

In Brooklyn, radio programs conducted by and for Haitian immigrants have been historically vital tools for those seeking information to survive both under an ideologically restrictive dictatorship and as newcomers in an unfamiliar country. These radio stations and their blend of news and culture programming served as sonic reminders of community, connecting them not just to current events in the United States, but also to news from their country of origin. Through interviews with staff members at three different kinds of radio stations—college-owned, subcarrier, and pirate—this essay explores the role of Haitian radio in community-building, activism, and citizenship for Haitians who arrived in the U.S. in the 1980s. These programs, which existed on the periphery of a competitive media market, embodied a virtual community for Haitians that superseded nation-state boundaries.

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“Haitians live for news,” said Ricot Dupuy in a 1994 interview with the *New York Times*. Dupuy is the station manager of Radio Soleil, a Brooklyn-based radio station that specializes in news relating to ethnically Haitian people living in Haiti and in the United States. Radio Soleil is one of many Haitian-culture radio stations in Flatbush, Brooklyn—the abundance of such stations can be attributed to the large waves of Haitians that landed in New York City in the ’70s and ’80s during the Duvalier regime.¹ In 1996, 70% of Haitian immigrants in NYC were reported to be living in Flatbush, East Flatbush, and Crown Heights (Wah & Pierre-Louis, 2004).² Among these migrants were professional journalists and activists who stayed updated on current events in Haiti after they moved. These information networks kept Haitians in the United States informed, despite very real dangers of being deported, exiled, or imprisoned. “It costs us,” Dupuy went on to say, “but Haitians have to listen to the news. News is everything to a Haitian” (quoted in Clines, 1994).

Radio has long served as a practical communication tool in Haiti. It was more widely accessible than television broadcasts, since the country’s mountainous terrain negatively affected TV signals. Another benefit of radio is that its sonic nature made its content accessible to both literate and non-literate people. In terms of price, a radio was also more accessible than a turntable or a CD player when it came to forms of entertainment. The content aired on Haitian radio programs was, however, impacted by oppressive politics. During the Duvalier regime (between 1957 and 1986), journalists in Haiti were often harassed, imprisoned indefinitely, and even mass-exiled in 1980. Forbidden radio broadcasts dispensed vital information that allowed citizens to survive. Civilians—who often feared being abducted, imprisoned, and/or murdered by government agents for encouraging dissent—listened to news about the government from radios stashed underneath their beds and in kitchen cabinets.

¹ François Duvalier served as the president of Haiti from 1957 to 1971. His son, Jean-Claude Duvalier, then served as Haiti’s president from 1971 to 1986.

² Data taken from the NYC Planning Department, 1996.

After these journalists arrived in the United States and began hosting radio programs, they were relegated to a peripheral portion of the American radio market. Radio shows conducted in Haitian Creole were designated as “minority-language” programming by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which had historically discouraged ownership of radio stations by people of color (POC)—sometimes even actively preventing it. This changed in 1973, when the Court of Appeals decided that POC ownership would “increase content” (Mason et al., 2001). After a period of regulation, “diversity programming” proved too vague of a goal to sufficiently maintain, and the FCC thus transitioned into a deregulation strategy. The Commission assumed unhindered market forces would achieve “broadcasting in the public interest” more than any set of regulations could. But even after deregulatory policies, radio professionals in POC communities still faced push-back from lawmakers actively dismantling any policies that promoted POC ownership. These officials reinforced marketplace barriers to disproportionately uplift broadcasters who communicated a “dominant worldview”—namely, mainstream radio stations that were immediately accessible to the average American listener (Brinson, 2008).

Despite the FCC’s prior commitment to a deregulation strategy, broadcast facilities became firmly controlled by major corporations, leaving radio programs for POC on the periphery. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 raised the single-ownership cap from two to eight stations and completely removed the limit on national ownership. As a result, about 50% of radio stations in the United States changed ownership in the two years that followed—most of them shifting from independently-owned to corporate.³ The microradio movement was an anti-mass-production movement intended to challenge the growing domination of corporate chain radio ownership. They did this by putting new voices on the airwaves and finding audiences for these new voices.

