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Reinscribing the Racial Subject in “Public Transcript”: Richard Wright’s *Black Boy (American Hunger)*

By E. Lâle Demirtürk

RICHARD WRIGHT’S *BLACK BOY* (1945)/*AMERICAN HUNGER* (1977) has been viewed as an important autobiography exploring the impact of racism on a black boy growing into manhood. The abundance of critical works on the text point to various vantage points from which it can be viewed as a “document” on the inside story of being both black and male in a white racist society. Yoshinobu Hakutani believes it is not just an autobiography “but also one of the most influential discourses on race in America” (116). Michel Fabre suggests that it “was forcing the American reader to consider the South from the black point of view” (280). Wright’s autobiography attempts, in Jerry Ward’s words, “to subvert the discourse of the dominant culture and bring it under the terms of his own control” (xix). The text becomes a racial moment in which a black boy’s using an “I” to tell his side of the story shakes the boundaries between the included and the excluded. Wright himself said he wrote the book to make a judgment on the fact that “the environment the South creates is too small to nourish human beings, especially Negro human beings. . . . I wanted to lend, give my tongue, to voiceless Negro boys” (“How” 65).

In fact *Black Boy (American Hunger): A Record of Childhood and Youth* can be placed within the tradition of African American autobiography based on the slave narrative form, because it indicts “a racist system based on ignorance, fear, and hate” (Dick 147). Autobiography as a genre has long stood as “one of the West’s master discourses, a discourse that has served to power and define centers, margins, boundaries, and grounds of action in the West” (Smith, *Subjectivity* 18). Appropriating the autobiographical practice has meant for the former slaves a reinscription of their emancipatory discourse and hence an act of resistance as a viable means for forming their subjectivity. Along the

same lines, "African-American intellectuals used the autobiographical form to examine ideological issues and to situate their personal preferences within that larger political context" (Franklin 11). Although the positionality of Wright as black autobiographer determines the quality of his politics, there were also some black autobiographers such as Booker T. Washington who gave themselves agency while acting in accord with the power elite in the North and the South during the post-Civil War and post-Reconstruction eras. In his autobiography *Up From Slavery* (1901), Washington's Atlanta Exposition Address to the white middle class audience comes alive: "As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past . . . we shall stand by you . . . interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one" (221). In this context, Washington's use of I signifies an insider within the white dominant culture. However, the question of how the autobiographical subject redefines for himself/herself the identity contents of the "I" becomes a political question in African American autobiography, and more precisely in Wright's case, because the racial subject engages the different voices of cultural discourses that have pinned him down to subjugation. In other words, he writes from an "outsider-within" location to produce an oppositional knowledge, veiled to others on the other side of the color line (Collins 8).

The text defies the imposition of mere autobiographical themes, as it addresses the power relations between the dominant and the subordinate in a racialized context. Taking the cue from James C. Scott's argument in his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, I would argue that Wright's autobiography invites a closer scrutiny of how the terms "public transcript" as "the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate" (2) and "hidden transcript" as "discourse that takes place 'offstage,' beyond direct observation by powerholders" (4) generate a statement on the impact of white domination on black public discourse. Scott claims that "the hidden transcript represents discourse . . . that is ordinarily excluded from the public transcript of subordinates by the exercise of power. The practice of domination, then, *creates* the hidden transcript" (27). In having access to the "hidden transcript" of black and to the "public transcript" of white communities, the border subject engages the discourse of subjectivity in *Black Boy (American Hunger)*. The text is "infused with [Wright's] attempt to control his anger when in the presence of whites and, in turn, to give vent to that anger in the safety of black company" (Scott 38–39). Wright makes a statement on how the "hidden transcript" operates among blacks in the early pages of his autobiography: "The

touchstone of fraternity was my feeling toward white people, how much hostility I held toward them, what degrees of value and honor I assigned to race. None of this was premeditated, but sprang spontaneously out of the talk of black boys who met at the crossroads" (91).

