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Exploring Student Attitudes to the Refugee Crisis: Songs on Migration

ABSTRACT

The issue of migrants and refugees has occupied Europe for the last few months. Much of the discourse surrounding this issue has been overwhelmingly negative, lapsing at times into stereotype, prejudice and even hate speech. As language teachers at a humanities faculty, we have a responsibility to address this issue in the classroom, especially as classroom experience tells us that our students are prone to stereotypical thinking. The article presents a series of song-based activities intended for use in language development classes for future teachers and translators at the Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor.

Keywords: migrants and refugees; negative discourse; stereotypical thinking; songs; intercultural awareness

Proučevanje odnosa študentov do begunske krize skozi izseljenske pesmi

POVZETEK

Vprašanje migrantov in beguncev že več mesecev zaposluje Evropo. Javna govorica o migrantih in beguncih je bila pretežno negativna, prežeta s stereotipi, predsodki in občasnim sovražnim govorom. Kot učitelji jezika na humanističnih fakultetah smo se dolžni pri pouku spoprijeti s temi pojavi, tem bolj ker izkušnje kažejo, da tudi naši študentje niso imuni pred stereotipnim razmišljanjem. V članku je predstavljena vrsta na pesmih zasnovanih dejavnosti, ki sem jih v ta namen z bodočimi učitelji in prevajalci izvedla pri predmetu razvijanje jezikovnih zmožnosti na Filozofski fakulteti v Mariboru.

Ključne besede: migranti in begunci; negativna javna govorica; stereotipno mišljenje; pesmi; medkulturno ozaveščanje

Exploring Student Attitudes to the Refugee Crisis: Songs on Migration

1 Introduction

According to the International Organisation for Migration,¹ more than a million refugees and migrants entered Europe in 2015. While winter was expected to slow the flow, more than 54,000 reached Europe by sea alone in January 2016, with the majority escaping war and violence in Syria and Afghanistan, and poverty in Kosovo. Most refugees have simply passed through Slovenia on their way to Germany, Austria and the Scandinavian countries, with only a tiny fraction of the overall number claiming asylum here.

The arrival of refugees and migrants in Europe has provoked an often ferocious and wide-ranging debate, with Slovenia being no exception, encompassing questions on how to define the new arrivals (as migrants or refugees), who among them we have a duty (if at all) to help, the form that help should take, and at what perceived cost this is to the existing European population. Yet, this debate has on occasion also lapsed into stereotype, prejudice and even hate speech, from prominent European public figures such as U.K. prime minister David Cameron,² who has been rebuked for referring to “swarms of people”, to political commentators such as Katie Hopkins, criticised by the *United Nations* High Commissioner on Human Rights (UNHCR) for likening migrants to “cockroaches” in a newspaper column,³ to individuals who used social networks to call for the return of Hitler and the gas chambers (some of whom found themselves on the so-called “pillars of shame” on the streets of Ljubljana). While these views are of course extreme, it seems that they do reflect to a certain extent the views of many in European society. As Katarina Vučko of the Mirovni inštitut (Peace Institute) claims in an interview with the *World Politics Review* on the treatment of refugees and migrants in Slovenia: “While civil society called for solidarity, acceptance and humane treatment of refugees, the more common response has been fear, racism, Islamophobia and hate speech” (Vučko 2015).

Such dehumanising discourse runs counter to the notion of a “more tolerant” society underpinning the vision of Europe expressed by the Declaration and Programme of Education for Democratic Citizenship (1999), which has served as a basis for the development of European language policy. In his guide to linguistic diversity and language education, Hugh Starkey cites John Trim, who underlines the consequences this type of discourse on the refugee crisis might have: “Negative stereotypes can be played upon by the unscrupulous and dangerous as well as unpleasant forms of inter-community fears and hatreds can be built up into violent backlash against closer European and global co-operation” (Starkey 2002, 12).

