“Failed” Migrants Return:
A Transforming Word from the Book of Ruth

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Abstract: This essay details how an “intuitive reading” of the Book of Ruth by a group of HIV carriers from Flores island, Indonesia, renewed their faith. The men caught the virus as economic migrants and then proceeded to give it to their wives on returning home sick. Rejected by family and by many members of the clergy, they have formed their own support group. Coming from the interior, most were not regular church goers before contacting the virus. A couple of years ago they began reading the Scriptures regularly once a month. They easily identified with Naomi and Ruth, with their failed migration, and with the tactics they were forced to use in order to survive on returning to Bethlehem. Members of the HIV support group, unsupported by the institutional Church or by their extended families, have discovered in reading the Bible together a liberating Word that has rekindled a deep personal faith in the God of compassion.

[EXT]“How come rejection is so deeply rooted? Why is it so difficult to accept people living with HIV (PLHIV) who, yes, may have a sullied background? Honestly, I am disillusioned with the attitude of clergy, Sisters and seminarians who judge us without bothering to listen to how we arrived at this situation. They condemn us without looking at the root of the problem. Discarded by family, friends and clergy, I, like many other PLHIVs, have often given way to despair. What’s happened to Christian doctrine? Is our Church only for the righteous? I am very disturbed…”[/EXT]

I hear such outpourings all too often. This one came from Ibu Magda, the founder-chair of an HIV/AIDS Support Group. This group of mainly Catholic HIV/AIDS carriers is based in the
town of Maumere on the island of Flores in eastern Indonesia. At monthly meetings we open the Bible. As they are mostly returned migrants, we once read through the Book of Ruth. The following is a reflection on this particular Bible sharing among these “failures” who have discovered a transforming Word in story of Naomi and Ruth, and a renewed personal faith, while being largely ostracized by family, Parish and the wider society.

[A] The Readers

Flores Island, 87% Catholic, is part of the most Christian Province (NTT) in majority Muslim Indonesia. The two million Florenese population, to a significant extent, depends on money sent back to families by its tens of thousands of economic migrants.¹ This migrant people can be found all over Indonesia and beyond, the majority migrating to the logging camps and palm-oil plantations of Kalimantan and the plantations and factories of Malaysia, while others go to the economic zone of Batam that nestles alongside Singapore. A large majority are men, over half are single, some 22% under 18 years of age. Most have little formal education, some 69% are primary school drop-outs. The majority stay for life, while many wives and children remain in Flores.² In the relative anonymity of city and migrant settlement, freed from traditional village norms, beliefs, mores and values, loosened from social-religious control mechanisms embedded in family and village life, the practice of sexual abstinence among the young bachelors and of fidelity among the married men are not universally observed.

[B] Returned Migrants

Increasingly, some of these Christian migrants have been returning home early with the HIV/AIDS virus which they then pass on to their wives, and subsequently the mother to her

¹ Bank records in each of the nine district capitals in Flores show substantial sums being transferred from migrants each month. Most is spent on school fees and improved housing.
newborn infant. To date the single cause of infection is casual or commercial sex by male migrants abroad and subsequent contact with their wives at home.³ Migrants depart Flores full of hope and vigor, but return empty, an embarrassing failure, having lost not just their health, but their social location and their financial independence. Above all they find themselves shunned and ostracized by their family network and, often enough, condemned by Church authorities enduring a “social death” more painful than the virus itself. Unsurprisingly early returnees tend to lose their self worth becoming suspicious of others, convinced that everyone knows of their pariah health condition. Lacking trust and self respect many become depressed. Alienated and rejected, having lost their defining economic, socio-cultural and religious supports, PLHIVs have had to fall back onto their own inner resources. And it is precisely here where they can reignite hope and renew faith in the unconditional and compassionate love of God.

