

Reading in Antarctica

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Abstract

In April 2019, Isabel Hofmeyr and Charne Lavery, colleagues from the Oceanic Humanities for the Global South project based in Johannesburg, undertook a trip to the Antarctic peninsula. In this article, they discuss their shared yet distinct experiences of the same ten-day cruise, focused on the experience, history, literature, indispensability, and impossibility of reading in Antarctica. The article proceeds in three steps: 'Not Reading in Antarctica', which focuses on the difficulties and dangers of reading in this environment; 'Some Reading in Antarctica', which lists what they did read, both beforehand and on the trip, as well as histories of reading in the far South; and 'Reading the Sea and Ice', which explains how the Antarctic environment turned them into elemental readers, or readers of and for the elements. Combining life writing and cultural history, they approach the question of situated reading as Reader 1 (Hofmeyr) and Reader 2 (Lavery).

Keywords: Antarctica; reading; elemental media; Southern Ocean; life writing

Not reading in Antarctica

(in which Reader 1 tries to keep her nose in a book while Reader 2 heads out on deck)

Reader 1: Sea-sickness

The instructions from the travel company were quite clear. The likelihood of sea sickness was high and when seasick you can't read. The cruise would be ten days long – what if I couldn't read for the entire period? Low panic set in until I remembered I could listen to books rather than read them and I duly acquired every piece of technology for playing audio books. As matters turned out, and armed with every available version of medication, I didn't get seasick and could read as much print as I wanted. The episode however was a useful introduction to reading in Antarctica, where everything is governed by the elements. The elements determine when one can read, what and how. If seasick, you must turn from print to audio. Even when not nauseous, and if the seas are a bit rough, you must lift your eyes from the page to glance at the horizon as a way of fending off mal-de-mer.

We received a ship's log after we disembarked, which recorded the conditions on each day of our journey. The voyage out from the port in Ushuaia via the Beagle Channel and across the Drake Passage—the narrowest point of the Southern Ocean—was unexpectedly calm. Day 3 of the voyage was recorded as 'Wind: N 5; Sea State: Slight; Weather: Fog; Air Temp: +3 °C; Sea Temp: +2 °C'. The fog marked the line of the Antarctic Convergence, where cold Antarctic waters meet warmer south Atlantic currents, and in those first days the widely rolling sea seemed hardly 'slight'. The return journey a few days later, however, reads as 'Sea State: Rough', and had us holding tight to our e-books which slid away down the bench if left unattended. The ship had in fact been forced to leave the peninsula early to try to circumvent a storm approaching from the west. The elements—air, water, their temperatures and pressures—were both determining for the shape of the voyage and intimately experienced at the level of eye to page.

Having taken to the audio book in Antarctica, on my return I in fact listened to *Moby Dick* followed by *The Mill on the Floss*. Coming from a relatively dry country, I couldn't but be

struck by the amount of water that one encounters in this and most other British novels. Water seems intrinsic to its design and form. This awareness of water was one of the after-effects of Antarctica, which turns one into a reader of elements and an elemental reader—reading, for instance, for water. This mode of reading is becoming influential: we now read for fog, atmosphere, air and rain (Carroll; Engelmann; Hensley and Steer; Peters; Taylor). Antarctica is an excellent training ground for this way of reading: it is a place built so starkly from the elements and one cannot but return as an elemental reader.

Reader 2: Seawatching, and the perils of reading

Before we left I started compiling a reading list, hoping to get much of it done on the long featureless days of sea travel, like the ship passengers of times past. I read none of it. Unlike my cabinmate and coauthor, who spent half her days peacefully in the library, I spent most of mine rushing distractedly from window to deck, from side to side, watching the sea. The sea! So vast and full of life. I had a lighter version of the same impulse as Jonathan Franzen, who in a well-known essay on a similar Antarctic cruise, tries to prove himself the ‘hardest-core birder,’ a figure who stands ‘all day in biting wind and salt spray, staring into fog or glare in the hope of glimpsing something unusual’. I’m no birder, but everything we saw was unusual to me. While Franzen in the characteristically grumpy essay lists the mundaneness of the tourist experience no matter where you are, he also stops in stunned wonder at the place itself: ‘I’d never before had the experience of beholding scenic beauty so dazzling that I couldn’t process it, couldn’t get it to register as something real’. What Franzen calls ‘seawatching’ took up all the space I had for reading.

