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Roma positionality – translating the Roma subjective experience into academic discourse

By

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DRAFT

Introduction

The field of Romani Studies was a near-exclusive monopoly of non-Roma scholars for decades but with the increasing numbers of Romani scholars, the relationship between the researcher and the researched with relation to Roma, and more broadly – regarding the positionality of a scholar writing from a minority perspective – is being revisited. This process is not free of tensions and confrontations along the divisive lines of ethnic identity.

In the current debates about the status of Romani scholars, often ethnic background has been juxtaposed with academic merit, causing heated discussions and alienating self-declared Romani scholars. At the same time, introduction of standpoint theory is still rare and perspectives dealing with positionality are almost absent in scholarship on Roma. Researchers themselves – both Roma and non-Roma - are yet to understand the relevance of positionality and its scholarly value for Romani studies.

In this paper, I discuss the importance of translating the subjective Roma experience into academic discourses for the development of Romani Studies as a discipline, but also for building self-esteem and confidence in the value of minority positionality in scholarship. Based on my own academic experiences as well as inspired in minority scholarship of other “subaltern” communities, I will outline the challenges and opportunities faced by minority scholars in negotiating multiple roles stemming from their “outsiders within” status (Collins 1986). I argue that the combination of lived experience, academic training and commitment to scientific rigour and quality that many Romani scholars possess offers the much-needed plurality of perspectives and voices otherwise missing currently from Romani Studies. The ascendance of authoritative Romani voices in scientific debates will help to unravel internal tensions, gaps and incongruences within Romani Studies by contrasting the body of knowledge on Roma with the lived experiences of community-members. Simultaneously, the increasing reflexivity of non-Roma scholars opens up new avenues of inquiry, inform research protocols, and give nuanced and ethical accounts, enriching for the development of Romani Studies as a scientific discipline.

Critical Turn in Romani Studies

Historically, the field of Romani Studies was a near-exclusive monopoly of non-Roma scholars.

Over the last few years, however, the increasing number of Romani university students and Romani scholars pursuing academic careers, is provoking a deeper reflection in Romani Studies.

As Roma ascend to the ranks of academic relevance, they also increasingly engage critically with the legacy of Romani studies and the body of knowledge created about Roma by non-Roma.

Matache points out that “for a long time, we have embraced most anybody as “expert” or “objective” interpreters of Roma realities, except for Romani researchers, who have often been perceived by their non-Romani fellows as political and overly tied to NGOs, emotional, or subjective” (Matache, 2017). Ken Lee notes that “the members of the Gypsy Lore Society and [the Journal] GLS claimed a privileged epistemological position, asserting that they were the only internationally recognised source of scholarly information about ‘The Gypsies’” (Lee, 2000: 133). Angela Kóczé (2015) further writes that, “Concerning the validation of Roma-related studies, there is a tacit consensus that non-Roma are in a better position to provide a more reliable and objective account of the situation of Roma. This assumption is based on the premise of ‘objectivity’ (...)” (Kóczé, 2015:84). She further explains “how epistemic authority has been claimed and manifested as an exclusive power of non-Roma scholars, to maintain hegemony over Roma-related knowledge production” (ibid.). Much of this discussions reflect the deep fissure between notions of scientism, that is, of “objective” and “neutral” scholarship, and critical research (Ryder, 2015; Bogdán et al., 2015; Ryder, 2017). But undoubtedly, it is also a premise of a power-struggle over knowledge production and ultimately for control and ownership over definitions.

Today, as the outspoken Romani scholars increase in number, there is a growing challenge to accommodate them within the existing panorama of Romani Studies (Matache, 2016b, 2017), leading to tensions along the divide of ethnic belonging. Inevitably, current situation results in the re-questions of the relationship between the researcher and the researched, and the positionality of a scholar writing from a minority perspective. This process is not free of tensions and confrontations along the divisive lines of ethnic identity.

In the context of Romani studies, the discussions related to the emerging Romani scholarship come late. Debates regarding the importance which ethnic background bears on researchers have been taking place for some time among other minority or “subaltern” groups across the world. The ascendance of Indigenous, Aboriginal or Afro-American individuals, to name a few, to ranks of academic distinction has provoked reflections regarding the relationship between the researcher and the researched and the importance of the voice “from within”. Post-colonialist and feminist theories, among others, provide an adequate theoretical background for these reflections. Looking into the experiences of other minority groups and their participation in knowledge production is instructive for understanding the emerging Romani scholarship within Romani Studies and its importance for the discipline.

