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Ideological Power in Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake: Bio politics, Exchangeability in Language, and Post human Legibility through the Lens of Judith Butler and bell hooks

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This article examines the role of ideology in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, focusing on how corporate power shapes life, identity, and the post-human condition. It aims to analyze how biopolitics, linguistic fluidity, and capitalist structures construct and legitimize a post-human future.

Methods: The study employs a critical literary analysis informed by Judith Butler's theory of performativity and bell hooks' critique of capitalism and gendered exploitation. Through close reading of the novel, the article investigates how language, branding, and corporate control function as mechanisms of biopower that shape bodies, identities, and desires.

Results: The analysis shows that biopower in *Oryx and Crake* operates through both biological manipulation and ideological control. Corporate structures commodify life itself, redefining what counts as human while normalizing bodily modification, consumerist identities, and systemic inequalities. Language and branding play a central role in shaping subjectivity, while gendered exploitation and normalized violence underpin the novel's portrayal of a supposedly "optimal" post-human humanity.

Conclusions: The article argues that Atwood critiques the post-human ideal by revealing how it depends on entrenched systems of inequality, exploitation, and ideological manipulation. *Oryx and Crake* ultimately functions as a cautionary narrative about the power of ideology in shaping the future, suggesting that acts of remembering and retelling history offer a form of resistance against the normalization of a post-human utopia.

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Introduction

Oryx and Crake by Margaret Atwood (2003) present a significant critique of biopolitics, corporate power, and the ideological control of citizens in a speculative future. Corporations are the dominant force driving the global economy, but they also have complete control over the biological foundation of life. Advancement in biotechnology means that the lines separating humanity from the post human are becoming increasingly blurred. According to the author, the world described in Oryx and Crake is chilling because life itself has been commodified and all human bodies and social systems have been optimized for profit maximization and efficiency. The text examines how the discourse of biopolitics, posthuman legibility, and language can be used to critically evaluate the ideological forces that perpetuate this corporate controlled future. Thus, this paper will analyze how power functions through biological and cultural control systems in Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake using frameworks derived from Michel Foucault's theory of biopower as found in *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony as cited in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1971), and Donna Haraway's posthumanist theories as expressed in *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1991).

Biotechnology and genetic engineering in Atwood's dystrophic setting are more than simply technological achievements. They act as instruments of social control as well as ideological reproduction. In Atwood’s fictional society, the exercise of power does not rely on physical coercion but upon shaping people: the bodies they inhabit, the desires they feel, and the vulnerabilities they experience. Foucault’s theory of biopower offers a framework through which to understand this relationship between power and people because he outlines a method by which the exercise of control over the masses has shifted from externally imposed sovereign rule such as being subject to a ruler's decree to internally managed systems focused on optimizing life (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 67). Atwood illustrates the concept of biopower through spatial and symbolic separation between the corporate compounds and pleeblands. Pleeblands serve as an example of the way language can act as structural support for social inequality, i.e., through the rich elite who live in corporate compounds and the poor, marginalized majority who dwell in Pleeblands. Atwood’s language purposely conflates the two terms with one another by including every description of each side as though it was equal, whereby continuous oppression of one group becomes normalized through repeated historical reference. In addition to the exploration of

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biopolitical arrangements, Oryx and Crake also explore a post-human environment in which the human experience has become increasingly malleable.

The present article will examine how Atwood critiques the post-human desire to surpass biological limitations using concepts from Donna Haraway's cyborg theory. According to Haraway, the post-human experience does not involve transcending the human body but instead involves a transformation of how technology and biology function as mechanisms of power (Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto* 151). In Atwood's fictional universe with genetically modified creatures such as the Crakers, there is a manifestation of corporate bio-capitalism, wherein bodies are created with the ultimate goal of being efficient and profitable. Moreover, the nature of the post-human experience is not free from exploitive gendered and racialized practices, but is predicated on such practices; thus, the intersection of capitalism and biotechnology will create new forms of domination. As a result, the manner in which ideological power operates within Atwood's novel can be understood as being based upon interplay of corporate hegemony, bio-power, and the oppression of women. Utilizing Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, the article will demonstrate how the exercise of power within society occurs not solely through coercive force but through the process of internalizing subjugation by those within the system. According to Gramsci, hegemony is maintained through the exertion of consent by those in the subjugated position through the cultural norms, day-to-day actions, and institutional frameworks that legitimize hegemony (Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* 12). Oryx and Crake exemplifies how institutions, like corporate education, biosecurity and corporate media create cultural consent as a tool for generating inequality and cultural conformity. Oryx exemplifies this through gendered subordination being both an instrument of capitalist exploitation, and an indicator of how that exploitation occurs.