Racial hierarchy informs the construction of whiteness "as an ideology, a system of beliefs privileging those with white skin" (Babb 47). Whiteness as a privileged social site operates by its dependency upon its Other (black) for its symbolic constitution. The title identifies white racist thinking in designating the social connotation of blackness: calling an African American a boy (or a nigger) provides the white man with an "elitist" perspective informing his social positionality in relation to the abject black American. Wright's grandfather's story is a significant example of how a black American can be "erased" from the official transcript simply because he mispronounced his name as Richard Vinson instead of Richard Wilson making it impossible for him to get the pension from the War Department after serving in the Union Army, a fact that explains why the white southern officer had "deliberately falsified Grandpa's papers" (163). Grandfather's illiteracy has cost him total displacement from the records, for the rendition of social invisibility is a consequence of not having linguistic power. *Black Boy (American Hunger)* offers a critical positioning which provides a sense of place and occupies a site outside the larger cultural and representational field in the act of dismantling the layers of dominant inscriptions enclosing him. The young black boy asks his mother why his grandmother looks white and learns that not only Granny's color but her name was also given by the "white man who owned her" (56). He soon discovers that blackness is closely connected with displacement and that blacks are placeless so long as the boundaries of the place are determined by whites, for they have linguistic power over black Americans. The text itself designates an ascribed social space for a "black boy," and the moment black boy starts writing from that *ascribed space*, he constitutes a new subject-position, because the "subject" is differently placed or *positioned* by different discourses and practices" (Hall 226). Black objectification invoked in a racist discourse seem to be challenged by this "new subject position which demands new discourses to speak out his mind. To constitute himself as the subject of his own history brings Wright into the domain of the universal (white) subject, inevitably challenging the dominant discourse.

Wright's critique of white supremacist stance involves our coming to terms with "absences" especially when the racial Other is actually *here* (quite visible), and therefore this is not a comforting narrative for those controlling the white public discourse. The discerning white gaze

in the title offers a judgmental stance subverted by a narrative that engages a discourse on whiteness in speaking from within the veil of racial alterity: to produce a discourse on whiteness as a counterhegemonic act interrogates the normative discourse. Investigating the politics of whiteness entails a particular way of knowing and being within the context of unequal terrains of power. Reconstructing whiteness as the position of an interrogated space subverts and challenges the hegemonic position of whiteness as that which “produces and racializes an abject Other” (McLaren 67). Whiteness stands for a social position and location of social privilege, but it also refers to “an unstable category which gains its meaning only through social relations” (Lopez xiv). In the scene following Wright’s flight from the orphan home, he comes across a white policeman whose nice manners and “confidential tone” causes him to feel “he was not ‘white’ any more” (37).

In the act of interrogating the politics of domination that informs the representation of blacks, the text starts with the title itself implying an assumption that blackness is associated with a lack (of whiteness and of manhood). Trudier Harris argues that “it is the white man’s tradition to call the black man ‘boy.’ If the black man is indeed a boy, then he can be easily controlled in everyday affairs. . . . ‘Boy,’ an effort at controlling language and thereby controlling the reality the language is designed to reflect, wipes out the symbolic, sexual implications of the black man as Man” (304). The one-dimensional representation of black male as boy is a political act of emasculating black masculinity. White constructions of black masculinity promoting an association between race and gender create a hierarchical construction of hegemonic masculinity and subordinate masculinity. The ‘hidden transcripts’ of subordinates in this case become an act of resistance to hegemonic masculinity, defined as the ‘culturally exalted form of masculinity’” (Hearn 207).

Examining the white masculinist imaginary of what constitutes black masculinity involves decoding the black male positioning as a “rebellious appropriation of prohibited masculine positionality” (Traister 289). Autobiography by definition produces a space of discourse that “offers an alternative to patronizing and marginalizing (mis)representation by others; it thus provides a medium for counterdiscourse that challenges stereotypes and misconceptions” (Couser 305). This counterdiscourse is implicated in African Americans’ “oppositional locations,” for the racialization of American national, masculine discourse as white implies the lack of full-fledged African American male political agency (Collins 8). Since human agency is what we need in bringing about changes in white hegemonic masculinist determination of not sharing

the public domain with African Americans, then we “need the honesty to objectify ourselves in the mirror of our particular others, and to choose our ethical battles in the context of the reality of those objectifications” (Mostern 216).