Indigenous scholarship, for example, emerged “as an alternative mode of engagement with knowledge to the dominant mode of Western research” (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014:430). It sought to tell “the history of Western research through the eyes of the colonized” (Tuhiwai Smith 1999:2). In doing so, the researchers “must reflect indigenous, rather the Western, ontologies and epistemologies” (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014:430). The development of an Indigenous academic agenda aimed to challenge and critically reflect on the knowledge produced about them by Western researchers or under Western scientific influence. Similar agendas are being or have been developed by academics belonging to other minority or “colonised” groups and “the continuation of Indigenous scholars’ engagement with the intellectual traditions of their cultures draws upon the emergence of a broader global intellectual movement through which the

'colonised' and the 'marginal' speak back to the 'centre'" (Rigney 2001:7). Furthermore, the development of "subaltern" scholarship is not only a process in which the "the marginal speak back to the centre" but also in which scholars increasingly turn inwards, exploring their own ways of knowing.

The emergence of Indigenous scholarship as well as the acknowledgment of the existence of Indigenous knowledge are perceived as "acts of intellectual self-determination" through which Indigenous scholars develop "new analyses and methodologies to decolonize themselves, their communities and their institutions" (Battiste 2005:1). Similar processes of 'intellectual decolonization' are taking place among other 'subaltern' groups and may too become part of Romani scholars' agendas.

The emergence and dynamic development of Romani scholars, and their increasing use of critical approaches and theories, such as Postcolonial Studies or Critical Race Theory, gradually challenges the legacy of Romani Studies and provides an entry to new avenues of research, conducted from a standpoint of a Romani scholar. It is important to highlight, however, that the critical engagement with Romani Studies – what can be dubbed as the critical turn in Romani Studies – has also taken on a quickening pace not only thanks Roma scholars themselves but also due to increasing dedication of non-Romani scholars who embraced critical theories and who acknowledge the need for greater reflexivity in Romani Studies.

Emerging Reflexivity of Non-Roma Scholars

Non-Roma scholars have been equally important in the emergence of Critical Romani Studies as a distinct scientific branch. The rise of Roma scholarship and the ongoing calls for inclusive, participatory and balanced research on Roma has also provoked a reflection among some non-Roma scholars.

In fact, over the last few years, an increasing number of contributions have been published by non-Roma scholars which deal with reflexivity and positionality (for example: Dunajeva, 2018; Fremlova, 2018; McGarry, 2010; Ryder, 2015; Silvermann, 2018; Tremlett, 2009, 2014; Vajda, 2015). Inspired by critical theories such as intersectionality, feminist theories, queer theories, critical race theory and critical whiteness theory, they provide much-needed insight which provide insight into how knowledge on Roma is produced and what implications one's position influenced the research agendas.

In 2015, Violeta Vajda has made a powerful call for employing critical whiteness theory in Romani Studies (Vajda, 2015). She raises essential questions about structural positionality of white non-Roma scholars in a monoculture and monological vacuum, calling out the "invisibility of white positionality". She argues that "the project of Romani emancipation with have difficulty moving forward until the concept of critical whiteness is incorporated into it, both theoretically and practically" (Vajda, 2015:48).

Carol Silvermann, a non-Roma scholar, activist and performer with over three decades of dedicated work with Roma, in a response to current discussion about who produces the knowledge on Roma and with what agendas, turns the focus of inquiry on herself, assessing the various shifting, overlapping and at times contradictory roles she has occupied throughout her years of research (Silvermann, 2018). In her convincing and personal account of her own

positionality vis-à-vis Romani subjects, and inspired in “critical whiteness” theory, she makes a call for a “reflexive turn” in Romani Studies, arguing that “while self-examination of knowledge production is useful for all researchers, for non-Roma it is mandatory because historically non-Roma have held more authority” (Silvermann, 2018:77). She further stresses the importance of accountability of scholars for their words and actions.

