

**“Home is where the heart lies”:
Nostalgia in the Works of
Contemporary Diasporic Caribbean
Women Poets**

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Nostalgia is a common sentiment amongst members of a diasporic community, and appears as a distinct theme throughout the poetry of women Caribbean poets living and writing from Canada, the US and Britain. Olive Senior, Claire Harris, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Lorna Goodison, Dionne Brand and Grace Nichols are all poets who seem to experience a conflict between resisting and giving in to nostalgia, and this is evident in their poetry. Boym suggests that nostalgia (from the Greek, *nostos*- return home, and *algia*- longing) is a 'longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy' (Boym). Indeed, all six poets recognize that the Caribbean they depict is a 'fantasy' or product of their imagination. Nostalgia is also, 'the expression of yearning for an earlier time or place or a significant person in one's history, the memory and significance of which or whom contributes to the sense of the self in the present moment' (Rubenstein). In these women's poetry the notion of nostalgia is tangled up with memories of the past, the physical land, tropical fruits, tropical weather, the mother figure and childhood. Whilst all six poets attempt to resist nostalgia, by either denying the value of the experience, or celebrating it, they are all *unable* to resist writing nostalgically with a sense of longing for their Caribbean homeland.

Olive Senior resides in both Canada and her homeland of Jamaica. Senior's most recent collection of poetry, *Over the Roofs of the World*, is the first in which she overtly addresses the experience of nostalgia. In her poem, "Blue Foot Traveller", she highlights the fictitious role of the protagonist's memory in failing to recognize that her idealized homeland has inevitably changed since her departure:

'That world no longer exists.
Yet from the architecture of longing
you continue to construct a bountiful edifice.

This is not exile.
You can return any day to the place that you came from
though the place you left has shifted a heartbeat' (Senior, "Blue Foot Traveller").

Olive Senior is acutely conscious of nostalgia as both a temptation to the diasporic poet and a 'construct'; 'that world [that] no longer exists' (Senior, "Blue Foot Traveller").

In this poem, Senior portrays the immigrant's state of nostalgia as an entrapment from life. She places the nostalgic immigrant as 'moor[ed]', 'snared', 'drowning' (Senior, "Leaving Home"). All these images reveal the immigrant's inability to disentangle herself from the past, in order to live in the future. Senior places the onus on immigrant to be solely responsible for her own fate. Therefore, the 'Executioner/ Midwife' metaphor at the end of the poem highlights a great significance in the immigrant's choice. Since an 'Executioner' is responsible for killing, and a 'Midwife' responsible for bringing life, Senior is also revealing 'cruelty' and pain in this 'choice'. Either choice also reveals a type of freedom from the entrapment of nostalgia: the 'Midwife' signifies a rebirth into a new life away from home; and the 'Executioner' signifies death/forgetting of home and a freedom thereafter.

Senior continues this notion of nostalgia as entrapment, or 'mooring' to the past throughout other poems in *Over the Roofs of the World*. In her poem "Blue", this entrapment is expressed as state of limbo:

Blue was that in-betweenness, that moment/
of change, of solstice, where you feared to fall
between worlds, into that blue crevice, become lost
in canyons and gullies, snow drift, millennium (Senior, "Blue").

We can relate this state of 'in-betweenness' to the immigrant's experience of entrapment between their home and new place of residence. By placing the persona in this poem as 'lost' in a blue crevice, canyon, gully or snow drift, Senior is illustrating the pain and discomfort of this 'in-betweenness.' Furthermore the saturation of blue images in this poem and many others in *Over the Roofs of the World* can function as a metaphor on several levels. Firstly we can read blue as a sad, homesick state. The second metaphor emerges from Caribbean folklore. Someone is described as a 'blue foot' when they are a 'stranger, not a born-ya' (Senior, "Embroidery"). By living in Canada, Senior herself experiences all these levels of blue; the 'in-betweenness', the pain of homesickness, and has herself become a 'blue foot.'