Language is also an important component in enforcing ideological control in Atwood's corporate dystopia. Naming and branding, and creating categories of language serve to commodify existence, and to define and maintain the social hierarchy through a linguistic system that supports and reinforces the power of the privileged, and the disempowerment of the marginalized. This article will illustrate, using the theories of semiotics and language as proposed by Saussure (*Course in General Linguistics* 47), how language within the novel, is an instrument for the construction of

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ideology rather than as a mirror of reality. The word Pleeblands used in the novel functions as a linguistic device to support exclusive definitions and delineate boundaries between the privileged and the marginalized (Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* 120). Additionally, the language used within the novel serves to govern the people within it and create a new language for the Crakers whereby they are taught to not use evasion or euphemism (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 348). Consequently, the constructed nature of the language serves to shape what can be expressed and understood resulting in certain forms of life, and certain forms of resistance being rendered unintelligible.

Material and Methods

This article will examine Oryx and Crake through a theoretical framework that incorporates Foucault's concept of bio power, Gramsci's theory of hegemony, and Haraway's idea of post-humanism to evaluate the ideological mechanisms that were at play in Oryx and Crake. Bio power serves as a lens through which power operates by regulating lives and bodies; this occurs not through direct force, but through the normalization of inequality and the transformation of desire into consumable objects. Hegemony helps to elucidate how corporate power is not merely imposed upon a system by means of force but rather how it becomes accepted as natural and inevitable by the subjects contained within that system. Finally, posthumanism allows assessing how the commodification of human bodies and genetic engineering in Oryx and Crake express the logic of bio-capitalism, in which post humanity is created to maximize the efficiency and profitability of the marketplace. Using a close reading approach, this paper will utilize ideological critique to detail the means by which language, imagery and symbolic representation support corporate authority through power and control. This study will utilize a framework of critical dystopia (Baccolini & Moylan, *Dark Horizons* 91), looking for both the dystopian and utopian aspects of Atwood's world; as well as, examining how the novel offers a critique of the posthuman condition by exposing the ethical dilemmas of biotechnology advancement.

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Results

Bio politics and the Corporate Control of Life

In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood creates a universe in which bio-politics are not just an abstract way of ruling the world, but rather are a way of enforcing corporate products on people and the economy, and ultimately our very existence. Foucault describes bio-power in his book *The History of Sexuality* (1978) as the method of control over human life through power that isn't demonstrated through force, but by targeting bodies, health, desires, and even death (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 67). Bio-power identifies modern day government power as using the management of life to govern a population. Bio-power uses methods such as health protocols, social control through surveillance and normalizing risk, to maintain control over a population, but Atwood's world transfers bio-power from government control, to private corporations who are now in absolute control over human life. The private, corporate-driven future in *Oryx and Crake* no longer views the body as simply biological, but instead as a trading tool that must be optimized for corporate profit. In the novel *Oryx and Crake*, bio-politics manifest in a horrifying way through the governance of private, corporate bodies. The book depicts how human beings don't have direct power or rule of their lives through politics but mostly rule by the private biology of corporations owning the power via company scientists who have produced or will produce the life itself. Crake represents the pinnacle of this power at its highest degree due to the manner in which he has designed and created the Crakers. In duplicating and creating his own version of how he thinks of what he believes are the ideal forms of existence, he has created a genetically engineered life in the Crakers; they will ultimately govern all life aspects going forward, everything from their creation to how they fulfill their meaning/purpose. The reality of creating the Crakers goes beyond the Synth Design. This is a radical reorganization of all life; it is not simply about redesigning a life-form that fits the corporate definition of efficiency, profit, and predictability in Crake's eyes; it is about eliminating the attributes of normal humanity that Crake views as hindering or destroying the human and the future progression of humankind, such as violence, greed, and jealousy (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 89). This desire and action to create the ideal/designed posthuman being through the elimination of those attributes creates a serious cost because in Crake's attempts to completely remove flaws he reduces human and therefore all of life to an object

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of efficiency, profitability, and predictability; thus, taking all agency, complexity, and full human experience from the Crakers. While Crake sees the program he created as an altruistic effort to fix humanity, it has become a kind of commodification and dehumanization, which is merely a reflection of capitalism, the very forces that Crake wants to overcome. By constructing the Crakers as living biological products, he is viewing life as a raw material used for optimization, being modified and shaped according to an economic vision, therefore reinforcing the commodification of life (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 102). By defining a post-human ideal of a perfect biologically engineered specimen, he has also redefined the nature of power by shifting from human agents to biological regulation/corporate control.

