



School of Art History

AH4254

Museums and Audiences

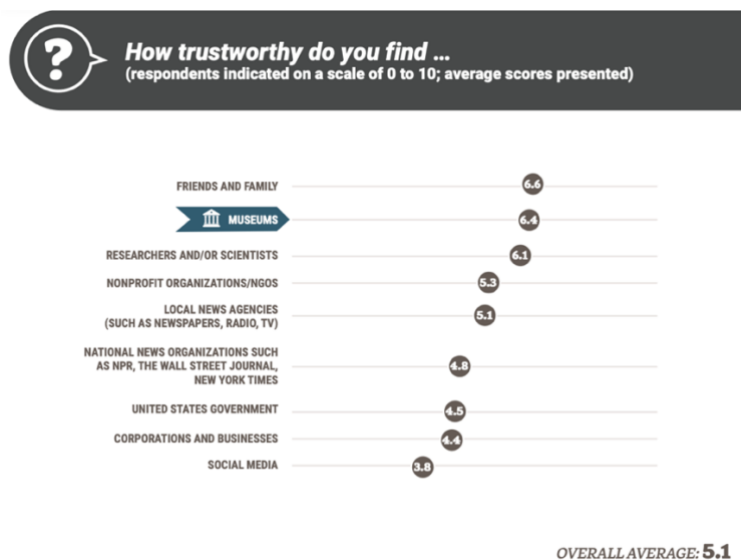
Academic Year 2023-2024

Research Essay:

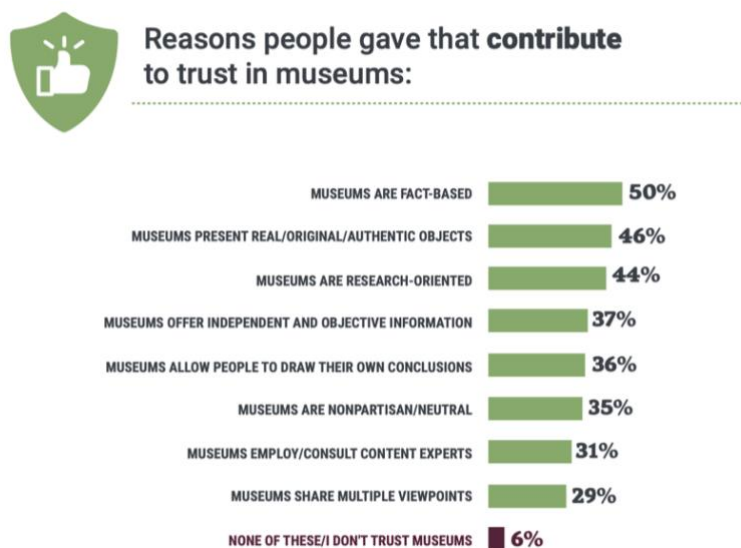
‘Should museums avoid controversy or not?’

Word Count: 3036

The museum, whether if it is private or public, has a position of status and authority over the general public, this in turn means that the museum has an obliged responsibility to the public as museums have expectations to inform, or rather influence, public knowledge and opinion. The American Alliance of Museums' report, *Museums and Trust*,¹ found that their respondents thought museums to be their second most trustworthy source (Figure 1.), with fifty per cent of respondents stating that museums being 'fact-based'² contributed to their trust in museums (Figure 2.).



(Figure 1.) Slide 9 from 'Museums and Trust, Spring 2021' Report, American Alliance of Museums



(Figure 2.) Slide 12 from 'Museums and Trust, Spring 2021', American Alliance of Museums

¹ American Alliance of Museums and Wilkening Consulting, LLC. 'Museums and Trust, Spring 2021', American Alliance of Museums (Washington D.C, 2021)

² Ibid., p.12

Regarding facts, it is undeniable that museums attribute their foundations from colonialism and imperialism, or directly have benefitted from it – making colonialism and imperialism synonymous to the museum. *Kids in Museums* includes ‘colonialism and imperialism’³ in their list of ‘challenging’⁴ topics, which denotes itself as a controversial topic of discussion. With the foundations of museum being tied to colonialism, there is an ongoing debate whether museums should avoid or address this controversial topic, since addressing colonialism is to affirm accountability of its oppressive past and start the process of decolonising the museum.

