

Eastern Westerns: Early French Constructions of American Identity

Alison McMahan

Before 1912 trade papers used the term “western” in a descriptive sense, as in the phrase “Wild West Dramas.” At that time, the films that today would be called “Westerns” were known under various genre categories: military films, Indian films, sometimes even “Western dramas” and “Western comedies.” Despite the great popularity of *The Great Train Robbery* (1903, directed by Edwin S. Porter) and its many imitators, the first appearance of the term “Western” to describe a film generically appeared in *The Moving Picture World* on July 20, 1912. Ironically, the westerns shot in and around Fort Lee had their heyday in 1911; by mid 1912 the western “fad” appeared to be over. According to a variety of articles and editorials in *The Moving Picture World*, the audience was tired of them. The use of “Jersey Scenery” especially exasperated one writer in *The New York Dramatic Mirror* (Bowser, 154). A few companies kept making them, of course, but more and more of these were satires, which demonstrates that the genre, indeed, had reached maturity. Of course, the migration of film companies to California brought spectacular light and landscapes, real Indians, real bronco riders, real Mexicans and stars like Tom Mix and William S. Hart to the genre, giving it a new life by 1915. As Eileen Bowser has noted, some filmmakers, such as Selig, went out to California as early as 1909 specifically to find better locations for westerns, even as westerns continued to be made in Fort Lee.

Many of the “Eastern Westerns” were made by French film manufacturers. A careful examination of these films reveals much about the special character of these early westerns, especially about how, with their “artifice and pantomime,” they handled issues of ethnicity, race and gender identity in their films. The earliest description of a French Western I have found is in a British-Gaumont catalogue from 1905. The title is *The Pioneers: A Story of the Early Settlers*. It is described as “A series of Five Splendid Scenes taken in the Adirondack Wilderness.” The Five tableaux appear to owe a debt of inspiration to the “Attack on the Settler’s Cabin” plays that were routinely included in Wild West shows such as Buffalo Bill

ALISON MCMAHAN is the MA Program Director in Film and Television Studies at the University of Amsterdam where she teaches early cinema and new media. Her book, *The Birth of Film Narrative: The Life and Work of Alice Guy Blaché*, will be published by Continuum in the 2001.

Cody's. Cody's show toured Britain and other parts of Europe often, and the first tour to Britain was in honor of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887. The second tour began in Paris for the inauguration of the Eiffel Tower and to open the Paris Universal Exposition in 1889, where the show had a six-month run and was immensely successful (Riley, 46–49). Like the American film manufacturers, French filmmakers were fascinated by the myth of the American West as it was depicted in plays, paintings and dime novels.

The same catalogue lists a few other films based on novels or burlesque acts that contain what we would today call western elements. (A partial list of "western" elements could include, in no particular order: alcoholism, the army, firearms, attacks, attacks by Indians, bullets, headbands, banks, buffalo, desperados, sheriffs, caravans, horses, horse tack, cemeteries, fist fights, ranch hands, duels, ambush, the Woman, forge, train stations, general stores, hold-ups, man-on-a-horse, hotels, Indian, trails, long trips, the Young Man, The Gambler, The Journalists, isolated homes, merchant-class homes, murder, Mexicans, pioneers, politicians, sylvan glades, main streets, barber shops, old men, Indian villages, ghost towns, new settlements, rape, fathers, and food.) However, by 1910 it was the "military films" genre that showed the most western elements. Military films were a clearly delineated genre, but through 1910 and 1911 a sub-category generally referred to as "Western drama" or even "Western melodrama" began to emerge from it.

