'Making Whiteness Strange'
White Identity In Post-Apartheid South African Art

Liese van der Watt

*Country of my skull... landscape of my bones*¹

By way of introduction, picture these South African landscapes.

The first one, painted in 1929 in the infancy of Afrikaner Nationalism by a famous Afrikaner landscape artist J H Pierneef, presents a cool and seamless panorama of an idyllic and fertile farm. The focus is on the white, Cape-Dutch style homestead as a symbol of prosperity and peace in settlement. The land is emptied out of any human activity, ready for the taking - a powerful representation of white ambition.

The second one, a work entitled *Transit Culture* painted by Wayne Barker in 1990, juxtaposes a Eucalyptus tree in signature Pierneef-style, with an empty and blood red canvas. Attached to the canvas hangs a white skeleton, forebodingly. Pierneef is quoted once again in 1991, this time by Roger van Wyk who copies a well-known Pierneef landscape over a placard with dummy hand-grenades and anti-personnel mines. These placards were common in public buildings in the 1980s at the height of the anti-apartheid struggle, alerting the South African public to be weary of strange objects. Van Wyk tellingly calls this conflation of an icon of white South African art history with symbols of violence *South African landscape tradition*, referring to a conflicted history where one group’s dreams and aspirations annihilated those of others.

Finally, in the mid-1990s Walter Meyer paints, almost anachronistically, the seamless and panoramic South African landscape once again. Similar to Pierneef, his landscapes too are empty of human activity, but unlike him, Meyer’s landscapes are also devoid of wealth and prosperity. Indeed, Meyer’s sparse landscapes are populated by ruins of farmhouses and vestiges of small-town dreams, a land filled with abandonment, with failure and decay.

These landscape paintings offer a genealogy of sorts: a potted visual history of white settlement in South Africa, communicated through the seemingly disembodied medium of landscape. And as with all genealogies, this one could be very different - at every point, an alternative choice could have been made.

Against this background I would like to look at art that approaches whiteness in South Africa differently by foregrounding precisely the

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embodiment of whiteness. More precisely, I will examine a few young white South African artists whose work and attempts to ‘make whiteness strange’—much as Richard Dyer has argued in discussing the necessity to analyse whiteness as a cultural force. Using various strategies and working in a variety of media, these artists turn the gaze inward to an examination of their own identities as shaped by their various trajectories of race, ethnicity, gender and history.

WHY WHITENESS?

I want to interrupt myself briefly at this point and acknowledge my hesitancy in thinking about whiteness, once more, in the context of South Africa. Is this not, one may ask, yet another attempt to foreground the experiences of white people over those of black people, as South Africa’s disgraceful history of colonialism and apartheid attests to? Is this not, like the politics of apartheid, once again a view that sees nothing but colour?

Thinking from a position further afield than the specifically South African situation, it is necessary to point out that a number of authors, in the last decade or so, have remarked upon the need to study whiteness per se—to a large extent inspired by the challenges of particularly black feminist scholarship. In one of the earliest study on the topic, Ruth Frankenberg has described whiteness as a descriptive force that shapes white people’s lives by pointing out that:

First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a ‘standpoint’, a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others and at society. Third, ‘whiteness’ refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed.

There appears to be general consensus in the literature on the ‘apparent emptiness of “white” as a cultural identity’, on the fact that whiteness as a cultural position is often unnamed and unmarked, or, as Richard Dyer has pointed out, an assumption of whiteness as being ‘non-raced’. David Roediger has noted in his study of the white American working class, that ‘the main body of writing by white Marxists in the United States has...naturalised whiteness’.

This naturalisation of white identity has resulted in a reluctance both to acknowledge the role of whiteness in racial oppression and to examine white hegemony. Studies of whiteness have therefore aimed to make ‘visible the processes by which the stability of whiteness...is secured and reproduced’, or as Dyer insists ‘the point of looking at whiteness is to dislodge it from its centrality and authority, not to reinstate it’. Likewise, Coco Fusco reminds us, in an often-quoted remark: “To ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalising it”.

The above studies, aimed at unsettling whiteness through a critique thereof and an ultimate disaffiliation from it, are identified as a ‘first wave of white critique’ by Mike Hill whose own edited text wants to introduce a ‘second wave’ in whiteness studies: critical of first wave texts that come dangerously close to ‘a secondary narcissism based on simple inversion’. Hill’s text wants to approach the study of whiteness itself critically. His point of departure is
that whiteness will not go away once it is acknowledged or critiqued, and he therefore aims to look at whiteness without disavowing his own whiteness. Rather, one could argue that his text wants to make whiteness not only visible, but possible, in the same way that Peter Erickson has suggested that ‘what we need is a theory and a practice that will make possible living with whiteness today.’

