatment at the hands of another paternal figure, the spirit guide Peter Quick. Rather than 'diagnosing' the trauma of incest by reading fiction either for its direct representation or its traces and symptoms, Llewellyn makes some suggestive links as to how an aesthetics of incest might be developed from literary studies' adaptation of trauma theory from the discipline of psychology. This of course raises further ethical questions that might be further explored: does this aestheticising of traumatic experience both silence and exploit trauma?

The next section of the collection shifts towards a model of trauma that focuses on the ways in which neo-Victorian fiction returns to the nineteenth century in order to bring to light voices previously excluded from the historical record, focusing especially on the victims of war and

colonisation. Dianne F. Sadoff's contribution, 'The Neo-Victorian Nation at Home and Abroad: Charles Dickens and Traumatic Rewriting', offers opportunities to re-read the multiple adaptations of *Great Expectations* (1860-61) via the logic of trauma and sets the tone for the essays in this section. Sadoff's essay focuses on *Great Expectations* alongside two fictional re-interpretations in Lloyd Jones' *Mister Pip* (2007) and Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997). She firstly explores how Dickens's text is structured by the logic of trauma, including "haunting by repressed memories, repetition compulsion, acting out and anxious dreams" (p. 164). However, Sadoff argues that this personal trauma eclipses that of colonialism, again suggesting a model of trauma that shifts away from individual psychology towards social and economic causes that the two later novels foreground, as explorations of "chronic psychic suffering" (p. 175). What emerges here is a sense that while trauma can represent an ethical recovery of marginalised voices, there can also be a struggle between traumatised subjects in which competing narratives vie for recognition. The belatedness of colonial traumas are shown to have been previously eclipsed by the trauma of declassing that Pip experiences, the later revisions of Dickens foregrounding exclusions within the original narrative.

In the next essay, Vanessa Guignery turns to the trauma of war in Beryl Bainbridge's *Master Georgie* (1988), focusing on the Crimean War and the way in which photography and text may be used to convey the experience of excluded voices. There is an interesting, if undeveloped, suggestion in this essay that the belated return to this trauma may be read as a response to the conflicts of the 1980s such as the Falklands War, although Guignery also suggests that the neo-Victorian fiction "serves a purpose of escapism from violence and conflict in the present time" (p. 203). Of course it can serve both ends simultaneously, and in a growing and diverse literary field there is certainly space to accommodate both points of view rather than insisting on consensus both within and across texts. Perhaps the belatedness of trauma is key to this dual perspective, if we follow the logic that it addresses in oblique form the anxieties of the present. Hence the text encourages the reader to transfer to our own times the epistemological questions raised regarding what can be known from different types of documentary evidence.

Celia Wallhead and Marie-Luise Kohlke make a convincing case for reading David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) through a neo-Victorian frame,

certainly not the most obvious approach with which to tackle this novel. Since the novel consists of six sections, progressing from a nineteenth-century journal written on the Chatham Islands to a post-apocalyptic future, previous criticism has, as the authors point out, tended to focus on the science-fictional aspects of this text. Eschewing this partial perspective, the authors' reading of *Cloud Atlas* draws together the central concerns of this collection, as they explore a novel that is explicitly concerned with the traces and repetitions of the past. Mitchell is thus shown to foreground the question of how different cultural, geographical and temporal contexts remember the past through access to different technologies of memory, from Adam Ewing's handwritten journal to the holographic testimony of a post-human "fabricant". This suggests questions about the materiality of traumatic traces, and whether developments in communications technologies might imply different ways in which trauma is archived and recovered by future generations. This leads to a reflection on the "virtual witnessing" (p. 249) the novel implies, in which a testimony depends for its survival on participatory reception and retelling, which they suggest mirrors the perspective of neo-Victorian fiction that confronts the reader with these questions. The traumatic contexts explored within the novel also lead to reflections, which could also apply to a number of the essays within this volume, on the portrayal of genocide and political violence that needs to move beyond "exclusively Eurocentric models of suffering that [...] privilege our own cultural denominators" (p. 231). The implication of this is that trauma itself could be said to engage in the kind of cultural imperialism that Mitchell's novel explores, and the challenge for authors and critics is to negotiate a path that allows the past to speak to the future without imposing our own framework upon those voices.