While these peripheral, “microradio” movements were left with a much smaller share of the national listenership, those who did tune in were intensely devoted. A 2006 case study of this movement showed that the high concentration of market shares held by large chains still left peripheral resources in the form of funding, promotion, and community listenership for more niche participants (Greve et al., 2006). After being designated by industry regulators and policymakers as a less profitable, cultural “out”-group, subgroups of POC radio owners focused on programming that spoke more directly and authentically to the niche audiences they depended on for listenership, enacting a phenomenon referred to as “autoproduction of culture”—how subgroups distinguish their

³ See Greve et. al’s 2006 case study, “Vox Populi,” p. 806.

“authentic” selves by grouping with like-minded individuals and consuming the culture they share. This includes active production of a lifestyle and identity from elements of traditional and mass-mediated symbols, and is catalyzed by stigmatization as a cultural “out”-group (Peterson & Anand, 2004).

This isn’t to say that non-English radio programs were doomed to be underfunded. Competition and growth among “minority-language” radio groups has been well-documented and explored. A 2003 study on POC radio listening preferences showed a significantly positive correlation between the size of Black and Latinx populations and the number of programs that appealed to these groups. There was a significant audience for POC radio that was starkly separate from the largely white mainstream (Waldfoegel, 2003). A 2011 media-economics study corroborated this: After analyzing 320 radio stations operating in the largest 50 radio markets in the U.S., researchers Xiaofei Wang and David Waterman concluded that there are indeed significant and positive correlations between the size of foreign language populations in the radio market and the number of radio programs available to POC in their respective languages (Wang & Waterman, 2011). On top of producing programming that could be “authentic,” there was a clear economic advantage for Haitian radio stations to produce authentically Haitian programming.

Haitian radio, in both Haiti and the United States, has a strong historical background in circumventing salient enemies to deliver much-needed information to citizens. As Dupuy mentioned in his interview with the *New York Times*, the independent press faced harsh opposition from the Duvalier regime in Haiti. In 1980, Jean-Claude Duvalier rounded up hundreds of journalists and academics and exiled them—some of them were beaten beyond recognition in the process. But in the United States, Haitian independent press and political media found more support and more followers. *Haiti en Marche*, *Haiti Progrès*, and *Haiti Observateur* were three independent newspapers founded in the U.S. in the ’70s and ’80s, all published in French. They all staunchly opposed the Duvalier regime, representing a political side of what Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide would later call the “Tenth Department”—Haitians living abroad who sent over \$100 million in remittances to their families in Haiti every year (Rhodes, 1999).

This is where Radio Soleil, and many other stations like it, found its mission, its staff, and its niche role in the independent press market. In 1998, social anthropologist Michel Laguerre claimed that the purpose of “transnational media” is to interconnect various sites to the homeland, not necessarily to force incorporation of new arrivals into the receiving country. He studied Radio Soleil as an example. At the time, the station was staffed by 20 journalists—all first-generation Haitian immigrants. Some had previously attended journalism

school in Haiti, and most of them had worked in radio in Haiti prior to arriving in the U.S. (Laguerre, 1998). But upon arriving in the United States, these radio professionals found themselves on the periphery of the American media market.

These journalists were immediately in competition with mainstream American media, which, as mentioned before, benefitted disproportionately from the support of industry regulations, corporate chains, and policymakers. Trying to break into the mainstream by hosting English-language programming that appealed to a wider audience would have been an uphill battle for resources. Radio Soleil's employees, along with those of other Haitian-owned stations, consciously chose to tailor their programming specifically to the Haitians in New York City. Radio Soleil only hosted roughly 10% of its programming in English—50% was in Haitian Creole, and 40% in French. Most of the programming focused on information coming from Haiti, rather than information on American politics and culture. Eventually, these radio hosts began broadcasting tips on where to find housing, jobs, and other Haitian immigrants in a language that their listeners were familiar with. The station carved out its own niche in the growing Haitian diaspora by keeping news local to NYC, rather than appealing to the other sizeable Haitian immigrant audiences in places like Washington, D.C., Montreal, and Miami. By devoting their programming to Haitians existing as both a subset of the American population and a subset of the larger Haitian diaspora, Radio Soleil gathered a devoted listener base and rose to prominence among other Haitian radio stations in Brooklyn. Radio programs conducted in non-English languages are a prime example of a peripheral part of New York urban life—while the language and culture of the programming did not appeal to all New York residents, the information was vital for its Haitian audience.

