

Othering, Scapegoating, and the Crisis of Modernity in *Wuthering Heights*

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Abstract

A classic example of romantic literature, Wuthering Heights is also an example of the way Victorian literature moves beyond Romanticism to embrace the modern age. The iconic romantic hero (Heathcliff) who must suffer othering, discrimination, and rejection to eventually die a romantic death, also paves how for the modern world and its ethos of embracing difference and otherness. The "other" in Victorian England was this constant threat to the status quo, the latent revolution that the Victorians have feared and anticipated. However, Hegelian (and other) conceptualizations of the meaning of the "other" as a prerequisite signifier of the self challenges this conventional image of the "other" as a mere outside object. In this paper, we read Heathcliff as a metaphoric defense mechanism against the fast pace of modernity. Combining textual analysis with a contextual regard for the spirit of the age in which the novel was written, the paper proves that Heathcliff's ordeal is the scapegoating of the romantic hero who helps the society to mature and accept otherness and modernity.

Keywords: Othering, Victorian Age, The Romantic Hero, Modernity

Introduction

Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* depicts the stormy, anxious, long movement from the old world into the modern one. The novel tackles one of the most serious Victorian anxieties; fear and rejection of others. The movement to modernity in the Victorian England involved encountering external and internal otherness. Colonization, external wars, slavery, and commerce have resulted in the encountering of foreigners. The Irish question, the industrial revolution and the emergence of a threatening working class, the rise in class differences increased the problem of otherness. Among the reasons that led to othering and discriminating against others in Victorian England were the notion of impurity and contamination of the outside world, the threatening danger of the "savage" working class. Tales of cannibalism during the Irish famine (1845-1852) and the fear of the mob were constant threats to the stability of the social order (Beaumont 140).

Othering is a multifaceted phenomenon of viewing and treating anything, any *one* as distinct or different from oneself (*The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*). It occurs in racial segregation, class discrimination and xenophobia. The concept of othering covers various practices and attitudes according to the reasons and objects of othering. These objects, i.e., the othered, are placed beneath the self in an ontological hierarchy, they are often deprived their humanity. The "other" is often seen to be beastly and demonic being outside the essentialist self. It is considered a threat to oneself.

Theoretically, this rejection of the other as an essential component of the conception of the self alienates the very understanding of selfhood. In addition to its ontological aspect, the category of "the other" is also a sort of

epistemological necessity, a mirror to view and construct the self. According to the German philosopher of modernity G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), the concept of “the other” is interconnected with our conception of who we are. Hegel’s self-consciousness is a dialectical process. It is through our interaction with an “other” outside of ourself that we recognize that self. In his famous “master-slave dialectic,” Hegel asserts that despite the master’s subjugation and “othering” of the slave; his very being as a master necessarily require the existence of the slave to recognize him as a master (Hegel; Kain 221). Therefore, our perception of who we are is based on that who is/are not ourself. Hence, people often ascribe to these “others” all the characteristics they deny about themselves. This results in different forms of alienation that lead to estrangement (Kain 221).

Manifestations of “the other” include foreigners, gypsies, the working class, the new rich and every other category that does not fit into the conventional classification and understanding of Victorian society. Metropolitan urbanization and modernization brought this variety of indigenous people together in one place. For the system to operate differences and varieties should be accepted. Othering these people can be understood as a social/national self-defence mechanism against the unknown. It was also a defiance and rejection of modernity. Rejection of variety and differences hinders the movement of modernity. No matter how modern and civilized the characters of *Wuthering Heights* seem to be, their rejection and othering Heathcliff, is an indication of their resistance to historical change. In contrast to the conventional view of Heathcliff as a vulgar, uncivilized outsider, in this paper, we read the othering of Heathcliff in the novel as an example of the Victorian resistance to modernity. The pain and violence that he experiences and exercises upon others are the pain and suffering that society must undergo in its way to modernity.