Choices of Narratives

An acknowledgement of a colonial past is an emerging social responsibility that is now expected of any institution as attitudes concerning colonialism and imperialism have changed and continue to further away from the beliefs, which are now, by a majority, deemed to be archaic. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) formed a new definition of the ‘museum’ in 2022, which encourages discussion in the museum environment as a place for ‘reflection and knowledge sharing’;⁵ this ICOM definition alone implies a disagreement to avoiding controversial topics. An aversion to discussing colonialism would potentially mean that collections and exhibitions that benefitted from or are linked to colonial history would be displayed without revised context, which inherently celebrates colonialism as its display alone subliminally glorifies the colonisers as Duncan F. Cameron notes that an object is ‘enshrined’⁶ once it is placed in the museum; Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams state that this control of historical narrative thus enables institutions to legitimise the ‘deployment of Western power in [those] other countries’,⁷ which is no longer an celebrated approach in today’s twenty-first

³ Kids in Museums. ‘Part 1: How Can Your Museum Engage Children, Young People and Families with Sensitive Topics?’, Kids in Museums (n.d): <https://kidsinmuseums.org.uk/resources/part-1-how-can-your-museum-engage-children-young-people-and-families-with-difficult-or-challenging-topics/> [Accessed 2 November 2023]

⁴ Ibid.

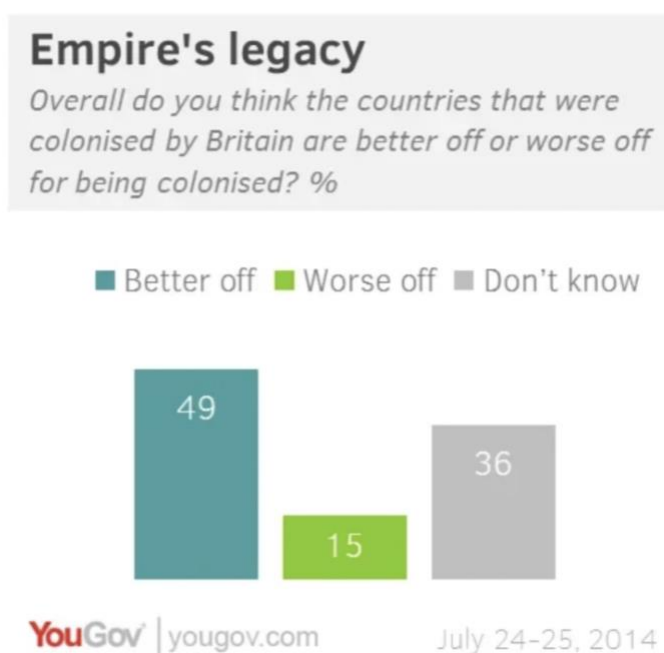
⁵ ICOM. ‘ICOM Approves a New Museum Definition’, International Council of Museums (24 August 2022): <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-approves-a-new-museum-definition/> [Accessed 2 November 2023]

⁶ Duncan, Cameron F. ‘The Museum, a Temple or the Forum’, *Curator: The Museum Journal*, Vol.14, No.1 (1971): p.21

⁷ Chrisman, Laura, and Patrick Williams. ‘Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: An Introduction’ in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, eds. Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams, 1st Edition (London: Routledge, 1994): p.8

century. With the selection of what is displayed creating such meaning on its own, the need for historical contextualising becomes a top priority, in order to avoid the continuance of depicting a colonial narrative, which could be deemed as a form of propaganda, and this, according to Duncan, has ‘at no time, any place in a museum.’⁸

This liberally-aligned argument is challenged by the supposedly apolitical forum known as Restore Trust. This forum argues that the ‘modish, divisive ideologies’,⁹ should not drive the National Trust’s priorities and goals, and instead the focus should be respecting and celebrating Britain’s heritage.¹⁰ This notion is reinforced by Will Dahlgreen’s YouGov report, in which he found that ‘three to one, British people think the British Empire is something to be proud of rather than ashamed of’,¹¹ and 49 per cent of respondents thought that countries colonised by Britain were better off (Figure 3.).