Bowser refers to military films as "Civil War Films" (177–179), and indeed many of these films were set in the Civil War, but also the Revolutionary War and the Mexican War or the war against the Indians. It is principally in the latter that the line between westerns and military films would blur. By 1911, *The Motion Picture World* and in *The Moving Picture News* clearly advertised and described westerns and military films as classifications within a single genre; Indian dramas, on the other hand, could be released as military films or as dramas. One of these advertisers was the Solax Company, where every film was supervised, and often written and directed, by the French motion picture pioneer Alice Guy Blaché. Guy Blaché had worked as the first head of production for the Gaumont Company until her marriage and migration to the U.S. in 1907. In 1910 she had started her own company, Solax, using the Gaumont studio in Flushing, Queens as her headquarters. Gaumont then distributed the Solax films in France, as well as in the U.S. Because Gaumont had access to licensed distributor status through George Kleine, until mid-1912 Solax found a ready market for their films. As with most film manufacturers, Solax released specific genre films on specific days of the week. In April 1911, Friday became the release day for military films. By this time Guy Blaché had hired another director, Wilbert Melville (who had a soldiering background.) to take charge of the military films, and so most of these Solax films can be attributed to him as director, with some exceptions. Solax produced military films every week throughout 1911 and well into 1912. A chronological examination of the films themselves, as well as their ads, can give us some idea of how the western evolved out of the military film. Not surprisingly, an overriding theme of these films is patriotism. Some were shot in military settings, such as Fort Meyer, Virginia, and the Atlantic Squadron's fighting vessels stationed on the Hudson. The opening scenes of *The Sergeant's Daughter* (Solax, 1910), for

example, showed scenes of thousands of troops embarking on a man-of-war, as well as scenes shot in the Philippines. This entire backdrop was created simply for a love story, but unfortunately, the film no longer exists.

For the Love of the Flag is a melodrama with the trappings of a military film. It exists only in nitrate form in the John E. Allen collection. Frank Roberts (Darwin Karr) is a draughtsman in a military office. He is accused of lying by a co-worker, is diffident in defending himself, and is fired. His wife (Blanche Cornwall) is supportive, but in a few months they have lost their lovely home and are living in a boarding house, where she is taking in sewing while caring for their child (Magda Foy). At one of his job interviews a "representative of a foreign government" (Lee Beggs) overhears him describing his military experience. Beggs' character follows him out to the street and offers him a large sum of money if he will re-draw the set-up of the fortifications now being built. Roberts refuses, but back at home things have gone from bad to worse; his wife's strength, which has kept him going until now, has worn out. Roberts sits down and makes the drawing. The representative enters, conspicuously waving a fat wad of cash. The two men sit down to discuss the arrangement while the child plays with tin soldiers at their feet—reminding Roberts that he is betraying his country. Beggs kicks the soldiers over and the boy runs off. The men resume their negotiations but now the child runs in, wildly waving a little Stars and Stripes. This is too much for Roberts, who refuses to go through with the deal. The foreign representative goes into a rage and starts beating the child, which consolidates Roberts' resolve to kick the representative out, and tear up the drawings. Roberts' wife tells him to go back to his first job and explain what really happened, but there is no need, as a convenient telegram arrives saying he has been exonerated and re-hired as Head Draughtsman.

For the Love of the Flag moves quickly, starting with the first scene showing the quarrel between the draughtsmen. Though Roberts is stony faced throughout, we read his emotional state through his wife's steady emotional decline, the growing mountain of sewing, the child's tin soldiers, and the toy flag. Here good American citizenship is measured by melodrama's yardstick. Roberts is expected to passively starve rather than betray his country, and his virtue will be rewarded by some higher source after he has been thoroughly tested. Georges Méliès produced a film in 1910 with a similar theme entitled *His Sergeant's Stripes*, about a sergeant who bravely delivers a message in enemy territory in order to earn the sergeant's stripe that will allow him to marry. However, the effort costs him his life, and his fiancée sews the stripe on the deceased sergeant's uniform for his burial.

The next Solax military film is more recognizable as a Western. *Greater Love Hath No Man* was released in June of 1911. Set in a gold rush camp, it is primarily a love story, the familiar triangle of two men in love with the same gun-toting woman who pans her own gold dust. When the camp supervisor, the object of the woman's affection, is threatened by Mexicans in the camp, Jake warns his rival of the danger and then defends him from the Mexicans to the death, winning himself one kiss from his love as he dies in her arms. The military appears in the form of a cavalry troop that arrives in time to save the pair of lovers, but too late to save Jake. Most of the Mexicans are in blackface, and are not individuated. Though the heroine, played by Vinnie Burns, who Guy trained as a stuntwoman, is assertive,

she lacks the agency of similar characters played by Burns in romantic comedies directed by Guy, or even in other Solax Westerns such as *Two Little Rangers*. Some work has been done on how Native Americans are depicted in these films (indeed, it was the subject of several editorials in *The Moving Picture World* at the time), but few scholars have looked at how Mexicans are represented. In *Greater Love* the Mexicans are given some reason for their revolt: they believe that the camp supervisor is short-weighting their gold dust. No such justification is given in the next Solax western, *Outwitted by Horse and Lariat* (Solax, 1911, which I attribute to Guy as director).

