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Correspondence

Editor,
African - Diaspora Discourse, A-DD,
Institute of African and Diaspora Studies,
JP Clark Building,
University of Lagos.
08126519419.
oesuola@unilag.edu.ng,

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ONE

Narrating the Black Male Immigrant Experience in Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom* (2020)

Christabel Aba Sam

University of Cape Coast, Ghana

Abstract

The African male body is rarely a site for discussing migratory subjectivities. Part of this problem is because the man is burdened with the responsibility to succeed anyway possible. And so while there is burgeoning literature on masculinities, migration, traumatic pasts and postcolonial futures as discrete thematic issues, little attention has been given to the intimate connections between masculinity, mobility, traumatic pasts and postcolonial futures. Using Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom* (2020), the paper examines how contemporary African authors re-imagine the postcolonial nation by reconfiguring discourses on gender, mobility and trauma. The critical questions that arise are: what is the relationship between masculine experience, traumatic pasts and migration? How do migratory subjectivities inform the emergence of new communities and democracies? The analysis of the texts will be guided by Connell's theory of masculinities and Nancy Van Styvendale's concept of transhistorical trauma. The paper establishes that more than the burden of physical dislocation and diminished economic independence, the experiences of male-characters are often adversely affected by their ranking within the African diaspora and speaking traumatic histories. The paper will also highlight novel ways – in which the Humanities in Africa, especially the twenty first century African novel, grapples with traumatic pasts, masculinity and mobility in order to reimagine postcolonial futures.

Keywords: Diaspora, Freedom, Hegemony, Masculinity, *Transcendent Kingdom*,

La narration de l'expérience de l'immigrant noir dans *Transcendent Kingdom* de Yaa Gyasi (2020)

Résumé

Le corps de l'homme africain est rarement un lieu de discussion des subjectivités migratoires. Ce problème s'explique en partie par le fait que l'homme est chargé de la responsabilité de réussir de toutes les manières possibles. Ainsi, alors qu'il existe une littérature florissante sur les masculinités, la migration, les passés traumatiques et les futurs postcoloniaux en tant que questions thématiques distinctes, peu d'attention a été accordée aux liens intimes entre la masculinité, la mobilité, les passés traumatiques et les futurs postcoloniaux. En s'appuyant sur *Transcendent Kingdom* (2020) de Yaa Gyasi, l'article examine comment les auteurs africains contemporains réimaginent la nation postcoloniale en reconfigurant les discours sur le genre, la mobilité et les traumatismes. Les questions critiques qui se posent sont les suivantes : quelle est la relation entre l'expérience masculine, les passés traumatiques et la migration ? Comment les subjectivités migratoires informent-elles l'émergence de nouvelles communautés et démocraties ? L'analyse des textes sera guidée par la théorie des masculinités de Connell et le concept de traumatisme transhistorique de Nancy Van Styvendale. L'article établit que, plus que le fardeau de la dislocation physique et de la diminution de l'indépendance économique, les expériences des personnages masculins sont souvent affectées par leur rang au sein de la diaspora africaine et par les histoires traumatiques qu'ils racontent. Cette communication mettra exergue les nouvelles façons dont les sciences humaines en Afrique, en particulier le roman africain du

vingt-et-unième siècle, s'attaquent aux passés traumatiques, à la masculinité et à la mobilité afin de ré-imaginer les futurs postcoloniaux.

Mots-clés: Diaspora, Liberté, Hégémonie, Masculinité, Royaume transcendant

Context

The African male body is rarely a considerable proposition in matters of migratory subjectivities. Part of this problem is because the man is burdened with the responsibility to succeed anyway possible. What is lacking in the literature is how the burden of physical dislocation and moderated economic independence adversely affect male rankings within Africa and the African diaspora. My purpose in this paper is to explore how contemporary African authors re-think the postcolonial nation by reconfiguring discourses on gender, mobility and trauma focusing on the experiences of the Chin Chin Man and his son in Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom* (2020). Yaa Gyasi's *The Transcendent Kingdom* (2020) is another interesting attempt at revisiting black migrant stories after her psyching entrance with the publication of *Homegoing* (2016), her debut novel. As a matter of stylistic peculiarity, Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom* (2020) also deals with legacies of slavery and colonial scrutiny, racial discernment especially from a diasporic perspective and the possibility of community; interlaced with religious politics and scientific realities. Yaa Gyasi's capacity at fusing these issues together while still ensuring a delicate balance is remarkable. After its publication in the year 2020, *Transcendent Kingdom* has received little scholarly attention (Guerrero, 2021; Nzusyo, 2021; Singh, 2021) most of them being book reviews. One important scholarly

