

**AN ENUNCIATIVE ANALYSIS OF MUSICAL DISCOURSE IN EILEEN SOUTHERN'S *THE MUSIC OF BLACK AMERICANS: A HISTORY* BASED ON BENVENISTE'S THEORY OF MUSIC**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Music is an art that consists of sequences of sounds in time, tones of definite pitch organized melodically, harmonically, and rhythmically and according to tone color. Despite its universal nature, music particularizes a people. Through it, like language, one can recognize a people.

Moreover, some studies on speech reigning against structuralism have shown that music is built on the intertwining of speech and subjectivity. In his theory of enunciation, Emile Benveniste, develops the notion of the language of music. He admitted though that this idea is a metaphor. In other words, exactly like in utterance, there is subjectivity in music. In fact, Benveniste thinks that this conception with regard to the relationship between music and language raises a series of questions of interests relevant to the topic under study here.

Also, one might ask the following question: what if Benveniste were musically right? In order to validate my claim, in this paper I will analyze musical discourse in Eileen Southern's *The Music of Black Americans: A History*.

The analytical focus will be on the first chapter entitled "The African Legacy." According to this chapter, each culture has its own music. Hence the problem: Can music facilitates identity construction? In other words, to what extent does African music asserts identity? This contribution comes in three parts. The first part deals with Primacy of enunciative music; the second part is about African music as word play. The third part deals with improvisation in music as known as deictics.

## I. PRIMACY OF ENUNCIATIVE MUSIC

Taking music as being enunciative amounts to stating that music is as an obvious way of expressing the presence of the speaker. In Benveniste's own words "Elle est la manifestation la plus commune de la présence du locuteur dans l'énonciation"<sup>1</sup> (Benveniste, 1974 :84). The primacy of enunciative music comes from the fact that before any other function is assigned to music, it is sign of the speaking subject, who has wants, desires and wishes to fulfill. Benveniste states that "[a]vant l'énonciation, la langue n'est que la possibilité de la langue "<sup>2</sup> (Ibid. 81).

As such, music can lead enunciatively to knowingness of a people. According to Richard Jobson<sup>3</sup> "Without any doubt, there is without doubt, no single people on the face of the earth more naturally affected to the sound of musicke than these people" (Southern, 5). This clearly indicates that music is an instrument that reveals identity. According to Steven Mithen "Music and language are human universals, being found in all known communities of modern humans and in all individuals not suffering from cognitive or physical pathology" (Mithen, 296). He even shows the similarities between them:

Both can be vocal, gestural, and written down; both are hierarchically structured, being constituted by acoustic elements (words or tones) that are combined into phrases (utterances or melodies) which can be further combined to make language or musical events. (Ibid.)

Otto Jespersen, indicating that there was a concomitant evolution of music and language, writes that "language began with half-musical analyzed expressions for individual beings and events" (Jespersen, 365).

By way of conclusion, Mithen writes that:

Combining the fossil record for complex utterances and the archaeological evidence for an absence of language-mediated behaviour, the parsimonious conclusion is that pre-modern humans communicated by a form of 'music-language'. This implies that language and musicality co-evolved, remaining as

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<sup>1</sup> "Music is the commonest manifestation of the locutor's presence in enunciation". [Translation mine]

<sup>2</sup> "Before enunciation, language is nothing other than the possibility of the langue. [Translation mine]

<sup>3</sup> He was an English sea captain sent to Africa by the London-based company of adventures in 1620 to explore the Gambia River area in view of assessing its potentials in terms of trade.

a single, non-symbolic, but emotionally potent form of communication until relatively late in human evolution. (Mithen, 298)

He later affirms that “Only with the emergence of modern humans did this communication system bifurcate into the two separate systems that we today describe as language and music” (Ibid.).