Increasingly, it is language educators who are being called upon to equip their learners, citizens of Europe, with the “toolkit” to live in a multicultural society and learn to deal with difference

¹ <http://www.iom.int/>

² Cameron was referring to the migrants in the Calais camp in an interview with ITV news on 30th July 2015; he claims that they wish to enter the U.K. to ensure a higher quality of life. <http://www.itv.com/news/update/2015-07-30/pm-a-swarm-of-migrants-want-to-come-to-britain/>

³ This now infamous quote appeared in her column in *The Sun* on 17th April, 2015. In her defence, Hopkins claimed that the term was used as a compliment, referring to the indestructible nature of those who succeeded in crossing to Europe (<http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/suncolumnists/katiehopkins/6414865/Katie-Hopkins-I-would-use-gunships-to-stop-migrants.html>).

“knowledgeably, sensibly, tolerantly and morally” (COE 1999, 8). Much of the existing common European language policy has been shaped by the principle of democratic citizenship, through which learners are familiarised with democratic life in order that they actively participate in it by exercising their rights and responsibilities (Audigier 2000; Forrester 1999). Michael Byram has expanded on this concept by shaping it into intercultural citizenship, which he describes as a framework of citizenship and language education. Intercultural citizenship comprises a series of “orientations” which serve as overall aims and corresponding objectives which guide the student to attaining them. The primary aim is to produce learners who are ready to question the taken-for-granted beliefs they hold about themselves and others, ready to accept that others may hold similar beliefs, and ready to respect the notion of universal rights, democratic principles and peaceful conflict resolution (Byram 2008).⁴

While intercultural education has been part of the language development classes at the Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor (Filozofska fakulteta Maribor) for some time, this year we will begin to specifically address the question of refugees and migration. On the one hand, as the UNCHR claims in their teaching materials,⁵ the issue of refugees and migration presents a valuable learning opportunity. They point out that migration and refugee issues are extremely helpful in the teaching of historical, geographical and human rights issues as well as a foundation for the teaching of language, literature or art. On the other hand, and more significantly, we have a responsibility as language and humanities professors to challenge the threat posed by the dehumanising discourse surrounding this issue (especially as classroom experience tells us that our students are prone to stereotypical thinking) and push for a more tolerant society.

2 The Use of Songs in the Classroom

The materials under preparation will draw upon a variety of resources, including newspaper articles, film, extracts from novels and existing literature on intercultural issues;⁶ however, one of the key strategies we will employ is one that our learners have responded positively to in the past – songs. Music and song have long been recognised as an incredibly versatile resource in the language classroom and much has been written on how they can be used for improving grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Music is also seen as a motivating factor, contributing to positive affect in the classroom, and as songs are regarded as authentic materials, their use is especially encouraged (Lems 2001; Kennedy 2014).

Songs can also play a significant role in developing both cultural and intercultural awareness. Some authors have pointed out the potential for analysing song lyrics to explore aspects of one’s own culture, as they provide a cultural and historical snapshot, not only offering learners an opportunity to analyse the period in which they were created but also to consider why a particular song was popular at that time (Knippling 2013). Songs have also been used in the intercultural

⁴ While democratic citizenship and intercultural citizenship prepare students for life within the present socio-political system, other authors, such as Želježič (2013), point to the need to develop critical awareness among students, so that they may effectively question the prevailing neoliberal agenda of the current system.

⁵ The materials are available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/4b7409436.html>

⁶ There are, of course, many other useful resources on the theme of migration, e.g., Sunjeev Sahota’s novel *Year of the Runaways* (2015) describes life in modern-day Britain through the experience of Indian migrant workers; the film *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002) tells the story of a second-generation young Sikh woman who pursues her dream of playing football despite her parents forbidding her to play; *Keeping up with the Khans*, a documentary produced by Channel 4, follows migrant workers arriving in Sheffield to begin new lives. The successful *Humans of New York* blog, a “catalogue” of New York inhabitants, is also an incredibly rich photographic and textual resource.

classroom, with some authors suggesting their use as a vehicle for exploring stereotypes, and challenging beliefs about our own and others' cultures (Hempkin 2013).