In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood builds on Foucault's ideas concerning biopower and extends his ideas into the domain of corporate governance as well as advances in biotechnology. In the novel, life is treated as a commodity and is controlled using corporate power, which parallels Foucault's notion that biopower is the creation of a manageable resource (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 72). Moreover, through genetic engineering and biotechnological advances, corporations are able to represent themselves as altruistic entities that provide solutions to alleviate human suffering, through curing illness, abolishing violence, and defeating old age. However, the advances made by corporations are concealing the true intent of corporate agendas. The book highlights how biotechnology, which is often framed as progress, provides corporations with new opportunities to assert control over all aspects of life. By doing so, corporations redefine life itself, not as something that allows for human flourishing, but instead as something that can be restructured into a commodity that meets the needs of the marketplace while maximizing profit (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 210). The redefinition of life to be a bio-economic resource demonstrates that the interests of capitalism in biotechnologies do not genuinely support the enhancement of life; instead, they exploit human biology to ensure the ongoing dominance of the corporation. By framing human life as a commodity that can be engineered, optimized, and sold, Atwood critiques the ideal of posthumanism and demonstrates that the reality of posthumanism is not based on liberation or freedom; instead, it is based on exploitation (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 253). The future envisioned by Atwood in *Oryx and Crake* does not represent an idealistic view of human accomplishment but rather represents a dystopian future in which the inherent natural disorderliness and complexity of human life is sacrificed to create streamlined, market-oriented biological products. The Crakers'

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engineered genetic makeup is an example of a bio-economic system where the corporation treats genetic codes, human desires, and all aspects of human life as potential commodities, intended to be sold, modified, and engineered for the greatest efficiency and profit potential. Biopower extends beyond mere control over people and includes efforts made towards developing more profitable behaviors and identities on behalf of corporations. Throughout the story of the novel, there are ever increasingly less distinct separations between the biological/human and the posthuman/economy; where the individual and the collective also continue to grow closer together as well (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 112). The reader is forced to question their own morality in relation to biopower and corporate power as the interfaces between biopower/corporate controls of peoples' lives are all-encompassing; in that they are engineered at all levels to benefit the Financial Elite globally. Ultimately, *Oryx and Crake*'s critique makes clear that the posthuman fantasy of creating an ideal, optimized human is merely the end product of a system that commodifies everything about a person's existence, including their very existence itself (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 278).

Hegemony and the Normalization of Corporate Power

Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemonic power allows for unpacking the ways in which power manifests in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. For Gramsci, power does not just rely on coercion or naked force; rather, it is created and maintained through the very socialization of dominant cultural ideals, thereby making the dominant cultural system appear to be natural, inescapable, or even desirable (Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* 12). The world of Atwood's dystopia exemplifies just how important the process of ideological control through hegemony is for the operation of corporate power. As the dominant corporate ideology pervades the entirety of contemporary social existence, the embedding of such corporate ideology into society's ordering system is what ultimately leads to the normalization of inequality and potency of exploitation, and commodification. Those residents of the corporate compounds who have internalized the values of the dominant corporate ideology are able to accept their privilege and security as natural consequences engendered by their class position; conversely, those living within the Pleeblands have been conditioned into acceptance of their disenfranchisement without ever having to intellectually challenge the legitimacy of the power structure upon them.

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Hegemonic power perpetuates itself through both spatial and discursive divisions in the world of the novel. The spatial and conceptual distinctions that are created by the boundaries of the protected corporate compounds and the trodden Pleeblands assist with the construction and reconstruction of the social hierarchy that is inherent to Atwood's dystopia. The term Pleebland functions as a mechanism of linguistic control, and exists for the mere purpose of serving as a tool for the development of an almost mythical perception of the Pleeblands as inferior and dangerous. The language used by those living in the privileged compounds separates them from the disenfranchised people; furthermore, it supports the privileged in their perception of their deserving wealth, security, and comfort (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 121). The streets of the underprivileged are severely limited and become a visible location for those living in the privileged compounds to see them as trash; their despair and suffering is viewed as a predictable outcome. As Gramsci suggests, when the underprivileged are educated by the privileged that the societal system exists through their obedience, they will maintain the social system because it has become naturalized or normalized.