The black boy’s depiction of his subjectivity intervenes in the white dominant discourse by bespeaking the representation of whiteness in the black mind, resisting the systematic dismissal of blacks from public consciousness. While a white supremacist attitude to keep the nigger in his place constitutes the white public discourse, the text invites an examination of where that place is located in unveiling the sociopolitical dynamics of blackness. Wright’s representation of the black subject’s formation reconstructs his social location, appropriating Gayatri C. Spivak’s claim that “[t]he subject is always centered” (*Post-Colonial Reason* 323). Wright’s marginal position is implicated in the center inhabited by the whites, as he inserts the inherent “I” of “black boy” into a narrative that forms the black subject.

In a country where all human relations are shaped by race, black manhood emerges “as a dominated social location” (Mostern 14). The black objectification embedded in the site of black boyhood is a contested site of racial difference, demanding a response to the following question in a racialized context: “How does a boy become a man?” (Middleton 17). This question addresses the formation of black masculine subjectivity, while generating the knowledge of what constitutes the white self. Traditionally speaking, “Boys are excluded from the activities which define man in the public and domestic sphere” (23). *Black Boy (American Hunger)* denotes “feminized black masculinity” that can become a forceful site of resistance, as the black boy subverts the white authority by entering into the social discourse he has never been admitted into. The location of the autobiographical subject can be problematic for an African American because the legacy of slavery “has rendered him a non-subject and thus a non-‘man’” (Smith, “Performativity” 25). Thus racialized subjectivity does not fit into established paradigms because racialized bodies are located in specific socioeconomic spaces so as not to produce different discourses to intersect the dominant discourse. Being a black boy invokes an act of displacement from the formation of white masculinity and hence it is clear that there is no other position from which to speak an emancipatory discourse than from an oppositional one.

The opening scene where Wright burns the curtains to express his anger against his mother’s authority signifies the defiance of parental authority as a metaphor for his later defiance of objectification. Even when a severe beating follows the scene of fire—“I was lashed so hard and long that I lost consciousness” (7)—he resists any strategy to make

him conform. His killing the kitten savagely to defy his father's authority is also another form of resistance, for he knows that his father cannot punish him for what he literally told him to do. Beating up the gang of boys who have constantly beaten him up and becoming a six-year-old alcoholic or writing four-letter words on the walls his mother makes him clean are all covert strategies of resistance in the South.

Wright's subsequent experience of defying authority, for instance, in Jackson, Mississippi, where he tells Granny to "kiss back there" ends up in severe beating again (48). But in a similar setting, just as when Granny and Addie failed to beat him, for a second time totally giving up on him, Uncle Tom's attempt to teach him submissiveness as "the backward black boys act on the plantations" does not prove successful, for Wright is ready to fight back (186). Hence Uncle Tom not only gives up on him but also on appropriating the white coercion into black suppression, whereas his mother beats him up, even after his scalp is stitched, to teach him he "must never fight white boys again, that [he] might be killed by them" (97). However, the anxiety attached to the white people in the South is reinforced in Uncle Haskins's murder by whites because his liquor business went so well, in having to run off to West Helena, in how Maggie and Prof. Matthews feel as white people are looking for Prof. Matthews, and in having to run away from whites to the North. All these add up to the "pressure of hate and threat that stemmed from the invisible whites," located in a world that made black boy feel displaced (85).

All these scenes of defiance and punishment are contrasted to Wright's success at school (promoted to 6th grade in Jim Hill Public School)—something the family never shares with him. In spite of all the family problems including his mother's paralysis for many years, Granny's coming to take care of them, going to Clarksdale with Uncle Edward and his mother, causing Granny to stay six weeks abed, and with Grandpa's death, Wright starts having job experiences where he acts in a tactful manner to indicate he knows "his place," an act of knowing necessary for his survival in the South. To be a "real" black boy, he has to unman himself to survive. His reality in the white world is shaped by various whites he works for: the white family who sees him as a racial stereotype—a potential thief, a nigger, and not intellectual; another white family that arouses constant fear in him so that he can eat a lot of food only when they are not around; the white boss' racist remark, "But I never saw a dog yet that could really hurt a nigger" (192)—all point to his non-personhood in the white mind. Similarly, a black carpenter warns him that the newspaper he sells is Klu Klux Klan propaganda and so positions Wright as an indirect agent promoting white racism, "If you sell 'em, you're just helping white people to kill

you" (154); Wright quits the job. Being seen as a passive agent in promoting white appropriation of black racial stereotype as completely ignorant teaches Wright to "read the 'baffling signs' of an oppressive, biracial social structure" to deconstruct the white social imaginary (Step 131).