In *Outwitted by Horse and Lariat*, Vinnie Burns, who played Florence in *Greater Love Hath No Man*, the older sister in *Two Little Rangers* and got friendly with a tiger in *Beasts of the Jungle*, plays the heroine who punches "SOS" onto a leaf with her hairpin, after she has been kidnapped by Mexican bandits. The bandits are played by Anglos in makeup, and live in a teepee village. Vinnie's lover and rescuer is played by a bronco rider, who swoops down into the enemy camp and lifts her up onto his galloping horse with one arm, while the other members of his troupe use their lassoes to good effect. In her autobiography, Guy said that she and her regular actors all learned how to use the lasso from these bronco riders. She also told *The Moving Picture World* that she hadn't thought of making a western until she saw these bronco riders in action. This seems rather disingenuous on her part, given the high demand for Westerns. What is interesting is that while complimenting her on the realism of her bronco rider, the writer for *The Moving Picture World* has nothing to say about the inconsistent way in which the Mexicans were depicted.

One has to ask how much of this stereotype of Mexicans was based on colonialist competition between France and Spain, and how much on tropes of Mexicans already established in other media. It is a question that only further research can answer. The way in which Mexicans are shown in this film is typically negative. They are seen as purely "threat[s] to white rule, thereby requiring civilizing or brutal punishment" as Daniel Bernardi has noted. Indians shared this "threatening" category, but were also shown as "fetishized objects of exotic beauty, icons for a racist scopophilia" (Bernardi, 5). Female Mexican characters were more likely to be fetishized, as was the Mexican woman in the first of Solax's military pictures, *Across the Mexican Line*, (Solax, 1911) which I attribute to Guy as director based on the date of release and stylistic choices. This interracial romance had the Mexican War as its backdrop, and probably owed a debt of inspiration to Helen Hunt Jackson's novel *Ramona*, as well as D. W. Griffith's filmic adaptation of that novel released in 1910. Sadly, although *Across the Mexican Line* still exists at the NFTVA, due to nitrate deterioration, it is unclear if it can be preserved. *Across the Mexican Line* was probably shot in the vicinity of the Gaumont Flushing studio in Queens, N.Y. Although most of these films were shot on studio sets, occasionally a company would venture out on location. One film that demonstrates this trend is the November 1910 Pathé Frères release entitled *A Mexican Legend*. Apparently shot in the Vejas mission in Northwest Mexico, the plot focuses on a monastery attacked by Indians. Father Ignatius, the abbot, is imprisoned in a tomb. A Christ figure in a painting comes to life, and leads the father out of the vault across a river on a floating island, then over a mountain to a hacienda, where he enlists the

help of some Mexican Vaqueros who come to the aid of the besieged monastery, and expel the Indians who are now drunk on the monastery wine. In this case the Mexican setting—even the use of real, exotic locations—is all put into the service, not of a Western, but of a French “miracle film” in Mexican garb.

Native Americans were somewhat more fortunate in their cinematic representations. They had a genre all of their own, the Indian dramas, a genre that peaked in popularity by 1913. In these films, the fetishization was more often applied to the male, taking advantage of his nudity. Many Indian characters were played by whites painted red, and little regard was given to correct depiction of Indian customs or dress. Some Indians complained about how they were represented, and their complaints were publicized in *The Moving Picture News* and *The Moving Picture World*. In response, some companies, such as Pathé American, began to hire real Indians, although extras were usually still played by whites in make up. Indeed, Pathé American hired two Winnebago Indians, James Young Deer and Miss Redwing, who had worked for The New York Motion Picture Company, the Lubin Company, and Kalem as actors; Young Deer also wrote and directed films for the company. The pair were veterans of Wild West shows and circuses, and were probably more influenced by their show business experience than their own cultural background. The Indian hero of the Wild West shows was stoic, noble and ready to sacrifice him or herself for a white colonist who had showed them some small kindness or friendship. An example of this sort of film is *Indian Seizes Kidnapper* (Pathé, 1910), collected in the Nederlands Film Museum.