The Anxiety of Otherness

Wuthering Heights adds to the dialogue on the anxiety of otherness during its time. It embraces otherness by starring Heathcliff as the ultimate outsider in Victorian literature. Almost all the

characters in the novel see Heathcliff as an intruder to the status quo. His otherness marks a serious obstacle in the movement towards the modern age. Heathcliff’s defiance to modernity is because it entailed othering and discriminating him. He refuses the modern world because it deprives him of his love, Catherine Earnshaw, who chose a new, more civilized life. However, Heathcliff is not the only character in the novel that defies the movement toward modernity. By rejecting him, other characters prevent this movement and create a twilight static moment of tension that the novel dramatizes. The novel’s world is static because of this undesirability of accepting modernity as it is and the impossibility of restoring the old world order. Heathcliff is made monstrous by this rejection. His otherness, then, is not an innate threat that he brings with him; rather, it is constructed in the kind of life they have subjected him to. Upon Heathcliff’s first introduction to the Earnshaw family (56-59), he is described as “a dirty, ragged, black-haired child.” Speaking about the foundling, Mr. Earnshaw, the father, says “it’s as dark almost as if it came from the devil.” He has seen the child starving, and houseless, and as good as dumb, in the streets of Liverpool, where he picked it up and inquired for its owner. Not a soul knew to whom it belonged (57). Given the name of the Earnshaw’s dead firstborn child, and growing to be Mr. Earnshaw’s favourite, Heathcliff is suspected to threaten the stability of the family order. He was mistreated and persecuted by the children Hindley, Catherine Earnshaw, and the servant, the narrator, Nelly Dean.

Throughout the novel, othering and mistreating Heathcliff is a matter of course. Except for Mr. Earnshaw, the father, all other characters treated him as alien to themselves and the world. Heathcliff’s otherness was inflicted on him in several ways and for several reasons: racial (or ethnic) segregation, class discrimination and xenophobia. As a racial outsider to the Englishness of all the characters, his otherness cannot be disputed (Sneidern 171). The Suspicion circles around the implications of Heathcliff’s origin because of its obscurity. Critics speculate that he is a Moroccan Arab, an African, Asian, or an Irish slave. He could have been a “sliver left over from the slave trade economy of consumption” (Beaumont 140).

Heathcliff was treated and imaged as a black, a gypsy, and a slave. His slavery is indicated from the beginning of his coming to height. A “vagabond” brought by the master Mr. Earnshaw in his journey back from Liverpool, the famous English city in slave commerce. (Sneidern 171). The foundling is described as a dark almost as if it came from the devil (57). Mr. Earnshaw relates to the family how he found the helpless child with no “owner” (57). Heathcliff is not quite regularly black, but “tainted by colour,” a mongrel, that was a source of great anxiety for the Victorians (Sneidern 172). Catherine compares and contrasts his blackness with the Lintons: “Why, how very black and cross you look! and How funny and grim! But that’s because I’m used to Edgar and Isabella Linton”. Heathcliff is often compared and contrasted to the whiteness of others in the same way. His blackness and “bad” looks created a kind of inferiority complex for him.

Class discrimination was another aspect of Heathcliff’s treatment. He was treated and imaged as a servant, a poor, origin-less working man who aspires to -and reaches- a higher class position, destroying the class structure of the Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange (Vine 341). His rise threatens the stability of order. His savagery, barbarism (and implied cannibalism) is a serious threat. Hindley Earnshaw always treats Heathcliff as a servant: “You may come and wish Miss Catherine welcome, like the other servants” (83). Immediately after Mr. Earnshaw’s death, Hindley becomes a real servant, preventing him from education and rising above his social status. Years after this, Heathcliff revenges himself by turning Hareton, Hindley’s son, into a servant in the house of Haerton’s own family. The treatment Heathcliff faces are typical of Victorian fears of the poor. The poor were feared being savage, barbaric, and even cannibalistic, threatening the middle and higher classes of society (Beaumont 150). Edgar Linton’s fear of the growing intimacy between his sister Isabella and Heathcliff is an example of the growing xenophobia and fear of the working class in Victorian society. Heathcliff’s sense of his class inferiority was aggravated in the scene when he and Catherine sneak into Thrushcross Grange. When Heathcliff and Catherine were caught spying on the Lintons, he was reproached and

discriminated against while she was welcomed as a lady:

“Frightful thing! Put him in the cellar, papa. He’s exactly like the son of the fortune-teller that stole my tame pheasant. Isn’t he, Edgar?”... ‘Miss Earnshaw? Nonsense!’ cried the dame; ‘Miss Earnshaw scouring the country with a gipsy!’” (78)