Claire Harris uses 'blue' as a sense of homesickness and escapism in her poem, "Towards the Cool of Summer." In this poem, the colour blue symbolizes a vast space (like the sky), into which Harris is able to imagine her soul travelling. This escapism

signifies Harris' longing for her childhood in Jamaica, and is therefore both a nostalgic longing *and* a celebration of her childhood:

I become blue meaning by this a measure
of release what I imagine the soul feels
as it escapes drained bone...blue as in
the tail feathers of tropical birds I knew

as a child or heart petals seen in tall shade trees
on long July roamings among the cocoa bird/orchid

too far above ground for traps in such blue
I float suspended disguised in my favorite self" (Harris, "The Conception of
Winter").

In this poem the blue 'tail feathers of tropical birds' triggers further memories of the flora and fauna of her Jamaican childhood. Similarly in "A Grammar of the Heart", Harris depicts mango trees as a lure home to the Caribbean in her poem, '[T]he mango wind drifting/from island backyards in the purpling of lilacs...' (Harris, "A Grammar of the Heart"). Like Senior, Harris' appreciation of nature creates a sense of longing for the Caribbean; 'So distant from my/ own rainforested mountains/ mountains rounded like whales/ stranded against the dawn' (Harris, "August"). In this passage Harris seems to be suggesting that her memories of the Jamaican mountains are on the brink of death; like 'whales/stranded.' There is also a sense of helplessness here, as Harris is too distant to keep these 'whales'/memories alive. Harris is also recognizing a failure of responsibility towards what she describes as 'my/own rainforested mountains.' Both Senior and Harris experience a sense responsibility for the natural environment of the Caribbean. But it is this responsibility and its potential of failure which exacerbate a nostalgic longing for their rainforested home; one which is fast disappearing due to the growing inaccuracy of their memories, and ecological devastation.

Harris sets this tropical vibrancy against the cold, whiteness of Canada; a place where people become 'bleached/ by nostalgia' (Harris, "En Route"); 'yellow in / exile' (Harris, "August"). Throughout her volume of poetry, *The Conception of Winter*, winter

becomes a metaphor for all that Canada is not: warm, comfortable and fertile. In her mind, Harris becomes trapped within ‘deep snowbound years/ of separation’ (Harris, "En Route"). It seems that her idea of home is the only thing that remains moving, lifelike; ‘in the beginning/I thrash/but now/ against the walls of winter/unable to sleep through the world/I walk as my mother did/stroking the fluttering/image’ (Harris, "Of Iron, Bars and Cages"). We get a sense that Harris’ idea of home, that ‘fluttering image’ is like a butterfly; both fragile and difficult to tame.

Harris also presents her nostalgia for the Caribbean as something intensely physical. She recalls, ‘there are days when no shout/ in the streets can bring me back from/ this place where faded dreams/ their skin taut on bone intent on clear/cold air beckon me’ (Harris, "Fleshed with Fire"). This metaphor of dreams and memories as skin reveals an interesting awareness of their basic function; that like the physical body, memories and dreams are integral to a sense of well-being, wholeness. This metaphor also sets up a connection between memory and the potential for pain, one which Harris uses to illustrate the difficulty in resisting a sense of nostalgia for home. This association between memory and pain can also be seen in Harris’ poem, “And So...Home”:

My mother her fingers part my hair make
 four neat plaits...She holds out a rainbow of ribbons says
choose one ribbons hanging from her fingers
 like paths how can I choose when any choice
 means a giving up years later shucking the island
 As painful and shucking skin’ (Harris, "And So...Home").

In this poem, Harris’ protagonist is aligned with Senior’s ‘Executioner/Midwife’ as both figures faced with an inevitable but painful choice of where to call ‘home’. This choice examines the protagonists’ emotional attitude to ‘home’ and the acceptance that this home will unavoidably change, be replaced or forgotten. Whilst Harris’ protagonist seems to recognize that her choice in ‘giving up’ her childhood home of Jamaica is a necessity to move on, she underestimates the deep-rooted pain that this causes. As in “Fleshed With Fire,” this pain is related to the skin and the skin’s ability to absorb a place, a ‘home’, so completely that it needs to be ‘shucked’ in order to rid those

memories. So like the ‘Midwife’ that delivers new life, Harris’ protagonist is reborn, in a new place, with new skin.