critique on Gyasi's novel is Nzusyo's (2021) paper. Nzusyo (2021)'s paper is an examination of how different people deal with issues of loss, grief and despair. Focussing on character actions, narrative style and plot, he argues that Gyasi exploits these resources to outline strategies for depicting human suffering. He concludes by naming personal choices and socialization experience as the two techniques Gyasi's novel advances. Kumar and Singh (2022) also pay attention to what constitutes addiction and how much of addiction will constitute illness drawing on the neuroscientific perspective in the novel. They looked at the intimate link between religion and science and contend that Gyasi's novel locates the possibility of redemption (from addiction and religion) by reclaiming the haunted present from past historical hegemonies and the liminal solace at the intersections of science and religion. While these studies are important in terms of the ways in which they comment on Gyasi's commitment in dealing with human suffering especially with the dispersal of family and concerns from the African diaspora, there is still more to do. Particularly so when the question of male fallibility appears to be central to our understanding of rethinking hegemony and redemption (Kumar and Singh, 2022). Hence, my purpose in this paper is to explore how contemporary African authors re-think the postcolonial nation by reconfiguring discourses on gender, mobility and trauma. The paper is thus guided by two key questions: what is the relationship between masculine experience, traumatic pasts and migration? How does migratory subjectivities inform the emergence of new communities and democracies? The paper is structured into three parts. First, I employ R. N. Connell's theory of masculinity to revisit discussions on men in Africa. Connell's framework allows a better appreciation of how the idea of hegemonic masculinities is

reshaped by the realities of physical dislocation. In the second part, I explore the traumatic dimensions of being African and most importantly being an African man in the diaspora. My discussions in this section are grounded in Nancy Van Styvendale's concept of transhistorical trauma as well as Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Again, Van Styvendale's theory highlights the connections between histories and traumas and how the two affect an individual's self-identity. The paper also offers an analysis on the character of the Chin Chin Man and how his masculine performance is affected by migration and racism. Third, I discuss the hegemonic nature of racism in the American context with respect to narratives of African migrants. Finally, the paper will look at how Gyasi's novel provides a framework for negotiating hegemonies and freedoms in the diaspora. Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom* (2020) is a classic bildungsroman with embedded epistolary styles. The novel tells the story of a Ghanaian immigrant family in America. The dispersal of the family of four begins with the mother, who wins the American Green Card Lottery and leaves for America with the usual African dream of getting greener pastures from the West. She is later joined by the rest of the family. Life in America is not what they expected. The Chin Chin Man, the husband/father, is unable to secure a well-paying job to support his family, coupled with the racial discrimination that he faces, he decides to return to Ghana leaving his wife and children in America. Shortly after his departure, Nana, his son, falls victim to drug addiction and later dies of the overdose. The mother, unable to handle the absence and loss of both husband and her son, falls into serious depression which begins young Gifty's search for truths of being. Gifty buries herself in her PhD research partly because of her family's realities in Alabama.

Theories of Masculinities

Connell's (1998) concept of hegemonic masculinity has become the locus for many discussions on rethinking the idea of the man across cultures despite its supposed simplicity of forcing false unity amongst men across borders (Hall 2002; Jefferson 2002). Connell's framework admits the roles of culture, religion, race and other power markers as responsible for reproducing stratified masculine identities in context-specific ways. This interpretation is affirmed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) when they explain that hegemonic masculinity is not fixed at the core but it acquires specific meaning in every social context. Regardless of whatever meaning it assumes in a given context, hegemonic masculinity always raises a question of power and privilege – capturing the sense of fluidity in being masculine. Also, crucial to theorising masculinities is the question of a suitable African model given the plurality of the African experience. Although I do not overlook the reasonableness of the contestations, especially as the label, African masculinity may produce racial and a restricted understanding of being an African male, this paper chooses to anchor the understanding of African masculinities on common colonial histories, patriarchies, religions, cultural factors and Black consciousness that define men on the continent and in the Diaspora. To this end, we reach a better understanding of the character of the Chin Chin Man beyond the realities of power and privilege. Thus, this paper explores the masculine performance of the Chin Chin Man at the intersections of African and Hegemonic masculinities.

