

Snake Church

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Abstract: This paper imagines Snake Church as a post-secular worship practice that reaches with and beyond the vilified serpent held within the limits of Judeo-Christianity. Snake Church offers a devotional practice enlivening enough to shift the languish of a post-secular world where the reasonableness of Enlightenment has crumbled into numbers like 440ppms and 1.5C. The Western empire has been revealed as stark naked, vulnerable, an old skin that cannot hold my world. Snake Church offers me a sacred opiating hope. As I approach a nascent liturgy, here, in the settler-ravaged Stony Rises, home to the Eastern Maar tiger snake and Eastern brown for millennia, I wonder, what might a prayer do for these ancient locals? Snake Church is not a holy rolling out of the self, to assume the mantle of a snake who wants nothing at all to do with me and the harms of my species. Instead, perhaps, it is a shedding of my old He-God skin, freeing me to grow towards something new in this play of sacrilegious devotion. Like a drop of poison, Snake Church might change my body completely.

Keywords: animal studies, ecotheology, snakes, ecocriticism, embodiment

Snake Church is a home-grown kookaburra-led cultural experiment. My scattered field notes, moments-in-time reports, begin with the first movements of spring, when the lush grass of unmown areas swallows my feet, then my knees. Snake Church finishes, for this paper at least, as the grass dries off and the orchard's flowers harden into fruit. Snake Church does not involve the worship of snakes, although perhaps Snake Church is a throwback to the animism of my European ancestors. Snake Church began in my head, was extended by a dalliance with the call of the kookaburra, and it will, most likely, morph towards some other form of being in this agglomeration that I call 'myself'.

Snake Church is situated on land where ways of being with snakes have always been, and always will be practiced by the resurging Eastern Maar Nation. I have not yet found stories of human/snake relations active in the Stony Rises, but old stories from Eastern Maar communities indicate there is no shortage of cosmological narratives in this territory I call home. Of course, the spiralling old knowledges of this continent are such that these Rises must be pulsing with powerful ancestral serpentine stories, as surely as the rivers here run underground, as surely as this place sparks fires, as surely as there are rainbows that cut these deep grey skies apart, as surely as with every step I walk on stones. It is not, however, my place to seek out these sacred snake stories (Bennett and Moreton). But perhaps I can speculate that there are watery underground stories about flowing out from times of staying still, biting stories about the crackle of fires opening seeds of new life, stories of slow emergence into change, like the prismatic colours that turn with the sun towards rain, stories of lava snakes creating the gullies and the hills, forming new layers of what might be told. But, no matter what these old snake stories are, they are not for me, an uninvited guest, to hold.

While I am not born to divine old sacred snake stories in the Rises, this does not make them less present in the ground and skies and air around me. I draw breath. It may be that because this is a spirit story, those old stories are present in ways that are beyond me. I pause, full of caution. To allude to ancestral presence, is that presumptuous, or the least that I can do? I have no way of knowing. I do know that my love for the Rises binds me in ways that risk the perverse 'adoption' fantasies that Tuck and Yang make so critically clear. Snake Church might be

a false move to innocence, a slanted claim to a deep truth within this place that I occupy, a grasping throwback to ideas of God-given right, an occlusion of the fact that this property I love has long been stolen.

There is a deep history here that makes me strange to this place, despite half a century of breathing it into my body. To write of a turn to the divine, of an attention to beingness that nurtures tenderness and care, risks a new generation of harm. Snake Church takes place on sacred ground that my family have hurt. Trees have been cut, soil has been poisoned.

I take a deep breath. Better to wrestle with my historicised body, than fall into a white girl attempt at belonging, to further colonise this place where I live. Deborah Bird Rose has shown in her work, and in the way she lived her life, that one thing I might do is ‘recuperate’ a form of ‘Western animism’ nourished by the ethics of relationality and care (492). Rose argues there is much that is animistic in the breath of the Judeo-Christian God. I find this too, and so Snake Church begins.

This is a doubtful troubled Snake Church, emerging from an effort to shift my childish dread of snakes into something less humanist, less colonialist, more inclusive, more hospitable. Developing my relationship with the snake co-inhabitants of this place towards something I understand as sacred is part of my work to imagine my way into a thriving emergent different way of being with snakes. Snake Church is an event-in-process that gives my human beingness a potential to flourish together with all kinds of snake beingness that have nothing at all to do with me.