Senior, Harris and Philip all stress the relationship between a feminine presence and a sense of ‘home.’ Like the figure of the ‘Midwife’, the figure of the mother is central to these three poets’ memories of home. Senior comments bluntly; ‘Home/ was Mother’ (Senior, "City Poem"). Similarly, Harris places her mother as a central element in her memories of home in Trinidad as a child. We can see this in her poem, “A Grammar of the Heart”:

and still
 I remember
 how she filled the house with such quiet gaiety
 gathering us all around her in the huge bed in
 the hot afternoons after the day’s teaching to
 laugh at our stories (Harris, "A Grammar of the Heart").

This is a very nostalgic poem, emphasizing (and perhaps exaggerating) the ‘gaiety,’ happiness and laughter of the mother figure throughout her childhood. Of the three poets, however, Marlene Nourbese Philip has the strongest and most detailed emphasis upon the connection between a nostalgic longing for home, and a longing for the mother figure. This longing for the ‘other’ as both mother, and motherland is central to Philip’s collection *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*. Her poem, “And Over Every Land and Sea”, is made up of nine short poems in which ‘[s]he rewrites the Greek story of separation of mother/daughter to encompass the fragmentation of cultures that resulted from the African diaspora’ (Deloughrey). The blurring between the figure of mother and her motherland is a clever technique employed by Philip throughout all nine poems:

‘skin hair heart beat
 and I recognize the salt
 sea ...
 earth
 the smell-like of I and she
 the perhaps blood lost-

She whom they call mother, I seek’ (Nourbese Philip, "Adoption Bureau").

In her book, *Home matters : longing and belonging, nostalgia and mourning in women's fiction*, Roberta Rubenstein comments that nostalgia signifies ‘the longing for an absent, emotionally important figure who is strongly associated with it [home].’ She adds that ‘memory traces of *home* are inevitably linked to those of *mother*’ (Rubenstein). There is a comfort in both the mother and Caribbean motherland that can be equated with the warmth and nurturing qualities of the womb. Indeed, this feeling goes beyond comfort to a real love. As Philip says in an interview, ‘[y]ou see, one of the things that I feel very strongly about...is that if you never form a bond with that place which is the equivalent of your natural mother, then it’s very hard, I believe to love another place’ (Mahlis). In “And Over Every Land and Sea” Philip reveals the daughter desperately searching to recognize her lost mother/motherland through the sensory triggers of smell, sound and sight:

Nose to ground –on all fours- I did once
 smell that smell,
 on a day of once-
 upon a time, tropic with blue
 when the new, newer and newest of leaves compete,
 in the season of suspicion she passed,
 then and ago trailed the wet and lost of smell;
 was it a trompe d’oeil
 the voice of her sound, or didn’t I once
 see her song, hear her image call
 me by name...
 the sound of a song sung long past time’ (Nourbese Philip, "Sightings").

Here we can see Philip’s clever association between a nostalgic longing and the function of imagination. By incorporating the fairy-tale phrase, ‘once-/upon a time’, Philip is stressing the way in which the imagination is able to exaggerate aspects of a lost home.

Philip has a pre-occupation with using mythology and fairy-tales in her poetry, and whilst this adds a level of subtlety and word-play, it also makes most of her poems hard to locate geographically. However, her poem “Sprung Rhythm” is unique in its clear

geographic location in the Caribbean. In this poem, we get a distinct sense of Philip's nostalgia for her hometown of Guayaguayare in Trinidad:

It was there I learnt to walk...
 There, family was the whole village, if not island...
 Colour like life was put on
 thick with an artist's knife- not brush.
 Red was hibiscus...
 There, where neat days patiently dovetailed
 each other, glued with rituals of purgings,
 school, washing and braiding of hair,
 Sunday mass and blackpudding breakfasts.

(Nourbese Philip, "Sprung Rhythm").

Alongside her descriptions of the repetitious acts of childhood, 'school, washing and braiding of hair,/Sunday mass and blackpudding breakfasts', which can be read as nostalgia, Philip also includes disturbing images that reveal a harshness amidst these repetitious acts of childhood. Philip highlights the shame and pain associated with being coloured. This can be seen in the phrases, 'Colour like life was put on thick with an artist's knife.' Here, the 'thick[ness]' of colour, like skin, is associated with the 'red[ness]' of hibiscus, or blood. By drawing a parallel between the two, Philip seems to be suggesting that childhood not always gentle and repetitious, but also full of shame and 'purgings' (Nourbese Philip, "Sprung Rhythm"). Like much of the mythology and fairy-tale style she draws upon, Philip imbues her poetry with a sense of contentment as well as fear, and often includes realistic, harsh aspects of her childhood in the Caribbean. Philip's poetry is a mixture of this realistic sense of home, which resists a sense of nostalgia that is wholly positive and idealistic, whilst also displaying a 'longing' for her mother/motherland, which does seem to exhibit nostalgia. These disparate notions of nostalgia, seem to suggest that even when the immigrant is aware of nostalgia as selectively positive, they are still unable to resist referring to their homeland with a sense of longing and nostalgia.