Reading the literature on whiteness, one is struck by the exceptions which post-apartheid South Africa offers to this rule of the apparent invisibility of whiteness. In South Africa, now more than ever, whiteness is neither ‘non-raced’ nor ‘invisible’ as Dyer puts it elsewhere, but constantly prioritised in political and cultural debates. Whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa has come under scrutiny in various areas of the political, economic and cultural mindscape. The TRC has pointedly raised the issue of white complicity and complacency with the apartheid regime, and white educational and economic privileges are being addressed through legislation and economic restitution. Indeed, analysing whiteness, interrogating and challenging it, is one of many ways in which the new South African nation is being ‘imagined’, at least by some.

And so, while I agree in principle with an argument put forward by Homi Bhabha that

what we need is a way of looking that restores a third dimension to hard-set profiles; a way of writing that makes black and white come alive in a shared text...to bring language to a space of community and conversation that is never simply white and never singly black,

it is also my belief that the specifics of the South African situation ask for analyses of racialised identities – and specifically of whiteness – in the post-apartheid moment that precludes premature celebrations of national unity: a unity which ultimately should indeed strive to be ‘never simply white and never singly black’.

That said, it does not mean that analyses of whiteness need perpetuate racist and essentialist ways of thinking about race. My project approaches whiteness as relational and intersubjective, rather than following the kind of binary thinking evident in the following extract from an article by Grant Farred on post-apartheid white identity:

White South Africans are singularly disqualified as nonnatives *ad infinitum* by their past. They have perpetually rendered themselves as ‘foreign,’ ‘othered’ by their history of invasion and illegitimate control of the indigenous peoples and their resources. [The rhetorical political slogan] ‘One settler, one bullet’ is an interrogation and invalidation of the authenticity of whites’ identities as South Africans.

(my italics)

Farred’s view is disturbingly essentialist as well as being oversimplified and untextured – even more so for his usage of the words *ad infinitum*, thereby implying that white people can by definition never claim South African identity. On the question of the culpability of generations, which Farred refers to in this quote, Dominick LaCapra has argued in the context of the Shoah that

Those [Germans] born later [cannot] be placed in a guilt-ridden lineage or made to bear the stain of a secularised original sin, although they may well have a specific responsibility in confronting a specific past.
Following this line of thinking then, this article will explore the work of a younger generation of artists who, I will argue, are actively rethinking and renegotiating their entry into the South African body politic by interrogating their identities as white South Africans. Granted, they are not representative of their entire generation where apathy is prevalent, but they are nevertheless significant in accepting, among others in different fields, a ‘specific responsibility in confronting a specific past’ as LaCapra put it.

WITNESSING TRAUMA

In a central place in Cathy Caruth’s study on trauma and history, Unclaimed Experience, stands what she terms ‘The Wound and the Voice’ – a reference to the myth of Tancred and Chlorinda, which Freud invoked in Beyond the Pleasure Principle to explain the uncanny repetitive nature of painful experiences. Caruth makes use of this myth to draw attention, in particular, to the voice of Chlorinda who can only cry out once her beloved Tancred wounds her a second time when her spirit is imprisoned in a tree. In this way, the myth exemplifies how traumatic experience is only known in the repetition thereof.17 The story of trauma as ‘belated experience’ as Caruth18 calls it or ‘precocious witnessing’ as Shoshana Felman19 has termed it, is however not of primary concern here. Rather, I want to focus on the reception of that voice, the addressee, which in this myth is Tancred, the witness to Chlorinda’s pain.

Tancred is both witness and the one who inflicted the pain in the first place. In this way this myth provides an analogy for the position of many, if not most whites in South Africa – a situation defined by being witness to a trauma while being intimately complicit, responsible for that trauma. This analogy is compounded even more in the instance of Tancred since he is, in turn, traumatised by the trauma of Chlorinda – albeit a very different kind of trauma, and a paradigm for vicarious traumatisation perhaps, to which I will return at the end of this article.