The songs our materials are based on are all related to the experience of migration and immigration: "The Scarborough Settler's Lament" (version by Stan Rogers); "Letter from America" by the Proclaimers; "The Blanket of Night" by Elbow; "Caledonia" by Frankie Miller. Two of the songs are produced by Scottish artists (The Proclaimers and Frankie Miller), one of the songs comes from an English band (Elbow), while one is the work of a Canadian artist (Stan Rogers). There is no intention here to focus on a specific "target culture". Indeed, as the materials are put into use, and undoubtedly refined, the learners will be encouraged to suggest songs to add to this selection (from their own – Slovene culture – especially). The songs differ in genre, from folk/traditional to pop, and in their date of production, while, importantly, they also deal with different aspects of the immigrant experience: yearning for the homeland, those left behind, the treacherous sea journey, and the experience of being in a foreign land.

The song-based activities can be used separately or together; the activities and the order in which they should be used are the same for each song. The background section is the first task students must complete. It asks them to consider the historical and cultural context in which the song was written or to which it refers, helping learners acquire the type of knowledge essential for the development of cognitive competencies demanded by democratic citizenship (Starkey 2002). The second section asks questions on the song lyrics and music/sounds, encouraging learners to reflect on the message of the song and how it is conveyed, in particular exploring the use of idiom and the interplay between text and music (and in some cases the visual aspects where there are accompanying videos). The follow-up section asks students to consider questions on migration by imagining themselves in the role of a migrant or refugee; they are designed to be discussed in class and are followed in some cases by creative writing tasks. They encourage our learners to consider the reasons migrants past and present have left home, how they have felt about having to do so, and the effect that this has had on their homeland. The hope is that these activities will ultimately help to humanise the refugee and migrant experience, by fostering empathy among our learners, which is one of the key attitudes Byram identifies in intercultural education, alongside "curiosity, openness, respect for otherness" (Byram 2009).⁷

3 Songs and Framework of Activities

3.1 Activity 1: Loss of Homeland

The first song in the set of activities is the "Scarborough Settler's Lament", author unknown, recorded by Stan Rogers, a Canadian singer-songwriter in 1982. It is thought that the author of this piece was a settler in Scarborough, now a region of Toronto, from the Borders area of Scotland, one of the many Scots who migrated from Scotland and settled in Canada. The lament is particularly common in Irish folk and traditional song, as many Irish also left their homeland to escape poverty and persecution (Porter 2013). This particular piece opens and closes with references to Canada. The settler mentions his adopted home, only to dismiss it with a cursory and bland description, damning the country of his residence with faint praise. While this place of wheat and pine, as he describes Canada, is "a goodly land", it is clearly not a land that inspires passion or belonging in the

⁷ Kennedy (2015) notes that developing empathy is one of the goals of activities used by Michelle Gadpaille with translation students, who are asked to produce their own "Slovene" versions of texts from other cultures, a strategy which the tasks presented here draw upon.

settler, lacking the vivid and aesthetically pleasing descriptions he gives to Scotland – there are no staid “muddy” creeks in the homeland, but a “purling burn” (flowing stream) and a “daisy spangled lea”. His longing for the homeland is deeply rooted in its natural features, which is common to migrant songs of the period (Lee Martin 2013; Dougal 2011; Gardner-Medwin 1991). There is a strong sense of time, a circularity expressed in the opening and closing references to Canada and the cycle of the day, from the “morning star” to the morning after his dream of home, reflecting the singer’s feeling of being trapped. The only escape is through dream, but painful reality hits upon awakening, and he is back in the land he cannot call home despite spending thirty years there: “And I awoke in Canada, three thousand miles frae home”.

As well as circularity, we are also made aware of the linear passing of time: while the natural features he describes and longs for (greedily, he sings) will endure, the settler’s life is passing. He recalls childhood, the joy of his youthful carefree days and that thirty years have passed since then. There is heavy intertextuality in this piece. Two references are made to Robert Burns’ famous work, “Auld Lang Syne”. One is the explicit reference to the title of the song heard from the blackbird, sung throughout the world at New Year in remembrance of the “good old times”, while the second reference is found in the “gowanies” that the settler would like to see blooming again in his homeland. It is “gowans” that Burns recalls pulling with his friends as a symbol of carefree youth in “Auld Lang Syne”.