This confrontation with the other's experiences of trauma and the question of how the past may address the concerns of the present are taken up in detail by Kate Mitchell's thought-provoking and detailed essay focusing on the reception and contexts of Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005) in terms of Aboriginal Australian history. Here Mitchell gives full space to the question, prompted by other essays in this volume noted above, of *why* the present moment should be returning to the traumas of the nineteenth century, so that novel is "less concerned with revealing a secret history than with performing memory" (p. 254). Mitchell traces how *The Secret River* was published in the context of Australia's acknowledgment of

guilt over past treatment of Aborigines and the need not simply to “disclose an untold story” but to “remember and commemorate it effectively” (p. 265). She argues that in contrast to the Australian government’s desire to forget the past, Grenville’s novel is an intervention into these debates, that she describes as an “active ‘technology’ rather than a passive ‘vessel’” (p. 273). This is a convincing argument that contains much fascinating detail about the politics of remembering within a specifically Australian context, demonstrating the importance of considering the specificity of the traumatic event, and the double temporality of the neo-Victorian that can speak both to past and the present simultaneously.

This contestation of colonial histories extends into the final section of the collection, with essays that continue to explore the challenges posed by marginalised memories within postcolonial contexts. Ann Heilmann explores the way in which an exiled Irish author in Nuala O’Faolain’s *My Dream of You* (2001) begins historical research for a novel only for it to become the occasion for a working through of both personal and cultural trauma, through her own past relationships and the Irish famine. Here, ethical debates surrounding the role of trauma in neo-Victorian fiction are played out within the novel itself, as the characters indulge in “trauma tourism” in the pursuance of “self-indulgent emotional excitement” (p. 298). This suggests the ethical witnessing explored in the previous section of the novel also has the potential to become mere self-interest. Heilmann argues that it is only when Kathleen renounces the attempt to complete her novel that she is able to work through her own trauma, thus suggesting a meta-fictional commentary on the value of the neo-Victorian perspective for reading the present as well as the past.

The question of exploitation is also posed by Elizabeth Wesseling, who, in her discussion of Robert Edric’s *The Book of the Heathen* (2000), asks why neo-Victorian representations of sex and violence can appear as over the top. There is a parallel here between trauma texts (one thinks of the debates surrounding the misery memoir, or ‘mis lit’) and the neo-Victorian, in that both are concerned with treading an uneasy path between ethical witnessing and these potentially exploitative renderings of experience. Wesseling argues that there is a process of displacement, so that the Victorians have come to play for us the role of the exoticised other that the colonial played for the Victorians themselves. She argues that the novel criticises colonialism through focusing on the masculinity that is implicit in

colonial ideals, and the implication of this is that the novel is as much about our own relationship with the past, as it “blocks the nostalgic desire to return to and identify with the past” (p. 336) by forcing us to confront our own desires to engage in “trauma tourism” (p. 298).

Elodie Rousselot takes up the complexities of nostalgia in her essay on Jane Urquhart’s novel, *The Whirlpool* (1986). Rousselot reads the novel through a framework derived from postmodernism, postcolonialism and Freud’s ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, exploring the way in which it contributes to a dialogue on Canadian national identity in the present through its exploration and re-writing of Canada’s colonial past. The novel presents two alternatives, in which it either is trapped within a melancholic and nostalgic attachment to the past, or offers a process of mourning and commemoration which breaks away from this attachment. This dual possibility is filtered through the novel’s focus on the poetry and death of Browning, so that the relationship to Victorian literature becomes a symbol of the freedom to forge new modes of national identity. Here, as in other essays in the volume, the implication is that neo-Victorianism itself is also engaged in this process of mourning, both commemorative and critical, rather than the melancholic entrapment of nostalgia.

The collection closes with a further contribution from Marie-Luise Kohlke who explores the legacy of the Indian Mutiny of 1857-58, addressing questions raised earlier about the extent to which reading trauma into the past simply encounters the reader’s own theoretical presuppositions. She argues that Victorian mutiny writings anticipate some of the key formulations of trauma theory by focusing on the unspeakable nature of the violence, while at the same time centering solely on British suffering and avoiding the shattering of identity associated with trauma. In contrast to this, neo-Victorian treatments of the subject draw attention to the “ideological, sometimes pathological practices that underpin practices of national mourning and commemoration” (p. 375). Significantly she also directs attention to the *limitations* of neo-Victorian commemoration: although this practice might seem to invite acknowledgement of or identification with the historical violence of colonisers, the opposite might also be the case, as readers “dis-identify with *who they are no longer*, potentially serving the evasion of historical accountability” (p. 377, original emphasis). This implies that neo-Victorian fictions could be said to suffer from ‘trauma envy’ as they efface Indian suffering and position themselves as arbiters of

what is deemed the unspeakable that it subsequently claims to uncover. She then traces this pattern of the representation and non-representation in a selection of mutiny fictions focusing on moments of graphic violence. Kohlke concludes by inverting the logic of representation that has been seen throughout much of the volume: instead of the bringing to light of the traumas of the past being necessarily an ethical act of after-witnessing, the framing and narrative strategies through which this is achieved cannot be ignored. Thus she argues that the refusal to represent trauma can also be “an acknowledgement of unequally recognised suffering and a refusal to appropriate and consume other’s trauma” (p. 394).