Although, perhaps Snake Church began with a tentative paper in 2018, conceiving Snake Church as a theoretical aim, an intellectual imagining, a way of pressing against the sanctums of my mind to find a less humanist way of togetherness. I was going to the Rises often back then, returning as I always have, after moving out in my late teens. Not long after that, the Rises became my registered living place. But there was no further thought of Snake Church until well after the middle of 2021. Winter, a time when brown snakes and tiger snakes of this place are

coiled in places I don't go, under rocks and/or in rotting stumps and/or in the soft-soiled fork of old trees, and/or under the kitchen floor and/or above my bedroom ceiling. Me too, resisting winter's cold.

Then an email lit me into action. Mayra Morales, a dancer and philosopher who sometimes inhabits a virtual thinking place called Senselab, called out 'an invitation to participate with the environment to craft a proposition that may be sparked and lifted and carried away by wind'. Morales' rendezvous was set at 'the crossroads of the interval, under the roof of the threshold's pulse'. In this open invitation to the possibilities of the world, Snake Church began to take a different kind of shape.

Morales' reference to the crossroads introduced me to Báyo Akómoláfé's relational posthumanist work towards 'sacred activism', where political effort and sacrosanct devotions become one. In Akómoláfé's construct, the sacred is not added to activism, and activism is not an add-on to that which is sacred. Instead, the sacred *is* activism, activism *is* sacred. In this mysterious process, as inconceivable as my own flesh becoming dust, 'the logic of the familiar is composted' so that new forms of wonder might infuse 'ways of thinking about change' (2018). For Akómoláfé, those at the margins resisting that which makes their spirituality languish can find themselves within a point of decision, a 'crossroad', where victory might be conceived as a fall. It is the pulse of failure that allows such a change. All else maintains the status quo.

A proposition became present in my body. Snake Church could be co-crafted in a more-than-human way. I could walk alongside my understanding of the snakes in this place, stretch towards an adherence that would let me feel my failing attendance to the divine in a new way.

Such a move, eventing a phenomenological Snake Church, drew on the propositional approach championed by Senselab, its mode of 'research-creation' that seeks 'open thought' (Manning). Snake Church might, I thought, move me into a more generative relational space with those long-bellied creatures that make me jump and tremble. It could be an interval, a crossroad, a place to pause with doubt, a place for trouble, a place for growth. Snake Church could be my way of getting lost, of getting distanced from what I knew. It could be my fall.

But how not to control the directions that Snake Church would take? How best to fall? At first, I imagined a worship service with others to put this sacred activism into play. That idea failed to thrive. I couldn't see past the party. More doubt. More trouble. Then I worried that eventing Snake Church alone was nothing more than a solipsistic posture. I let that fall too, let it fail. The idea of being alone is altogether a human construct in this busy living place. I resolved to attend to 'shifting alliances and strange dalliances and morphing identities', whatever all of that might turn out to be (Akómoláfé and Ladha, 822). Perhaps Snake Church had begun before that conference, when I first started to write towards a love to heal my fear of snakes. Akómoláfé writes that the way to be 'response-able to these times of dramatic shifts and troubling encounters at the edges of our flesh', is to be 'animal enough to be sensuously keen and alive to possibilities the surface knows nothing about' (2021). My body a surface, the Rises a possibility, Snake Church an encounter. Or perhaps there's no start and no end to it all, life as ouroboros.

The Spring Equinox rolled its way towards me. Snakes a-stir stirred up old pagan connotations. Newly inspired, I faced my animist tendencies squarely, enjoyed the embrace of their contradictions. It was hardly a turn from humanism to choose the Spring Equinox to begin. I breathed in, then out, my thoughts scented with Rose. Enough for this to be some kind of 'recuperation'.

If nothing else, the Equinox was more grounded than a regular congregational time. I have gathered at Sunday churches often enough to have over two hands worth of places and service times engraved into my clock-watching body: Stonyford (2:30pm), South Purrumbete (9:30am), Cobden (11am), Prahran (5pm), Glen Waverley (10am), Neutral Bay (9:30am), West Hawthorn (10am), North Melbourne (10am), Brunswick (9:30am), Brunswick East (10am), Colac (10am). The precision of those times. All that watching of the clock to make time to move beyond my own concerns.