(Figure 3.) YouGov table, Empire’s legacy, July 24-25, 2014

⁸ Duncan, ‘The Museum, a Temple or the Forum’, p.21

⁹ Restore Trust. ‘About Us’, Restore Trust (n.d): <https://www.restoretrust.org.uk/about-us> [Accessed 2 November 2023]

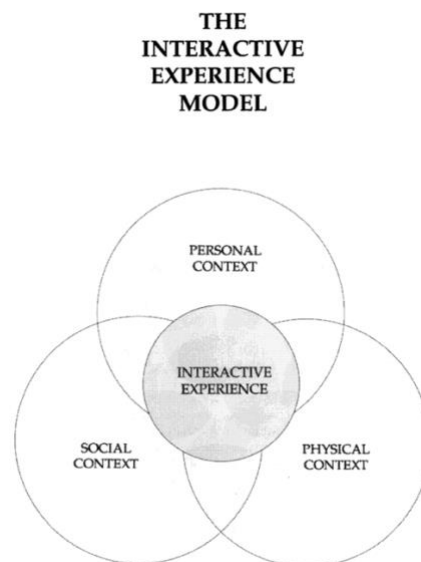
¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Dahlgreen, Will. ‘The British Empire is ‘something to be proud of’, YouGov (26 July 2014): https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/9954-britain-proud-its-empire?redirect_from=%2Fnews%2F2014%2F07%2F26%2Fbritain-proud-its-empire%2F [Accessed 4 November 2023]

These conflicting avenues on which narrative to bare in the museum, whether it be pride of heritage or colonial consciousness, each connote to differing political messages, making controversy unavoidable. However, an institution can attempt to avoid controversy through ‘neutrality’.

Creating an (Un)comfortable Experience

A driving factor for museums to pursue neutrality and to avoid the controversy shrouding colonialism and imperialism stems to the individual’s experience in a museum. Each visitor of a museum has a different reason as to why they have visited the museum, whether if it is educational, leisure, or both, the museum must facilitate to all these needs and desire since the ICOM definition also states that the museum should also be a place that offers ‘varied experiences for education, [and] enjoyment.’¹² The key aim for institutions is to attract new visitors, retain its current ones and not to deter is reinforced by the Morris Hargreaves McIntyre organisation, which uses psychographic, cultural segmentation in order to offer ‘mass personalisation’¹³ and ‘meet the needs of the international arts and cultural sector.’¹⁴ Whilst all museums have their niches, the fundamental goal of encouraging visitation remains the same.



(Figure 4.) John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking’s Interactive Experience Model

¹² ‘ICOM Approves a New Museum Definition’, <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-approves-a-new-museum-definition/> [Accessed 2 November 2023]

¹³ MHM. ‘Culture Segments’, Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (n.d): <https://www.mhminsight.com/culture-segments/> [Accessed 2 November 2023]

¹⁴ Ibid.

Looking at the returning museum visitors, addressing colonialism puts the elements of nostalgia and familiarity at risk because addressing colonialism and imperialism would likely prompt the museum to rethink its labelling, layout, collections, programming, and exhibitions. This would undoubtedly affect all three contexts (Personal, Physical and Social) within John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking's The Interactive Experience Model (Figure 4.). The elements of nostalgia and familiarity are put at risk and the shift of museum narrative has the potential to deter these returning museum visitors due to uncomfortable viewing experience. However, one may argue that this shift in narratives and didactics are necessary, regardless of whether it makes a new or returning visitor uncomfortable; to not do so would be upholding 'social irresponsibility in museum programming'.¹⁵ Some may suggest that diversifying collections and programming without the explicitly mentioning colonialism and imperialism could create a comfortable experience for new and returning visitors, since diversification on its own is arguably less controversial in lieu of colonialism and imperialism. However, Shaheen Kasmani, mentioned in Elisa Shoenberger's article—'What does it mean to decolonize a museum?'¹⁶ draws a distinction and states 'decolonisation is not the same as diversity [... it] is the upfront challenge of white supremacy, de-centres the Eurocentric view, values narrative of that has been made Other'.¹⁷ In this way, to solely diversify the museum without addressing colonialism, would be to essentially appropriate colonial thought and practice into twenty-first century sensitivities. Furthermore, this would greatly undermine the personal experiences and objective histories of those oppressed by colonisers and those whose ancestors were colonised as diversifying a collection or programme without addressing its socio-historical could come across as form of fetishizing, similar to Primitivism and Orientalism, or culturally insensitive.

