

## Photography, Borders and the Fear of the 'Racialised Other'

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Over the last three decades, Europe has undergone seismic geopolitical, socio-political, cultural, and economic transformations. The European borders have been redrawn, and what was once a vision of a Europe free of internal borders has been replaced by the reality of 'Fortress Europe.' For Balibar, 'Europe' is 'a phantom of the past,' and 'a name that "is history" rather than society, politics, or economics' (Balibar 197). Today, the word *Europe* is commonly used to refer to the European Union (EU) as a political confederation of independent member nation states, whose citizens have been able to move freely across member states' internal borders, thanks to the implementation in the 1990s of the Schengen and Dublin Conventions. This right to freedom of movement and visa-free border-crossing has, nevertheless, been accompanied by the intensification and militarisation of Europe's external borders, which makes attempts by refugees and migrants to cross them a highly risky and, often, necessarily clandestine endeavour. The movement of refugee and migrant people across EU borders is hardly a recent phenomenon, but it has intensified as a result of the ongoing war in Syria and political unrest in the MENA region following the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011. In consequence, the number of people attempting to reach Europe via reopened central Mediterranean's routes has risen.

Such strategies have resulted in increasing numbers of border-crossing casualties, in particular throughout the years 2015-2016.<sup>1</sup> The casualties are directly

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<sup>1</sup> According to the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Missing Migrants Project more than 5,000 people lost their lives in the Mediterranean Sea in 2016, a record number. See: IOM Global Migration Data Analysis Centre Data Briefing Series, no. 8, March 2017. Available online: <https://publications.iom.int/books/global-migration-data>

related to extensive militarisation of the EU's outer borders and the violent security policies and procedures involved in border control. Mezzadra has described these violent processes as Europe's 'border war,' a war taking place 'in the name of Europe,' on behalf of European citizens (Mezzadra, as quoted in Balibar 202). This aggressive border enforcement is commonly outsourced by the EU, whose agreements with neighbouring countries – in particular, Turkey and Libya – are aimed at repelling border-crossing attempts and deterring would-be migrants. Since 2005, the European border agency Frontex (a contraction of *frontiers extérieures* – literally, "external borders") has been responsible for surveillance and control in the border zones and in particular, around the Mediterranean Sea. The formation of Frontex signaled an intensification of the EU's border management in response to increased numbers of EU-bound migrants from North and West Africa, who jumped the wall in Ceuta in 2005. Similarly, Frontex received extra funding after four major shipwrecks, on 3 and 11 October 2013 and 12 and 18 April 2015 (Heller and Pezzani). In spite of Frontex's intensification of rescue operations in the Mediterranean, migrant deaths increased in number. This is attributed partly to the highly dangerous methods of human traffickers, which have resulted in the tragic deaths of thousands of people (Heller and Pezzani).

The high number of casualties resulting from attempted EU border crossing has been visualised in a large number of photographs, including the infamous one of the toddler Aylan Kurdi, who was drowned in September 2015. The endless reproducibility of Aylan's photograph provoked strong responses from the public, bringing the EU borders and migrancy to the forefront of European current affairs discourse. The documenting of mortality rates, along with use by the authorities of military jargon, photographs of deaths during crossings, and over-crowded trafficking and rescue vessels, have all contributed to what DeGenova has defined as 'border spectacle' – the visible rendering of migration through spectacular enactment of borders and their exclusionary effects (DeGenova 1183). Such spectacular enactments are accompanied by 'the spectacle of statistics' – an emphatic underscoring of the *enormity* of the numbers of refugees and migrants seeking entry to Europe (DeGenova and Tazzioli 22). This statistical spectacle is invoked by the EU's institutions of governance and the member states' national governments, as well as by the media and right-wing populist political parties and groups, and works to instill a sense of 'crisis' in the general public. The interchangeable terms 'migrant crisis' and 'refugee crisis' are often used to refer to an acceleration or 'influx' of migrant people since 2015, and both suggest that 'migration itself has been defined in terms of crisis that needs to be managed' (DeGenova et al 59). As DeGenova reminds us 'describing the situation as a "crisis" appears to be precisely