Spring Equinox was, as it turned out, equally precise, locked to 5:20am on the 23rd of September.

I began to prepare.

September the 19th

With Snake Church in mind, I have started to clear out the old cubby. Again. The small round of stones, by far the grandest cubby known to me at the time. The build, led by my older brother. I played a desultory part, lifting small stones to bolster up the circle of bigger rocks dug out to make a hollow in the ground. My sisters there too, gathering long grass and bracken and sticks to build the roof. I discovered the cubby about twenty years ago, decades after the roof had fallen into dirt.

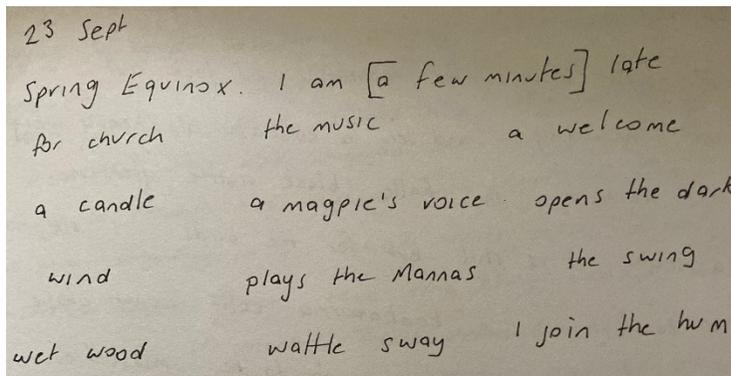
The cubby is at the top of the rise behind the shed, a short walk from the house. It was, for a while, a safe place for campfires. Nicely out of the wind. A few years ago, a limb of an uncontained black wattle I put in as part of the reveg splayed over it and leant in low. A fire risk. In a hollow like this, sparks fly up before they fly out. Not long before, this errant limb had been sawn off and dragged to the bonfire-in-waiting out the front, growing in the clear of the fire break. The fronded branch dragged behind me like a lamb to slaughter.

I dug out most of the weeds, and shifted the sticks and logs set for a fire I didn't get round to burning before the wattle drooped down again into danger. It was early spring, when snakes are full of unspent powerful venom and unable to move fast. Poorly equipped to flee, some settle for attack. The sticks were a higgly piggle, wriggling like snakes as I loosened them to clear out Snake Church. Rubber boots on, the hoe giving me an extra arm's length, one by one, I fished the sticks out, piled them into a potential of a small fire at the entrance. I mowed low around the sticks readied for the burn, then mowed round the round of the cubby, as diligent as the people who mow the lawns around their churches. As diligent as someone well used to spotting slow-moving snakes. Cutting out a space for Snake Church, digging into it, mowing around it, the process had begun, the eventing was underway.

September the 20th

Snake Church is clear enough now so snakes can be seen. If this was their habitat, it is now ravaged. This is the damage that comes with my opening to the divine that is snake. Who would be a god when worshippers are made of my kind of stuff?

I still had no sense of what the practice would be, but the idea had moved into the sweat of my body. The insects and grubs and birds knew all about it. Perhaps snakes too, moving their slow spring bodies away from all that fuss. I set my alarm.



23 Sept
 Spring Equinox. I am [a few minutes] late
 for church the music a welcome
 a candle a magpie's voice opens the dark
 wind plays the Mannas the swing
 wet wood wattle sway I join the hum

Figure 1: Diary entry (author).

Later that day, I burned the sticks in the clearing I'd made. Enjoyed it, not thinking about the killing in that fire lit for my pleasure. Too busy wondering what was next, not a thought for the fresh snake food I'd just cooked to ashes.

The 'next' came along soon after. A distant kookaburra call. A tingle in my memory-riddled body. The year before, I had laughed with kookaburras loud and long enough for them to bring a young one to check me out. I don't know what I said but it was enough to give them all a laugh. Unless they gathered to give me a good telling off. One way or another, we have things to communicate with each other.

There it was. I would let the kookaburras call me to worship. Their brilliant wolfing music would be like bells in a belfry. I felt the quiet throb of my being that gives me peace. Yes. I would go to the hewn-out altar on the rise whenever I was called. The kookaburras would let me know when it was time for Snake Church. The commitment slipped in with an ease that made it feel inspired.