¹⁵ Duncan, 'The Museum, a Temple or the Forum', p.21

¹⁶ Shoenberger, Elisa. 'What does it mean to decolonize a museum?', Museum Next (2 January 2023): <https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-does-it-mean-to-decolonize-a-museum/> [Accessed 4 November 2023]

¹⁷ Ibid.

The Fitzwilliam Museum



(Figure 5.) Sir Stanley Spencer, *Love among the Nations*, 1935–1936

The Fitzwilliam in Cambridge, United Kingdom, faced the controversies regarding its colonial history and content when a new interpretative label was written for Sir Stanley Spencer's *Love among the Nations* (Figure 5.), which used to be on a permanent display at The Fitzwilliam until it was taken down in 2022 after being exhibited for eleven years. The interpretative new label, written by Dr Rebecca Birrell, addressed the social historical contexts contemporary to when *Love among the Nations* was painted. The label directly acknowledges racism and imperialism that Spencer intentionally conveyed; however, this interpretative label received backlash from the media. Craig Simpson wrote in favour of the interpretation that Spencer's painting was more about 'free love'¹⁸ and reinforces this argument by mentioning that Spencer was a 'deeply Christian artist'.¹⁹ Another journalist, Janet Daley, presents an argument that mirrors the sentiments upheld by Restore Trust as she claims that the new interpretative label outlining its colonial past led to the painting being taken off display, and called this a form of censorship.²⁰ Dr Birrell recalled this flurry of media attention and mentioned that the senior

¹⁸ Simpson, Craig. 'Cambridge museum brands free love painting 'racist'', The Telegraph (26 April 2023): <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/04/25/cambridge-museum-removes-painting-after-calling-it-racist/> [Accessed 11 November 2023]

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Daley, Janet. 'British arts have been surrendered to tyrannical Left-wing mob', The Telegraph (29 April 2023): <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/04/29/british-arts-surrendered-to-a-tyrannical-left-wing-mob/> [Accessed 11 November 2023]

board of staff were distressed by such reportage, emphasising that The Fitzwilliam had not experienced negative backlash to that extent. However, Dr Birrell argued that the attention, good or bad, from the media should not have been the focus of The Fitzwilliam's senior board of staff when the aim was to educate or consider the history that has not been taught, which is ironic since the motto of The Fitzwilliam is 'for the increase of learning'.²¹ In this instance, The Fitzwilliam was at an odds as an individual within their institution decided to directly address a painting's colonial history, despite the museum seemingly not wanting to be involved in any form of controversy, questioning the integrity of the museum. If Dr Birrell did not write this interpretative label, the label *Love among the Nations* would have remained the same in a tone that condones colonial thought. In doing so, this object has been 'marginalised in favour of celebratory narratives',²² as John Giblin, Imma Ramos, and Nikki Grout would argue, echoing the point also presented by Chrisman and Williams.²³

Following this incident over Dr Birrell's interpretative label, The Fitzwilliam announced its the curation of the exhibition, *Black Atlantic: Power, People, Resistance*.²⁴ The exhibition acknowledges its colonial past as the description reads: 'Fitzwilliam's generosity was only possible because of the wealth his grandfather accumulated in part through the transatlantic slave trade.'²⁵ *Black Atlantic* is the first in a series of exhibitions and gallery interventions planned at The Fitzwilliam, between 2023 to 2026.²⁶ This shift demonstrates both sides of the argument in avoiding and addressing colonial histories. Whilst The Fitzwilliam initially did not actively support Dr Birrell's interpretative label, uproar, and the attention it received required the museum to change or update their educational programming.