Transhistorical Trauma

The dynamics in the performance of masculinities for the African man change completely in the diasporic space. In the diasporic context like Europe and America, the African man becomes aware of his colour, status and general identity. African migrant men now have to negotiate and perform their identity being conscious of their status as products of colonialism in their new economic environment. The experience of African migrant men is influenced by legacies of the colonial experience in the form of what Nancy Van Styvendale has described as transhistorical trauma. In her (2008) publication, she argues that the legacies of a trauma causing an event which happened in the past can continue into the present. In other words, for Van Styvendale, transhistorical is when the impact of trauma transcends the historical into the present in the form of “ongoing domestic colonisation” or “neocolonial oppression” (208). Transhistorical trauma is thus, characteristically collective and intergenerational. It does not focus on a single event but rather, it demands that we pay attention to past atrocities and how those happenings influence present oppressions. Van Styvendale’s concept of transhistorical trauma makes it possible for us to address what Craps and Buelens (2008) have described as “chronic psychic suffering produced by the structural violence of racial, gender, sexual, class and other iniquities yet to be fully accounted for” (3-4). Transhistorical trauma permits an analysis of the experiences as well as the psychological state of the male characters and even the female characters in the text. The link between the manifestation of transhistorical trauma and the original trauma causing event like slavery (colonialism) and racism is not always clear to establish. One of the causes of this is that racial issues and racism have become hegemonic ideologies especially within the

American setting. By hegemony, we make reference to Gramsci's concept of hegemony as has been elaborated in Bates (1975). The concept holds that the ideas of the powerful and dominant cultures are diffused and implemented with the consent of the minority class. In other words, the minority class may not necessarily benefit from the hegemonic ideas but by accepting and consenting to some popular ideas, they end up legitimising these oppressive ideas. For example, a racial minority denying the existence of racism indirectly endorses White supremacy which is the case of the Black Mamba, Gifty's mother. This paper interrogates how the racial hegemony coupled with the transhistorical traumatic experiences of the African male impact the negotiation of masculinities in the diaspora.

From giants to hunched men: The trauma of racism and African masculinity in the diasporic context

The movement of the Chin Chin Man and his family from Ghana to America, like many African families in the diaspora, is motivated by their quest to achieve economic freedom in the 'El Dorado West'. Unlike many of the narratives on migration from Africa to the West, the Chin Chin Man is not eager to migrate to America. He is happy with his life in Kumasi, Ghana and he only agrees to move because of his family. This little but important detail gives the reader a sense of premonition about the fate that lies ahead of the family in America.

Like the many shocks that greet most African migrants on arrival at their 'paradise', life in America is everything that the Chin Chin Man has not anticipated. The very first challenge he faces is an attack on his physique and identity as a black man. Standing at six feet four inches, the stature of the Chin Chin Man is the ideal

stature that a man can wish for in the Ghanaian context. However, in America that becomes a weakness. This is because his kind (black men and black american men) are associated with stereotypes of theft and crime, a situation which highlights Oliver's (2003) observation that African-American men are often stereotyped as criminal and threatening, an image which she(Oliver) opines, is perpetuated and reinforced by the media. He struggles to find a job and when he eventually finds one, he loses it because of his stature. His wife narrates that "the home health service had hired him, but too many people complained once they saw him walk in the door" (29). For the first time, the Chin Chin Man's body type and appearance became a problem. This is however not an isolated occurrence happening to the Chin Chin Man alone. The discrimination and distrust that the Chin Chin Man faces as a black immigrant and particularly about his body type is part of the legacy of colonialism and slavery that has lingered on in the American context for years. Gyasi does not go any further to tell the reader the nature of the complaints the people made when the Chin Chin Man walks through the door. However, one cannot help but see a connection between the treatment of the Chin Chin Man and the persisting negative perception in America about 'big black men' being violent and aggressive. This perhaps, may be due to the historical antecedent that black men who were well built were the strongest and resilient ones in slave camps and were therefore the associated with resistance and revolt against slave masters. This helps to explain why the Chin Chin, within a space of four months, is accused of theft three times at the Walmart and subjected to humiliating body searches.