Kookaburras and snakes have a particular relationship in the cultural imaginary that dominated my childhood. Dead snakes slung on fences disappeared, I assumed, into the bellies of the kookaburras. Popular culture was on the side of my truth. The kookaburra with a snake in their beak (fig. 2) is an image that has been painted (Cayley, 1898) postcarded (unknown, 1914), collected in museums (Jenson, 1930) and sketched for ‘Mrs Kookaburra’s Dinner Party’ (Gibbs, 1940). Some things just go together. Wurundjeri Woi wurrung Elder Uncle Dave Wandin, a generous gentle soul of the Wurundjeri Tribe Council, says snakes were spotted, back in his ancestors’ day, by looking for plants that held the cure for snakebite. Perhaps, if a kookaburra is around, snakes might not be too far away.



Figure 2: Cayley; Unknown; Jenson; Gibbs.

I had no idea what my worship might entail once I arrived at Snake Church following that kookaburra call. I knew it wouldn’t involve formal readings or orchestrated singing, I didn’t want to plan a sermon, and even meditation felt like a human-centred contrivance. Then along

came Antonia Pont's insightful work on the practice of sitting, her thoughts unfolding towards mine with a gentle synchronicity that felt like an intervention.

Quiet sitting is an old practice of my family, one I have participated in for as far back as I can remember. This would be my response to the call. I would sit in quiet for as long as I was comfortable. A Snake Church of being in sacred silence with the snakes of this place. That would be more than enough.

But for days and then weeks the kookaburras themselves were quiet. In the absence of their song, I created a pattern from the Spring Equinox, decided attendance to the moon phases might be a more regular and predicable call. No getting over my humanness, over my years of churching on a regular basis.

October the 21st

In the shadows of my torch the grass is long, the moon is high high high in the sky. The wind is soft, the round of the cubby looks beautiful. The black wattle straggles, half dying for a cut, half full of life. The sound of trucks on the highway, the wind, coming from the north. Not at ease enough to sit, I stand and feel the circle of the clearing.

But even full moons came too rarely.

I felt a drive for more, decided the sight of a kookaburra would be a prompt to stay wherever I was, as still and quiet for as long as I felt comfortable. They were barely seen, so when they appeared I took notice.

October the 22nd

A short service today. Stripping for my shower, dropping my clothes in the laundry, I see a kookaburra on the lawn under the clothesline. It's cold but I am faithful. I go out to the back path, stand still, for as long as I feel comfortable. Still no call to the altar. When the kookaburra flies across to the nectarine tree I have my shower, wondering what the kookaburra made of all my fuss.

Weeks later, I'm talking over the fate of a pile of dead wood with my brother. Great habitat for snakes, great fuel for a bushfire with twenty years of reveg over the rise. He says he'll help me clear it. Our talk is interrupted by a kookaburra. I look over to Snake Church, decide not to go, my brother has too much on to rush to the old cubby. I give him the be-still concept in five seconds. He is quiet for less than five seconds.

I hear them again, not long after, five kilometres from home. I'm walking with my mother and sister along the bush track. Those two are more ready to play. My mother lasts for thirty seconds then breaks back into chat. My sister tells me she heard the calls of five other different birds. She likes to stretch me, help me test what I can be. I don't take the bait, I'm a layperson, not a nun. Even Snake Church might be more than I can manage.

Things remain quiet for some time.

October the 25th

I ride my bike into the bush to check out the For Sale for MS and end up at Snake Church. I text MS. 'Right opposite the sprawl of Rock Bottom. Kookas going off.' MS sees it as a portent, it's hard not to, asks if they are 'enthusiastic about the possibility'. I suggest 'they reckon the price is a joke', note my 'creative experiment', tell her I'm 'taking a kooka call as a call to Snake Church'. Her text flashes back. What 'denomination?'

It's a good question.

By the end of October kookaburras are guaranteed to be seen at the rise and fall of the sun. Each time I see them, I still myself into silence. They fill me with joy. I no more take them for granted than I do the stars. Yet still, nothing to say that I can hear.

October the 29th

On the front veranda with MM. We're in quiet. MM knows the drill. After some time, a good time, the kookaburra dives from the telephone wire into the long grass hiding the stone fence. MM says, 'Too cool'. My own voice, like a baby kooka, echoes these words, like a fledgling following the wing way of an elder.