[B]Local Support Group[B]

One such young widow, Ibu Magda, negotiated with health authorities and opened a consultation clinic, *Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT) Sehati* for peer counseling and medical advice, at the local general hospital in Maumere town. Later she formed the *Kelompok Dukungan Sebaya (KDS) Flores Plus Support Group*. KDS is a faith-based network run entirely by PLHIVs, which accepts members where they happen to be emotionally, spiritually and socially. Apart from practical advice on medication, diet and lifestyle, they give priority to psychosocial support. This is proving to be the key feature that decides whether HIV morphs into a fatal virus (AIDS) or remains a chronic lifelong condition.⁴ For while HIV/AIDS is caused by a virus, its

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³Commercial sex in Maumere by the military and the police, bus, truck and motor-cycle taxi drivers may well be spreading the virus locally beginning with these most-at-risk populations (MARP).

⁴In the West the expected lifespan of PLHIVs is now similar to the national average; in Indonesia (2011) it was improving but still seven years shorter. Thus the virus is no longer fatal but still chronic.
spread among migrants is fuelled by stigma, fear, misinformation and indifference. Medication can control the disease, but only compassion, love, respect and understanding brings healing. As a safe space KDS Flores Plus Support Group works at improving health, while organizing for the mutual psychosocial support and self-empowerment of its members.5

Key metaphors associated with HIV/AIDS globally also fit the local situation: the virus is *alien* (originates overseas), *invasive* (attacks local cultural and religious norms), *shameful* (exposes the carrier’s prior sexual practice), and *accusatory* (the carrier is presumed guilty). In short the virus, the carrier, and in some cases the carer, are stigmatized.6

And so while medication is essential it is not sufficient. PLHIVs need to come to accept themselves in all their fragility, regain self respect and rekindle the courage to be loved and cherished again. In a trusting, non-judgmental atmosphere they can learn to become human again.

In such a safe unmonitored site, Bible Sharing can break through fear and so break the shield of silence. Wherever the Word of God is “read with soul”7 the Word proves sharper than any two-edged sword, cutting open any encapsulating or enervating mask, dispelling fear and uncertainty, while conferring affirmative meaning by opening up the person to a greater fidelity, purity and sincerity, embraced by the unconditional and compassionate love of a vulnerable, crucified God. Only when carriers are willing to be honest with themselves can this contagious virus, caught and transmitted by behavior, be halted. In certain circumstances Bible reading can prompt this breakthrough as readers confront the reality of their own lives and opt for change.

[A]The Reading[A]

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5 KDS Flores Plus Support Group is a community-based, low cost, low tech and culturally grounded faith-based network. On culturally grounded ways to discourage sexual (and drug-using) behaviors that drive the spread of HIV, see Green and Ruark 2011. A broader range of theological reflections is found in Paterson 2009.


7 Martin Buber, 242-43.
Some 20 members of KDS Flores Support Group read the *Book of Ruth* in four sessions over as many months.\(^8\) No reading strategy was announced in advance; members were free to react to the text in any way they wished, each from their individual or group context, in what, *post factum*, can be termed “an hermeneutics of compassion in detachment”).\(^9\) Here I report the story of Magda and her fellow PLHIVs as the text opened up their wounded selves. Their transparency in the face of the Word and in the presence of the others, prised open those members who were still imprisoned in numbing indecision, fear and self doubt. The non-judgmental atmosphere engendered trust, and trust gave birth to new hope. Undeniably the story of Na’omi and Ruth has rekindled the self esteem of the PLHIV readers who had been rejected and excluded by family and society in general; they now realize that they are accepted by God, by their fellow PLHIVs, and by themselves.

**[B] A Merging of Horizons[B]**

The facilitator’ role was limited to brief explanations of some cultural aspects of the text and to answering questions of biblical exegesis, while silently monitoring the sharing, ready to raise questions if the reading seemed to “contradict” professional exegetes’ studies of the text.\(^{10}\) However, this latter monitoring role proved to be superfluous.

A single word, a short phrase, or a simple verse from the *Book of Ruth* echoing personal traumas, broke through the silence of persons suppressed by stigmatization and rejection. They were surprised to find their story retold in the Bible, a story that cut through their fear and uncertainty. Each PLHIV quickly identified with one or more of the characters in the narrative. Almost

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\(^8\) Other passages studied recently, Mark 10:46-52 & John. 5:1-18.