I had other reasons too, humbler than the fear-of-missing-out on sightings. I am prone to motion sickness and, despite being far more heavily drugged than Reader 1, queasiness hovered, and much more closely when looking down at a page. This sense of slight hazard to the act of reading persisted throughout the trip, and is perhaps why since returning I’ve been drawn to stories of the dangers of Antarctic reading. One is a short story by Russian novelist Gary Shteyngart, ‘The Devil You Know’, which was commissioned for an episode of the radio show and podcast, *This American Life*. It is written as a series of diary entries by Sergey, a research engineer overwintering on a Russian Antarctic base, who measures his vodka in grams. On the base, he says, the only relief from boredom is a handful of politically-sanctioned websites (for example IlovePutin.com) and a small library of books. But, ominously, ‘all is not well in that realm’. The engineer, from a working class background and reading his way through the classics for the first time, is taken by the brilliance of *Anna Karenina*, *Moby Dick*, *Mrs Dalloway*, and a translation of Philip Roth, *The Complaint of Tovarich Partnoy*. Before he can finish any of them, however, an educated and chatty welder named Oleg finds a way to drop hints revealing their endings. “‘Oh, hello,” he says, “I’m Mrs Dalloway. I really should have married that fascinating Peter Walsh instead of boring, predictable Mr Dalloway. I wonder how my party will go tonight.”” Eventually, one spoiler too many and 700g into the evening’s vodka, Sergey snaps and, shouting, ‘How’s that for an ending,’ stabs Oleg in the chest.

The fiction is based on a true story, which made it into the news in 2018 (for a summary see Livni). But it isn’t the only incident of its kind. In 1979 a British expedition led by Ranulph Fiennes conducted the first circumpolar navigation of the earth, from Greenwich via Cape Town and the SANAE base to the South Pole, and then back across the Pacific to the North Pole. On the Antarctic leg a supply team of two young men was set up on the edge of the continent to overwinter in a tiny hut, with only each other and two hundred books for company. Recalling that long winter, Anto Birkbeck noted that, ‘There’s no question that if you put two people in a hut the size of a caravan and shut them up for nine months, you will generate intense frustration.’ There came a point when Birkbeck was absorbed in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and, for one tense walk in a blizzard and carrying an ice-axe, contemplated attacking his companion with it (“The Library of Ice”). These stories

suggest the strange potency of reading in Antarctica, something for which we weren't quite prepared.

Some reading in Antarctica

(in which Reader 1 and 2 discuss reading beforehand versus reading in situ – with some recipes thrown in)

Reader 1: Reading in Preparation

Having realised with some relief that I wouldn't get seasick, I made my way to the tiny ship's library, a small collection of about a hundred books. I had expected something grander but nonetheless scanned the shelves to see what was available — mostly coffee table books on Antarctica, show-casing perfect versions of the photographs that each tourist on the boat would less expertly take. After the cruise the ship's passengers joined an online folder to share photographs of the trip, which largely served to underline the point.

Before leaving I had of course read in preparation for going, in this case re-read Elizabeth Leane's magisterial *Antarctica in Fiction* which I had previously used for a piece that I had written on South Africa's sub-antarctic islands (Hofmeyr). Leane upends the idea that Antarctica is a blankness that cannot be represented: "it is nothingness, and nothingness cannot, by definition, be depicted" (Leane 1). As her superb account indicates, there have been centuries long traditions of writing about Antarctica, including most recently in popular culture which includes "action-adventure-eco-thrillers ... Antarctic category romance, Antarctic chick-lit, Antarctic cyberpunk – even an Antarctic sitcom" (5). As a reader, I felt humbled at what had gone before, how much there was to read and how paltry my reading could ever be.

There is a particular pleasure which comes from reading about the place one is in. Anne Fadiman calls it 'You-Are-There Reading'. As she explains, we love this mode of reading because

the mind's eye isn't literal enough for us. We want to walk into the pages ... to see exactly what the author described, so that all we need to do to cross the eidetic threshold is squint a little. (Fadiman 51–52)

When in a place itself, the words seem to sink in deeper and be more resonant, in part, no doubt, as one seeks to make sense of a new environment.