What Wright "shares" with whites in public discourse is the public transcript prescribed for a Negro: his mere survival depends on the extent to which he hides his 'hidden transcript' that interferes with the white public domain, built upon public values such as blacks' being docile, ignorant, and lazy. The rise of Wright's black consciousness comes with his recognition that whiteness is indeed associated with terror in the South. Bob's being killed by whites because of fooling with a white prostitute in a hotel crushes Wright's inner world, and he feels that the "penalty of death awaited [him] if [he] made a false move and [he] wondered if it was worth-while to make any move at all" (203). The earlier scene of confrontation with Uncle Tom in which Wright threatened him with a razor introduces Wright's impulse to assert his "masculine" power in the South—an impulse carried to the graduation speech scene. Even though the face of the white principal gives Wright the already written speech he is expected to read, he still makes his own speech: "With almost seventeen years of baffled living behind me, I faced the world in 1925" (211).

The consequences of not fitting into the white code of black behavior are clearly shown in many scenes: the racist father and son who own the store beat up the black woman who does not pay on time; Wright is beaten by the whites for not saying "sir," "Ain't you learned to say *sir* to a white man yet?" (214); he rides his bicycle for deliveries in a white neighborhood when the police warn him not to do it at night again; he learns he should not look at the white boss directly in the eye; a white boss, used to "merry niggers," kicks him out of the job because he never fits the stereotype. Eventually, it is his friend Griggs who warns him to "learn how to live in the South!" for he is marked for not acting black (217). The racism Wright experiences in the optical trade when the white man tells him he does not have to learn about the trade helps reveal that the right to know is racialized. When anticipating violence emotionally exhausts him, Wright decides to go up North: "I had begun coping with the white world too late. I could not make subservience an automatic part of my behavior" (231). Working in the hotel where Bob was killed, he is amazed to see how "the black boys acted out the roles that the white race had mapped out for them" (232). The white night watchman's sexual harassment of Negro girls is in contrast to black bellboys like Wright who are not supposed to look at the white naked prostitutes in bed. The white male body has a

right to the black girl's body, whereas the black male body is marked by the white myth of the black male as totally disempowered. The white masculinist stereotyping of blacks is reiterated in Mr. Olin's joy to see blacks fighting each other, as Wright and Harrison do the make-believe fight. Wright's concealment of his hatred for whites—"the safety of my life in the South depended upon how well I concealed from all whites what I felt" (275)—is also the disclosure of how his pent-up anger feeds into the "hidden transcript," for his survival depends on how well he can keep his real feelings hidden. Mr. Falk's letting him use his library card to borrow books shows a black boy's interest in learning/reading would be a challenge to the white status quo. Similarly, he tells his white boss that he has to take his paralyzed mother to Chicago, "That would create in his mind the impression that I was not asserting my will" (300), because the fact that he does not like the life in the South would be a threat to whites. Wright's migration to the North means "he rejected the 'place' the whites had accorded the blacks in the South" (Lenz 91).

American Hunger starts with his experiences in the Chicago of the late 1920s where Aunt Maggie and Wright fled to escape white oppression. Wright soon discovers that white codes are different in the North where there is no visible sign of racial fear. Unlike in the South, he can now sit next to a white man, who will be oblivious to his presence: "Was he conscious of my blackness?" (309). The paternalistic relationship between whites and Negroes in the South seems to be replaced by a different interracial relationship in the North. Working as a postal clerk or an insurance agent, he believes it is only the Negro who has the deepest insight into what it means to be black in America. Wright's connection to, his gradual dissatisfaction with, and his eventual split from the Communist Party as described in his autobiography also invites a consideration of his autobiographical essay about his experiences in the Communist Party. Wright feels excited about the Chicago John Reed Club and about the Communist Party to start with: "It seemed to me that here at last, in the realm of revolutionary expression, Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role" ("Richard Wright" 123); he is carried away by the romantic involvement with the belief that there is an organized effort to represent the truth of the lives of the oppressed. But this belief becomes a fantasy when, as the executive secretary of the club, he has to confront the black Communists' condemnation of him as "intellectual," a term used interchangeably with "bourgeois." Experiencing a total lack of freedom of speech in the Club and in the Party dominated by the discourse of whiteness, as the essay delineates, Wright decides to split from both, and hence from the black and white Communists alike:

"Once again I told myself that I must learn to stand alone" (162). Similarly, in *American Hunger*, Wright's work at the clinic and even in the Communist Party enables him to believe that whites cannot see blacks objectively enough, not even in the North. Damned as intellectual (or bourgeois) in the Communist Party, he later drops his membership: "It was irrational that Communists should hate what they called 'intellectuals,' or anybody who tried to think for himself" (435).

The white racist South in the early twentieth century is certainly defined by the legacy of master/slave power dynamics based on segregation and black subjugation, since individuality and manhood are the two social sites that are exclusively reserved for whites. Then Wright's autobiography shows what it is like to grow up black male in the South, or more precisely what it is like not to grow up in the eyes of white males, being entrapped by the social dynamics of subordinate masculinity. Gaining insight into how the South stifles his existence, Wright believes the North now represents "a place where everything was possible, I kept hope alive in me" (199). Denying black objectification, Wright probes the discourse on whiteness while he reconstructs the culturally emasculated black man as a site of resistance, as his courage and determination mark him an adult male.

The text delineates "the political, ideological, and cultural processes of subject formation on the racial border" (JanMohamed, "Worldliness" 116). Wright represents himself as black subject who is not content to remain within the prescribed borders. The formation of a racialized individual produces a discourse on the white oppressor's constitution of otherness. The black boy speaks to and engages non-hegemonic discourse to transgress the boundaries of a Black Belt discourse that has ascribed an essential selfhood to him: By "choosing for the title of his autobiography the generic marker of racist objectification, 'black boy,' Wright correctly implies that he is describing the formation of all those who have been 'subjectified' by racism" (JanMohamed, "Negating" 121). The text negotiates the cultural readings of blackness, but Wright shifts paradigms to display the transformation of the abject black American into a black subject. Intrusion into the white public domain reflects on the politics of dislocation as implicated in white supremacist predication of Americanization on the subordination of African Americans. When the subordinate discourse is reinscribed within the dominant discourse, the narrative demands that the white colonialist unlearn his supremacist attitude and deconstruct its racialized Other, for it becomes problematic to define who has the right to the inside: "But then, where is the inside? To define an inside is a political decision" (Spivak, "Reading" 102).

Being erased from the public discourse produces a problematic positioning of subaltern agency for African Americans, especially when the "hidden transcript" is transposed on the cultural domain of the dominant discourse by a "black boy." The narrative places the black subject in relation to the public domain that constantly others itself to the positionality of blackness constructing a social space whose terms of value are to be negotiated, for "the public transcript will typically . . . provide convincing evidence for the hegemony of dominant values, for the hegemony of dominant discourse" (Scott 4). Wright's relations with the white bosses in the text signify a so-called intersection between the dominant and the subordinate where his "public transcript" voices what whites want to hear, and obviously his "hidden transcript" never finds any public expression except in his autobiographical act. The white audience is an outsider to the inside narrative, because each "participant will be familiar with the public transcript and the hidden transcript of his or her circle, but not with the hidden transcript of the other" (Scott 15). The hidden transcript ironically serves as the privileged site for the subordinate discourse in the sense that the text negotiates the powers of cultural/racial difference in order to efface the domination intrinsic to racialized power. Patricia Hill Collins's question, "could she find a home in a system that, at best, was predicated upon my alleged inferiority and, at worst, was dedicated to my removal?" (4), describes the politics of home as problematic. Wright's social location as an "outsider-within" is a social space that offers an "unhomely" site to a black boy whose presence is implicated in the homely site of the white hegemonic position (Bhabha "World" 141). The center/margin polarity constitutes sites demanding a redefinition of the center as another margin: the shift in perspective of the center as marginal cannot be shown just by deploying marginality in the margins but by "implicating myself in that center and sensing what politics make it marginal" (Spivak, "Reading" 107).