As for Eileen Jackson Southern, she writes that

There was ceremonial music for the festivals commemorating agricultural rites, celebrating the installation of kings or bringing together important chiefs of the nation, and reenacting historical events of significance. (Southern, 5)

She plainly states that music is enunciative. In other words, music can signify as long as there is music for specific purpose. When a particular type of music is played, encoded, listeners are capable of decoding the message to know the event at stake. Along the same line, Benveniste concludes:

Il reste donc loisible, moyennant quelques métaphores, d’assimiler l’exécution d’une composition musicale à la production d’un énoncé de langue; on pourra parler d’un "discours" musical, qui s’analyse en "phrases" séparées par des "pauses" ou des "silences", marqués par des "motifs" reconnaissables<sup>4</sup>. (Benveniste, 1974:60)

Understanding particularities of music, Benveniste posits a principle of non-redundancy between semiotic systems, according to which “two semiotic systems of different types cannot be mutually interchangeable” (Robert, 235). That is musical and linguistic meaning may be extrinsic or intrinsic. But in music intrinsic meaning predominates over extrinsic meaning, whereas in language it is other way round.

Olaudah Equiano seeing music as particularizing African people writes:

Thus every great event, such as a triumphant return from battle or other cause of public rejoicing, is celebrated in public dances, which are accompanied with songs and music suited to the occasion. The assembly is separated into four divisions, which dance either apart or in succession, and each with a character **peculiar to itself**. The first division contains the married men, who in their dances frequently exhibit feats of arms and the representation of a battle. To

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<sup>4</sup> “It is therefore permissible, by means of a few metaphors, to liken the composition of a music to the writing of a ‘discourse.’ One may speak of a musical discourse to analyzed through ‘sentences’ separated by ‘pauses’ or ‘silences’, recognizable by means of ‘motives.’” [Translation mine]

these succeed the married women, who dance in the second division. The young men occupy the third, and the maidens the fourth. Each represents some interesting scene of real life, such as a great achievement, domestic employment, a pathetic story, or some rural sport; and as the subject is generally founded on some recent event, it is therefore **ever new**. This gives our dances a spirit and variety which I have scarcely seen elsewhere. (Equiano, 7-8) [Emphasis is mine]

As can be seen, these particularities and these systems can be interpreted through reliance on language. One may therefore agree with Benveniste for whom "La langue est l'interprétant de tous les autres systèmes, linguistiques et non-linguistiques"<sup>5</sup> (Benveniste, 1974:60).

Likely attesting to the belief that there is language in music, Giorgio Agamben asks the following question: "What is the meaning of 'there is language?' [... ] What is the meaning of 'I speak'?" Even if he judged language of "obdurate opacity, strange, complex," Giorgio Agamben defended the claim that "Language is and yet is not our voice" (Agamben, 107).

Alain Berrendonner also assimilates enunciation to music when he claims:

Le seul acte qu'on accomplisse en parlant est "une gesticulation phonatoire et rythmique révélatrice d'une activité de combinaison syntagmatique".  
"Autrement dit, un acte locutoire, une énonciation." <sup>6</sup> (Berrendonner, 81)

According to Doh Ludovic Fié, music is intrinsically enunciative. He writes, "La musique est l'exercice du vouloir, la musique est une expression métaphysique"<sup>7</sup>. [...] "Ce qui distingue la musique des autres arts, c'est qu'elle n'est pas une reproduction du phénomène ou, pour mieux dire de l'objectité"<sup>8</sup> (Fié, 235).

One can reasonably conclude on the primacy of enunciation using Benveniste's words, he states:

<sup>5</sup> "All other systems, whether linguistic or not, are interpreted through language." [Translation mine]

<sup>6</sup> "The only act that one can accomplish when speaking is "a phonatory and rhythmic gesticulation that reveals a syntagmatic combinatory activity. "In other words, it is an act of locution, an enunciation". [Translation mine]

<sup>7</sup> Music is the exercise of willing; music is a metaphysical expression. [...]" [Translation mine]

<sup>8</sup> "What distinguishes music from other arts is that music is not a reproduction of the phenomenon or to better put it, it is not the reproduction of the object." [Translation mine]

En conclusion, il faut dépasser la notion saussurienne du signe comme principe unique, dont dépendraient à la fois la structure et le fonctionnement de la langue. [...] Dans l'analyse intra-linguistique, par l'ouverture d'une nouvelle dimension de signifiante, celle du discours<sup>9</sup>. (Benveniste, 1974:66)

The importance of enunciative music can also be seen in other ways. In other words, music can also be used in a playful way, among others. It is a way of taking seriousness out of music, it is “de-meaning.”