As will be clear by now, despite their individual approaches and subject matter, there are a number of thematic continuities explored by the essays that prompt reflections on the way in which trauma as an object of interpretation, emotionally invested and generating new readings might be challenged and extended. It is certainly refreshing to see a collection that moves beyond the standard reference points for both trauma theory and neo-Victorian fiction, a deliberate move by the editors who note that “certain neo-Victorian perspectives – the nineteenth-century fallen woman, medium or homosexual, for instance – have become rather over-used, tired and hackneyed, to the point where it becomes difficult to view them any longer as embodiments of an ethics of alterity” (p. 23). Indeed there is a surprising absence of tropes of haunting, given its resonance with trauma theory, and it is replaced with a clear emphasis on the politics of trauma in relation to post-colonial and other non-European perspectives. The drawback here – and it is certainly not unique to this collection, but rather endemic to trauma theory itself – is that trauma has by now created such a pervasive discourse that the reading of trauma into earlier historical periods could itself be considered an imposition of our theoretical biases on to the intended ethical process of allowing the repressed voices of history to speak. This concern comes across most clearly in Kohlke’s essay, which confronts directly the problems and limitations of the belief that witnessing is necessarily an ethical act, and suggests ways in which fiction might challenge prevailing ethical ideas derived from trauma studies.

A central issue raised by the volume is to what extent the pervasiveness of trauma discourse now means its traces are liable to be detected in discursive contexts that do not strictly fit within existing models of trauma, and the danger is that any kind of painful experience is equated

with trauma. Of course, this is not to suggest that we should be restricted to rigidly applying categories derived from psychoanalytic or psychiatric formulations, but equally this interpretive drift can lead to uncertainty as to which particular configuration of discourses is being invoked under the name of trauma in a given instance. This is not so much a negative comment as a pointing towards future expansions and challenges to the dominance of trauma as a way of exploring the past. Discussing the impact of evolutionary theory in terms of trauma, for example, provides an unexpected challenge to the trauma paradigm and is suggestive of further debates to come about the limits and limitations of what we consider trauma. What seems to emerge here is a sense that we can identify traumatic symptoms without there being a corresponding cause, leading to a question of whether this is simply analogous to psychic trauma, or whether there is in fact a different aetiology for cultural trauma. Equally, the considerable emphasis on the postcolonial in this volume, a perspective within trauma studies that has received less coverage in the past than those positions derived from the Holocaust or feminism, adds further evidence for an extension of trauma beyond the ways it has so far been conceptualised. In both instances, these essays suggest the need to further explore the impact of cumulative and collective traumas that do not fit so easily under the rubric of the unique and unexpected individual event.

As a whole the collection thus suggests that the neo-Victorian is in a particularly apt position to explore the dual temporality of trauma, giving voice to the silences of the past while having the potential to reflect on the motivations for doing so; yet at the same time, it still being haunted by the spectre of exploitation or “trauma tourism”. One of the questions that the volume poses is *why* the present moment should see a return to nineteenth-century traumas? Is this solely a response to the prevalence of trauma studies within academic discourse and popular culture? Within the collection this question is raised a number of times, with Kate Mitchell giving the most detailed exploration of how the past is being used to address the present. The danger here is that without this perspective neo-Victorian fiction might come to stand as a way of triumphing over the past, revealing the ideologies, oppressions and prejudices responsible for silencing other Victorians, while itself remaining silent about its own motivations for this return. This is a question also addressed by the editors who note that in the neo-Victorian encounter “the traumatised subject of modernity

pre/rediscovers itself in its manifold nineteenth-century others” (p. 14). The volume thus raises fruitful questions about the ethics of this relationship between past and present, and readers of this volume will find much to stimulate further reflections on these questions, both in theoretical terms and in the range of fictional material covered. As well as neo-Victorian fiction playing the role of after-witness, a position argued for convincingly throughout, it could also be argued that the perspectives in this volume are suggestive of the ways in which such novels might also be made to perform the role of prospective-witness for us, through staging a confrontation between marginalised Victorian perspectives and our own sometimes conflicted motivations for recovering these voices.

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