Antarctic narratives themselves are infused with reading. As Hester Blum outlines in her *News at the Ends of the Earth: Print Culture of Polar Exploration*, 'virtually all polar ships had libraries'. For polar exploration history, 'books seem to have been as essential as pemmican, primus stoves, fuels and fur' (Blum xv). For Antarctic explorers reading involved more than just orientation: it was often a critical method of survival, support, entertainment. As Leane notes, Scott took nine hundred books to Antarctica, most staying in the base huts but some despite their weight being taken on sledging expeditions. Books were read and re-read, read aloud, discussed, enacted, debated. Texts were tailored to the environment: men composed sledging poems and recited them to match the rhythm of the sled.

Our trip was hardly a polar exploration. Having recently joined the Antarctic research community in South Africa we had been repeatedly told that in order to study the region, even its cultural contours, we had to go there. But I could not spare the time it takes to join a research cruise from Cape Town to the South African base – a round trip of around three months depending on the weather. So we opted for a small tourist cruise, the second last of the season. The ship, built in 1976 as a research vessel and converted after twenty years of service into a '114-passenger expedition vessel', was staffed by adventure guides, former

scientists, and current scientists who used the tourist trips as a way to inexpensively gather data.

Reader 2: Alternative Antarctic reading list

I did read a few things on the ten day journey, even if only partially. One book from the library that I carried around for a few days, its title having caught my eye, was Matthew Henson's *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*. It is the autobiography of Robert Peary's right-hand man, an African-American teammate who was fluent in Inuit and a skilled dog handler and navigator (Counter). He was also, as it turns out, in fact possibly the first to the North Pole. He led the final push to the pole, although Peary's achievement is still commemorated by a bronze statue in New York. Henson in the book and later interviews partially upends the historical record about exploration by great white men, but then, reading a little further, falls into some of the same patterns himself. In the margins of his account are the four Inuit guides who led both Henson and Peary to the pole. As he writes, "We were six: Peary, the commander, the Esquimos, Ootah, Egingwah, Seegloo and Ooqueah, and myself" (Henson 127).

This story behind the story behind the story of the North Pole entirely took the wind out of my desire to read only the hypermasculine stories of white exploration in the South, known still without irony as 'the Heroic Era'. Antarctic histories are in fact slowly being 'indigenized', by demonstrating the ways in which, for instance, indigenous people from the northern polar regions were included on Antarctic expeditions—from Carsten Borchgrevink's 1899 expedition which included two Sami team members to the Japanese expedition of 1910-12 where two Ainu men from Sakhalin contributed crucial cold-climate survival skills (Maddison). Or, the ways in which critical polar technology and skills gave indigenous peoples a 'proxy presence' on southern voyages (Maddison). For instance, Roald Amundsen, who eventually became the first to reach the South Pole, learned valuable survival skills from the Inuit during a prior attempt to find the North-West Passage (although one crewman noted that he also spent a considerable portion of the expedition reading novels instead) (Larson 9). This requires, clearly, exploring alternate archives. Hester Blum's book, for instance, rather than focusing on the monumental narratives of exploration like Shackleton's *South*, is attentive to

other archives and forms of thought that organized themselves around the poles, whether messages left in cairns and other provisional caches fashioned from rock and ice, oceanic dead letters, "open polar sea" and hollow earth theories, or Inuit epistemology and indigenous lifeways. (Blum 6)

All this suggests an alternative Antarctic reading list, one which accounts for non-heroic and subaltern stories, a decolonized textual Antarctica.

These include alternative stories of race and gender. Archaeological studies reveal the presence of African sealers and whalers on the Subantarctic islands circling the white continent (for instance McGowan). Historians record the history of black labourers and sailors on South African and other Antarctic voyages (van der Watt and Swart; van Sittert). While this is still a developing area of research (see also Lavery, "Antarctica and Africa"), there are lively historical, speculative and current accounts of women in Antarctica (see also Le Guin; Glasberg). It was only on the second leg of the trip from South Africa to Antarctica – from Johannesburg to Sao Paulo to Buenos Aires to Ushuaia – that I remembered the first book I'd read on the subject. I was seventeen and stuck on an interminable backpackers bus to northern Namibia, so made my way through the entire offering of the bus's single shelf of random discarded books. One of those books was about an all-women Antarctic record attempt (Hamilton). The women were funny and British, the writing unselfconscious, and the narrative was spattered with little details that stuck with me: planning maximum-calorie rations in which chocolate and peanut butter featured strongly; these women with voracious,

unending appetites; negotiating toilet breaks inside the tent flap in a blizzard; women pulling tyres up muddy hills in England for months in training; their writing about the various colours of ice, which I remember finding sweetly implausible at the time (all true, as discussed below).