\(^9\) Bae, 390-91.

\(^{10}\) Commentaries read on Ruth include Amy-Jill Levine 1992, Jack Miles 1995, Madipoane Masenya 2004, and Isabel Apawo Phiri 2006.
immediately the biblical account and the individual stories intertwined becoming a single colorful, coherent tale.

**Samples with Commentary**

“...there was a famine in the land,” (Ruth 1:1) “Ah that’s me!” Between many tears, and for the very first time, Magda told her story. “I am Ruth [Hbr. “friendship”], my husband was Mahlon [Hbr. “sickness”]. After junior high school I had to find a way to support my mother and younger siblings. I learnt to sew and then opened a tailoring stall at the local market, but only earned enough to feed myself a day at a time. Eight years later my brother migrated to Batam.\(^{11}\) When he planned to marry a fellow migrant I was sent to Batam as the family’s representative at the wedding. It was there that I met my future husband. I didn’t know he was HIV positive. He was a good man. He respected me. He respected my brother. I accompanied my sister-in-law to Java to her mother’s house where she was to give birth to her first born, and then returned to Flores to marry my fiancé. We cohabited. My family insisted that we should marry before living together, but in those days I was naive, I didn’t know how strong-willed men can be. As a woman I had little choice. Nevertheless, we separated a week before our marriage. Then he fell sick, very sick indeed.” Comment by facilitator: as elsewhere, HIV/AIDS thrives among conformist populations marred by poverty and lack of education, gender inequality and low social status. In the haunting words of Paul Farmer, “HIV/AIDS has a ‘preferential option for the poor’”.\(^{12}\)

“Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” (1:16) The loneliness, invisibility and social isolation of Na’omi and Ruth

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\(^{11}\) Batam Island is an economic zone close to Singapore, some two thousand kilometers from Flores Island.  
\(^{12}\) Overberg, 11.
sparked this outpouring from the heart: “My family demanded I separate, but how could I? I loved him, loved him very much. If I left him he would die, and if he died alone my heart would die also. And so I cared for him in the intensive care unit of Maumere hospital. My family was adamant and I had to choose between my elder brother and my husband. My family cut me off. They accused my husband of beating me, but he was fierce only with words, never physically. He fell into a coma and for three months he never recognized anyone, including his wife who tended him daily. Then he recognized who I was and advised me to return to my family. ‘If I leave you, you will die, and I will die also.’ I lay beside him every night in the hospital. I bore this burden alone for, as yet, his mother knew nothing.”

“Do not call me Na’omi [pleasant]. call me Mara [bitter]. for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.” (1:20) “I cared for him calmly, but cried bitterly when alone. And so he died and together with his family I attended his funeral, but not a single member of my family came. Then my brother came to me weeping. ‘Why are you crying,’ I asked, ‘my husband is dead. He cannot hear you. It’s too late for sympathy, too late to make peace. Truly, ‘I departed full, and the Lord has brought me home empty.’” (Ruth 1:21)

“And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred ...” (1:19) “Village society is very conformist; the nonconformist must migrant or be excluded. Rapid social change is shaking village life, our families feel threatened; traditional ethical norms no longer hold. I feel that we PLHIV returnees are a scapegoat, we ‘represent’ all that threatens social stability that is outside our control. We seek protection but are confronted with persecution.” The facilitator notes: The returnee men take longer to accept their condition than the women. In our patriarchal society men are fairly free in their sexual encounters as long as it does not disturb social harmony. But now the virus is revealing to the public their previously private life and our patriarchal double-
standards are being laid bare. Societal healing is needed and so women PLHIVs urge greater
gender justice and equality. Returnee PLHIVs will be accepted only when the wider society is
able to question the unequal and unjust male-female relations and question the institution-centred
role of the ordained male Church officials, and the causal link between the two.
As the story of Na’omi and Ruth continued, so other verses elicited experiences long suppressed
even to the bearers themselves:

“Let me go to the field, and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find
favour.” (Ruth 2:2) Individuals recalled how they live from day to day, from one casual job to
another. The women PLHIVs recalled their survival strategies.