Lorna Goodison is also aware of this same difficulty in recognizing memories as fictitious images and longings for home, whilst also being highly susceptible to nostalgia.

“Change if you Must, Just Change Slow” is written like a celebration of the small Jamaican villages of Goodison’s upbringing, highlighting the unique, minute details of the people and land of Jamaica. The following extract from “Change if you Must, Just Change Slow” reveals a strong sense of nostalgia and a recognition of her Jamaican home as precious:

We will crouch down then in a red earth
 hollow, press our lips close to the heart
 Of this deep Cockpit Country and call out
 please don't change or change if you want
 just change slow. Old countryman riding
 jackass, big woman watering the dry peas
 fat cow, and mawga dog, oneroom dwelling
 with intricate carved lace fretwork eaves.
 Heaped yam hills, garlands of green vines
 cockades of bamboo on crown of the hillside. (*Interview with Lorna Goodison*)

In this poem Goodison, like a tour-guide, moves as if on a journey through her homeland country, pointing out the features that make it a unique, for example the ‘big women watering’, the ‘yam hills.’ Goodison is highly selective in only choosing features that portray her Jamaican village as secluded culturally, and untainted by the outside world.

From reading “Change if you Must, Just Change Slow”, we can understand Goodison’s position as ‘rooted deep’ (Goodison, "About the Tamarind"), in the Caribbean, despite living in the US, Canada and Britain. She adds to this idea of rootedness with a warning: ‘Do not leave Xamayca forever, your wild self/ sprouts here like long-limbed guinea grass/ dispersed, blown about and tossed.../ Settle lightly’(Goodison, "To Absorb the Green"). Here we get a sense of fertility, a sense of wildness originating from home, the original ‘Xamayca’ before colonisation. By using this indigenous name for Jamaica, Goodison seems to be highlighting a paradox of colonization; that whilst Europe was culturally invading the Caribbean, it also brought about an uncomfortable need for the Caribbean people to leave Jamaica to find what was culturally and spiritually lost through the process of colonisation. Whilst in “To Absorb the Green”, Goodison recognizes this inevitability of being ‘dispersed, blown about’ and

moving away from the Caribbean, there is an understanding of the need to only ‘settle lightly’ and return home. This can be seen to add another dimension to the notion of nostalgia; as the intention to always return home.

In a later poem, “Jamaica 1980”, Goodison portrays Jamaica as a shadow, a fishing net; ‘It trails always behind me/ a webbed seine/ with a catch of fantasy/a penance I pay for being me’ (Goodison, "Jamaica 1980"). There is a recognition here of the role of ‘fantasy’ and imagination in remembering Jamaica, her homeland. Goodison recognizes memory as not only fantastical but also complex and in a sense futile. She refers to it as ‘coiled and sectioned’ (Goodison, "The Living Converter Woman of Green Island") and ‘hot and hopeless’ (Goodison, "Bedsread"). Here we can see a strong link to Senior’s notion of the immigrant’s state of nostalgia as an entrapment from life. Like Senior’s descriptions of being moored, ‘snared’, ‘drowning’ (Senior, "Leaving Home") in the past, Goodison’s recognition of the past as a ‘webbed seine’ (Goodison, "Jamaica 1980"), ‘coiled and sectioned’ (Goodison, "The Living Converter Woman of Green Island"), reveals this similar sense of entrapment. All these images reveal the immigrant’s inability to disentangle themselves from the past, in order to live in the future. This illustrates a strong sense of nostalgia.