In a similar spirit, Lucie Fremlova examines positionality and reflexivity of a non-Romani scholar by critically examining non-Roma researcher identity and its accompanying privilege (Fremlova, 2018). In an insightful account, Fremlova constructs a convincing argument about the methodological and theoretical implications of a non-Roma researcher’s status. By “queer(y)ing” ethics, methodologies of enquiry and through queer theorizing, Fremlova makes a valuable contribution to the discussion on reflectivity in Romani Studies at the intersection of multiple identities and positions. She argues that “there is an urgent need for non-Roma scholars engaging in what is sometimes referred to as “outsider research” to consider and incorporate the topics of researcher positionality and reflexivity on a much greater scale” (Fremlova, 2018:104). Fremlova concludes with listing suggested question which each and every non-Roma researcher should ask himself in order to reflect on their own positionality and privilege.

Likewise, Jekatyerina Dunajeva examine critically her own research experiences which conducting fieldwork in a Roma settlement (Dunajeva, 2018). She reflects on interactions and the power dynamics between the researcher and the informants during research concluding that all researchers “must be sensitive to asymmetries of power in the context of interactions” (Dunajeva, 2018:139) and how this informs and influences the outcomes of research and consequently, the academic knowledge produced.

The above mentioned examples represent essential contributions to contemporary polarized discussions in Romani Studies. Not only do they represent a developing ethical practice committed to quality of academic knowledge as well as respectful and dignified treatment of Roma. They also open up new fields of inquiry in Romani Studies and undeniably push the discipline towards development. At the same time, emerging reflexivity of non-Romani scholars and the inclusion of positionality perspectives paths the way to academic reconciliation of the Roma vs. non-Roma divide.

Translating Roma subjective experience into academic discourse – opportunities and challenges

While Roma scholars call for recognition of authority and legitimacy of their own scholarly voice (Matache, 2016a, 2016b, 2017, Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2015, 2018c), they also struggle with articulating in what ways their own Roma positionality informs their processes of knowledge production.

Emergence of Romani scholarship is ultimately an opportunity for the development of Romani Studies. The ascendance of authoritative Romani voices within scientific debates helps to unravel internal tensions, gaps and incongruences within Romani Studies. It also opens up Romani studies to new approaches, different inquiries and innovative avenues of research, in accordance with ethical guidelines necessary for inclusive and respectful research with Roma communities. With the growing popularity of “the Roma issue” in the academic world, it is increasingly necessary to develop such ethical guidelines and adequate research protocols in Romani studies. The

meaningful involvement of Roma in knowledge production will help to establish such protocols that guarantee ethical, dignified and scientifically rigorous research on Roma.

At the same time, however, Roma scholars themselves are facing a challenge of articulating what Roma positionality actually means. Elaborating a “Roma standpoint theory” or “Roma school of thought” has not yet come to existence although arguably its foundations are being gradually laid down. In this sense, embracing reflexivity and positionality should also become a common practice among Roma researchers themselves. Roma scholars are yet to give convincing answers to such questions like: What is the Roma standpoint? How is the research produced on Roma different from their non-Roma colleagues? What are the common features of Roma positionality? And given the vast diversity of Roma communities, can we speak of a single Roma standpoint theory at all?

Speaking from within – a personal equation

The first steps to answer these questions must start with looking at oneself.

When I decided to enroll in doctoral studies in 2012, I was entering the academic field as a Roma person with a background in Roma activism. Even then, as an early career scholar, my position as a Roma scholar was vocal and visible. In my early papers, academic discussions and online, I was often raising my voice to highlight the absence of Roma scholarship and the need for plural narratives coming from the Roma community members themselves. My call for more inclusive Romani scholarship was often treated (and wrongfully so) as an attack on established non-Roma scholars. Sporadic attacks and personalized criticism I was confronted with tended to question my very position – as a Roma scholar with activist background – assuming biased research and resulting inferior validity of my arguments as “tainted” by a political agenda. Quite surprisingly, critics I faced referred more to my vocal position as a Roma scholar rather than engaged in a meaningful way with my arguments and scholarly writing.

Indeed, who I was and where I came from played an essential role in my academic production. My background informed my research: the different facets of my identity – as a Roma, as a woman, and a young scholar, as a European, as an activist – influenced my academic work from the choice of the field of inquiry, to my research questions and methods employed.