“Have I not charged the young men not to molest you?” (2:9) They acknowledge their unfulfilled
need to have a strong male protector in order to survive in a male-centred society. They respect
Na’omi for not going straight to Bo’as [Hbr. “in him is strength”] to seek protection; she would
be embarrassed but, more importantly, in principle she wished to be self-reliant.

“Why have I found favour in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, when I am a
foreigner?” (2:10) The women PLHIVs discussed their status as widows which mirror those in
the Bible. The facilitator explained: ‘almānā (Ruth 4:5, 10), a widow, is a woman without any
male to support her socially and financially, neither father, husband, nor adult male sibling. Like
Na’omi and Ruth, the PLHIVs are not just widows but also migrants (Hbr. gēr), that is, resident
aliens, forced to leave family and live among strangers, outside the geographical area of their
own kin.13

“When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet [genitals] and
lie down; and he will tell you what to do.” (Ruth 3:4) At this verse a cacophony of voices
erupted, “Yes, like Na’omi and Ruth we must devise cunning tricks with much deceit. There is

13 Hiebert, 125-41.
no other way for a stigmatized woman with no male support in this male-centred society.” The facilitator notes: to date none of the PLHIVs had encountered a Bo’as [in whom is strength]. People are infected with fear, with a fear stronger than faith. The stigma of HIV/AIDS is contagious and tends to infect anyone in the vicinity, carers and helpers alike, as the virus is associated with sexual contact outside accepted religious and cultural norms. Just two generations ago leprosy and the leper were stigmatized in Flores, today it is HIV/AIDS, its carriers and their carers.14

“The day you buy the field from the hand of Na’omi, you are also buying Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead ...” (4:5). Unlike Na’omi and Ruth, Magda and other PLHIV women migrants have no male authority figure to grant access to family and social life in a society where a woman’s economic well-being is directly related to her link with some male.

“Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next of kin ...” (Ruth 4:14) Cut off from family, economic support and from many clergy due to the stigma of HIV/AIDS, the PLHIVs were left with nobody but themselves and their God, the God who takes a special interest in the 'almānā and gēr, a God who sustains the widow and accompanies the stranger, supplying the providing role of the missing male kin.15 Alienated from family and all that kinship means in an indigenous society, living with the material poverty and psychological stress that social marginalization and stigmatization entails, deep personal faith in a saving God has brought these women together and now they are supporting and counseling fellow male PLHIVs as they Endeavour to live by faith, a faith that does justice. Emmanuel: the experience of “I am with you” changes everything.

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15 Hiebert, 126-30.
Although Ruth’s name has been “erased” from the royal genealogy (“Now these are the descendants of Perez ... Salmon of Bo’az, Bo’az of Obed (sic.), Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David”), the PLHIV readers were inspired by God’s plan in placing the foreigner, the pagan Ruth, in direct line to David, and so Jesus. Buoyed up by renewed self esteem, some were inspired by the possibility that in God’s plan they, too, can live once again for others. Some began to believe that, in God’s grace, they too might be able to become active agents of their own future. Nevertheless, none could identify with the “happy ending” of the biblical book; more than one cried out: “I have suffered more than I can bare, will rejection never come to an end?” They have regained fidelity, yet are aware of their fragility as they face an unknown and unknowable future; they fumble towards the necessary courage to choose uncertainty rather than succumb to certain death.

[B] Further Observations [B]

Key names drew the PLHIVs into the heart of the biblical story: “Moab” is enemy territory yet fertile, just as Flores migrants are drawn to economically advantageous sites among unwelcoming local inhabitants. They easily identified with “Chilion” [Hbr. “failure”] and Orpah [Hbr. “returnee”] while appreciating Ruth [Hbr. “friendship”] who, as a Moabitess would have been stigmatized in Bethlehem as an aggressive temptresses who worshiped false gods, and yet she loved Na’omi unconditionally without any guarantee for the future, for both were without child or husband and had lost everything and, as such, were icons of The Other who loves us faithfully and unreservedly from the “failure” of the Cross. Na’omi and Ruth, two widow returnee failures, also image the KDS Flores Support group itself in virtually every way: as economic failures, as socially stigmatized and rejected, as women and men under great psychosocial stress, with an unknown and unknowable future. The reader and the read, the
outcaste and the Christ coalesced. Na’omi and Ruth’s “unfathomable” bonding mirrored their own “illogical” friendships that they had struck up among fellow PLHIVs, relationships outside ethnic ties, unthinkable to family, a tight bonding among “failures” without any apparent economic advantage or gain in future security.