This class difference gradually separates Heathcliff from his beloved Catherine. She treats him in a subjugated manner. In a common sense, he is more a subject to herself than a lover. She did not think of him as an independent being. He is not merely lower than her aspirations but also a subject for her own self. “It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff,” she tells Nelly Dean (127). Heathcliff summarizes his view of class struggle to Catherine: “The tyrant grinds down his slaves and they don’t turn against him, they crush those beneath them” (179). He accepts being her slave, but asks her to allow him to crush his enemies by making them lower than himself. This can be seen in his wife’s words the night Catherine was buried. Isabella tells him: “Heathcliff, if I were you, I’d go stretch myself over her grave and die like a faithful dog” (283). The faithful Heathcliff does so eventually, but only after he revenges himself against all those who mistreated him.

Another aspect of Heathcliff’s othering is the implication that he has a foreign origin. Xenophobia was a serious Victorian anxiety. It was a way of interpreting the foreignness of people from other countries as a threat to the English culture and identity. Tromp et al. argue that the image of the foreigner often takes its shape through the concern of changing identities and the merging of the self and the other (2). This merging results in contamination of the Englishness of Victorian society. It is a fear of racial impurities, cultural degradation, savage, and barbaric values (4). “Victorian Xenophobia was a rhetorical strategy that transforms “foreign” people... into perceived invaders with the dangerous power to alter the social fabric of the nation and the identity of the English” (Tromp et al.) Suggestions for Heathcliff’s foreignness were made as early as his first words in the Heights. Nelly Dean tells us that he mutters a few words, “some gibberish that nobody could understand.” This is not merely because he

was unable to speak yet, -she tells us earlier that he could walk and talk -but as an implication that he speaks some other language (57). When he and Catherine were caught spying on the Lintons, Mr. Linton, expressed his understanding of Catherine's act, but he could not understand the intrusion of Heathcliff: "But who is this? Where did she pick up this companion? Oho! I declare he is that strange acquisition my late neighbour made, in his journey to Liverpool - a little Lascar, or an American or Spanish castaway" (78). The foreignness of the boy's origin is a continuous stain on Heathcliff. Earlier in the novel Nelly Dean tells the child Heathcliff that he should have high notion of himself. Out of her pity to the child, Nelly tells him a fictional story about his possible origin, creating his inflated self-image as a superior, misrecognized outsider. In a gesture of pity, but also as a class solidarity with the kid, she invites him -similar to the

You're fit for a prince in disguise. Who knows but your father was Emperor of China, and your mother an Indian queen, each of them able to buy up, with one week's income, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange together? And you were kidnapped by wicked sailors and brought to England. Were [sic] I in your place, I would frame high notions of my birth (89).

The growth of this made-up self-image helped the boy survive the hardships of living under Hindley Earnshaw persecution. It gives him a purpose in life, a goal to pursue. The young boy smiled as he started forming his imaginary self in his mind, revenging himself against his persecutors. This fictional construction of identity that the narrator offers to Heathcliff is, in a way, a precursor of the (post)modernist notion of the constructed-ness of identity. Imagination is offered here as a necessary escape from reality. However, throughout the novel, Heathcliff wants to revenge himself as a matter of fact, not imagination. His inability to do so hinders his evolution into maturity, reasonableness, and a rational sense of selfhood. Nelly Dean advises Heathcliff to "frame" his own origin in an act of self-invention, for an origin is exactly what Heathcliff lacks; and indeed, Heathcliff later literalizes Nelly's narrative by possessing the Heights and the Grange and became himself as the property patriarch in the process (Vine 347-8). Later, Nelly Dean witnesses the outburst of the growing self-image that she has

kindly planted in the little child's mind. She tells Heathcliff that he should leave the country: "[I]f you really have a regard for [Catherine], you'll shun crossing her way again: nay, you'll move out of this country entirely; and that you may not regret it" (237). Edgar Linton wishes the same. He tells Nelly Dean that his sister Isabella should convince her husband to do so (234).