²¹ The Fitzwilliam Museum. 'Learning', The Fitzwilliam Museum (n.d): <https://fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk> [Accessed 11 November 2023]

²² Giblin, John, Imma Ramos, and Nikki Grout. 'Dismantling the Master's House'. *Third Text*, Vol.33, No. 4–5 (3 September 2019): p.474

²³ Chrisman and Williams. 'Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: An Introduction', p.8

²⁴ The Fitzwilliam Museum. 'Black Atlantic: Power, People, Resistance', The Fitzwilliam Museum (n.d): <https://fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/plan-your-visit/exhibitions/black-atlantic-power-people-resistance> [Accessed 11 November 2023]

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

To Censor or Not to Censor

There are two ways in which censorship can be discussed when looking at colonialism: who is the museum censoring information and interpretations from?, and which side of history is being censored?

One of the main concerns regarding colonialism and imperialism, or any controversial topic, is how it will be taught to young people and children, and if it is even appropriate given that oppression and brutality are synonymous to empire colonialism. As already stated, *Kids in Museums* acknowledge the difficulty surrounding the topic of colonialism and imperialism,²⁷ yet emphasise the importance to discuss these topics with young people with the goal of ‘fostering understanding and promoting tolerance’,²⁸ as well as encouraging involvement and engagement with museums.²⁹ A report conducted by A Merrie Noyse Music and Heritage Consultants, on behalf of Arts Connect in 2018 found that institutions were recognised to be places where ‘difficult conversations can and should happen’³⁰ and more importantly, the report found that respondents thought that ‘it is not the topic that matters but the way in which the content is communicated to children and young people.’³¹ With this argument presented, controversy should not be avoided but rather discussed openly, with museums being the spearhead to have these conversation because more importantly, the report demonstrates that people want to be educated and have these discussions. This builds unto Eilean Hooper-Greenhill’s ideas of learning through conversation and interpretation.³² Hooper-Greenhill’s proposed that effective learning occurs through conversation and not rigid didactics and rhetoric. Whilst in theory, this would have its benefits, in practice it does not work since the historicism concerning colonialism has been long avoided, or one could say censored.

²⁷ Kids in Museums. <https://kidsinmuseums.org.uk/resources/part-1-how-can-your-museum-engage-children-young-people-and-families-with-difficult-or-challenging-topics/> [Accessed 2 November 2023]

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ A Merrie Noyse Music and Heritage Consultants. Executive Summary of the Report: ‘Challenging Conversations: Teaching challenging and difficult subjects to children and young people in Galleries, Museums and Heritage Sites’, Arts Connect and Heritage Education Leaders Group West Midlands (University of Wolverhampton, 2018): p.6

³¹ Ibid.

³² Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean. *Museums and Their Visitors*, 2nd Edition (London: Routledge, 1994)

The censoring of colonial histories to glorify the supposed perquisites of British colonialism has been, for the majority, uncontested. However, following the socio-political movement of Black Lives Matter (BLM), and the furthering away from pre-twenty-first century notions that were inherently racist, the need to address roots of colonialism and empire in museums has never been more relevant – especially since it highlights the institutionalised racism within the heritage and museum sector. Furthermore, the power dynamic between the museum and oppressed is so spotlighted as museums ‘stand as representatives of authority’,³³ which stems from European dominion.

However, the apparent issue of censoring British history by discussing colonialism remains persistent in undermining the need to address colonial histories. As previously mentioned, Daley’s comments about The Fitzwilliam and Sir Stanley Spencer’s *Love among the Nations*, and the sentiments of the Restore Trust; push to avoid discussing colonialism as it allegedly censors British history that institutions, like The Fitzwilliam, should be celebrating. and in the same breadth remain as neutral. However, Ali Meghji counteracts these statements as he argues that decolonisation is not censorship, but rather ‘filling in the gaps’.³⁴ Meghji does not suggest any censoring of any side of history but rather looking at the full picture to enrich knowledge, not replace it. To censor colonialism from curricula or claim that addressing colonialism censors history undermines the fact that ‘colonialism created the modern world’,³⁵ and not looking at its oppressive process or its long-term and wider consequences subverts the definition of what a museum is.