But walking around with my father, she'd seen
how America changed around big black men. She

saw him try to shrink to size, his long, proud back hunched as he walked with my mother through the Walmart, where he was accused of stealing three times in four months. Each time, they took him to a little room off the exit of the store. They leaned him against the wall and patted him down, their hands drifting up one pant leg and down the other. Homesick, humiliated, he stopped leaving the house (30).

The alliterative sequence of ‘homesick’ and ‘humiliated’ are clear indications of the racial discriminations meted out to the Chin Chin Man on the basis of colour and migration. The once proud man, the African big man, literally wants to diminish in size in order not to attract any further unwanted attention to himself. This outward display of defeat in his posture gives the reader an idea of the extent of the psychological trauma that the Chin Chin Man undergoes. His personality as a black man is adversely affected to an extent that he decides to hide from the world by keeping indoors.

The instances of racial discrimination that the Chin Chin Man face could not have been more damaging than his inability to protect his family from such abuses as the expectations of patriarchy of the African man has it. However, the American context and his status as an African immigrant robs him of his status as a protector for his family. He has to watch on as his family is put through various forms of discriminatory acts. The Chin Chin Man is aware of Mr. Thomas’ discriminatory comments “anything other than that nigger” and calls his son “the little monkey” (29), yet he has little energy to stand up for his family. At one of Nana’s soccer games, a White father shouts at his son to the hearing of

everyone around that “don’t you let them niggers’ win. Don’t you let them score another goal on you, you hear me?” (55). This is a direct attack on the Chin Chin Man and his family, the only black family on the field that day, but he continues to maintain a helpless urge.

I was too young to understand the word the man had used, but I was old enough to understand the change in atmosphere. Nana didn’t move, nor did the Chin Chin Man, but still everyone was staring at the three of us, the only black people on the field that day. Was “them niggers” simply a grammatical error, or was the plural supposed to include my father and me? What would we win? What was that man in danger of losing (56)?

Gifty’s assessment of the situation on the field is important for two reasons. First, Gyasi interrogates how the Black man is considered an error of creation and yet remain a threat to White superiority. This paradox is read in ‘what would we win as blacks’ as a carefully constructed inferior race and ‘what was that man (the Whiteman) in danger of losing’ as the privileged race. Gyasi’s argument is that discrimination against blacks in the diaspora should be read as a result of white nervousness about the possibility of black revenge. In other words, the white man’s comment is simply a White diversionary tactic to turn the gaze of Black achievements. Second, the man’s comment is not only a deliberate attempt at offending Gifty’s family, and a possible re-education of whiteness and white supremacy, but also to reveal the high stakes of the game. To him (the white father), a loss to a team with a Blackman (or People of Color) would not only constitute failure and disgrace; but a stain in his nature as the

glorified and dignified Self, one who defines and regulates the Other. In other words, a loss to the Other, is then an indication of defeat to his superiority, a situation he would badly want to avoid. Arguing from the foregoing, the football match, echoing Ahmed's (2002) assertion about colonial encounters that they "reopen the prior histories of encounter that violate and fix others in regimes of difference"(8), the trope of the football, as I argue, transcends mere sport and becomes a metaphorical arena which acts in a dual epistemic sense: as a spectacle for contesting and questioning white supremacy as well as a space for subverting hegemonic masculinities within an American socio-cultural context; a situation which is further steeped and echoed by Gifty's questioning of the scenario; "What would we win? What was that man in danger of losing?"

The psychological burden of the Chin Chin Man is further complicated because he has to deal with the trouble of been dependent on his wife - a reversal of the normative gender roles in patriarchal Africa as Hibbins, (2005) and Mungai & Pease (2009) have established. That losing the status as the breadwinner of the family is usually a main cause of frustration for immigrant men because part of their perception of a man as a provider is threatened.