My travels and experiences – as a Romani activist, employee of Roma organizations and especially as a researcher - have lead me to understand the complicated and frequently ambiguous status of a researcher, who constantly has to negotiate different roles while in the field. This was especially relevant for me as a person with a Romani background who researches topics related in one way or another to the Romani population. Throughout these experiences, both in Europe and Latin America, I learned that my status as an investigator was ambiguous, even more so than for a researcher coming from outside of the Romani community – as a foreigner, a stranger and an investigator, I was an outsider. However, as a Roma, declared and recognized by my interlocutors (often initially with a dose of disbelief), I was an insider, facilitating my entrance to the field, gaining trust and accessing the intimacy of Romani families and communities. My professional experience and personal involvement in Romani activism added an additional layer to my status as a researcher. Over the years, and thanks to my previous research experiences, I have tried to maintain a balance between these different roles, learning how to negotiate and separate different roles depending on the context, field and objectives of research.

These personal challenges which I encountered and dealt with over the years reflect a broader discussion emerging within the field of Romani Studies, specifically, and more broadly, with regards to the salience of “subaltern” scholarship.

My previous academic experience, and most notably my participation in different research projects, allowed me to negotiate these different roles and to rely on my academic training in order to differentiate my role as a scholar from other involvements. Based on my own experience, I argue that the added value of Romani scholars resides in their status as “outsiders within” (Collins, 1986; Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2015, 2018b). The combination of lived experience, academic training and commitment to scientific rigour and quality that many Romani scholars possess offers the much-needed plurality of perspectives and voices otherwise missing currently from Romani Studies. The ascendance of authoritative Romani voices in scientific debates will help to unravel internal tensions, gaps and incongruences within Romani Studies by contrasting the body of knowledge on Roma with the lived experiences of community-members. In this sense, Romani scholars can approximate first-hand knowledge which can otherwise be inaccessible or difficult to attain by non-Romani scholars. How otherwise would it be possible to provide insight into the “authenticity tests” which a Romani scholar goes through when entering the field of research among a Roma group different than your own? Or, how can a non-Roma researcher explain the intricate and complex relationship of belonging and distinctiveness when building relationships with Roma from another country or sub-group? Or in what way can a non-Roma scholar describe why and how Romani identity is performed, described and felt differently, depending on the context; or understand the processes of “passing” and “invisibility”, as something that is contextual, temporary and fluid? These questions can be answered best from within Romani subjectivity, bearing in mind internal codes of conduct and performances of daily rituals, which require a level of intimacy, proximity and insiders’ knowledge.

While claiming the need for plural Roma voices and assertive Roma scholarship I increasingly found it difficult to operationalize the concept of Roma positionality. I attempted to translate my own experiences into academic discourse and apply a conscious Roma standpoint reading of my findings. Indeed, throughout my doctoral research, I attempted to speak from within. But my research focused on strategies of ethnic mobilization, engaged with Roma politics and Roma policies, inevitably bringing the narrative to reflect broader socio-political dynamics. The nature of my doctoral research did not inform enough about the distinct Roma modes of knowing coming from within the Roma subjectivity of the Roma subjects.

The lack of a Roma standpoint theory or protocols of critical Roma scholarship and the still limited accounts which articulate powerfully the Roma position in knowledge-production create a vacuum. As I dwelled more on these questions, I craved practical and concrete examples of quality academic works that would represent such “Roma modes of knowing”.

Surprisingly, a vivid example came from the person closest to me and from research written almost 40 years ago.

Speaking from within – an example of “Roma modes of knowing”

It was 1980 when my father Andrzej Mirga defended his Master’s thesis “Stereotype of the Goral (Non-Roma/ Gadjo highlander) among the Roma community in the South of Poland” at the Department of Ethnology at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland (in Polish) (Mirga, 1980).

My father, one of ten siblings of my illiterate Roma grandparents, was the first Roma person to attend a university in Poland (a year earlier his brother Jan Mirga entered the Academy of Physical Education in Krakow, being the first Roma to attend a higher education institution in the country; a few years later their sister Stanislawa entered the Academy of Pedagogy, as a first Romani woman in Poland).