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analysis-centre-data-briefing-series-issue-no-8-march-2017. Comparable numbers are provided by UNHCR, which calculates the number of the missing migrants as 3138 in 2017, and 2277 in 2018. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>

a device for the authorisation of exceptional or “emergency” governmental measures aimed at enhancing and expanding border enforcement and immigration policing. The spectacle of Europe’s “migrant crisis” is largely equated, consequently, with a crisis of control over the ostensible borders of Europe’ (DeGenova *The “Crisis”* 39 [his emphasis]). Related terms, such as ‘humanitarian crisis,’ a ‘crisis of the European border regime,’ or ‘Europe’s refugee crisis’ have been used extensively to describe the same phenomenon. Such descriptors obfuscate crucial aspects of what is a multilateral crisis, for example the 2007 ‘economic crisis’ in Europe, the ‘crisis in the Middle East’ and the scale of refugees fleeing war and conflict zones (DeGenova and Tazzioli 8).

This article examines the ways in which photography enacts this ‘border spectacle’ and contributes to the growing discourse around the ‘crisis of the European borders.’ Focusing on a pro-Brexit political poster (‘Breaking Point’) used by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) during the 2016 UK referendum campaign, this article discusses how UKIP’s (pro-Brexit) campaigning contributed to dominant and largely uncontested visual narratives of refugees and migrants as a ‘threat’ to British prosperity and national security. It analyses the ways in which the photograph (taken by Getty Images photographer Jeffrey Mitchell) used in the ‘Breaking Point’ poster portrays refugees as a large, out of control, dangerous crowd, and thereby perpetuates stereotypical representations of the racialised Muslim ‘Other.’ It also discusses the ways in which the poster’s racialised anti-immigration connotations were conveyed in the wider media, in particular through coverage that juxtaposed the figure of the (then) UKIP leader and (current) Member of the European Parliament Nigel Farage with the poster’s representation of refugees. This article takes the view that borders are not simply lines of territorial demarcation, but rather *social relationships* between citizens and those designated ‘non-citizens,’ and argues that this presumed distinction between people was at work in UKIP’s ‘Breaking Point’ poster and accompanying political messaging, along with its coverage. Finally, it considers how explicit representations of refugees as ‘threatening subjects,’ ‘potential criminals,’ or even ‘terrorists,’ constitutes a stereotyping praxis commonly seen in recent populist, far-right political campaigning, and considers the role of this in the recent rise of racist, xenophobic, anti-immigration agendas in Europe.

### **The Threatening Crowd and Fear of the ‘Racialised Other’**

A vast number of photographs of the ‘refugee crisis’ have been taken by photo-journalists, professional photographers, NGO professionals, aid volunteers and – less commonly – by refugees themselves. Circulated via mainstream and social media, these photographs frequently focus on the hardship of the migratory journey and visualise tragic losses of life resulting from border-crossing attempts. The infamous photograph of Aylan Kurdi, a drowned three-year-old boy, was debated intensively in the mainstream and social media. It symbolised in the most visceral

way thousands of lives – including those of very young children – lost in the Mediterranean. The circulation in the media of photographs of suffering and dying refugees perpetuates stereotypical representations of the migrant people as miserable, helpless victims and passive subjects; such images aim to elicit the viewer's compassion and sympathy. Photographs of death and suffering at Europe's borders highlight a humanitarian crisis of an unprecedented scale and often contribute to the spectacularising of the 'humanitarian border,' which, as Walters defines it, 'is less interested in the military of political security concerns, and instead focuses on a perspective on migrants as victims, individual lost souls to be rescued and cared for' (DeGenova et.al. 68).