Stan Roger’s version is a traditional folk arrangement. He uses his voice to heighten the emotional effect, almost trembling with emotion as he laments his homeland. Rogers also elongates certain lyrics for emphasis, particularly noticeable in the lines “my country”. The words “No more” serve as a turning point in the song, when the listener understands that he will never be able to return to the homeland and enjoy the sights he is describing so vividly; to underscore the poignancy of these lyrics and their importance for our understanding of the lament, the violin and flute join the guitar in accompanying Rogers’ voice.

Accompanying activities:

<p>Background</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In order to understand the reason the settler left Scotland, it’s important to read something on the Highland Clearances. What was the role they played in migration from Scotland? • Where have Slovenes who have emigrated traditionally settled? What reasons have Slovenes had for leaving their homes?
<p>Questions on the song</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why did the settler have to leave Scotland for Canada? • What differences do you see in the way Canada and Scotland are portrayed? What do they tell us about how the settler feels about his native and adopted homes? • What role do the natural features in the song play? Compare the use of the wind in the traditional song “Norland Wind – the wild geese”. How does the wind feature there? • Why do you think the settler doesn’t return to Scotland?

Follow-up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever experienced this type of homesickness? • The writer’s longing finds expression in Scotland’s natural features. If you were far from home, what would you remember about your homeland? • What does the song indicate about our notions of “home”? Write a short piece on what your home means to you.
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3.2 Activity 2: Those Left Behind

The Proclaimers, Scottish twin brothers Craig and Charlie, belong firmly in the pop genre, but have carried over political and social themes from the folk/rock tradition into their work. “Letter from America”, released in 1987, ostensibly also focuses on migration to Canada and the United States, but the song deals with those who are left behind and the state that Scotland is left in by the flow of people leaving her shores. The song consists of a series of questions, imperatives and statements, directly addressing the migrants themselves. The singers ask that those leaving write home, the letter from America in the title, maintaining a link between the new and old lands. The extensive nature of migration is mentioned here, as the lyrics make reference to the towns throughout Scotland losing inhabitants and the areas in which they settle, stretching from Miami to Canada.

Yet, similar to the settler’s lament, there is a sense that all may not be well in “the promised land”, and while there are hints that the new lands may not fulfil their promise, there is a clear indication of Scotland’s fate: those leaving are “my blood” and the homeland is portrayed as a “dying mutual friend”. The singers implore those leaving to consider the consequences of their departure and appeal to their emotional attachment to Scotland to reconsider: “Do we not love her?” and “Do we have to roam the world to prove how much it hurts?” Yet, typically of Proclaimers songs, much of the blame for Scotland’s problems is placed on the Scots’ shoulders themselves.⁸

However, the reference to a “dying mutual friend” and the geographical places hint at another reading of the song. “Letter from America” was written in 1987, when the Thatcher years were taking their toll on Scotland and the Scots. This was a period in which Scottish industry (coal mining and shipbuilding in particular) was being closed down, resulting in the ruin of many of the places referred to in this piece. The Scotland that is bleeding to death, according to this interpretation, is a Scotland beset by economic difficulties ushered in by an indifferent political elite.

As in other works by the Proclaimers, the delivery of the song is worthy of mention. The brothers make use of occasional vocal effects to highlight particular lyrics. As they ask the migrants to “take a look up the railtrack”, one of the voices mimics the sound of a train running along tracks. When these sounds are combined with the vocals, which are delivered in a heavy East-of-Scotland accent, with the singing reminiscent of harmonic chanting in places, the overall effect is of anger or frustration. The Proclaimers often produce an indignant sound, which usually serves to complement and enhance the lyrical content of their songs. (“Throw the R Away”, a protest at having to speak with an English accent to advance in UK society, is an excellent example of this.)

⁸ “Cap in Hand”, adopted by the pro-independence campaign before the 2014 referendum, is an excellent example of a song in which the Proclaimers point the finger at their fellow Scots as being complicit, if not entirely responsible, for their woes. They claim that the Scots have meekly accepted their fate as a subservient nation, asking why we “have let someone else rule our land, cap in hand”.