So my expectations, derived first from those sporty women, were oblique to what Leane describes as ‘the constant association of the continent with purity’ (Leane 10). It was an alternative introduction to the continent, through women, their hungers, strategies, anxieties. We were travelling as a group of four women too, sharing small, serviceable rooms with tiny beds, sharing buffs and socks, our miniature bathrooms festooned with drying underwear. We talked about ice and whales, books and what we had eaten or were about to eat. The food on the trip was excellent, made only more enjoyable by the tendency – on the rougher crossing home – to slide about. Food is in fact a recurring theme in Antarctic reading and writing, a subgenre of Antarctic recipe books. During the ‘heroic era’, cookery books were much sought after, recipes dissected in great details, a substitute for food when supplies were low. Shackleton commented: ‘Had only two meals to-day, to save food, so read some Darwin for lunch’ (Leane 117). A long poem, ‘Homo Antarcticus’ (2018, *Negative Space*), by Albanian Luljeta Lleshanaku (translated by Ani Gjika), describes the bleak realities of colonial Antarctic exploration, but also captures this culinary side-avenue of Antarctic reading (Lleshanaku). The speaker is based on Shackleton’s right hand man, Frank Wild.

And every night, before bed,
we read recipes to each other
one of a few things we secretly rescued
from the ship before she sank,
as if these items were her lingerie.

What a show it was!

What pathos in pronouncing *prosciutto, sugar, omelet!*

What sensuality in *milk, parsley, cinnamon!*

Even today, for instance, the Antarctica Legacy of South Africa database project includes numerous recipe books compiled by scientific and support expedition team members (<http://alp.lib.sun.ac.za/>). As Wendy Trusler and Carole Devine note, in their book *The Antarctic Book of Cooking and Cleaning*, ‘the first thing that comes to mind about Antarctica is not likely the food. But if you are going there, it is the second’ (Trusler and Devine).

Kanishk Tharoor in a short story ‘Icebreakers’ – from a collection of stories, *Swimmer Among the Stars* – describes a series of icebreaker ships from each of the Antarctic nations getting stuck one after another in the sea ice around Antarctica (Tharoor). Indefinitely marooned, sailors and scientists walk and ski across the ice from ship to ship sharing cuisines and recipes. But they are stuck in this situation due to the paradoxical expansion of the sea ice in a time of planetary overheating, connected but marooned by the unnaturally advancing ice (see also Lavery, “Thinking from the Southern Ocean”). Amitav Ghosh in his important critical intervention on the realist novel’s inability to represent the increasingly strange climatic events of climate change (Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*), describes the Tharoor as one of the few exceptions, a writer whose half-realist, half-fantastical stories go some way towards providing a ‘voice for the Anthropocene’ (Ghosh, “A Voice for the Anthropocene”). The alternative Antarctic reading list increasingly needs to include other species, and elements.

Reading the Sea and Ice

(in which Reader 1 and 2 grapple with reading the elements)

Reader 1: Age of water, age of air, age of rock

Amongst the volumes I found in the library was David Campbell's superb *The Crystal Desert: Summers in Antarctica*. An expert on marine crustaceans, Campbell describes three summers spent on a Brazilian Antarctic research station. The book captures the extreme contrast of the crystal desert of the land and the 'procreative frenzy' of the sea during the summer months, 'a celebration of everything living, of unchecked DNA ... transmuting sunlight and minerals into life itself, hatching, squabbling, swimming, and soaring on the sea wind'. 'Antarctica', he notes, 'seemed to be a prebiotic place, as the world must have looked before the broth of life bubbled and popped into whales and tropical forests — and humans' (D. G. Campbell 39).