[A] The Redaction

“If [you] keep quiet, the stones themselves will cry out.” (Luke 19:40)

[B] Patterning Fractured Stories

What was happening when the PLHIVs read the text? Were they simply reading into the text what they liked, instrumentalising the text as an occasion to expound their personal word? I think precisely the opposite was happening. The PLHIVs were “seduced” by the Word (Jer. 20:7). The narrative of Na’omi (pleasant yet bitter) and Ruth (faithful yet alien) became each one’s personal story, each discovered their own story in the text. In the biblical account broken and scattered lives take on a narrative structure, make sense; they are transformed and transfigured and given a graced meaning.

One can transpose Rowan Williams’ understanding of Augustine of Hippo’s spiritual reading of the psalms to the PLHIV migrants’ reading of the Book of Ruth. The PLHIV readers could again “imagine a wholeness of experienced history in our life as if life itself were a text, as if the remembered story of our conversation with God represented part of an intelligible narrative or a single song.”16 In reading the text, fractured lives become whole. Hence, the story of Na’omi and Ruth “unseal[ed] deep places, emotions otherwise buried, and provid[ed] an analogy for the unity or intelligibility of a human life lived in faith. Here is a conversation with God ... [a]nd in

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16 Williams, 18.
the course of that conversation, the human speaker is radically changed and enabled to express what is otherwise hidden from him or her.”17

As with Augustine in praying the psalms, so with the returned migrants in reading the Book of Ruth: the biblical narrative proposed a structure that gave a unified story and a graced meaning to their thereto inarticulate, fearfully scattered lives. In reading the text the PLHIVs found themselves reading their own story and for the first time found meaning and purpose within it. They discovered a pattern in their traumatic lives that redeemed, liberated, and gave new hope. In the biblical account they heard “a language of doubt, near-despair, repentance, and lonely suffering, as well as praise and thanksgiving, [namely] the acceptance of that human condition that Christ embraced in his incarnation.”18

This spiritual reading of the story of Na’omi and Ruth does not evade or relativize the historical sense of the biblical narrative which has rooted the readers in their own contemporary history. The reading does not simply link them with a scriptural past; what occurred in the past is happening today in the lives of the readers. This open, intuitive way of reading the scriptures reopened the possibility for growth and wholeness. As Rowan Williams concludes, “there is a paradoxical dimension to [Augustine’s] hermeneutics: what most locates us in our earthly experience in all its reality is what most opens up the fuller sense because it most prompts desire.”19

The story of Na’omi and Ruth offered a way for members of the PLHIV group to appreciate their personal narrative anew, acknowledging their incomplete, sinful and depressing present moment, while experiencing renewed hope in the embrace of the unconditional and passionate love of God. The Book of Ruth provides a script for a conversation between the failed and rejected

17 ibid.
18 ibid., 21.
19 ibid. 23.
migrant and the newly rediscovered faithful and life-affirming Companion of the stranger, the God who willingly suffered with us on Calvary and so was raised from the dead.

The biblical Word thus transforms the personal narrative, from a story of a migrant’s failure with her/his limited economic goals, to become a record of radical hopefulness that looks forward to the future, albeit to a future that cannot be determined or described from where she/he now stands. In reading the Word, the Word has read, interpreted and converted the reader who is now exposed to the Word as the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6), the Jesus of the Beatitudes (Matt 5:1-12), the nonconformist Jesus who touched lepers, becoming defiled himself, in order to heal (Mark 1:40-45; Matt. 8:1-4; Luke 5:12-16).