As the overall sound of “Letter from America” is “busy”, with a heavy guitar sound, various vocal effects and strong lyrical delivery, one of the most effective strategies the brothers employ for emphasis is to strip everything back, apart from one voice. This is heard when the line “Lochaber no more” is sung, underscoring the heavy emotional load of the lyric referring to the fate of Lochaber and many other Scottish towns.

Accompanying activities:

Background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This song was written by The Proclaimers in 1987, when migration from Scotland to the United States and Canada was minimal. What do you know about the U.K. during that time (Margaret Thatcher’s rule) that would explain the song’s appeal and relevance then?
Questions on the song	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is the “dying mutual friend”? • How does the repetition of “no more” help construct the meaning of the song? • What do you think is the significance of the place names in the song? • What effect (if at all) does it have on the song that the Proclaimers sing with a Scottish accent? Are there any Slovene artists that sing with an accent? • On the soundtrack, there are interesting vocal effects (often when one of the brothers are singing), and at the end of the song (when Lochaber no more is sung) there is an instrumental effect. How do you think they help convey the meaning of the song?
Follow-up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it possible to “love” your country? • As well-educated young people, do you think you have a “duty” to stay in Slovenia and use your skills here? Would you leave Slovenia if you were offered employment elsewhere? • The song refers to “The way you felt the day you sailed”. How would someone embarking on this journey feel? Write a diary entry for the day you left your homeland. • Can you write a letter from America? What would you say to those you had left behind about your decision to leave and your new life?

3.3 Activity 3: The Return of the Exile

“Caledonia”, written by Dougie Maclean in 1977, is a love song to Scotland, referred to in this work by her Latin name. The song was made famous and re-released in a version recorded by Frankie Miller in 1991 for a Tennent’s Lager advertisement and enjoyed fresh popularity last year, when it was adopted by the Yes campaign as an anthem for Scottish independence. The song addresses “Caledonia”, expressing the overwhelming love that the author feels for her.

What stands out here is the expression of the singer’s internal narrative, as he speaks of the thought process he has undergone in deciding to return home. He and Scotland are intimately linked, signalled by references to losing his sense of self – “I might drift away” – if he stays away from home

any longer. The song suggests that the author has somehow done what he's needed to do, and that he has behaved badly or inappropriately. However, this has ultimately been for the greater good, as he has freed himself to return home. The lyrics also indicate that the singer has reached a moment of clarity or an epiphany, a common feature in the pop and rock genre (Kennedy 2015). At this point in the song, the singer indicates that he is now not only able to think clearly – his thoughts are uncluttered, as signalled by the “empty room” and the dampening of the “flames” – but his senses are sharper, as he can hear “the forest choir”. The natural features of Caledonia are not intended to depict a physical place as they were in the Scarborough lament, but instead map out the mental landscape of the singer as he makes the decision to return home.

Unlike the other lovers that the singer has kissed, it is Caledonia that has remained constant in his life.

Accompanying activities:

Background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This song became extremely popular in the 1970's, a time of political upheaval in Scotland. When the songwriter speaks of the changes that have overcome him, he could also be referring to Scotland herself. What was happening in Scotland at that time, and why did this song enjoy another surge of popularity last year?
Questions on the song	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who or what is Caledonia? In what ways do you think that this is a love song? In contrast to “The Settler’s Lament”, this song says little about the place/person it is dedicated to and more about the person who wrote it. How does the author use idiom and metaphor to convey the decision-making process they have undergone? Compare the two most famous versions of this song (by Frankie Miller and Dougie Maclean). Which one do you think is the more effective or appealing of the two? Can you explain why?
Follow-up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the longest period you have spent away from Slovenia? Do you have relatives or friends who have left home, perhaps for an extended period? If you were to spend a period of time away from home, what do you think you would have to get used to on your return? How would you relocate the video to the Slovene context? What would you substitute for London, Edinburgh and the pub scene?