Indians en masse were also depicted as treacherous attackers, motivated or unmotivated. Rarely was the suffering of the Indian at the hands of white colonizers shown. Most of the Indian dramas that featured all-Indian characters were usually love stories, where intertribal warfare or feuds keeps the lovers apart. Gaumont's 1912 *Coeur Ardent*, directed by Jean Durand, is interesting because it is shot in southern France, and all of the characters are played by French actors. The plot is about two lovers in one tribe. The young suitor cannot raise the dowry to marry his love, so he steals cattle from another Indian herd. He is punished for this by being made a target for the other tribe's warriors in a bizarre contest; if he can cross the river before they shoot him down, he will live. Since he survives bravely he is able, finally, to marry the chief's daughter. The emphasis in the film is on the bloody, ritual test. Similarly, *Cheyenne's Bride* (American Kinema [Pathé Frères, 1911]) shows intertribal warfare, in which at the end the disobedient daughter is tied to a wild horse and sent to die in the wilderness, but is saved at the last minute by her lover. Not all the films focused on brutal (and mythical) tribal practices. A Pathé film known as *Indian Love* is another miracle film in Indian garb. A chief from a neighboring tribe falls in love with another chief's daughter, who rejects his peace initiatives. The daughter pines away of thwarted love and dies, but the spirit of the Great Manitou takes pity on them, and shows her lover how to use a magical grass to bring her back to life.

That westerns produced by French film manufacturers owed more to French genres than adherence to western myths is also shown in the 1910 Pathé film *Abraham Lincoln's Clemency*. In this film, Lincoln is shown forgiving a sentinel who fell asleep at his post, a common legend that was usually recounted of Napoleon Bonaparte. The French also dealt with the issue of what it meant to be an American

citizen in films that were not really westerns, but contained some similar tropes. Because of a drop in popularity, Solax ceased releasing military films on a weekly basis early in 1912. However, themes that would later be associated with the western remained present in Solax's dramas, especially gambling. A good example of this is *The Girl in the Armchair* (Solax, 1913, directed by Alice Guy), in which a young man, driven to steal to repay a gambling debt, is finally exonerated and reunited with his sweetheart.

The theme of citizenship re-appears in *The Making of an American Citizen* (Solax, 1913, directed by Alice Guy). The plot involves a husband and wife (presumably Russian) who leave the old country and arrive at Ellis Island, then establish themselves on the Lower East Side, then move to a farm in the country. The husband treats his wife as a pack mule, and when she collapses from fatigue he goes into a fury. In every scene some representative of American Society (all male) teaches him better manners, and he finally learns that this sort of behavior will not be accepted in his adoptive land. Thanhouser, an independent film company based in New Rochelle, N.Y., made a similar film called *An American in the Making*, in which an Italian immigrant goes to work in an American factory. The emphasis in this film is on the sophistication of The Great American Industrial Machine: the many devices used to protect workmen, such as goggles to protect the eyes in the steel works, and guards attached to saws, are prominently displayed. Instead of highlighting better working conditions, as Thanhouser does, the Solax films in contrast focus on the difference in social mores, especially as they pertain to women.

It is surprising that the French producer of these films, Alice Guy Blaché, did not make more films about foreigners. Among her extant films there is one other on cross-cultural relations: *A Man's a Man* (Solax, 1912, 1 reel, preserved in the George Eastman House). Generally in films of this period, Jews are depicted as loan sharks, pawnbrokers, or peddlers. Invariably they are evil, or at best, as in *Lucky Cohen* (Lubin, 1913), clever enough to have someone else take the blame for their misdeeds. Cohen is a peddler who is robbed by a tramp, who takes his clothes. A mob, thinking the tramp is the Jew, attacks the tramp and leaves him by the road, badly beaten. Cohen then recovers his clothes and his goods and goes happily on his way. Guy herself depicted Jews as stereotypical pawnbrokers and loan sharks in other films. These roles were usually played very broadly by Lee Beggs, but in *A Man's a Man*, Beggs plays the head of the lynch mob, and the Jew is played by an unknown actor.