The humanitarian aspect of this 'crisis' has been mediated by photographs of groups of people on overcrowded boats and trains, walking along borders, and suffering on their journeys. Photographs and videos in the mainstream media's coverage show refugees walking *en masse*, being confronted by police, or trapped inside a nation's borders. Photos of refugees were published on a daily basis throughout 2015-2016. Reuters photographer Yannis Behrakis became the Guardian Photographer of the Year in 2015 for his photographs of overloaded boats arriving at the Greek Islands and crowds of refugees being obstructed at the border between Greece and the Republic of North Macedonia from continuing to their chosen destinations (Reuters). Behrakis's reportage deployed a methodology common to many photojournalists: to zoom out, in order to portray the magnitude of a flow of people in transit, or to zoom in, in order to focus on individual refugee stories, in an attempt to 'rescue' the subject from dehumanizing statistics and abstract narratives. Sergey Ponomarev's coverage of the refugees travelling the Western Balkan route appeared in *The New York Times* and as part of the exhibition 'A Lens on Syria,' held at the Imperial War Museum in London. This route became popular after two shipwrecks occurred in April 2015 (as mentioned above), which resulted in the intensification of border controls in the Mediterranean (an effort primarily led by Frontex). As a result, instead of heading to Italy, refugees were re-routed from the Turkish coast towards the Greek islands, and from there, they travelled onwards through mainland Greece to Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary and Slovenia. In most of the cases, the desired destination was Germany. The majority of Ponomarev's photographs show the overcrowded boats and trains used by the refugees in their hazardous journeys to Europe (Ponomarev).

Many photojournalists have documented the great number of refugees who travelled the Western Balkan route between September 2015 and March 2016. This route became more indirect and dangerous, when Hungary repeatedly closed its borders to the refugees in the autumn of 2015. In September 2015, it 'instituted emergency legislation in the border zone that threatened all border-crossers with up to three years imprisonment, in flagrant disregard for any and all petitions for asylum – in an extravagant gesture of renewed commitment to its assigned role in

enforcing the borders of “Europe” (DeGenova *The “Crisis”* 43). Hungary’s right-wing prime minister Viktor Orbán defended his decision to use wire-fencing to close the country’s border with Serbia as a way to protect ‘Christian Europe’ from a ‘Muslim menace,’ clarifying that ‘Muslim refugees’ were particularly unwelcome (DeGenova *The “Crisis”* 42). Far-right parties throughout Europe have used similar arguments, advocating that jobs, economic growth and national security are threatened by the arrival of refugees. A viral video taken in early September 2015 of a camerawoman at the Hungarian border tripping a male refugee holding his son, and kicking a refugee boy and girl, visualised in the most grotesque way a growing anti-immigrant sentiment taking root in several European countries, which such imagery only served to re-enforce. The entry point into Hungary from Serbia was fenced shut in 2016, and in March of that year the EU finalised a deal with Turkey. In response to the perceived threat of an uncontrollable ‘mass influx’ of refugees, a number of EU borders were closed in 2015, resulting in the temporary suspension of the Schengen treaty, (along with its guarantee of freedom of movement between signatory member states, and limited border checks between those states).

Refugees were directed to Slovenia days after Hungary closed its borders. As an EU member state, Hungary was subject to the Schengen agreement. Thousands of migrants arriving by train into Hungary had to then walk through fields for eight kilometers to the Croatian-Slovenian border, and from there to a designated refugee camp in Brežice. Jeffrey Mitchell took a number of photographs of the human convoy along the border, capturing the hardship and suffering. Among them are ones depicting women carrying babies, and temporary encampments, with refugees trying to keep warm around an open fire. On 23 October 2015, Mitchell photographed a group of migrants being escorted by police to the Brežice camp. This was the photograph used in 2016 by UKIP in their ‘Breaking Point’ poster in the run-up to the UK’s referendum on EU membership.

Mitchell took the photograph from a bridge using the right lenses to compress the crowd, which is predominantly male. While a woman and a child can be seen, there is no obvious heterogeneity in terms of gender, which destabilizes the group. The men are seen walking very closely together with some looking outwards and beyond the crowd with agonised expressions, they are effectively depicted as a homogenous mass – rather than a varied group of individual subjects. The photograph is cropped to suggest that this ‘human trail’ is only partially visible, the implication being that it continues, perhaps in enormous numbers, beyond the frame. There is no indication of the actual numbers of refugees present, but the photograph gives the impression of a very large crowd that appears to be moving, uncontrollably, towards the photographer, and by implication, towards us, the viewers. This reading of the image is at variance with the reality of events shown in the photograph – in fact, as noted above, the migrants were being led to the official Brežice refugee camp in Slovenia, by the Croatian police. However, in

contrast with other photographs on the Getty website, this photograph does not include any police. In reality, the migrants were being escorted and supervised, yet, the photograph suggests the crowd's movement is self-directed, and uncontrolled.