3.4 Activity 4: The Treacherous Journey

This song, “The Blanket of Night” by the Manchester group Elbow is the only one of the works in the material written as a direct response to the current refugee crisis. Like many of the songs of the Irish immigrant community in the USA and Australia, it takes as its theme the sea and the dangers of attempting to cross it (Porter 2013). Pictures of the coastline in Greece and Italy have provided some incredibly powerful and, at times, harrowing images.⁹

⁹ The image of Aylan Kurdi, a three year old Syrian boy, who died alongside his mother and sibling on a beach in Turkey, was

The title indicates the stealth with which the refugees must move, under cover of darkness, while also alluding to the fact that this is all they have to protect them from the elements. The sense of danger is acute from the opening of this piece in the depiction of the boat as a flimsy object “paper cup” and the strength of the sea in comparison “heaving chest”. This is also the first of the series of pairs, sometimes juxtaposing, that run through the lyrics: the place they were born and the land of the free; the sea that will either save them or swallow them as it takes “us for its own”. Yet, the pair at the heart of the song is the couple trying to flee and they are alone in the night at the mercy of the waves. The lyrics implore the ocean to “carry her, carry me”, “just the two of us”.

However, the journey is too much for “her” and she succumbs: “gone the light from her eyes”. The narrator asks if he is responsible for her death and if he could have done something to prevent it. This is at the heart of the message Garvey wishes to convey, that the political rhetoric surrounding the issue has been occupied with blame, and blaming the refugees themselves for dying in the seas trying to reach Europe.

One of the most striking aspects of the songs is the sound and musical effects that Garvey employs. The majestic orchestral opening, reflecting the powerful sea, gives way to a pared-down score, like the flimsy craft the migrants in this song will use to traverse the sea. The opening lines introduce an effect which is used throughout the song. The musical notes rise and fall, reflecting the shape and movement of waves lapping the shore. This effect is further heightened as sound effects like bubbles are heard, perhaps signalling the danger of slipping underwater. There is also a rhythmic, pulsing sound created by the cello – which mimics a heartbeat – yet, suddenly there is a pause, as though the heart has skipped a beat, underscoring the precarious nature of the venture undertaken. As Garvey sings the section of lyrics beginning with “The ocean...”, the orchestra returns, cymbals clashing, heightening the sense of foreboding and underscoring the emotional distress of the partner asking if he is in some way to blame for the disaster that has befallen them. The song also comes to what seems like an abrupt end. As soon as the last lyrics are sung, “swallow her, swallow me”, the music stops rather than the more conventional fade out, underscoring the absolute finality of the refugee’s fate.

Accompanying activities:

Background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guy Harvey, the lead singer and songwriter in Elbow, says himself that this song was written in direct response to the politicians’ rhetoric on the refugee crisis. How would you describe the way your government, and other European governments, has reacted?
Questions on the song	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you understand by the title “The Blanket of Night”? How appropriate a title do you think it is for this song? • What do you think the songwriter refers to with “paper cup”? • What do you think are the “silver prayers” being sown? • Harvey, the songwriter, makes good use of sound metaphor. How does he use effects like pauses and specific instrumental sounds to enhance the lyrics? Can you think of similarly used effects in other songs you know? • What do you think that the songwriter signifies with the abrupt ending of the song?

widely published and is reported to have increased the pressure on European authorities to accept more refugees and migrants.

Follow-up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would make you leave your home on such a dangerous voyage? • Can we justify putting ourselves and our loved ones in danger to undertake such a journey? • We know nothing about the refugees in the song except that they set off by sea to escape their homeland. Write either the beginning of their story, including details of who they are, where they are from, where they are going and why they are fleeing, or the end of the story. What happens to the surviving partner when he reaches his destination?
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4 Conclusion

The issue of refugees and migrants needs to be directly addressed within the humanities, and within language studies in particular, which are increasingly seen as sites of intercultural learning and training. The songs and accompanying activities presented here offer an opportunity to explore this topic in the classroom, allowing our learners to consider the reasons behind past and present migration, how migrants have felt about leaving home and the effect migration has had on those left behind. Also, by treating these songs as works of literature in their own right, analysing the use of idiom, language and musical effects, the students will gain an understanding of how the message of the song is conveyed, contributing to the development of skills helpful in language and literature studies. Further, and most importantly, by placing our learners imaginatively in the role of refugee or migrant through the creative activities on offer, they will be encouraged to develop the empathy that has been absent from much of the discourse surrounding this issue and that is vital for intercultural learning.

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