My practice of falling into silence when I see them gets thinner, shorter. It's getting warmer. There must be more snakes about. A friend from overseas comes to visit.

November the 1st

I walk the bush track with CC. When a kookaburra alights to our right, on an overhanging limb, I can't resist, even though there's no kooka talk. 'Snake Church', I say. 'Just be with this moment for as long as you feel comfortable'. CC dives into the quiet as others might take to water on a hot day. The kookaburra has made us a sacred place. Later, CC tells me it should be Kookaburra Church, that snakes don't feel to her like they're on the side of good. Her childhood, like mine, spent in the company of parents who were steady churchgoers. For her, Church of England then Anglican, for me, Presbyterian then Uniting. Her childhood, like mine, spent in the occasional company of snakes. For her, reticulated pythons and cobras. For me, tiger snakes and eastern browns.

CC is right. It could be Kookaburra Church. It could be Everything Church. But the work I need to do is all about the snakes. It's like that line from Emily Dickinson, 'there is no monotony' in the atmosphere of a snake (Hsu 9). Not that I get bored with kookaburras, but snakes turn my body inside out.

CC's old church thinking gets me thinking yet again about Lilith as/and the snake, in the Garden of Eden. Lilith and me, creating our own kind of Snake Church. Garlanding my faith with the story of snaky Lilith makes it into something I can live with.

The biblical Lilith is an old idea, but the Oracle of Delphi is older. The potentialities of snakes in the sanctum are embedded in the European ancestry loosely associated with my acculturation and my body. The Pythia, priestess, advisor to the rulers of Greece for over a thousand years, is older, wiser and more powerful than Zeus. The Pythia understood what it was to live with snakes, keeping on with old wisdoms that appreciated the gains of a companionable envenoming.

It is quite probable that snake venom creates human knowledges that would otherwise be inaccessible, as suggested by the story of the Oracle. Other old cultures are also open to the idea that a scrape of human skin, just enough to allow for a tiny drop of venom, allows the nonhuman world to open up its secrets. In Delhi, street venom will get you dancing all night (Singh). It's enlightening, to think a drop of venom can heal as much as it can harm. Venom might disturb the heart's rhythms, paralyse muscles and waylay nerve signals, but its active compounds can also control bleeding during surgery, lower blood pressure, slow tumour growth, delay Alzheimer's Disease and perhaps, even cure Covid-19 (Sung et al; Estevão-Costa; Kurrupu). Envenoming might well be an enlivening blessing as well as a deadening curse, as suggested by the Rod of Asclepius.

In the face of heavily layered *history* and *theology* (not *thealogy*) it is a marginal call to place Snake Church within a long matrilineal history of invoking ophidian divinity, but it is a seductive idea, wise women seeking venom delirium to find something beyond human wisdom. I have a hunch that Lilith cut up the dance floor. Pythia too. And those women in the *Bacchae* suckling snakes, they had some fun before the patriarchy closed them back in.

But I am of the Judeo-Christian church, a church built on the idea of the Evil Serpent. Snake hate is a touchstone of human exceptionality, the foundation stone of judgement, part of the brimstone stench of eternal death hung like a millstone around the neck of non-believers. And here, in the Stony Rises, I'm stonewalling all that.

I am free to do so. There is enough give in the Christian church to make room for me in its fringes, rethinking the scriptures, reworking the old practices. These margins have always been there, making room for a sacred activism such as this. After all, St Francis of Assisi saw

animals as ‘good creatures of God’ and ‘beloved of God’, as fellow creatures who ‘praise and delight God in their particular modes of flourishing’ (Clough 243). Snakes were not excluded from his ideas.

All the same, while there are plenty of animal lovers amongst my eco-feminist faith community in that Garden of Eden called CERES, I am not fully confident that if a snake came up from the Yarra River down the hill, they would be made as welcome as the dogs that join the circle. I’d be drawing my legs up on the chair as well. There is no such thing as a perfect church.

Yet the freedom of Snake Church feels like it’s getting close in this sacred activism, this striving to thrive with a less defined God/de. Perhaps it might create a ‘cognitive flourishing’ of the spirit, such things happen (Lee). Snake Church is a flung seed that might flower my knowledges towards new understandings, despite the fact that, that like the Rises, my soul is rocky ground.