These aspects of othering and discrimination that Heathcliff suffers are factors that created the monster in him. The consequences are brutal. Because of their fear of Heathcliff's otherness, the Earnshaws and Lintons created a monster out of that child. He grows up to destroy the two families, to possess their houses and to persecute their second generation, crushing everything that stands in his way. It is their othering that made him so cruel. Their rejection and discrimination killed sociable men. Heathcliff's barbarism is constructed by the very attitudes that consider him to be so. He was the obverse to the societal othering practices. His romantic love for Catherine is crushed by the discriminating practices of society and Catherine herself. His revenge against society is an outburst, a reflection of their own cruelty. The novel expresses the human need to accept otherness in order to move to the modern world. Love for Heathcliff is not just a feeling, it is an attitude to the world, an act of moving beyond the self to embrace the other. This is the only resort that can restore humanity. Crushing and destroying the last resort is unleashes the monster from this romantic hero.

The Contradiction of Passion and Otherness

A love story that connects the structure of the novel is problematic. It is a unique love affair that is difficult to describe as a one-sided or a conventional one. Heathcliff's love to Catherine is his unique haven amidst the ocean of othering and discrimination he fights. His love is an expression of his to belong. Catherine is the only character that loves him. Unlike other characters' treatment, Catherine's love gives him a feeling of belonging. She identifies herself with him. She tells Miss Dean that she is Heathcliff: "Nelly, I AM Heathcliff! He's always, always in my mind" (130) Instead of building walls between their different identities she

unites them. This “selving” or identification of the self with the other is, supposedly, the opposite of the othering act. However, Catherine’s love of Heathcliff is problematic. This is distinctive and abstract. It transcends the conventional sense of physical or sensual desire. This transcendental, abstract sense of “selving” is beyond Heathcliff’s capacity for understanding. He does not actually hear this part of Catherine’s speech, (at least this is what Nelly Dean wants us to believe). However even if he did, it would make no sense for him. His decision to leave the house was a natural result of being rejected. By this abstract wording, Catherine was trying to convince herself (and Miss Dean) that she is not betraying her heart by choosing to marry Edgar Linton. She claims and assumes that she is doing Heathcliff a favor by helping him to rise through the money and position of her future husband. This assumption disregards Heathcliff. It subject to Catherine’s personality. Therefore, her love for and identification with him is not necessarily an expression of her rejection of social discriminatory values. It is another form of othering, a bourgeois subjugation of man and a disregard for his individuality. Her relationship with him is a form of defying (and mastering) the patriarchal structure of Heights by mastering Heathcliff. Symbolically, Heathcliff was for her to replace a whip, a reference to her characteristic wish to master rule. As a young girl, she uses Heathcliff as an amusement, playful, joyful thing that she cannot take seriously. He later became the embodiment of her childish dreams of freedom and mastery. He is something that she possesses, orders, and directions. Prior to these justifying “selving” or identification words, was the dramatic scene of Catherine’s declaration to Miss Dean her decision to marry his rival, Edgar Linton, and her sense of degradation to be married to Heathcliff. This scene represents for Heathcliff’s epitome of the social and class discrimination he suffers. Heathcliff understands the mistreatment he is subjected to by others. He suffers, but is strong enough to withstand it. However when it comes to Catherine’s treatment and disregard, he can no longer survive.

Catherine tries to justify her decision by claiming the intention to help Heathcliff rise with her husband’s money. She does not admit the fact that she cannot

have Heathcliff and Edgar simultaneously. From a social, “realistic” point of view, Catherine’s “selving” or identifying herself with Heathcliff, is an attempt to use abstract language to avoid the simple fact that he is a poor outsider that she cannot marry. She was looking for change. She yearns to get rid of the suffocating Heights and the rule of her brother Hindley. She thinks that she helps Heathcliff by liberating him and herself from the Heights. She loves him in her own way, without concern for his opinion. She did not think of him as an independent individual. By emancipating the slave, she is enacts a new form of slavery, the subjugation of his identity to her own. The problem with Catherine’s sort of love is not the lack of authenticity, but that it is different from what Heathcliff needs and higher than the reach of his understanding. Heathcliff as the object of this love is some transcendent being in Catherine’s mind, not the person we see in the novel. Heathcliff is not a man of words or abstract expressions. He is not able to understand Catherine’s point of view, which she never takes a step toward explaining or discussing with him. She confuses him. He has this strange kind of love-pride conflict with her. She loves Heathcliff with this idea and subjugates Heathcliff. Her decision to marry Edgar is a well calculated pragmatic affair. Her love to Heathcliff is an imaginary creation of her personal Heaven. It is a doubling of herself image, an invention of what she imagines herself to be (Visel 40). Indeed, her identification with him is a fictionalization of her own being:

[R]hetorically, she produces herself as tenor to Heathcliff’s vehicle and incarnates her identity as the gendered meaning of Heathcliff’s history. Since her identity is produced in a movement of othering, Cathy doubles Heathcliff’s troubled relation to his own selfhood. (Vine 347)

For Catherine, Heathcliff is not simply a real person, he is a fictional, romantic idea. The way she describes Heathcliff to Isabella (when the latter confronts her of her love to Heathcliff) reveals Catherine’s viewpoint of Heathcliff the man, not the idea, ‘I wouldn’t be you for a kingdom, then Catherine declared Nelly, ...Tell her what Heathcliff is: an unreclaimed (sic) creature, without refinement, without cultivation; an arid wilderness of furze and whinstone.... I know he couldn’t love a Linton; and yet he’d be quite capable of marrying your fortune

(162-163). Knowing that this is the opinion of the closest ally to Heathcliff, his beloved, is crucial to understanding the amount of disregard and othering that the man has been subjected to.

The Future of Others in the World of Wuthering Heights

As an “other” to the people of the Heights, Heathcliff could have had a different future except for the love of Catherine. She has caused all the suffering he undertakes by loving him in her own self-centered way. Heathcliff confronts Catherine of his opinion of what she has done to him:

And as to you, Catherine, I have a mind to speak a few words now, while we are at it. I want you to be aware that I KNOW you have treated me infernally - infernally! Do you hear? And if you flatter yourself that I don't perceive it, you are a fool; and if you think I can be consoled by sweet words, you are an idiot: and if you fancy I'll suffer unrevenged, I'll convince you of the contrary, in a very little while! (178-179)

He is telling her that by treating him infernally, by subjugating him to herself in this inferior way, she has created a beast. The infernal mistreatment Heathcliff is subjected to throughout the novel, especially by Catherine, has criminalized him. Everyone treats him as a villain. His consequential actions were in line with this role. The uniqueness of the novel's characterization is in the representation of Heathcliff's character. The several narrative layers, different narrators, and viewpoints in telling the story create a halo of attractive mystery around him. The readers are not sure who the real villain is; Heathcliff or all others who mistreat and misjudge him. Because the narrators are not necessarily reliable or impartial, a final judgment is not possible.

Heathcliff's suffering, however, does not result in a revenge against Catherine. Rather, he accepts her rules of the game and plan to inflict his misery on others.

'I seek no revenge on you,' replied Heathcliff, less vehemently. 'That's not the plan. The tyrant grinds down his slaves and they don't turn against him; they crush those beneath them. You are welcome to torture me to death for your amusement, only allow me to amuse myself a little in the same style (179).

Heathcliff accepts the rules of othering imposed on him. He planned to revenge himself through the

same mechanism. He says that the monster you have created will create his monster others, and the sequence continues. The last part of the novel, therefore, is a reflection, a reversal of the torture discriminating process. Hareton Earnshaw is the monster other that Heathcliff creates. Heathcliff assumes the role of the persecuting master against his enemies or their representatives. The torture of his wife Isabella is not only a revenge of her brother. It also revolts against all kinds of expectations that others have of themselves. He believed that her naivety was sin. She must pay to be too dreamy and childish. He tells Nelly about Isabella's delusion:

'Picturing in me a hero of romance, and expecting unlimited indulgences from my chivalrous devotion. I can hardly regard her in the light of a rational creature, so obstinately has she persisted in forming a fabulous notion of my character and acting on the false impressions she cherished. (241) ...The first thing she saw me do, on coming out of the Grange, was to hang up her little dog; and when she pleaded for it, the first words I uttered were a wish that I had the hanging of every being belonging to her, except one: possibly she took that exception for herself. But no brutality disgusted her: I suppose she has an innate admiration of it, if only her precious person were secure from injury! (242).