Although the marker "black boy" as the spatial mediation of racialized discourse reinforces the white masculinist "public transcript," Wright utilizes his "hidden transcript" as a form of shifting his positionality in displacing whiteness as the site of racial knowing. The "hidden transcript" is very much positioned as he speaks at the margins: when the social location assigned/prescribed by the white masculinist power structure to a black boy is no longer designating a "homely site" and black boy as a social site no longer exists, then where does the text position whiteness as a social site except in the margins, so long as we negotiate the terms upon which it is predicated. For the first time, the "hidden transcript" of the subordinate and the "public

transcript” of the dominant enter into a terrain of public discourse producing a text in which we as readers enact our roles as mediators in the racialization of white American masculine discourse, which otherwise subscribes to colorlessness in the racial terrain and hence to supremacy: “The norming of space is partially done in terms of the *racing* of space, the depiction of space as dominated by individuals (whether persons or subpersons) of a certain race” (Mills 42). The act of acquiring political agency as an African American subject depends on decoding the hegemonic construction of white masculinity as normative. When deconstructing the white masculinist social imaginary, the African American subject has to recover his personhood in order to speak from within the domain of racial alterity, implicated in the white public discourse where otherness operates as a privileged site of subaltern agency.

The spatialization of race as a location defines the white self-conception as personhood built upon the repudiation of the black Other, reinforcing the notion that “[t]his space is *our* space, a space in which we (we white people) are at home, a cozy domestic space” (Mills 42). At the end of his autobiography, Wright’s walking home can be read as a symbolic act of walking back “home” to the title to reinhabit that “cozy domestic space” of the whites in order to claim full contents of the internal racial paradigm. In other words, the text “walks back home” to subjectify the black objectification in an effort to make it home. At the end of the text, Wright’s “radio was playing, pouring a white man’s voice into my home” stands out as an intersection between white man’s voice we as readers do not hear and the black subject whose voice is placed (452). We hear the black subject verbalizing “the inexpressibly human” (453)—another symbolic act in which we listen to the black subject speaking as opposed to the white man who does not (at least to us) any longer. *Black Boy (American Hunger)* in this context becomes a text that disrupts the white racial discourse by constituting a counterdiscourse that intervenes this white social imaginary. This act of intervention produces a historical moment that divides the identities of black boy from a black man who sets himself as a border crosser addressing multiple audiences, racial formations, and discourses. The borderline space, a site of the racial Other, becomes a site of negotiating difference through a borderline process where white masculinist identities create a sense of themselves in relation to an Other. We need to cross borders to start the negotiation and, in the process, the racial space becomes home when difference is domesticated.

As Wright displays how the white domination of black public discourse impedes the formation of black male subjectivity, he is also producing a public discourse out of the “hidden transcript.” The racial struggle over the boundaries between the public and hidden transcripts

is the pivotal point in *Black Boy (American Hunger)* where we cannot ignore the “hidden transcript” of the Other, an act that expands the possibilities of how we reread the signifiers of *black* and *boy*. By presenting the site of subversive discourse, Wright defies the sanctions deployed to enforce subordination: “The collective hidden transcript of a subordinate group often bears the forms of negation that, if they were transposed to the context of domination, would represent an act of rebellion” (Scott 115). Hence, Wright opens up the spaces of discourse out of which he produces a text that represents the social site of the “hidden transcript” in transformation where “[b]lackness can now signify vital prestige rather than abjection” (Gilroy 36). From the perspective of the nation’s margin “black boy” has spoken to the center, repositioning himself as a black man. By doing so, he transgresses the boundaries in negotiating the presence of the past and addressing the issue Homi Bhabha raises: “How does one encounter the past as an anteriority that continually introduces an otherness or alterity into the present?” (“Dissemination” 157). The sociocultural constituents of Southern black boyhood defining Wright’s personal past introduces an alterity interrupting the present in an autobiographical act of positing himself as subject. The alterity intervenes in the process of shaping the social location of the racial subject into a “homely” site. However the politics of discursive construction of the black subject determines the pertinence of that alterity in defining subjectivity, as Wright speaks not only from the nation’s margin to the center, but from within the site of racial alterity, privileging the “new “ subject position on the border. In this context, he introduces his autobiography as the only viable site to speak from, while he interrupts (and reinscribes his alterity within) the white public discourse in an attempt to authenticate it through the agency of his African American masculine subjectivity.

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