This preservation of language and culture was a natural response to living in a country in which Haitians faced social designations that misrepresented their ethnicity. Many Haitians took pride in being distinctly Haitian—in addition to their language and culture, some attributed that pride to having come from the country that earned its independence from the first successful slave revolt (Zéphir, 1996). In the United States, however, people who were racially Black—regardless of their country of origin—were often lumped into the same “African-American” social designation by outside groups. The fact that English was not Haitians' first language was also a reported characteristic of “foreign-ness” that increased the likelihood of discrimination (Thornton et al., 2013). Due to these combined pressures—of being designated as “African-American” while simultaneously being treated as foreigners due to their language and culture—Haitians and other immigrants fostered closeness within their communities and distinguished themselves

through cultural practices. Radio—which had historically been important for many Haitians before and after migration—became one of the ways Haitians nurtured this closeness. Haitian radio in New York City served as an autoproduction of community and an affirmation of cultural authenticity. It provided information cultivated just for Haitian arrivals in a language immediately accessible to them. Embodiment, here, is maintaining Haitian identity through consumption of news and culture—using radio to incorporate themselves into American society as citizens, while still retaining the Haitian culture that separated them from the “African-American” generalization.

About the interviews

The following interviews are firsthand accounts from Ricot Dupuy and two other Haitian radio professionals in Brooklyn. I chose the NYC Haitian radio scene for its rich history involving Haitian migration—Radio Soleil being a prime example of how radio stations became incubators for human rights activism, housing assistance, family reunification, and preservation of culture. To get a more fleshed-out understanding of the New York Haitian radio scene, I chose to interview three professionals who have each engaged with distinctly different radio production formats. These interviews took place between January and April 2018. Ricot Dupuy has been serving as station manager and as a radio host on Radio Soleil since its founding in 1992. Soleil is a subcarrier station, also known as a Subsidiary Communications Authority. It uses a separate audio channel that is transmitted along with the main signal over a broadcast station—to receive this signal, radios with special receivers must be purchased.⁴ Dupuy describes his show as 70% news from Haiti and 30% news from the U.S. and other countries—specifically, how news from these countries impacts Haitians. Radio Soleil draws a large audience of Haitian immigrants, many of them older by virtue of arriving in the United States around the same time as Dupuy. Its website has a section devoted to “Diaspora Revolt,” hosts extensive sections written exclusively in Haitian Creole, and promotes content from Haitian social media personalities.⁵

Professor Lionel Legros hosted a Haitian news and culture program on WKCR of Columbia University from about 1969 to 2002. He described his show as a “postcard,” focusing on news and musical content. However, toward the end of the Duvaliers’ regime, new DJs joined the show with the intention of rebranding. The program became *The Haitian Hour*, and it took a more radicalized approach toward news, vocally denouncing the Duvalier regime

⁴ “Broadcast Radio Subcarriers or Subsidiary Communications Authority (SCA),” Federal Communications Commission.

⁵ www.radiosoleil.com

and the United States' involvement in supporting it. Its political content, combined with WKCR's status as a non-commercial, student-run radio station, drew a large audience of radicalized students and international activist groups. Because WKCR is a Columbia University station and not one he founded himself, Legros' freedom was heavily impacted by university board regulations and the requirement for student engagement in order for him to keep airing his program.

Dorville is a radio host on *Radyo Independans*—a “pirate” radio station that operates without an FCC license or designated frequency. *Radyo Independans* takes over the frequency of a local college, 90.9, after the college station stops broadcasting at 7 p.m. Dorville commits about 60% of his show to music and 40% to Haitian history, but the structure of the show itself differs depending on which Wednesday of the month it is. Each Wednesday corresponds to one of four parts: a music review show that critiques Haitian musical lyrics and structure; a Haitian jazz music program; “Voudou Spirits,” which provides a space for *voudouisants* (practitioners of Haitian vodoun) to talk about their culture; and an open discussion show, in which Dorville invites various guests to discuss any topic of their choosing. Similar to *Radio Soleil*, *Radyo Independans* likely has an audience of older Haitian immigrants; however, because there is no extra cost requirement to listen to this pirate station, it might have a larger audience.