Depicting a crowd in this way, from a high vantage point, gives rise to connotations of the crowd as 'dangerous' and 'out of control.' This depiction is commonplace in media images that seek to demonize crowds, for example as 'violent' protesters, or, in recent years, 'Islamist mobs.' The photographs of the suspected terrorists released immediately after the 9/11 terrorist attack, identified the male, 'non-white Other' as 'potential terrorist.' In the aftermath of 9/11, repeated circulation of the photographs of hijackers, and accompanying references to 'faces of terror' crystallised what the public should expect terrorists to look like (Gates 434). The photos also invoked 'the idea of an amorphous, racialized, fetishized enemy 'Other' that had penetrated both the national territory and the national imagination' (Gates 434). In all these cases, the image of the face signifies racial identity and embodies terror, echoing parochial, pseudo-scientific and highly racialized discourses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries according to which physiognomic characteristics can denote criminality. The actual racial identities and political beliefs of the 9/11 hijackers have, therefore, given rise to a racist reception in the media that sought to 'Other' Muslims in general, presenting them as 'potential terrorists,' and objects of fear and hatred.

The spatial and bodily politics of fear, and actual politics of control, which have been dominant since 11 September 2001, have intensified in the last decade, in particular following terrorist attacks in various European cities. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris, on 13 November 2015, the idea that an 'uncontrolled influx' of refugees was providing cover for 'foreign fighters' and 'home-grown extremists,' moving freely between the Syrian combat zone and Western Europe, dominated public discourse. This triggered another wave of EU border-control intensification, and 'despite the fact that all of the alleged culprits of the Paris shootings identified were in fact (racialized 'minority') Europeans, the spectacle of terror nevertheless served quite effectively as a virtually unquestionable pretext for dramatically reinvigorated border enforcement' (DeGenova *The "Crisis"* 40-41). The multiple sexual assaults that took place during New Year's Eve celebrations in Cologne in January 2016 were attributed to 'unruly mobs' of young men appearing to come from either the Middle East or Northern Africa, and of presumed 'Muslim' identity. The 'Muslim racialised Other' (a hybrid figure produced by falsely conflating religion and race) is presented as a 'potential terrorist' who poses a threat not only to Europe's security, but also presents a burden on the EU's health services, education systems, job markets and housing supply among others. The Muslim refugees who arrived at Europe since 2015 were no exception.

### **Photography as Border: 'Non-Citizens' and the Far-Right**

On 23 June 2016, Britain held a referendum on whether the country should leave or remain in the European Union. The Leave campaign supported by UKIP focused mainly on the issue of immigration in the final weeks of campaigning (Miah). In order to convince the electorate to vote to leave the EU, UKIP's campaign poster featured Mitchell's photograph of refugees discussed above, accompanied by the slogan 'Breaking Point: the EU failed us all.' In smaller letters was written: 'We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders.' The central feature of UKIP's campaign was their argument that the UK's EU membership suppresses the sovereign will of the British people, which UKIP wanted to reclaim. The poster was launched by UKIP's then leader Nigel Farage, and became known to the public primarily through a second photograph: that of Farage posing in front of it. This second photograph was reproduced in several national newspapers in the weeks preceding the referendum and elicited strong reactions. Politicians, journalists and the general public accused UKIP of xenophobic, race-based politics, and the promotion of racial hatred. Twitter users and media commentators highlighted the similarities that the 'Breaking Point' poster bore with Third-Reich era Nazi propaganda warning of the 'Jewish threat.'

The second photograph provided a striking contrast between an individual – Farage – and the crowd of refugees shown in the 'Breaking Point' poster. Farage's composed stance in front of the poster contrasts the inherent kinesis of the crowd. He posed with his legs spread wide, a posture perceived as a classic 'power stance' and adopted by many leading Conservative politicians since 2015 (Belam). Farage is detached from the crowd; the contrast between the composed individual and the 'uncontrolled' crowd of refugees is the leading feature of the photograph. This 'out of control' and 'impulsive' crowd appears as 'something to be feared, from the perspective of the bourgeois individualist subject, because it threatens desubjectification on the primary level' (Schnapp and Tiew 321-2). The crowd's 'uncontrollable' aspect and its gender homogeneity played a crucial role in the campaign. In Farage's words: 'as you can see from this picture, most of the people coming are young males and, yes, they may be coming from countries that are not in a very happy state, they may be coming from places that are poorer than us, but the EU has made a fundamental error that risks the security of everybody' (Stewart and Mason). There is a linguistic dichotomy between we/us and they/them in Farage's statement. The pronoun 'we' clearly refers here to British citizens, while the refugees are assumed to pose a threat to Britain's national borders.