While initially my father wanted to study Law, he eventually opted for a degree in Ethnology in 1975. Throughout the next years, he received a rather classical training rooted in then-rigorous standards of scientific engagement with cultures and peoples of the world – based foremost in the ethnographic methods and techniques of data collection and interpretation. At the time, and at the height of the communist regime, the fieldwork was limited to linguistic, national and cultural minorities present in an overwhelmingly homogeneous Poland (white, ethnically Polish, catholic). The ethnographic methods of inquiry were predominantly sustained on participant and non-participant observation; the tools of data collections were: field journals, tape recorders and photographic cameras.

My father quite naturally turned towards his own community to apply the knowledge and skills he was thought at the university. Of course, he was not the only ethnographer who was interested in researching the Roma. Indeed, even when he was younger, he recalls ethnographers coming to his own community in Czarna Gora in the Polish mountains, interviewing his family members, taking pictures and spending time in the settlement. There were already multiple books written about the Roma in Poland (most significantly those written by J. Ficowski); the Roma community members were also accustomed to curious non-Roma researchers asking questions, elaborating family genealogies, and documenting the smallest rituals of the everyday Roma life. Up until that moment, those researchers were exclusively non-Roma outsiders.

While at the time, questions of positionality, standpoint theories, feminist, postcolonial and/or critical theories were virtually non-existent in the academic discourse in Poland, for my father his unique position was self-evident, and more importantly, self-declared, articulated and organic. In the opening chapter he writes:

“The objective of my work is to exemplify, as comprehensively as possible, the stereotype of Gadjo that exists among the researched population. The fulfilment of this objective represents a difficulty because, first of all, a stereotype is a category of group consciousness, meaning that the study of a stereotype is a study of “collective consciousness” which imposes on the researcher certain limitations as to the research methods as well as the interpretation of findings/ understanding of meanings that in reality function in that community. [...] the first challenge is somewhat overcome as the author of this study is a member of the Roma community as well as a member of the researched community.”(Mirga, 1980:2-3)

His modes of interaction with the objects of research – always and exclusively in *Romanes*, their mother tongue, the understanding of cultural codes, the accessibility granted to the highest degree of community and family intimacy and the trust granted to him by other Roma gave him a unique status in the process of knowledge production. This familiarity may also present some challenges too. He declares:

“The only difficulty that emerged during conducting research, which was difficult to overcome with some informants is that Roma believed that I, as a member of the same community, unnecessarily ask them about the Gadje, how they see them, what they think of them etc. – after all I am aware of all of this, I know this.” (Mirga, 1980:3)

The privileged positionality as an insider did only transcend his academic writings, but can also be exemplified by the ethnographic data he collected. A side-note here is worth mentioning. As an ethnography student conducting fieldwork my father also documented the field using cameras. Across many years of studies, my father made dozens of photographs of Roma in his own community and many other Roma communities across the region. These photos were recovered only some years ago and admired today, some four decades later, they seem remarkable. Unlike many other ethnographic photos of the Roma which commonly transmit distance and distrust on the side of the researched and orientalist, exotic infatuation on the side of the researcher, the black and white photographs made by my father resonate with pride, dignity, intimacy, sense of humour, familiarity and warmth. Years later, these re-discovered pictures served as a source of inspiration for many paintings of my cousin Malgorzata Mirga-Tas - the photos and paintings were exhibited together for the first time in 2018 in Krakow in the “The Right to Look” exhibition, curated by Wojciech Szymanski. In his curatorial concept, Szymanski writes:

“In case of Mirga, one is entitled to talk about an act of reclaiming the medium that has been previously used to produce the image of the object by the discourse of ethnography. By means of this operation, a member of the Romani (and thus far subjugated by ethnographers) community reclaims for his people their own image and turns them into the subject. In the photographs by Mirga (a soon-to-be ethnography graduate), ethnography, anthropology and ethnology, namely the disciplines whose history is irrevocably and organically linked with the imperial gaze, become performatively deconstructed.” (Wojciech Szymanski, “The Right to Look” curatorial concept, Gry House Gallery in Krakow, February 2018).

These one-of-a-kind photos were later incorporated by Andre Raatsz, curator of the section “Politics of Photography” of the RomArchive - Digital Archive of the Roma, into his online collection as examples of self-narration and self-representation, used as a means to deconstruct antigypsyist representations of Roma in photography.