On starting radio programs

I kicked off each interview by asking each host about how they started their radio programs. To be successful and accepted radio hosts, DJs on these Haitian stations must demonstrate cultural competency and a passion for matters of interest relevant to the greater Haitian community. These stations fit the definition of “ethnic enclaves”—immigrants with substantial expertise gained from their home countries participating in concentrated entrepreneurship.⁶ Each station had its own distinct qualifications, but one consistent factor in both student-run and volunteer-run stations was that their hosts and DJs possessed at least a baseline competency in journalism.

To host a show at WKCR, Columbia University's student-run radio station, Professor Legros had to apply. He explains his start here:

In the summer of '68 or '69, I came back from Haiti and I came to work for a medical student. We were working in the library, and he said, “I'm the Chief Engineer at WKCR.” And I asked him, “How do you get a program at WKCR?” And that question really gave life to the Haitian show.

⁶This definition of “ethnic enclave” is taken from Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut's *Immigrant America: A Portrait*, University of California Press (2014).

Legros was required to submit a proposal to be reviewed by a board, and he eventually started his weekly show with a few close friends. As a result, his show was constantly operating under the scrutiny of the board, and at one point the university pressured him to bring more students onto his show. Legros tried to recruit students from the university's Haitian Club, but noted that many students were preoccupied by schoolwork, and those that did volunteer often didn't stick around.

Compare this to Ricot Dupuy, station manager of Radio Soleil. Like WKCR, there was a board to review show applications. Acceptances were made based on whether the station needed the kind of show that was proposed as well as the qualifications of the DJs themselves. As Dupuy told me during our interview:

First of all, you have to be educated. You don't go on the air without a formal education. You have to have the proper voice, vocal equipment. Radio is an art. You have to be able to convince people, which you do with the proper voice and background.

Radyo Independans, by comparison, required a much more DIY approach toward running the station and hosting its programs. In Haiti, Dorville attended school for journalism, with interests in anthropology and sociology. After he moved to New York, he was writing for a newspaper when he was invited to a radio station for an on-air interview. The staff at the station then asked him to join the station as a DJ, kickstarting his career as a radio host. Dorville treated radio as a continuation of the skills he learned in Haiti: "We bring exactly the same kind of behaviors of what we used to do back home. We should use this opportunity to change." He had the same journalistic skills and the exact same intention to use them to inform the public and denounce the Duvalier regime. In the United States, Dorville felt just as empowered by his background in political press as he did when he was in Haiti.

At Radyo Independans, DJs have to take on multiple responsibilities due to the small staff size. Dorville informed me that at this station, every DJ learns to do everything. The mixing setup is small—a mixing board and a couple computers. There is no designated chief operating officer. If there is a technical issue, each DJ must learn how to solve it. Dorville circumvents this by collaborating on a three-man team for his program: one person handles the electronics; another scours the web for information; and Dorville is behind the microphone, hosting the program.

He noted that many people have the money and technology available to start their own radio—anyone could technically broadcast a show, and as long as the range was small enough (Dorville estimated about 20 blocks, maximum), the FCC would not give them much trouble. But not everyone has the "right stuff." I asked what he meant by this, and his response was similar to what Dupuy's had been: the basics. Journalism school was not required, but a good

radio host was someone who didn't "just talk." As an example, Dorville mentioned a particularly problematic DJ: "Every Sunday, he came in and said anything that came into his head." He is no longer a part of the station.

Radio as resistance

Even more important than technical expertise or vocational training in journalism was a passion for addressing issues relevant to Haitian people. In the 1960s, this cultural authenticity manifested in all the stations as a shared mission: to expose and combat the specter of the Duvalier dictatorship. Of the three stations, Legros had the largest audience for political activism, given WKCR's status as a college campus. He recalled pre-1968 Columbia as a "cauldron of student rebellion," and mentioned multiple radical organizations who partnered with *The Haitian Hour*. Action Patriotique was a collection of student activists returning from Europe. Kouidor (or "Golden Calabash"), a radical group from Paris, also partnered with Legros and the larger Haitian community in the U.S. These groups were open in their opposition. During a demonstration in the late '60s, they chose not to obscure their faces, despite the danger of retaliation from the regime. Legros was crystal clear about his refusal to hide his face: "We were going to expose Duvalier openly."