The Chin Chin Man got a job as a janitor at a day care centre. He was paid under the table, seven dollars an hour, an hour a day, five days a week. After buying a monthly bus pass, he hardly broke even, but it was something to do. "It got him off the couch," my mother said (39).

The Chin Chin Man’s condition was near fatal with the gradual eroding masculine confidence given the inconsequential nature of his job and the new family dynamics. Gifty tells us “My parents started fighting every day. They fought about money, how there was never enough” (63).

Who did this? Where did you find it?” I burst into tears, giving us away. I was ready to confess to all of our crimes, but the Chin Chin Man chimed in. “Leave the kids alone. Do you want them to starve? Is that what you want?” My mother pulled something out of her purse. A bill? A receipt? “We will all starve if we don’t start making more money. We can’t afford to live like this any longer (60).

The Chin Chin Man lost grip of himself. He had become so insignificant in his own home that he had no moral authority to run his family because he had fallen from masculine grace. The wife’s work of attending to old people who needed care was what became the main livelihood for the entire family. He chooses to finally return to Ghana as a way of mediating the hegemonies of migration. These inhumane acts of White-aggression and micro-insults reinforce how the ideology and social structures in the diaspora lead to the disempowerment and emasculation of the father as a Patriarch; a circumstance which makes the Chin Chin Man “shrink to size” an indication of a reduction in his masculine pride. He becomes homesick upon realization that black mobility not only displaces the subaltern but also denies the diasporic masculine subject voice and agency. His yearn for home is thus an attempt to reclaim his ‘destabilized masculine image’ and to re-negotiate the normative shifts in the

family. Although his departure is tragic, reading the effectual consequences it had on his family, it is an artistic strategy by Gyasi to represent the experiences of black families in the diaspora as a metonymy for rethinking new communities and democracies.

Exploring hegemonic apparatuses in the diaspora and the quest for negotiating freedoms

The discussion in this section highlights how the experiences of the Chin Chin Man and his family, as a racial minority, become illustrative of the hegemonic nature of racism in the American context and how the African immigrant as a minority group gets sucked into this racial hegemonic ideology. Africa has suffered and continues to suffer great crimes of racial injustices in the history of the world. The duo evil of colonialism and of slavery (which may partly be due to our own making,) still haunt the African present in ways that make it almost impossible to outlive its horrendous effects. In contemporary times, racism has become the novel ideological hegemonic apparatus that reinforces White supremacy and Black inferiorities especially within the context of the diaspora. Africans' plight in the diaspora is largely the making of precolonial traditional rulers who provided the platform for slavery and by extension promoted the institutionalisation of racism. You may read a text on the origin of racism for better understanding.

Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom* highlights how African immigrants are becoming accustomed to racial segregation such that they no longer consider it as a slur to human dignity. Gyasi contends that such 'normalizations' only succeed in legitimizing White superiority and endangering the sovereignty of African bodies in the diaspora. Gifty's mother's experience with Mr

Thomas is an instance of black complicity in the continuity of racial injustices. Gifty reveals that her mother “almost never admitted to racism. Even Mr. Thomas, who had never called my mother anything other than ‘that nigger’, was, to her, just a confused old man” (29). According to Meghji and Saini (2018), the attempt to rationalise racism with any form of logic rather than admitting to racism becomes a means of validating racism especially when that is done by a person who is affected by the racial injustice. This ‘anything but racism reaction’ is a component of the broader idea of post-racialism which states that society has moved beyond the “disabling racial divisions of the past” (Bobo, 2011:14). In other words, by denying that racism still pervades the society, white dominance is automatically reproduced as the natural order.

This post-racialist strategy downplays racism and gets minority classes to accept the same and when that happens racism continues to be institutionalised which is what Gyasi portrays through Gifty’s mother in the novel. The macro class has managed to put across that America has moved beyond its racialised past. That position has been popularised to the extent that minority groups feel pressured to take an anti-racist stand and risk being tagged as ‘playing the race card’ or being racist themselves. As a way to avoid this experience, racial minorities will rather come up with any other reason rather than admitting to the existence of racism. The Black Mamba’s attempt to defend the actions of Mr. Thomas by attributing it to foolishness is arguably a way of de-emphasizing the continued treachery of racial discrimination to African migrants.