## II. AFRICAN MUSIC AS WORD PLAY

The goal of music is simply to play with words, what is at stake is not the content of the message conveyed as well as its correctness, rather, what matters is music for its own sake. Mungo Park called those who use music as a play of words. ‘Jillikea or singing men’ (Park, 202). These singing men used their talents to “divert the fatigue” of the travelling companions of Mungo. Admittedly, griots used to sing praise songs for their patrons; they also were willing to sing for anyone who paid money — “solid pudding for empty praise.” Claude Hagège rightly puts that “l’homme est un animal qui non seulement joue, mais sait jouer”<sup>10</sup> (Hagège, 351). Since childhood, Hagège believes, the individual has that “irrépressible envie de jouer des mots”<sup>11</sup> (Ibid.). Consequently, Hagège adds that “le reproche de ‘parler pour ne rien dire’ méconnaît l’envie de parler pour dire autre chose que pour dire”<sup>12</sup> (Ibid.).

Music as a way of being playful (de-meaning) may also use other appendages to maintain its playful and less serious nature. In fact, according to Richard Jobson who is quoted by Southern, “de-meaning” music can also pair up with ornamentation, beauty. Jobson believes that:

There is without doubt, no people on the earth more naturally affected to the sound of musicke than these people; which the principall persons do hold as an

<sup>9</sup> “In conclusion, it is necessary to go beyond the Saussurian notion of sign as the unique principle, on which are supposed to depend at the same time the structure and the functioning of language, in the intra-linguistic analysis, by way of the opening of a new dimension of production of meaning that is through discourse.” [Translation mine]

<sup>10</sup> “Man is an animal that not only plays, but also he knows how to play well.” [Translation mine]

<sup>11</sup> “Irrepressible desire to play with words.” [Translation mine]

<sup>12</sup> “The accusation of ‘speaking in vain’ underestimates the desire to speak to express other than something meaningful.” [Translation mine]

ornament of their state, so as when we come to see them their musicke will seldome be wanting [...]"

The phrase "These people" obviously refers to Africans, precisely west-costal Africans. It means that wherever and whenever they are, music is used. (Southern, 5)

Doh Ludovic Fie understands this propensity to use music in a playful way. He puts it as follows:

La condition humaine oscille entre souffrance et ennui. Mais l'homme peut échapper au tourment phénoménal par la contemplation esthétique qui trouve sa plus haute expression dans la musique.<sup>13</sup> (Fie, 223)

Likewise, Bi Tié Emmanuel Toh, stresses the usefulness of music in playful contexts and situation. He writes,

C'est que l'art, en tant qu'impression apparente de déformation du réel, est, en réalité, son édification. Ici, la tendance à la déformation du réel est plutôt un expédient pour le débarrasser de toutes les scories et de tout l'alliage qui infirmit et handicapent son bon fonctionnement. La catharsis aristotélicienne de l'antiquité grecque en répond. L'art, exutoire d'évacuation des névroses, est une cure de psychanalyse pour toute la société qui en fait un miroir pour la réalisation de son équilibre.<sup>14</sup> (Toh, 16)

This less-serious and playful music develops love, and fellowship. According to Stuart Grant, "affective manifestations in speaking are clearly interpretable" (Grant, 116).

For Stuart Grant again, music or speech is an option. "Speaking is a mode of concern. To speak is an expression of a degree of commitment; commitment of body and intention to some purpose" (Grant, 116).

Therefore one is willing to concur with Stuart Grant when he cited Heidegger in following words: "Thus the Sage, originary Speech [...] is essentially pure self-demonstration" (Grant, 121).