Campbell depicts Antarctica both above and below the water line. On the wind-plagued land only 'biological haiku' can survive: 'there is no plant taller than a lichen here, no animal larger than a midge' (D. G. Campbell 63). Under the water line by contrast, conditions are more constant and benign: 'it is wet, has a stable temperature, and is washed by nutrients from ... penguin rooker[ies]' (D. G. Campbell 881). Antarctica itself begins in the elements and the region as a whole is generally understood to begin with the Antarctic convergence where the 'cold polar surface water slides beneath the slightly warmer water from the north' (D. G. Campbell 336). The water itself has differential ages, the deepest, coldest water, thousands of years old, having crawled its way along the belly of the ocean before rising again at the poles. Floating ice, 'windblown litter that rattles and grinds' heralds the approaching land (D. G. Campbell 366).

One cannot but think of elements in a new way: water, air and rock have age. The landscape of the peninsula itself is epic and elemental. Once the tail end of the Andes, the peninsula looks like the Swiss alps, eighty per cent underwater with blue icebergs thrown in: a monochrome palette of bright ice and black rock scattered with monumental blocks of light blue ice. The area is dense with mammals and birds, all experts at exploiting the Antarctic elements. The birds are creatures of the wind, experts at deploying aerodynamic properties of wind on water. At the end of the summer, the bays like nurseries teem with parents and their offspring: humpback whales, elephant and leopard seals, chinstrap and Gentoo penguins, skuas, terns, petrels, albatrosses.

The age and scale of the Antarctic elements make one admire those who have attempted to portray them. As outdoor enthusiast Reader 2 has already noted, Jonathan Franzen was lost for words in the face of Antarctica. Trying to get Antarctica onto paper is no easy task. While more concerned with its submarine migrants than Antarctica itself, Herman Melville played up the humour of the enterprise, comparing various sizes of book to species of whales: the Folio Whale, the Octavo Whale, and the Duodecimo Whale. This famous passage has been contrasted with the other moment in the text where book and whale encounter each other. This scene unfolds as a tired crew haul their whale catch onto land, looking forward to their profits and what they will buy. Their hopes are dashed when an emissary appears 'with a copy of Blackstone under his arm; and laying it upon the whale's head' claims it for the resident duke'. Once on land, the whale is subject to human law and easily beaten by a book. In the ocean, it is an entirely different matter.

Reader 2: Ice as medium

Part of overly diligent seawatching meant trying to learn to read the sea itself (McCann 35–36). The foggy oily calm which marked the convergence zone, a distinctive haze seen from the dining room one evening. What looked like particularly regular dark choppy wavelets in the distance, which resolved into penguins porpoising. Distinguishing wave crests from whale

blows, which are the same colour and shape, but the whale blows linger, as though paused. Developing soft eyes, on the encouragement of the birders, to take in a wider range of the visual field. Gatherings of birds on the surface of the sea mean whales or something else interesting beneath them. The dark-dark sky of a snowstorm approaching. The white of a whale's fluking tail means a deep dive of possibly more than thirty minutes, so you might as well move on.

As with the gatherings of birds, we learned to watch the surface of the sea for hints of what was underneath. A lot of what was out there in Antarctic waters could not be seen, and so we relied on the shipboard lectures to give us a glimpse of the lively submarine world. I had just reread Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and it seemed newly significant that the submarine crew approaches Antarctica from beneath. Sceptical of Captain Nemo's intention to go to the South Pole, the narrator argues that such a journey would require wings to fly over the impassable ice shelf. "Over it, sir!" said Captain Nemo quietly; "No not *over* it, but *under* it!" (Verne 269). I wished fairly often that we were in a submarine too, better able to witness the humpback's repeated upward surges swallowing krill at implausible depths, the acrobatics of penguin hunting, hanging gardens of algae on the undersides of sea ice. Our travelling companion, Lauren Beukes, was taken by the lecture of a marine biologist on board whose research involved attaching cameras to the heads of Weddell seals and thereby getting a rare glimpse of the sub-ice Antarctic sea. She wrote a story about it — not so much reading, as writing in Antarctica (Beukes).