The next strategy that makes African migrants succumb to racial hegemony as the novel indicates is ‘the English language card’. Speaking English with an African accent in the diasporic context is

usually a marker of exclusion. The public reproach and the policing that characterises African English accents in the diaspora cause many African migrants to see themselves as being deficient in comparison to the native speakers. This mentality induces a form of inferiority complex in African migrants in the transnational context. In the novel, Gyasi illustrates this phenomenon with Gifty's mother. Gifty states that her mother speaks freely and with confidence when she speaks in Fante or Twi but when she speaks "in English, she was meek. She stumbled and was embarrassed, and so to hide it she demurred" (111). She recounts an occasion when she intentionally refused to repeat her order for water when the waiter did not hear her the first time thinking that she was not mentioning it well. She feels embarrassed by her English to the extent that she literally tries to shrink in size. Gyasi argues that this 'meek' mentality only confines the African migrant to a subordinate rank.

Gyasi contends that the internalisation of popularised and institutionalised racial misconceptions about blacks by blacks themselves can refabricate racial hegemony in unsuspecting ways. She highlights among other things the idea that blacks are prone to crime and violence and are liable to drug addiction as dubious and conspiratorial. She carefully negates these notions by exposing the cynicism in such ideas by drawing attention to the Walmart incident and the conversation between the two white ladies at the First Assemblies Church of God.

I heard he's on drugs," Mrs. Cline said. She was a deacon at the First Assemblies. Fifty-five years old, unmarried, straight as a broom with lips so thin they looked like a slit across her face. "No," Mrs. Morton gasped. "Oh yes, honey. Why do you think he doesn't come around here

anymore? He's not playing this season, so we know he's not too busy." "That's sad. That's sad he's on drugs." "It is sad, but—and I really do hate to say this—their kind does seem to have a taste for drugs. I mean, they are always on drugs. That's why there's so much crime." "You're right. I have noticed that (146).

Gyasi's attitude towards falsified perceptions about Africa and African descent is stern. Tracing the route of such institutionalized hegemonic ideologies 'they are always on drugs. That's why there's so much crime' to racist projects like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Gyasi proposes a conscious re-education and re-orientation of the African, especially African migrants so that they are not caught by the psychological and physiological effects of being African in the diaspora. Gifty admits that:

When I was a child, no one ever said the words "institutionalized racism." We hardly even said the word "racism." I don't think I took a single class in college that talked about the physiological effects of years of personally mediated racism and internalized racism. (147)

Gifty's admission re-opens discussions on the function of the novel in Africa and the nature of the educational curricula in Africa as a whole. She calls for the re-education of postcolonial subjects through a careful revision of the colonial discourses in which Africa worlds have been established. She proposes a curriculum that provides some answers for the logic of colonial rule and how it affected African communities. Gyasi advocates for a decolonized Afro-centric curriculum to mediate the tensions between residual prejudices and the realities of Africa. She

constructs America and by extension other similar western contexts as spaces that reopen the wounds of Africa's troubled past in most unexpected ways to the African migrant. By stepping in the American context, the African immigrant enters and rejoins the struggle for negotiating personhood. The likes of the Chin Chin Man and his family, therefore, need to develop the right mental capital and fortitude by embracing the Black collective past in the face of racial aggression in the diaspora. It is important to note that Gyasi's envisioning of new democracies and communities lies in her critique of existing racial apparatuses that hamper black freedom and the alternative modes of being within the diaspora.

Conclusion

What this paper has sought to do is explore how Gyasi shifts the narrative on migratory subjectivities by paying attention to the experiences of African male migrants. My purpose was to demonstrate how the focus on the male narrative helps to unravel the intimate connections between masculinity, mobility, traumatic pasts and postcolonial futures. The paper has shown that the burden of physical dislocation and moderated economic independence adversely affect male rankings within Africa and the African diaspora focusing on the experiences of the Chin Chin Man and his son. The paper has also demonstrated that the experiences of Chin Chin man and his family, as a migrant family, become illustrative of the hegemonic nature of racism in the American context and how the African immigrant as a minority group gets sucked into this racial hegemonic ideology. The paper further advances the need to combat personalised and institutionalised racism through targeted curricula reforms and revisiting the need for return as important routes to the future of the African diaspora.

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