Over the next few days, a patch of beautiful weather brings many kookaburra sightings, many moments of quiet. Perhaps more snakes. The kookaburras move in close with the suddenness of the warmth.

November the 3rd

I follow the kookaburra call into soft rain that’s brought the long spring grass to tears. Sit on the fallen branch between the two fronds birthing from the wattle’s undead wood like baby trees. There’s a soft sway in the tree paddock as far as I can see. Once more, that call.

My trips up the rise become more and more regular. Sometimes I hear the call in the back of my consciousness like I hear a slither in the grass.

The days roll on.

November the 27th

MS comes to stay. I leave our quiet chat on the front veranda, leave her sitting, when the call comes through the morning air. MM is watering. He tells me not to be rude, says I'm acting unhinged. He's daring me to break my vow like the good atheist he is. I tell him MS, of all people, will understand. She does, she gets it, entirely.

Not much later in the day there's another call to worship. This time MS joins me. Later in the day she goes there on her own.

November the 28th

Today the calls don't stop. Five times I hear them, perhaps more, I've lost count. At the end of the day the call is strong, doubled, then tripled, and I go to the back, obedient, faithful, and see MM has stepped back from getting in the clothes, listening with intent. We stare up, they are so close, three kookaburras in a row on a low manna gum branch, belting it out like a gospel choir. In the wake, even MM is compelled to the altar. It feels like the least that we can do.

All this and still, no snakes at the altar. Altar. I love this fail, my frequent misspell of altar as alter.

I would have seen a snake if they chose to attend. I look around very carefully, before I sit or stand in Snake Church. This is how I have been trained to live in this place.

Not that I have a hankering to see a snake at Snake Church. To see a snake is to see the possibility of being bitten. This is part of the truth Val Plumwood felt, while being rolled by a crocodile. To be close to death is a good path for humans to truly understand how a 'powerful creature can ignore [their] special status' (10). Not that I'm small enough for a snake to see me as prey. If a snakebite kills me, it will be an accident I have created, not a brilliant ploy of paralysis caused by a hungry snake.

There is no need for a snake to join me in this pew. Each time I participate in this event, this kookaburra-led Snake Church, I seem to thrive a little more. I listen, my body responds. It feels like I am growing. It seems the black wattle has never blossomed as boldly as it is blossoming this year.

It might be time to get a groove on in Snake Church. Dance to the music in the air. Lilith, Pythia, the maenads and me.

I open to this thought. As Akómoláfé points out, ‘one must be sufficiently pierced’ by the ‘wounds’ created with us by the world to ‘notice the sacred’ and ‘sense the playful indeterminacy of things’ (2021). Those creamy blossoms that smell like the start of summer, the unpredictable call of a kookaburra, the quick of snakes that have been sensed, but not yet seen, at least so far this year, these are the wounds that mark my body intimately, like a nail through flesh, flourishing wounds that let me fall away from human victory, that help me to give up on myself.

December the 5th

I go to Snake Church as soon as I get up. The sun has beaten me there. Too late to see those magic fingers of God pressing through the wattle. I’m warmish in my nightie. As I walk down from my service, I see a kooka on the telephone wire. A quick chuckle sends me back up the rise. Then a kooka call from the manna gum out the back, loud and full of joy, as if I have at last, anticipated the call. A joke I’m finally let into. I finish my service, get to writing Snake Church, edit less than a page when they call me out again. I come back to my writing, cleared again by the warmish cool of the morning. There is nothing I regret in the leaving of my desk.

This is where I am. It’s only been months, way too soon to call, but for now, Snake Church is an enlivening practice of listening, being led, sitting and nothing more. I am being pulled out of old habits, reshaping in the smallest and deepest of ways.

The Summer Solstice is approaching. The precise measure is 2:58am on Wednesday the 22nd of December. Anything could happen, it always does, the world here is always in the making. Perhaps this yearly measure will call in the finish of Snake Church, perhaps it will be the start of a new proposition, perhaps a snake might join me in worship. Perhaps I'll sleep right through. Whatever happens, whatever 'events', I have faith that Snake Church will fail, fall and flourish with or without the with-the-world body I call 'me'. My every worship practice leaves a mark, and some may well leave scars.

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