And even more so, reading the ice. The visual experience of being in Antarctica is like living in a black and white movie that had been tinted with the most impossibly vivid range of blues. The clear turquoise blue of some of the icebergs looked like a cartoon colour, bizarrely tropical, or as my fellow traveller said, the white-and-blue of laundry soap. Icebergs are particularly blue, like the deep aquamarine crevices in the glaciers from which they'd calved. Icebergs aren't frozen seawater, it turns out, but frozen freshwater snow that's dropped off the edge of the continent as the slow-moving glacial rivers finally let go. What can most clearly be read from the colour of ice is its age: the older the ice, the bluer. Snow is white because it's full of air; as it layers over itself it turns to ice, and darkens as the air is squeezed out by the weight. Ice buried under layers of ice turns powder blue, through the inexorable squeezing out of air; then turquoise, then highlighter-blue, then cobalt. The oldest ice is diamond-hard and almost colourless, black ice, given wide berth by the boats.

The colours also present a uniquely comprehensible story of climate change. White ice melts into dark water, and as it disappears there's less whiteness to reflect the sun's rays on a global scale — what is called the albedo effect. As the world heats up, more white heat-protective ice melts into black heat-hungry ocean. The dire feedback loop and its exponential effect was visible on the granular season-by-season scale of the guides' experience — two seasons ago that glacier came all the way to here, last year it was further back, now it's all the way back there. Ice is of course one of the best mediums of information about atmospheric change through planetary time. Ice cores drilled in the far South are 'witnesses to global climate and its history' which can be read through their layers of summer and winter snowfall—coarse-grained summer ice and fine-grained, wind-blased winter ice—that can be counted like tree rings (N. Campbell 25). Our expedition leader, Katja, overwintered a few times on the continent as an atmospheric chemist, drilling ice cores through ancient ice layers exposed by relentless winds in the dry valleys, reading millennia of atmospheric changes in the air bubbles they retained. She also used spare ice-core ice for her nightly whiskey. The cubes gently pop as they melt, she said, releasing pressurized, prehistoric air into the glass. Just by being in Antarctica — as the summer seas melted glacier-born icebergs from far inland and long ago — we were breathing ancient air.

Conclusion

In 1986 Stephen Pyne wrote that ‘ice is the beginning of Antarctica and ice is its end’ (2). But what does it mean to read the ice, which is, as in this anecdote of melting, a disappearing medium? The archives of ice (Blum 42) or the library of ice (N. Campbell), are already vanishing, becoming illegible, an unfinished story written in disappearing ink.

We never saw Antarctica proper, or the parts of the continent that are fully glaciated and therefore flat and bleak — by far the greatest part and therefore most of what is mostly seen of its widely circulated images. Instead we went, like most tourists, a lot of scientists, the early whalers and almost all of the penguins, to the Antarctic peninsula. If you imagine Antarctica as a speech bubble, then the peninsula is its tail as spoken by South America. Antarctic scientists call the Peninsula the banana belt of the continent, positively tropical compared to the interior. This is largely to do with the fact that it’s much further north; noting that, when you’re down there, north is the edge of the map, south the centre.

One of the lasting effects of the trip, in addition to this reorientation towards the South (see Lavery, “Thinking from the Southern Ocean”; Samuelson and Lavery). has been to make us elemental readers, now much more alert to water, ice, clouds, rain and the part they play in literary texts. In doing so, we joined an ever-growing band of scholars for whom, as Nicole Starosielski indicates, “all media becomes environmental media, and all media studies becomes environmental media studies” (4). Yet, going to Antarctica directs one’s attention not only to the elements in literary texts, it also makes one viscerally aware of how reading is shaped by the elements we find ourselves in. While using atmospheric rather than elemental language, Jesse Oak Taylor observes: “Atmosphere is a formal property, bound up both in the texture of language and in the material presence of books themselves; it is also a material property, inhering in the air shared by the world, the text, and the critic” (7). Taylor speaks of the London fog and its representation in modernist novels which rather shrinks in comparison to the Antarctic and the Southern Ocean. Part of the trip was the visceral reminder of the hard facts of geography, both physical distance and hemispheric connection. Our journey took us via Sao Paulo, to Buenos Aires and then to Ushuaia, the southernmost city in the world. From Ushuaia, it was a three-day journey by boat across the Drake passage with four short days exploring the Antarctic peninsula before making the return voyage back to Ushuaia and eventually back home. The Southern Ocean is indeed vast and requires a new kind of orientation, both to the South and to the elements.

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