In *A Man's a Man*, however, Guy Blaché seems to be conscious of the general atmosphere of anti-Semitism then prevalent, and tries to redress this by depicting the Jew as a complete victim. The Jew is a Lower East Side apple vendor who is first insulted, then knocked down by a rich Gentile. When his apples spill on the sidewalk, he is set upon by street urchins who steal all of them. The rich Gentile also runs over the Jew's only child, killing the young girl. Despite this heinous conduct, the Jew subsequently shelters the Gentile from a lynch mob that tries to kill him. In gratitude and shame, the Gentile offers the Jew money, but he refuses it. A year later both men meet at the cemetery, over the child's grave. The final title is: "A man's a man, be he Jew or Gentile." Clearly the film does not address real issues between Jews and Gentiles, but rather class standing: the final title

could have been "A man's a man, be he rich or poor." The same plot could easily have been recounted as an Indian drama.

Finally, we can look at how these French westerns handled issues of gender identity, masculinity and femininity. Cross-dressing was a staple of the cinema of the period. A standard dramatic trope in literature as well as film was the young woman who dons a soldier's uniform and identity in order to (a) rescue her lover; (b) be with her lover; (c) do a job her lover cannot do because of a wound or cowardice; or (d) all of the above. When a woman puts on a man's clothing and identity in these films, it is always seen as proof of great love. Further, for a woman to behave in a masculine way is seen as a great sacrifice, performed temporarily under duress, and finished with as quickly as possible. One of many possible examples of this is the film *How States Are Made*, a copy of which is preserved in the Nederlands Filmmuseum Collection.

In *The House with the Closed Shutters* (Biograph, 1910), D. W. Griffith carries this plot a little further, as a girl and her soldier brother trade places. In his discussion of this film, Scott Simmon has pointed out that in fact the image of a Southern Belle riding a horse and using a gun was not so far from reality, as women in the south were trained in these arts right alongside their brothers. Griffith followed the same plot pattern in *Taming a Husband* and *Willful Peggy*, both also made in 1910. Guy also explored the idea of men taking on women's roles using role-reversal without cross-dressing. One of the best examples of this is *Algie the Miner* (February, 1912), directed by Edward Warren and Harry Shenck, with Guy credited as "producer and directing supervision" (Bachy, 217). The Solax ad summarizes it as follows:

A Billy Quirck comedy. Algie is a "sissy boy" who has as much backbone as a jellyfish. When Algie falls in love and finds that his sweetheart objects to his "personality" he goes West and after several ludicrous experiences and hard struggles he becomes a "man." A comedy with strong character portrayals.

What is interesting about this summary is that it is actually fairly different from the film. In fact, Algie's sweetheart appears to be quite attached to him, no matter how foppish he is (his sissiness is indicated by whiteface makeup and white gloves). It is her Father who objects to the match. When Algie asks for his daughter's hand, her father writes a note promising that Algie can marry his daughter only if he can prove himself "a man" by going West for a year. The father thinks this will get rid of Algie for sure, but Algie signs the note with great seriousness and determination. The daughter is clearly bereft as Algie leaves. Next we see Algie packing in his over-decorated room. Among other things, he packs a lace doily and a tiny silver pistol, which he stuffs into his belt so that it is pointing directly at his groin.

Out west, we see Algie getting off a train in some dusty location, and approaching two hard-bitten characters, whom he asks for directions. When they answer, he kisses one of ruffians in gratitude, which makes the man's hat fall off. Infuriated, the Westerner pulls out a very large gun. Algie, frightened, falls to his knees, and the second man stops the first from shooting Algie, so Algie kisses him, too.

This is too much for both men, so they lift Algie up, carry him to a train trestle, and perch him there while they decide what to do with him. Algie tries pulling his little pistol, which amuses them, so they carry him off to the saloon for the entertainment of their friends. In the saloon he is introduced to Big Jim, the biggest ruffian of all with, of course, the largest pistol. Algie's education is "entrusted" to Big Jim. Next, we are shown a series of scenes that depict what can only be described as a love story between the two men. Big Jim gradually breaks Algie in to the realities of gold rush life, while Algie nurses Big Jim through a bout with the DTs, and finally helps him quit drinking altogether. Several scenes, such as the moment when Big Jim throws Algie on the bed to put an end to his whining, are clearly meant to read as a "Taming of the Shrew" motif. At the film's climax, the two men strike gold together, and Algie gets to show his mettle defending both Big Jim and the gold. With his manhood proven, Algie and Big Jim go back East, so Algie can claim his sweetheart. He no longer wears the pancake makeup, the suit or the gloves, and he rings the doorbell "western style" by shooting in the air. Again, he deals not with his sweetheart, but with her father, who agrees to allow the two to marry under the watchful eye of Big Jim's gun. This film, preserved in the Library of Congress, doesn't appear to have been the object of widespread study, but it is a sensitive portrayal of male bonding, the difficulties of living up to a "masculine ideal" (imposed by a powerful father figure), and an exploration of the all-male society of the gold-rush camp.