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<sup>13</sup> "Human condition wavers between suffering and boredom. But the individual can escape this phenomenal torment through aesthetic contemplation whose highest expression is music." [Translation mine]

<sup>14</sup> "Although art is as an obvious expression of distortion of reality it actually edifies it. Here, the tendency to distort reality is rather an expedient to rid it of any unnecessary thing that stymies its good functioning. The Aristotelian catharsis of Ancient Greece attests to this. Art, an outlet to expunge neurosis, is a psychoanalytic healing process for the whole society which uses it to find societal balance." [Translation mine]

Alain Berrendonner believes that speeches mean nothing by themselves. "Pour celui-ci, aucune valeur pragmatique n'est inscrite dans le signifié des mots ou dans la structure des phrases. Leur signification première est purement représentative. Toute valeur d'acte est donc dérivée" (Berrendonner, 123).<sup>15</sup> It becomes clear through this derived value of action that subjectivity is unavoidable in music. Benveniste states this in the following terms:

La relation du locuteur à la langue détermine les caractères linguistiques de l'énonciation. On doit l'envisager comme le fait du locuteur, qui prend la langue pour instruments, et dans les caractères linguistiques qui marquent cette relation. (Benveniste, 1974:80)

Playfulness, or lack interest or seriousness is also another feature of African musical expressivity. That's why, Doh Ludovic Fie rightly puts "l'art donne lieu à une fonction désintéressée. [...] L'art n'a pas une place accessoire, celle consistant notamment à distraire l'individu dans une vie morbide"<sup>16</sup> (Fié, 236).

Along the same line, Tiburce Koffi rightly tells:

L'art y était une activité sociale certes, mais à la fonction ludique, socialisante et "participationniste" car il permettait de recréer le climat de vie communautaire que la rigueur des travaux champêtres et autres activités de production avaient interrompu<sup>17</sup>. (Koffi, 69)

He goes on further. He stresses the uselessness and playfulness of some forms of African music which he considers as one of the reasons of advanced for Africa's underdevelopment. According to Tiburce Koffi, "Rien d'autres que des ballades ennuyeuses de griots qui ne cessent de nous conter la grandeur d'une époque qui, dans les faits, n'a laissé aucune trace sérieuse!"<sup>18</sup> (Ibid. 88)

<sup>15</sup> "No pragmatic value is attached to the signified nor to sentence structures (signifier). Their first signification is first merely nominal. Any value attached to an act is therefore derivative." [Translation mine]

<sup>16</sup> "Art has a selfless function. Art doesn't have an ancillary value, one that namely serves a distraction purpose in morbid life." [Translation mine]

<sup>17</sup> "Admittedly, art was a social activity. However, it had a playful, socializing and 'participative' function because it used to recreate communal life climate which were, discontinued by farming and other production activities." [Translation mine]

<sup>18</sup> "Nothing other than boring ballads by griots who tirelessly tell stories about the greatness of a time past that left behind no serious trace!" [Translation mine]

However, this form of music for the sake of merely playing is positive per se according to Doh Ludovic Fie, "Ce stade est caractérisé par le dépérissement de la volonté. Cette suppression de la volonté par elle-même conduit à un "océan de quiétude, ce repos profond de l'âme, cette sérénité et cette assurance profonde de l'âme, c'est le bonheur"<sup>19</sup> (Fié, 236). In other words, playful and less serious music, excised from the political and ideological concerns such as can be seen in the so-called serious music, leads to peace of mind, hence to peacefulness.

Ascribing a playful characteristic to music like making it less complicated, complex and abstract partakes of the coming of an ambiance of bliss made possible by taking music on its own essential terms. These terms include entertainment for the sake of bringing peace. Music may also be produced by way of improvisation. This aspect of music is no less important as we shall see.

### III. MUSIC IMPROVISATION AS DEICTICS

Deictic refers to the way in which the speaker/singer or music-maker stages himself as a person with his/her subjectivity or distinct sensibilities according to Benveniste (1966:229). It is individualization or improvisation. In fact, through music, the individual manages to express his/her subjectivity.