Farage is, in this instance, intended to signify here a particular type of 'Britishness' – male, white and middle-class. His figure contrasts starkly with the refugees in the poster behind him, who are young men of colour, whose dark skin operates as a signifier of the (racialised) 'Other.' In the context of UKIP's campaigning, they are held up as objectified 'difference' (racial, cultural, religious). UKIP offers a homogenous, ethno-nationalist representation of British

citizenship, which excludes racial and ethnic minorities, including migrants. From this perspective, ‘non-white people’ are argued to threaten the UK’s prosperity and are responsible for the decline of white communities. Public debate around Brexit has been fraught with the language of racism and Islamophobia. In this case, Muslims are not simply defined as a religious but also as a *racial* group. ‘Race,’ as Miah has made clear, ‘is central to the emergence, evolution and metamorphosis of Brexit. It continues, conceptually and ideologically, to shape the parameters of the Brexit debate and will no doubt continue to frame future debates in this mould’ (Miah 634). Fear towards people of color has arguably been instilled by UK government policy: the ‘Operation Vaken’ campaign was launched by then Home Secretary Teresa May in 2013, its message – ‘In the UK illegally? Go Home or Face Arrest’ – was circulated as billboards and posters aimed at minority ethnic communities; these appeared in newspapers, shop windows, community centres and Islamic places of worship. Following the recent terrorist attacks, ‘these notices were not aimed at deporting illegal immigrants since, according to the government’s own figures, only eleven people left the country as a direct result of the campaign; the aim, rather, was to instill fear of people of color’ (Miah 635).

This language of racism can be found in campaigns by other European far-right political parties, which have used photographs of migrant people to build a narrative of ‘criminal foreigners’ and a ‘threat to the nation.’ The right-wing populist Swiss People’s Party (*Schweizerische Volkspartei*, SVP) launched a poster campaign in 2007 in support of the deportation without trial of ‘criminal foreigners.’ Their poster portrays three white sheep on the top of the Swiss flag, and one black sheep being kicked out of the flag area by a white sheep. The slogan ‘achieve security’ held the clear implication: ‘through the deportation of criminal foreigners.’ Since 2007, this poster design has been used in localised, racist anti-immigrant campaigning by Germany’s National Democratic Party (*Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, NPD), Spain’s National Democracy (*Democracia Nacional*, DN) and Italy’s Northern League (*Lega Nord*, LN) (Doerr 321-2). Its circulation in different political and cultural contexts and widespread publication on websites and blogs run by European populist and extremist right-wing parties and groups testifies to the representation of refugees as a ‘threatening Other’ by the right (Doerr 315-335). The stigmatization of cultural, ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities as a feared ‘Other’ that threatens ‘we-group’ identity has become the defining characteristic of right-wing populist parties (Wodak 2-4).

Nevertheless, the difference between the individual and the crowd is not just racial, cultural and religious. Their relationship is mediated by the implied presence of the border, which separates those who are safely inside the border – in the case under discussion, Farage – and those outside – in this case, the refugees walking along the border of Croatia and Slovenia. This border is not physical, and cannot be indexically represented in a UKIP campaign photograph. Even more



importantly, the border along which the refugees are depicted in Mitchell's photograph is not a UK border. Neither is it simply a line of demarcation, a 'thing' (such as a wall, a fence or a bridge), but rather, *a social relationship mediated by things* (Mezzadra and Neilson 6-7). Borders appear as objectified entities, but they conceal sociopolitical relations. Their thing-like appearance is the result of repetitive discourses and processes that continuously objectify borders, turning them into objects or objective facts. DeGenova explains how the objectification of borders involves productive activity: 'Once objectified thus, we may nevertheless recognise borders to be enduringly *productive*. Borders, in this sense, may be considered *means of production* – for the production of space, or indeed, the production of difference in space. As enactments in and upon space, like any means of production, borders must themselves be produced and continuously re-produced [his emphasis]' (DeGenova *The "Crisis"* 49).