Colonialism is not just History

To avoid discussing colonialism in the museum hinders the discussion on the wider impacts of colonialism and imperial thought; this would be a disservice to the museum since they are widely recognised as beacons of knowledge. To ignore the effects of colonialism and the slave trade is to ignore the wider discussion of class and racial discrimination, which are still fervent

³³ Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean. ‘Towards plural perspectives’ in *Cultural Diversity: Developing Museum Audiences in Britain*, ed. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (London; Washington: Leicester University Press, 1997): p.8

³⁴ Meghji, Ali. ‘The Tories Think the Curriculum Means Censorship. They Couldn’t be More Wrong’, Novara Media (9 March 2021): <https://novaramedia.com/2021/03/09/the-tories-think-decolonising-the-curriculum-means-censorship-they-couldnt-be-more-wrong/> [Accessed 16 November 2023]

³⁵ Ibid.

issues in today's societies. Chrisman and Williams note that 'British working-classes were often characterised in racial terms borrowed from the contemporary practices of slavery' during the early nineteenth-century;³⁶ to avoid the topic of colonialism marginalises multiple groups, which goes against the ICOM's definitive attribute of inclusivity.³⁷ One of the Understanding Slavery Initiative's (USI) main principles aligns with Chrisman and Williams' point as USI believes 'the history of transatlantic slavery does not belong to any one cultural group, or nation [... it's] seen and felt in various areas of today's societies on an international scale.'³⁸ The effects of colonialism affects all and this needs to be acknowledged since it is unavoidable.

Furthermore, addressing the controversial topic of colonialism enables museums and audiences to discuss other controversial topics, such as the climate crisis since it was exacerbated, and still is, by colonialism. Anuradha Varanasi emphasised colonialism's sudden relevance in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), as leading scientists acknowledged colonialism as a 'historic and ongoing driver of the climate crisis.'³⁹ The legacy of colonialism continues to simultaneously damaged lands and broke communities, additionally ensuing environmental racism. Hadeel Assali, a lecturer and postdoctoral scholar affiliated with the Columbia Climate School, stated that 'we cannot have environmental justice without reversing the harms of colonialism',⁴⁰ demonstrating that avoiding that even the discussion of colonialism impacts issues that are not solely rooted in art historicism and social history.

Conclusion

The topic of colonialism will continue to be a controversial one, but this does not mean museums should avoid it – rather the opposite. With a museum having such authority, it has a

³⁶ Chrisman and Williams. 'Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: An Introduction', p.17

³⁷ 'ICOM Approves a New Museum Definition', <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-approves-a-new-museum-definition/> [Accessed 2 November 2023]

³⁸ Understanding Slavery Initiative. 'What is USI?', Understanding Slavery Initiative (n.d): <https://understandingslavery.com/about-us/what-is-usi/> [Accessed 1 December 2023]

³⁹ Varanasi, Anuradha, 'How Colonialism Spawned and Continues to Exacerbate the Climate Crisis', *State of the Plant*, Columbia Climate School of Columbia University (21 September 2022): <https://news.climate.columbia.edu/2022/09/21/how-colonialism-spawned-and-continues-to-exacerbate-the-climate-crisis/> [Accessed 1 December 2023]

⁴⁰ Ibid.

social responsibility to address and interpret issues of public importance, regardless of it being controversial or not.⁴¹ Colonialism affects the community and individual on local or international scales and this cannot be avoided in conversation. It may be an uncomfortable discussion but as shown through the Arts Connect report, people want to learn, and the American Alliance of Museums' report implies that people expect to be taught due to the attributes that they trust a museum to uphold (see Figure 1.). Discussing colonialism and empire will not be easy but a visitor must 'learn from being uncomfortable'⁴² as it is necessary feeling when encountering new perspective. To avoid the topic of colonialism because of the controversy surrounding would only be an injustice to the museum, the visitor, and the non-visitor.

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⁴¹ Duncan, 'The Museum, a Temple or the Forum', p.21

⁴² Giblin, Ramos, and Grout. 'Dismantling the Master's House', p.473

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