Just as Algie found his masculinity in the west, Western women were also free of many cumbersome rules of polite society. Women in California already had the right to vote (unlike French women, who wouldn't get that right until after World War II). In *Two Little Rangers*, sometimes also known as *The Little Rangers* (Solax, August 1912), the setting is the West (as recreated in Fort Lee). Father is the postmaster, assisted by his two daughters (one played by Vinnie Burns, the other by an unidentified 10-year-old girl), and the male hero, Jim. The story begins when Jim rescues, and father shelters, the battered wife (Blanche Cornwall) of the villain, Grey. Grey gets his revenge by throwing the father off a cliff, and then framing Jim for the attempted murder, by leaving Jim's knife stuck in a tree at the scene. The older of the two sisters (Burns) uses her lasso to rescue her father from the ledge where he has fallen. But the real hero of this film is her 10-year-old sister, who protects Jim with her six-shooter, and helps her sister set the villain's cabin on fire with flaming arrows. When Grey runs out, the young girl drives him over the cliff at gunpoint. Of course, Jim, father and even Grey's wife forgive Grey once he is at death's door. The final triangular tableau, reminiscent of a pietà arrangement, is typical of Guy's endings for her action films; we see a very similar tableau at the end of *Greater Love Hath No Man*. Again, Wild West Shows might have had an influence here; Annie Oakley, the female shootist, rode horses and used a lasso in the Wild West show, and an image of her using a lasso was widely circulated around the time that *Two Little Rangers* was produced.

By 1913, Westerns with a "Jersey setting" were no longer being made, with the exception of parodies. Again, a Solax film as an example. The title is *Playing Trumps* (August, 1912). Billy Quirck plays suitor to Blanche Cornwall, but her attentions are always diverted by the more elegant and more sophisticated entertainments offered by his two rivals, one played by Darwin Karr. In addition

to the contrast between their cosmopolitanism and Billy's relative simplicity, Billy's rivals also both a foot taller than he is, so that they can physically overpower him with ease. Billy's winning strategy is to hire a film production company, and with their help, stage a mock "rescue" of Blanche. While Blanche is out on a drive with his two rivals, their car breaks down. A gang of "Mexicans" (white actors in makeup) assault the car, and take Blanche hostage. Billy arrives, shoots into the air, and rescues Blanche, while his two rivals both behave with perfect cowardice. Once Blanche is safely in Billy's arms, the actors all get up from the floor where they were playing dead, and the director enters the frame and congratulates Billy on his performance. Billy and Blanche then get into the film crew's van, leaving the two rivals behind. Thus, Billy's goal in *Playing Trumps* is to show Blanche that he is better at scripting and staging his own life (or at least, his own romance) than his rivals are, and it is on this basis that he finally gets her attention.

What can be said, then, in conclusion about these Eastern Westerns, these films about America made by French film manufacturers in Fort Lee? Some characteristics can be isolated. The films show strong influence of other media, such as Wild West Shows and sensational novels. The western per se did not exist until the end of this period (1913); the term "western" gradually came into use, first as an adjective, then "western dramas" and "western comedies" became more and more common. However, films that we would today label as "western" were made as military films, Indian dramas, western dramas and melodramas, and western comedies. Many of these "western comedies" were actually parodies, as the genre matured very quickly. The operating set of cultural assumptions is more often rooted in French narrative traditions and tropes than in American ones. When it comes to representation, the films display a cross-categorization of racial, ethnic and gender tropes that together constituted a multi-faceted reading of what it meant to be an American. Though individual films would appear to make identity biologically determined, taken in the aggregate, the overriding impression is of an American national identity that is historically and culturally constructed. A more comprehensive study of westerns produced in Fort Lee remains to be done. Once it is completed, we could trace what elements of the Western that came later owe their source referents to the French.

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