Also partnering with Legros was a group called the Haitian Fathers—a Brooklyn-based group of priests exiled by the Duvalier regime who were a part of a growing, anti-Duvalier theological movement. The Haitian Fathers collected all news related to Haitians and mailed it directly from Brooklyn to Haiti—people would receive these writings and read them in secret. Legros recalled that one of his first published groups of poems was published in the literary review published by the Haitian Fathers. It was titled *Sel*, after the smelling salts used to wake up people who had been turned into *zonbi* (zombies) in vodoun lore.

Throughout the 1960s, Legros became involved in demonstrations against the consulate, which he and his supporters decried for being complicit in supporting the regime. The consulate had given him trouble before, when they seized his passport. He described the process of re-obtaining it as if it were a test of his authenticity as a Haitian: "That was a huge blow to me. Because when they do that to you, they decide who is and who's not a Haitian. If you are not on the Duvalier side, you are not Haitian." *The Haitian Hour* would become so politically vocal that the consulate even pressured the hosts, claiming their program was damaging to tourism in Haiti.

Haitian radio and mutual aid

Opposing the regime went hand-in-hand with using expertise and information networks to provide mutual aid resources for the Haitian community. In 1972, when the first wave of Haitian immigrants came to the United States seeking political asylum, Professor Legros' radio show took on a new purpose. In our interview, he explained the language he heard Americans directing toward Haitian immigrants:

[We heard] all kinds of made-up justifications: "These people should not be let in. They're not political prisoners. They are not economic refugees." We were fighting a new war. We [were] going to expose what was happening to the Haitian refugees. So, the radio show wasn't just about politics in Haiti. It was about politics here [in the United States]. Because we want these people to have a side.

Legros' correspondents in Miami supplied him with the latest news on shipwrecks, people thrown in jail, and any other information that he believed would help expose Duvalier. As his quote above demonstrates, the United States also fell under his scrutiny. Legros regularly ran exposés on the Haitian embassy in New York, and was thus quick to speak on any ties he saw between the United States and the Duvaliers: "You're not accepting these refugees because you're supporting the regime.' That was our battle cry."

The Haitian Hour soon became actively involved in refugee aid. Miami correspondents sent lists of people that were searching for their family and friends. Every Sunday, Legros and his co-hosts received a list of people looking for someone from a certain Haitian province, or a brother, sister, etc., which they read on-air. "You're not just listening to news. You're listening if you're looking for somebody," he told me. When asked if anyone was ever found, he replied, "Oh yes."

Through Radio Soleil, Ricot Dupuy continues to offer similar forms of aid. Legal counseling, immigration services, and advising on landlord/tenant interactions are services the station currently provides. Listeners often call in to the station—frequent talking points include Temporary Protected Status, difficulties with finding jobs, and racial issues. Dupuy corresponds with contacts in Haiti and often receives information from sister stations that are based out of that country. He tells me he uses this information to give his listeners the facts they need to defend themselves and speak up on injustices:

If somebody—a group or a political party—is haunting them, they could use the information to challenge them back. We want them to act in their own interest. Because the country is theirs. We can't allow a group of thugs to wrestle control away from them. One thing now is that they're stealing elections. They're rigged. And this station is heavily involved in challenging that.

For Dupuy, the role of Haitian radio is to inform Haitians of corruption happening in plain sight—in this case, rigged elections—and to empower them to take action.

It's worth noting that none of these programs were hosted for personal monetary gain. Radyo Independans occasionally received financial support from listeners and Haitian businesses, but all the funds were put toward rent and utilities. Both Radyo Independans and Radio Soleil hosted pledge drives and “Radio-thons,” during which their journalists and personalities interacted directly with their listeners. Legros recalled *The Haitian Hour's* largest fundraising event: he invited guest musicians to an auditorium for a live performance. “We packed the place,” he said.

Haitian radio and the Pan-African diaspora

All three Haitian radio stations actively involved themselves in struggles that affected the Pan-African diaspora in the United States. Legros mentioned one instance around the time of the Vietnam War in which vocal separation from other African-Americans was discouraged: “We got into a controversy because [one of our DJs] said something stupid on the news—something like: ‘We are very proud Black people! We are not like African-Americans!’ Something very stupid.” Ricot Dupuy put his involvement in African-American issues simply: “Anything that happens with Blacks here affects Haitians. It's all news. If it impacts Blacks? We're Blacks, so it's important to us.”