Speaking about "overly meaningful" music, that is music with excessive emphasis on politics and other worldly concerns, Claude Hagège warned that "La musique n'est pas un schéma abstrait de communication"(Hagege, 346).<sup>20</sup> Music should be free of the philosophical abstraction bestowed on it, thereby making it too serious and distractively ineffectual. Thinking about abstract details in music makes it excessively serious as advocated by music critics like Theodor W. Adorno.<sup>21</sup> Improvisation carries less weight on playful music. Eileen Southern has the following to say:

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<sup>19</sup> "At this stage personal will fade away. This depletion of will by itself leads to an 'ocean of quietness', this is a deep resting state for the soul, serenity and this deep sense of security for the soul amounting to happiness." [Translation mine]

<sup>20</sup> "Music is not an abstract communication." [Translation mine]

<sup>21</sup> "This Frankfurt theorist believes flat-out that popular folk music (and for that matter any entertainment music) is of no significance Adorno believes that "[...] art is regarded by him as a form

Melodic improvisation was as characteristic a feature of the music as was singing "extempore", that is, text improvisation. The first affected the second to some extent: a singer would invent a song on the spot, then naturally change the repetitions in the melody to fit the ever-changing text. But instrumental music also was affected by improvisation. (Southern, 14)

Speaking of the people he descends from, Olaudah Esquiano declared: "We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets". He means what Africans know and practice most among other things is, music. In the same vein, Tiburce Koffi puts that "Notre vie sociale est rythmée par le bruit" [our life is rhythmic because of noise] (Koffi, 80). As a consequence of this noisy life, Tiburce Koffi tells us we have jazz, "nous avons inspiré le jazz"<sup>22</sup> (Ibid. 66). In jazz, both are supposed to narrate stories.

With this idea of inspiration in mind, one can soundly understand the relevance of the notion of rhythm discussed by Benveniste. In fact, the linguist gives a thorough exegesis of the Greek word 'ruthmos'.

He also looks at other words derived from the same root and finds words meaning transform, disproportionate, modality, in a suitable fashion, and amorphous, among others, all of which clearly indicates a strong case for a meaning of *ruthmos* meaning something to do with form. (Benveniste, 1971: 281-288).

What one can learn from this sequence is that rhythm is not innocent. It entices meaning; it can be adjusted according to situation and by the same token prompted transformation. According to Eileen Southern, "Bowdich observes that the Ashanti thought it "absurd" to worship God in any way other than through singing and chanting" (Southern, 7). Eileen Southern continues:

Among some peoples of Angola (now the Congo and Zaire), there was a tradition for litigation music. In presenting cases to the judge-chief, the litigants chanted their arguments to the accompaniment of drums and song. All this music was ceremonial and ritualized, and frequently performed in conjunction with dance and/or drama by professional music. (Ibid.)

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of knowledge; its purpose is no longer to be beautiful, or merely to entertain. Its purpose is now to be true" (Paddison, 205). Of course, art here has to be understood as popular culture of which music is an important element. For further readings, see Adorno's critique of Jazz and mainly his *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* and the oft-quoted and criticized pieces titled "On Jazz" and "A Social Critique of Radio Music"

<sup>22</sup> "We inspired Jazz." [Translation mine]

Consequently, Emile Benveniste pairs up art with deictics because of their being empty and ever varying according to the artist who is the speaker:

L'art n'est jamais ici qu'une œuvre d'art particulière, où l'artiste instaure librement des oppositions et des valeurs dont il joue en toute souveraineté, n'ayant ni de "réponse" à attendre, ni de contradiction à éliminer, mais seulement une vision à exprimer, selon des critères, conscients ou non, dont la composition entière porte témoignage et devient manifestation<sup>23</sup>. (Benveniste, 1974: 59)

Reasonably, Stuart Grant ranges music among "Metaphors of language" (Grant, 112). Emile Benveniste who finds particularistic features to music in its "deictisation" has this to say.

Il n'y a pas de "synonymie" entre systèmes sémiotiques; on ne peut pas "dire la même chose" par la parole et par la musique qui sont des systèmes à base différente. L'homme ne dispose pas de plusieurs systèmes distincts pour le même rapport de signification<sup>24</sup>. (Benveniste 1974: 53)

Understanding this wake-up call amounts to viewing music as a quite different system. If a connecting bridge is to be build, one may state after Emile Benveniste that "On peut dire en somme, si la musique est considérée comme une "langue", que c'est une langue qui a une syntaxe"<sup>25</sup> (Benveniste, 1954:56). Additionally, speaking of music as an autonomous code Steven Mithen adds, "In general, the variations of pitch, rhythm, tone, and timbre of primate vocalizations —that is, their musicality— play an essential role in manipulating the emotional states and behavior of other individuals" (Mithen, 297).