The photograph of Farage in front of the 'Breaking Point' poster reproduces both the 'objective' border, along with the oppositional figures of the citizen (Farage) and the non-citizen (refugee). The border here is, therefore, an imaginary, pictorially represented as a *relationship* between Farage and the crowd. The border is not visualised here as a wall, barbed-wire fence or border checkpoint (the customary symbolic depictions seen in photojournalistic images and documentary photographs of borders). It is enacted through the racialised, and classed differences between Farage and the refugees, which are markers of power imbalance, of fundamental inequality. The border is constructed pictorially, as a striking contrast between those inside (citizens) and those outside (non-citizens). This imaginary, performative and highly constructed separation enacts border enforcement at the symbolic level. The photograph *itself* becomes a border, one which generates, sustains and mediates the continuous production of a set of clear, binary, oppositional distinctions between 'inside' and 'outside,' 'wanted' and 'unwanted,' 'desirable' and 'undesirable,' 'legitimate' and 'deportable.'

In this sense, UKIP's Brexit campaign, along with photographs of crowded migrant ships, documentation of migrant mortality, use of military jargon, and the intensification of control and surveillance techniques, are part of a constellation of images and discursive formations that produce and re-produce the 'border spectacle' of 'migrant illegality.' This 'border spectacle' is defined as, a constellation of images: of patrols, raids, detentions and deportations across territorial borders, as well as the much more ubiquitous, spectacular practices of law enforcement and the violation of law (DeGenova *Spectacle* 1183-4). This enactment of the border at the level of representation reinforces Balibar's arguments that, nowadays, not only have borders become dislocated and ubiquitous – they are also transported beyond any material borderlines (Balibar 203). In the European context, the proliferation of borders and the spectacle of migrant 'illegality' directly contrasts with the 'recruitment of "illegal" migrants by European Union member states, as undocumented labour' (De Genova "Spectacles" 1185). Thus, while the

European economy needs migrant labour, its practices effectively seek not only to attract, but also to conversely repel would-be migrants. This results in migrants, refugees and asylum seekers existing in a state of permanent insecurity. This insecurity then extends to the *insiders*, as a result of the transformation of migrants 'into subjects and objects of fear, *experiencing fear* of being rejected and eliminated, and *inspiring fear* in the 'stable' populations' (Balibar 2003).

### Conclusion

UKIP's EU referendum campaign poster 'Breaking Point' is a characteristic example of an incontrovertibly xenophobic and racist political message that seeks to turn immigrants into objects of fear. The campaign shares similarities with other recent nationalist-populist and far-right political campaigns in Europe that have used provocative posters to portray immigrants as 'threatening subjects,' 'criminal foreigners,' or even 'potential terrorists.' In the spring of 2018, the nationalist Hungarian government used Mitchell's photograph in its own anti-immigration campaign. Initially circulated on social media and later distributed offline in poster form, the photograph was reproduced with a 'stop' sign imposed on top of it. This re-appropriation of the Mitchell photograph is evidence that European far-right activists are using online platforms to collaborate and share strategies, ideas and visual material, with the aim of advancing their racist political agendas. Photographs, then, can be seen as an integral part of a media-saturated, discursive regime, belonging to a larger sociopolitical procedure that renders refugees 'illegal,' 'non-desirable,' 'non-citizens.' To the extent that these discourses and representations go uncontested, those seeking refuge in Europe will continue to be treated as scapegoats in anti-immigrant and xenophobic agendas. Such agendas contribute to the intensification and proliferation of security measures, and the empowerment of populist-nationalist and far-right political discourse. It is therefore clear that the struggle against anti-immigration discourses must involve a rejection of media-generated fear of the 'Other,' as well as a contestation of the present regime of media, governmental, and far-right representations, which increasingly represent refugees as 'threats,' 'potential criminals,' and 'possible terrorists.'

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