Atwood's narrative demonstrates how the corporate world produces control through the hegemonic production of culture rather than through violence. The separation of both groups is not just physical but also mental/ideological. The children of the privileged compounds are indoctrinated into the system via various corporate entities; therefore, as they grow older, they understand the separation and differences between the privileged and the underprivileged groups as a result of human nature (Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* 17). The structures of social control shape perceptions to persuade individuals that their inequality results from natural differences rather than from socially designed consequences of unequal social hierarchies.

Using Gramsci's lens, it becomes clear that corporate power in *Oryx and Crake* does not need to use coercion or constant surveillance to maintain control; rather, the ability of the system to construct the concept of inequality, exploitation, and commodification as inherent to the way things are helps to sustain corporate power through its ideological dominance (Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* 20). As a consequence, the smooth operation of the system tends to lead to the residents of the compounds accepting their own privilege without challenging it as they live their lives. The compounds' residents do not require coercion to accept the suffering of individuals living in Pleeblands; they have been conditioned to view it as an unfortunate but

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necessary part of the world, and the world cannot operate without such divisions. In *Oryx and Crake*, the normalization of inequality becomes an unquestioned part of the system's logic. The residents of the compounds are therefore not just passive recipients of this system; they also actively contribute to this system through their internalization of the belief that their privilege derives from merit, efficiency, and progress rather than exploitation. The systems of ideas that preserve the power of corporations, educational, media, and biochemical security, also create the perception that there is an inevitable and logical barrier between the elite class and the poor, and therefore, without that barrier, the future success of our society would be in jeopardy (Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* 22). As Gramsci stated, hegemony is not only about the use of force in maintaining power; it is a result of the agreement between the oppressed and subjugated to accept their power as normal, i.e. if you are in a position of power, then you are the rightful authority figure; if you do not possess such power, you do not have a choice but to submit to that authority.

In Atwood's universe, hegemony is more than just a theory; it is a living reality that governs all aspects of human life. The contrast between the Pleeblands and the compounds is not just a spatial separation; rather, it is also an example of the ideological separation between the two types of communities, a separation that is created by the corporate world. The term Pleeblands does more than explain how to identify the Pleeblands and compounds; it establishes the legal and moral rights of people who live in those communities to determine which individuals are entitled to live and be cared for in the compounds and which people are not entitled to live or receive care in the compounds. Hence, the use of Pleeblands as a linguistic device to delineate the Pleeblands and the compounds serves an important function in maintaining the hegemony of the corporate world and instructing the people living in the compounds to see the world in a way that rationalizes their socio-economic superiority over the people living in the Pleeblands and justifies the exploitation of the people living in the Pleeblands. The phrase Pleeblands serves as an illustration of the fact that when it comes to corporate power, those who have been excluded from that power are not simply removed from their social context; rather, their existence is rendered unnoticeable, with all of their pain and suffering being seen as nothing more than an expected result of their place within the social structure. In this way, this concept is also applied to the overall use of language as a way

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in which hegemonic power is maintained. This was especially evident when looking at the various branding in Atwood's novel, such as that used in naming businesses as a way to make physical things come to be seen as commodified (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 155). Atwood also utilizes these names in order to further create the narrative that supports the commodification of life; that is, Atwood implies through corporate branding that commodities, including human beings, are normalized as products for consumption, exchange, or optimization. One of the most important aspects of this manipulation by corporations in the novel is that it allows for even the most horrifically unequal class divisions and inequities to be cultivated as natural and desirable.

Language and the Commodification of Bodies

Language does not serve merely as a vehicle for communication; it is also a powerful ideological instrument of control which has been carefully incorporated into the structure of the corporate dystopia depicted in *Oryx and Crake*. Ferdinand de Saussure discusses this relationship between language, power and society in *Course in General Linguistics*, where he argues that language/sign systems are social constructs; therefore, they reflect and create the power dynamics within a given society (Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* 31). In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood uses language strategically to construct and reinforce these power dynamics; thus transforming language into a mechanism for commodifying bodies and lives. By using language as a tool to manipulate people and ecosystems, individuals and species are decomposed and commodified, with their worth being determined not by their complexity or uniqueness but by their market value and profit potential/productivity (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 99). One of the most extreme examples of these linguistic controls is the use of the term Pleeblands. Rather than simply identify a geographical location, Pleeblands serves as an instrument of language that reinforces the corporate narrative by naturalizing, normalizing, and legitimizing systematic social inequality. Thus, the corporate powers use language as a means to systemic marginalization and exploitation, normalizing systemic injustice through the construction of background assumptions rather than challenging their moral legitimacy. The language and culture of Atwood's universe have been created to ensure that corporate governance operates efficiently. In Atwood's work, Pleeblands is used as a term to signify a land full of filthy people; a place where you will find filthy people. The definition of Pleeblands is derogatory; it describes the inhabitants of Pleeblands as inferior and disposable (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 107). The connotation of the word Pleeblands, along with its association