Furthermore, these readers are reminding all of us that authentic human life cannot be found in striving for success, power or pleasure. Once again in the words of Rowan Williams, “What holds the two stories together is our reproduction of Christ’s acceptance of the fallen and struggling condition to which we are, without exception, destined. And in that identification of narratives, the narrated human life of the believer becomes a sign of God.20

**A Committed, Compassionate Reading**

“Failed” migrants returning with HIV/AIDS are teaching us how to read the Bible anew, in discovering a “surplus of meaning”21 hitherto hidden in the text and suppressed in our lives. In their compassionate readings from their fragmented site, “failed” migrants engage the written Word as promoting the good and the beautiful, however tragic the situation in which they find themselves. Such readings work only when we displace any assumption that might tend to compromise the unconditional love of God. Only then can the evocative phrase “and the Lord has brought me home empty” be experienced as part of God’s plan, as *kenosis*, the necessary

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20 ibid. 26.
21 Paul Ricoeur, 1976.
condition for each one of us before the Spirit can take over and new life is born. This biblical understanding by PLHIV migrants invites us to place compassion (“willingly suffer with”) at the heart of our exegesis, as an essential hermeneutical key, and place it even more so, at the core of our faith and culture (cf. Luke 6:36).

So it is becoming apparent that these “failed” migrants, those most rejected by society and most embarrassing to the Church, precisely these “lepers” are breaking down barriers by challenging key alienating customs and laws embedded in our patriarchal society. They are challenging us to read the Bible compassionately, readings that are transparently transformative of personal and inter-personal relationships. Patriarchal, indigenous societies like that on Flores need the challenge of such a hermeneutic, and not just the clan-based, “male-stream”, judgmental society of honor and shame, but also, and more specifically, the clerical Church locked into the power structures of the surrounding society.

**Compassionate Readers**

When Church leaders position themselves primarily as officials and representatives of the ecclesial institution, they will always be tempted to defend the institution, insisting on following the law that promises clarity and certainty, insist on obedience to its ethical norms, and so tend to be intolerant of those who cross them (Rödlach 2011:298-300). This is a particular danger in indigenous societies where clergy enjoy high status. We clergy need, in all humility, to listen, to repent, and to re-imagine our role charismatically and prophetically rather than act as enforcement officials of institutional norms (cf. Weber 1958). The returned migrants challenge us clergy to face the Abba of the crucified and risen One. For the God ever-present in a conformist, patriarchal culture and clerical Church, is the God who punishes illicit sex with the

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scourge of HIV. As for the PLHIVs so it must be with Church leaders, the Revengeful Judge must give way to the God who lives in solidarity with the sufferer, the orphan and widow, the vulnerable God of solidarity in suffering and hope. And not just in the rhetoric of homilies or in the fruit of abstract, uncommitted exegesis, but in supportive relationships with the fragile outcasts of society. The “failed” migrants are inviting to look deeply into ourselves and to test against the Scriptures some of our intensely held beliefs and practices (cf Overberg 2006:29).

[B]Towards a More Compassionate Society[B]

The “failed” migrants are challenging us to widen the scope of their reading to embrace the wider society. The transformative reading of the stigmatized must lead to societal repentance, the renewal of the society that stigmatizes and excludes. Their reading urges us to rewrite relationships so that they transparently embody the inclusive values of the Reign of God. Once again a missional hermeneutics is arising from the periphery, from faith reflection by marginal groups. God is choosing “what is weak in the world to shame the strong, what is low and despised in the world ... to bring to nothing things that are...” (1 Cor. 1:27-28). Inter-textual readings, that weave the scriptural text and the personal text into single pattern, are one way of accompanying today’s “lepers”. Their reading is sorely needed by an institutional Church locked into a patriarchal culture of power and success. If we but listen to the faith-readings of these returned migrants, we can experience again the Christ who dwells in our hearts in faith, “that being rooted and grounded in love, [we] may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God.” (Eph. 3:17-19)

[A]Bibliography[A]


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