Like the photographs, the master thesis of my father, was recovered years later from the Department of Ethnography Archives of the Jagiellonian University (my father had only an incomplete manuscript of his own work). For me, reading this text almost 40 years after its elaboration, and in the midst of the current heated debated between polarized Roma and non-Roma scholars sparked by the emergence of Critical Romani Studies, became a refreshing and somewhat frustrating discovery.

On the one hand, it is a vivid example of Roma knowledge production rooted in quality and scientific rigor and speaking distinctively from within the Roma positionality. Firstly, the thesis “Stereotype of the Gadjo among the Roma community in the South of Poland” is unique and original by the very question it asks – turning the gaze of the researched back at the researchers; and more broadly, speaking back from the peripheral minority position back to the majority center.

Secondly, the thesis encapsulates Roma worldviews told from a non-hierarchical position, free from exoticism and cultural orientalization, and directed at elevating and dignifying “Roma modes of knowing” – understood as the reading of reality from within a Roma community standpoint.

Finally, and most importantly, the thesis is valuable for what it reveals not about the Roma community who are researched but about the non-Roma majority which the Roma are asked about. Through the detailed accounts of the Roma community members, it speaks about the history of relationships between the Roma and the non-Roma, stories of perceived mistreatment and injustices inflicted by the majority on the Roma, reflecting critically on the values as well as social and family relationships of the non-Roma majority. In this way, the Gadjó identity is described and highlighted. Here, it is the non-Roma who is treated as “the Other”, who is analyzed critically and whose culture is problematized. For the non-Roma readers, the thesis is quite a discovery of an identity they did not realize they had, and a foundation of “gadjology” studies which have only recently been timidly announced (in the context of CEU Critical Romani Studies conferences). It is a valuable and unique exercise – allowing the non-Roma to look back at themselves, reflect on their own values, social and familial codes, and acknowledging their “whiteness”/ “gadjó-status” that tends to be taken-for-granted and commonly unacknowledged at all.

On the other hand, the frustrating aspects lies the uniqueness of the thesis. Since the 1980s, when the research was conducted and published, the Romani Studies as a discipline has progressed very little towards embracing Romani scholarship and Romani positionality. One reason for this state of affairs is the development of the “arena of Romani affairs” (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2018a) influenced by the proliferation of Roma-targeted policies and projects. Scholarship on Roma became dominated with its role to inform policy-makers, public institutions and charities, in solving the Roma socio-economic problems. The purpose of academic research as a source of expertise for policies influenced the scope of topics and ways of engaging with the topic of Roma – focusing on deficits of the population, problematizing the Roma identity and often “ethnicizing” socio-economic problems. This development led to the reification of experts as ultimate agents representing “objective and scientific knowledge”.

Finally, what resonates is also the self-assurance and confidence with which the text is written – there is no trace of the criticisms of insiders as an argument for bias research, or the fissure between “objective” science and engaged, participatory research (Bogdán, Ryder, & Taba, 2015; Ryder, 2015).

Conclusions

With the increasing number of Romani scholars, there is a growing challenge to accommodate them within the existing panorama of Romani Studies (Matache, 2016b, 2017), leading to tensions along the divide of ethnic belonging. In an attempt at overcoming these temporary fissures between Roma and non-Romani scholars, it is essential that all scholars, disregarding of their ethnicity embrace the discussion regarding reflectivity and positionality of researchers. It is high time that “studying the self” in the process of academic inquiry transforms into a regular practice and not, as it is still today in the context of Romani studies, a novelty.

Romani scholars can approximate first-hand knowledge which can otherwise be inaccessible or difficult to attain by non-Romani scholars. At the same time, it is also significant that despite its added value, the emergence of Romani scholarship does not automatically mean that researchers of Romani background are inherently immune to methodological shortcomings, theoretical pitfalls and indeed, even internalized racism. Simultaneously, as illustrated by the increasing number of contributions of non-Roma scholars with regards to their own privilege position(s) adds to establishing new avenues of research and result in nuanced, case-sensitive and insightful

contributions. After all, and quite understandably so, “you have to position yourself somewhere in order to be able to say anything at all” (Hall, 1990:18).

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