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with filthiness, danger, and disposability, characterizes the social difference between those occupying the corporate world and those who live in the Pleeblands as a natural occurrence, something that is accepted without question and is taken for granted. In Atwood's usage of language, God & Cohen describe Saussure's use of the term sign as being only a linguistic signifier and not carrying an inherent meaning other than what is ascribed to it through the social system in which it exists (God & Cohen, *Course in General Linguistics* 58). Therefore, the term Pleeblands represents more than simply a location; it also serves as a means of reinvigorating the established ideology of social classes. The use of the term Pleeblands as a descriptor of a geographical location has rendered inequality as a concept an absolute fact of life; therefore, the ongoing oppression of the inhabitants of Pleeblands is perceived as an integral part of the social order, without the need for any examination or deconstruction (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 114). The Crakers were genetically engineered beings designed by Crake to gain insight into how bio-politically regulated society uses various forms of language. Crake has designed the Craker's language to be completely devoid of ambiguity, metaphor, or nuance, thus removing the ability of the Crakers to engage in any form of symbolic thought or interpretive flexibility. The result is that Crake has used language as a methodological tool of control over the Crakers; by eliminating the use of metaphor and the possibility for symbolic resistance, he has ensured that the Crakers will never develop the capacity for critical awareness and therefore, will always be subordinate to their assigned and imposed social systems (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 192). The Crakers' language serves as an example of how language is used as a tool for compliance only, not for communication. In this way, Atwood demonstrates the terrifying potential of biotechnology as a means of controlling not only the physical body of the subject, but also, the cognitive and emotional faculties of that subject (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 72). The Crakers' language was created to be simple, straightforward, and easily interpreted. It is a reflection of the total reconfiguration of both the human body and the human mind as a result of biotechnological developments. Their inability to make use of metaphor or to participate in symbolic reasoning serves as a reflection of the greater posthuman agenda as described by Atwood in *Oryx and Crake* wherein bodies have become commodities that can be altered or optimized for the purposes of corporations (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 215). Within this framework, language acts as a means to restrict the Crakers' view of the

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world in which they exist to a limited, predetermined viewpoint in service of corporate development. The Crakers cannot contemplate any other world apart from the one designed for them because the language has been created to ensure they are incapable of thinking outside those parameters. Therefore, the Crakers' language serves as a prime example of how biopolitical practices, as defined by Foucault, operate through the regulation not only of the body but also of the mind, desire, and perception (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 85). Atwood's depiction of biopolitical control through language highlights the disturbing potential future where the act of speaking is used to facilitate or reinforce compliance, efficiency, and profit. By controlling language, Crake and the corporations not only control what can be spoken, but also everything that can be thought, perceived, or imagined (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 265). The Crakers are completely incapable of imagining or criticizing their own world, and therefore, they serve as an ideal product in an engineered biocapitalist system, which has been designed to meet market needs with no resistance or questions asked. The instantiation and creation of a world where both human bodies and minds are created/produced as a means to achieve maximum profits represents an extension of the commodification of life where the very essence of what it means to be a human can be manipulated, commodified, and sold (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 270).

Discussion

Atwood's Oryx and Crake portrays a dystopian landscape in which corporate capitalism, biotechnological innovation, and posthumanity are all integrated into one commodified, optimized and systematic society through the biopower, hegemony and posthumanism frameworks. Through the examination of the biopower, hegemony and posthumanism frameworks, Atwood critiques the workings of power through biological and socio-cultural mechanisms of control. Atwood's narrative urges readers to explore the implications of living in a world in which biotechnologies and capitalism have become intertwined, as well as to understand how language can be utilized in order to control and commodify the human body. Through its stark portrayal of the ideological power embedded in technologies that are propagated under the guise of liberating humanity, *Oryx and Crake* serves as a powerful reminder of the implications of a world dictated by biocapitalism and the posthuman ideal.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Islamic Azad University.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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