Like Harris, Goodison refers to the Canadian winter acts as a hostile place; ‘I am weary of all winters mother/ winter within, winter without’ (Goodison, "I Am Weary of All Winters Mother"). She recognizes the emotional effect of winter as creating a sense of nostalgia for the tropics. In this poem “I am Weary of All Winters Mother”, Goodison directs her feelings towards her motherland in a similar style to Philip. Goodison sounds like a child yearning for solace and, for advice from her familiar motherland. This implies that perhaps she has not yet been fully weaned, nor become independent from this motherland.

Whilst Dionne Brand is very wary of nostalgia, and recognizes its fictitious nature as ‘a lie’ (Brand, "No Language Is Neutral"), she is unable to resist writing nostalgically of her Caribbean homeland. This seems to create an internal battle. Publicly, Brand stresses that she is rootless, ‘stateless’ (Brand, "Chronicles of the Hostile Sun"). One critic comments, ‘Brand’s characters are often homeless and in exile, inhabiting an in-between space of “not nowhere and is”’ (Saul, 62). This comes about through her mistrust of

immigrants who talk of their home in the Caribbean, ‘with a voice half lie and half memory’ (Brand, "No Language Is Neutral"). Brand sees the truth as ‘skittish’ and admits, ‘anyway it’s fiction what I remember’ (Brand, "No Language Is Neutral"). Zockodnik comments that Brand moves, ‘from a nostalgic desire for homeland to a recognition of homeland in herself and in a synthesis of experiences shared with others, Brand carves from her exile a paradoxical place of belonging’ (Zackodnik). This ‘homeland in herself’ is similar to Senior’s comment about ‘living in her head’ (McLean). Both writers claim to be at home in their minds and not attached to a physical space, but this is problematic, as nostalgia is created and expressed from ideas/words created within the head. Brand’s containment within herself does seem to bring about conflict until conflict emerges on her flight between her home of Trinidad and Toronto:

‘Our
nostalgia was a lie and the passage on that six hour
flight to ourselves is wide and like another world, and
then another one inside and is so separate and fast
to the skin but voiceless, never born, or born and
stilled’ (Brand, "No Language Is Neutral").

Here we see a binary division of the self; one side denying nostalgia, the other attached to home. Brand expresses the latter part of herself as suppressed and silenced, but attached to the skin. This is similar to the conflict faced by Harris’ protagonist, who recognized that the process of ‘giving up’ of her childhood home of Jamaica caused the ‘shucking’ of skin, the skin that had, in a sense, absorbed memories of Jamaica. However Brand’s ‘other self’ is also ‘born and stilled.’ This can be seen as a tragic twist to Senior’s ‘Midwife’ metaphor. In her poem, (Senior, "Leaving Home"), the ‘Midwife’ symbolized a rebirth into a new life, from the containment of nostalgia for home. In Brand’s poem, this ‘other one’ in Canada is ‘born stilled’ and ‘voiceless’: a sad reflection of the suppressed state of the immigrant living abroad.

The paradox is that this silenced, ‘voiceless’ part of her identity is not at all contented. In fact Brand refers to it as ‘some damn memory half-eaten/and half-hungry’ (Brand, "No Language Is Neutral"). This hunger for home is insatiable, and like Senior and Harris, Brand depicts memories as painful ‘the past burning at/ the back of

your head' (Brand, "No Language Is Neutral"). She depicts the transition from the unified to the binary consciousness as having occurred at the point when she left the Caribbean for the first time; a transition that 'breaks the/heart open' (25). However for Brand the past seems to be both painful and negative, and like a 'crumbling' ruin, with its foundations in her head. Brand comments in an interview, 'the past is also something that hovers in our imaginations. And it repeats, and sometimes we can see it and sometimes we can't see it, and sometimes it's forgotten deliberately, or unconsciously. But it is this crumbling thing' (Walcott).

Despite her recognition of nostalgia 'as a lie' (Brand, "No Language Is Neutral"), there are many instances in Brand's poetry when she appears to express nostalgia. In *Winter Epigrams* she speaks from her position in Toronto Canada; 'Two things I will not buy/ in this city/ mangoes and/ poinsettia;/ exiled,/ I must keep a little self respect' (Brand, "Winter Epigrams"). She continues this same exiled, nostalgic voice in "No Language is Neutral":

Dumbfounded I walk as if these sidewalks are a
place I'm visiting. Like a holy ghost, I package the
smell of zinnias and lady of the night, I horde the taste
of star apples and granadilla (Brand, "No Language Is Neutral").