Heathcliff is discontented with what others expect him to be. This brutality in treating Isabella is a practice of his notion of acting his slave-tyranny, crushing those beneath himself. Being a tortured slave for Catherine's love he indulges in torturing those who are lower than him. It is important to see the kind of class, or difference in awareness in these lines. They also indicate the fact that his brutality reflects the brutality of the other characters and society itself. Their brutality against animals, which is a recurrent motif in the novel, indicates Heathcliff's narrative function as an obverse other, a reflection of the society. Other characteristics are equally barbaric and cruel in the treatment of animals. Heathcliff acts his savagery out in the public. This is probably the reason why he is attractive to readers. Heathcliff's savagery is full of life and energy. This is in contrast with the dull, civilized world. It is also the reason why he is loved by Catherine, why Hindley accepts to have him in the house after his return as an accomplished “gentleman”. Heathcliff's barbarism is

indeed a product of civilization (Beaumont 154). It is also the obverse self-image of the “civilized” society. Those characters who are attracted to Heathcliff need to project their own savagery and barbarism. In a barbaric society moving toward modernity, an outside other is necessary to create the “self-double” (Visel 40). After the death of Hindley, Heathcliff tells his son Hareton: “Now, my bonny lad, you are MINE! And we will see if one tree will not grow as crooked as another, with the same wind to twist it” (300). This shows Heathcliff’s plan to revenge himself over his enemies by their representatives, in attempt to prove -to himself- that his savagery, barbarism or crookedness is wrought on him by others, by the surrounding twisting wind, as he says.

Throughout the rest of the novel Hareton Earnshaw acquires the characteristics of Heathcliff in cruelty, uncivility, and bad manners. Heathcliff reverses the othering process against representatives of his enemies. He tries hard to crush them, to torture and use them to achieve his interests. He mistreated Hareton in the way he was mistreated by the father. Hareton becomes Heathcliff’s obverse other. He resembled him in several ways. He is dirty, vulgar, harsh, and savages in his behaviour. Heathcliff uses him as a slave in his own house. The roles of the master and slave are reversed in their relationships. However, the two like each other in a very strange way. Hareton’s love and admiration to his persecutor is like Heathcliff’s love to Catherine Earnshaw. Heathcliff’s love of the boy is self-reflective. He sees himself as young man. He admired his patience, self-respect, and defiance. He loves him more than his biological son the young Linton. He sees Hareton struggling through similar pain and hardship to his own. The ending of the novel confirms the romantic love story structure. Love in the first generation has died because the lovers could not move out of their inner selves to reach into the otherness of their loved ones. Heathcliff and Catherine were so enclosed in their selves that they could not see beyond. In the second generation, love acquires new energy, new potential through the openness to the other. The young Catherine moved beyond her pride and personal self-boundary to embrace the otherness of Hareton. This movement, indicative of the movement to modernity in the more general, allegorical reading of the

novel, is the kind of love necessary to have in the modern age- a sense of intimate care for the beloved beyond the ownership or erasure of the boundaries between self and others. The latter accepts the hard and embarrassing modernizing act of learning to read only when he reaches beyond his enclosed self. The affirming closure of the novel’s end is that the movement to modernity and civilization is not by rejecting others, nor by destroying the limits of the distinctive selfhood, but only by accepting and embracing differences and moving beyond them.

Conclusion

The question of otherness is problematically framed in the narrative framework of Wuthering Heights. Heathcliff’s otherness is dramatised to the point where he appears to be the antagonist. However, this interpretation is not always helpful. The idea that Heathcliff’s othering is a process of creating an image of the counter-self is a crucial component of the overall message that the book conveys to the reader. Heathcliff is everything that bourgeois Victorian culture, which is considered “civilised,” is actually not. Throughout the novel, othering is a metaphor for Victorians’ fear of all that is not their true “self,” as well as the results of that fear. Modernity cannot be achieved without the challenging cultural job of accepting and embracing otherness. Among other things, modernity means embracing and respecting diversity and individuality. To shake up stale social structures, Heathcliff’s arrival at the Heights is crucial. To grow up and enter the modern world, one must experience otherness. The study concludes that the first generation’s inability to embrace otherness is a feature of their resistance to embracing the contemporary world, as demonstrated by Catherine Earnshaw’s preference for Linton over Heathcliff. The relationship of the second generation represented by Catherine and Hareton, is an example of how the second generation takes this risk and constructively goes through the required change.

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