Dorville expressed an interest to connect with African-American musical traditions through the Haitian jazz segment of his show. “In the '20s, when we were colonized by America, they didn't want us to mix with Black Americans,” he said, referring to the United States' military occupation of Haiti that lasted from 1915 to 1934. “This is the main reason why we do not have the culture of jazz in Haiti. They tried to separate us because of the Haitian Revolution.” Dorville was adamant in playing jazz from Haitian musicians exclusively—if he was going to connect with jazz, he would only do it in an authentically Haitian way. “Everything from our community, I promote it for free,” he said. In a statement that reflected his and the other stations' dedication to Haitian immigrants' culture and home country, he continues: “We have to promote Haitians. This is my goal.”

Conclusion

In line with the expertise and entrepreneurship seen in ethnic enclaves, each station required journalistic integrity from its DJs and, more importantly, a full commitment to discussing issues that exclusively affected Haitian people. The format of each station and the role of each professional strongly affected how much control they had over

their staffing. Whereas Ricot Dupuy, a station manager, could turn down hosts based on their qualifications, Dorville was unable to make the same decisions, since he was a host and part of a small team, rather than a manager. Legros presumably had more difficulty with recruitment because Columbia forced him to reach out to students rather than trusted members of his community. Across all stations, however, the role of the DJ was clear: they were expositors and resisters. None of these stations accepted DJs that showed any kind of support for the Duvalier regime or its disciples. Resistance was crucial to these stations' collective mission.

To be "authentically Haitian" meant to unequivocally oppose the Duvalier regime through the content of their programming and through more direct forms of community organizing and activism. Greve et al. noted that unfilled demand and a salient enemy against which to mobilize spurred the founding of small specialist organizations—or, in other words, enclaves (Greve et al., 2006). These authors explored this theory by studying corporate chains in the radio market, but the same theory applies to an ideologically restrictive regime. Through restriction of information and punitive measures, the Haitian government set the stage for clandestine radio broadcasts to emerge. After arriving in the less ideologically restricted but more competitive American radio market, opposing the regime and uplifting the now marginalized Haitian community became a practice of culture production. This is how these three Haitian radio professionals distinguished themselves from other cultures and maintained closeness in their communities.

While issues specific to the Haitian community took the forefront of Haitian radio programming, this did not exclude hosts from incorporating African-American culture into their programming. Through his Haitian jazz segment, Dorville bridged a cultural divide between Haitian and African-American music that had been exacerbated by U.S. imperialism. In "Postcolonialism and Multiculturalism: Between Race and Ethnicity," Sneja Gunew (1997) writes: "It could be suggested that while race is structured by the desire to be considered human, ethnicity is structured by a concomitant desire for citizenship ... to be a legitimate part of political structures." Professor Legros' experience at the center of international radical movements spoke to what citizenship meant for him and for other members of the Haitian community: interrogating the relationship between the country that received them and the country they came from. They demanded that the United States be held accountable for implicitly supporting the Duvalier regime. Haitians used the information gained from radio to incorporate themselves into the United States as citizens and members of a new political landscape, forming political alliances through a struggle against the government in a country they no longer lived in.

Haitian radio professionals used cultural critique, news coverage, and direct outreach to connect Haitian listeners in both the U.S. and Haiti, creating a dynamic, virtual, and international community. Ricot Dupuy, Professor Legros, and Dorville have all actively worked to maintain their Haitian identity and culture in a country where they could have assimilated as just Black. This embodied community may not be symmetrical to living in Haiti itself, but the love and importance of radio was the same there as it would become in the United States. For Haitian immigrants, the media market had changed, but the practical uses of radio and the ghost of the Duvaliers were still present. Diaspora is not just characterized by physical displacement, but also by the channels of information that facilitate connections to the homeland and to the greater diaspora. The movement of Haitian culture through migration kickstarted the formation of these radio stations and continues to be why they provide valuable, lived-through meaning for both their actors and their listeners. In line with the understanding of periphery as a mode of production of space, transnational radio carved out its own space in a capitalist media market and created a two-way information channel for Haitian migrants that superseded nation-state boundaries.

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