Both poems are reminiscent of Senior and Harris' preoccupation with the fruits of the Caribbean as a trigger for nostalgia. So whilst Brand seems firm in her opinions of nostalgia as fictitious and dishonest, there seems a part of her (the silenced 'other'), who cannot escape experiencing nostalgic memories of the Caribbean.

Grace Nichols also recognizes the fictitious nature of memories, and yet she writes nostalgically of her homeland in Guyana. Nichols is a diasporic poet working in London. She seems more aware of the diasporic community in the UK than the other women poets do of the diasporic community in Canada. Furthermore she raises awareness that these other immigrants also experience a sense of nostalgia. Her poem "Island Man" from the same collection also deals with the nostalgia of an old Caribbean man living in London:

Morning
and island man wakes up

to the sound of blue surf
 in his head...
 from the east
 of his small emerald island' (Nichols, "Island Man").

Nichols herself constantly craves for the Caribbean, and like Senior, Harris and Brand, this craving is often allied with food. In "Like a Beacon", she writes:

In London
 every now and then
 I get this craving
 for my mother's food
 I leave art galleries
 in search of plantains
 saltfish/ sweet potatoes (Nichols, "Like a Beacon").

Like Senior, Harris and Brand, Nichols writes several other poems about mangoes, star-apples, guineps. Similar to these other women poets, Nichols also draws the connection between tropical fruits and a longing for her childhood;

Now I return to my child-kingdom
 To my brownwater house of many mansions
 To buy green and sunbaked pasturelands...
 How I bit into green guavas then (Nichols, "Child-Kingdom").

Nichols seems to idealize her childhood, and this is a source of much nostalgia. She sees this period of her life as a 'a watershed of sunlight' (Nichols, "Childhood"), when she was queen of her 'child-kingdom' (Nichols, "Child-Kingdom").

Nichols recognizes the heart as central to the experience of nostalgia, and much like Senior's comment that, 'the place you left has shifted a heartbeat' (Senior, "Blue Foot Traveller"), Nichols comments; 'home is where the heart lies' (Nichols, "Fear"). This comment is similar to Brand's recognition that, 'our nostalgia was a lie' (Brand, "No Language Is Neutral"). However, unlike both Senior and Brand who refer to the role of the head in remembering their past, Nichols registers the heart as a key source of all the later pain and anguish. However the heart, like the head is still able to 'lie' and idealize the past. In her poem, "Two Old Black Men on a Leicester Square Park Bench", Nichols

does recognize this temptation to idealize the past; 'O it's easy/to rainbow the past' (Fat Black, 35). Nevertheless, this does not seem to stop her from nostalgically recalling her own memories of childhood and her motherland, Guyana.

These six diasporic women poets; Senior, Harris, Philip, Goodison, Brand and Nichols, all express nostalgia as a deeply personal experience. Whether they admit to being 'rooted' (Goodison) in their homeland with the intentions of always 'homing back', or whether they claim to be 'stateless' (Brand) and 'live in [their] head' (Senior), the notion of nostalgia and the longing for the familiar pieces of their childhood in the Caribbean is central to their expression of identity. In writing of these poets, nostalgia for the Caribbean is often triggered by memories of the vibrant fruits, colours, and warmth of the tropics in contrast the dull winter landscapes of Canada and Britain. However, nostalgia itself, as opposed to just memories of childhood, is essential to each poet's expression of their identity. This is not void of conflict, in fact quite the opposite. Each poet seems to recognize that they are entrapped within a state of nostalgia, and whilst they recognize their nostalgic memories of home as a 'lie' (Brand, "No Language Is Neutral"; Nichols, "Fear"), or a 'fiction' (Harris, "Woeman Womb Prisoned"), they are unable to escape nostalgia, or avoid it in their poetry. In order to become free from nostalgia, they all face a difficult choice: whether like the subject of Senior's 'Executioner' they choose to kill off their memories of their Caribbean motherland; or like the patient of Senior's 'Midwife' they choose to undergo a rebirth into an acceptance of their new life in Canada/Britain. This choice is not easy, nor free of struggle: it is, after all, a choice between life and death; entrapment and freedom.

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