It is easy to grasp emotional state taking advantage on the comparison made by Benveniste. He "compares and contrasts *rhythmos* with *schema*, a more widely used term for form, and comes to the conclusion that *rhythmos* specifically "designates form in the instant

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<sup>23</sup> "Art does not have to be taken for particular work of art, whereby the artist institutes free oppositions and values in all sovereignty, the artist has neither 'answers' to expect, nor any contradiction to eliminate. He or she rather only has a vision to express, according to some criteria, (conscious or not), the whole composition of which bears s testimony and becomes manifest."

<sup>24</sup> "There is no "synonymy" between semiotic systems. One "cannot express the same thing" by means of speech as well as by means of music which are systems of different kinds basis. The individual doesn't have several distinct systems for the same relationship of meaning production or signification." [Translation mine]

<sup>25</sup> "In short, one may say that, if music can be considered as a "language", then, it is a language with a syntax." [Translation mine]

that is assumed by what is moving, mobile and fluid... the form as improvised, momentary, changeable” (Benveniste, 1971: 285-286).

This autonomy of music works in a sort of parallelism with language, Benveniste tells us that "On penserait à une homologie avec le fonctionnement de la langue" (1974:55).

<sup>26</sup> This ‘uptake<sup>27</sup>’ is necessary in order to reach successfully the goal of illocution. This indicates how delicate deictics works musically. Southern Eileen observes, and very wittingly so, that:

There was ceremonial music for the festivals commemorating agriculture rites, celebrating the installation of kings or bringing together important chiefs of the nation, and reenacting historical events of significance.

All this bears witness to the deictical uses of music. Emile Benveniste sees nothing in this but the deployment of subjectivity:

Toutes les langues ont en commun certaines catégories d’expression qui semblent répondre à un modèle constant. Les formes que revêtent ces catégories sont enregistrées et inventoriées dans les descriptions, mais leurs fonctions n’apparaissent clairement que si on les étudie dans l’exercice du langage et dans la production du discours. Ce sont des catégories élémentaires, qui sont indépendantes de toute détermination culturelle et où nous voyons l’expérience subjective des sujets qui se posent et se situent dans et par le langage<sup>28</sup>. (Benveniste, 1974 :67)

Speaking along the same line, Werner Jaeger observes that “rhythm then is that which imposes bonds on movement and confines the flux of things... rhythm in music and dancing is not flow but pause, the steady limitation of movement” (Jaeger, 125-126). Meaning is therefore omnipresent. It is then not astonishing to agree with Robert H. Robins who states, “Meaning is everywhere understood as involving the relation of language to the rest of the world, and such meaningfulness is an essential part of any definition of language” (Robins,

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<sup>26</sup> “One may think of a homology in the functioning of language.” [Translation mine]

<sup>27</sup> Jean Cervoni (1987: 109).

<sup>28</sup> “All languages have in common some categories of expression that seem to answer to a consistent model. The shapes taken by these categories are recorded and inventoried in their descriptions. However, their functions only become clear if studied in the use of language as well as during speech production. These categories are the elementary categories are elementary and independent of all cultural determination and where the subjective experiences of the individual become apprehended through language and in the context thereof.” [Translation mine]

67). In short, in music there is some meaning to be observed from a context that is exactly like deictics.

## CONCLUSION

Although musical cultures of West Africa during slave-trade varied from one nation to the other, cultures shared enough features to constitute an identifiable heritage for Africans people. In this work, the primordial nature of music as an integral part of everyday life, of distinctive performative practices has been made obvious. That is, music serves not only in conventional purposes like enhancing worship rituals and providing recreational outlets, but also it used to offer a means of communication and a way of sharing collective experiences. Finally, the integration of music as something central to African peoples' life has been and still is a characteristic feature of the cultures.

Music bears the potential of eliminating egoism, thereby allowing the individual to begin living communally through playful music. To come to a compromise, it ought to be said that music is simply a code-switching. It is an extended vocal space: a continuum between instrumental uses of the voice and vocal uses of instrument. Therefore, Benveniste is right when he states that music conveys identity.

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