Translating this to the South African situation, I suggest that both artists Minnette Vári and Kendell Geers are witnessing performatively in the way, as Felman has suggested, teaching and psychoanalysis

are called upon to be performative, and not just cognitive, insofar as they both strive to produce, and to enable, change. Both this kind of teaching and psychoanalysis are interested not merely in new information, but, primarily, in the capacity of their recipients to transform themselves in function of the newness of that information.20

An early sculpture by Minnette Vári entitled Firestone (1997) is a compelling and potent metaphor to point us in the direction of an analysis of whiteness per se. The rubber tyre has become almost emblematic of South Africa’s tainted history in its immediate referral to the practice of so-callednecklacing murders – a notorious method employed in the black townships in the 1980s to kill suspected black police informers. A tyre soaked in fuel would be placed around a victim’s body or neck and then ignited. Vári’s employment of a popular brand of rubber tyres, ‘Firestone’, becomes piercingly ironic in this context. But it is her decision to mould the tyre in white porcelain that makes this work conceptually so compelling. The radical re-visualising of this familiar image by using the colour white becomes, in the South African situation, an icon

17 Trauma is always, writes Caruth ‘the story of a wound that cries out, addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available’, Unclaimed Experience, op cit, p 5.


19 Shoshana Felman, ‘Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching’ in Trauma: Explorations in Memory, Cathy Caruth, ed, Johns Hopkins, Baltimore, 1995, pp 29-31, for her discussion of precocious witnessing in relation to the poetry of Mallarme.

Minnette Vári, *Alien*, 1998, video animation, dimensions variable. Copyright the artist
evocative of racial politics: Vári has quite literally ‘made whiteness strange’ and the image speaks succinctly of white complicity in what was regarded and publicised as black on black violence in the townships.

In 1998 Vári produced an animated video entitled Alien in which she inserts her naked body into ten short sections taken from television news footage about South Africa broadcasted between 1993 and 1998. Vári’s naked body morphs into different roles – she mimics a United Nations delegate giving an address, her body replaces those of four right-wing Afrikaner Weerstand’s Beweging members (Afrikaner Resistance Movement) atop a Volkswagen Combi, she becomes someone putting on earphones during a TRC hearing, and morphs into the bodies of voters at a polling station. The avatar of her body does not fit these figures’ bodies perfectly and the result is a morphing, twisting and dissolving body. All of this is set in a blank white field in which isolated objects gleaned from TV news footage and evocative of private recollections, appear and disappear: South African Defence Force helicopters flying by, a lion stalking across the screen, a South African bus. Alien becomes a collage of impressions that make up ‘a strange version of South Africa as understood by the world based on ‘eyewitness’ accounts’.

It is important to clarify at this point that there are, of course, various types of witnessing: Dori Laub, a psychoanalyst involved in the Fortunoff Video Archive at Yale which collects testimonies of Holocaust survivors, distinguishes the level of ‘being a witness to oneself within the experience, the level of being witness to the testimonies of others, and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself’. Shoshana Felman identifies three types of witnessing in her discussion of Claude Lanzmann’s movie Shoah: those who witness as victims of disaster, those who witness as perpetrators and those who witness as bystanders. What is striking about these different witnesses is what Felman has described as their incommensurability – an incompatibility of witnessing born out of dissimilar personal and historical contexts.

And it is exactly this incommensurability of witnessing various histories and events that Vári expresses so well in this work, what she has called our ‘helplessness in the face of history’. The work represents her inability to fathom all the various fragments that make up South Africa’s history into any coherent whole, her inability to attain closure in the face of histories being revised, rewritten and sometimes declared inauthentic. Merged with sourced material from South Africa’s history, her re-invention is based on the fragments of memory and her alien self becomes a sign of the inability to integrate memory fully into understanding. Vári writes:

We see ourselves in this revolving mirror of up-to-the-minute news, but also expose the world’s desires with regard to this country and its situation. The distortion of the figures is the discomfort of an ill-fitting interpretation.

Alien was first shown as part of Vári’s exhibition entitled Beyond the pale which placed identity centre stage in various ways – the title refers, of course, also to the politics of whiteness, and by building all these references into her work, Vári explores that which lies beyond ‘the pale’ of whiteness in a South African context: a zone in which identities are neither stable nor safe, but dependent on re-alignment and re-invention for survival. In this work, Vári’s alien body literally enacts this displacement, loss and fragmentation, but importantly, also resilience and survival through the relentless mutation and re-invention of her body.

Memory, that inconstant partner to remembering, is again the main theme
Minnette Vári, Oracle, 1999, video animation, dimensions variable. Copyright the artist
in Vári’s next work entitled Oracle. One of six artists to be nominated for the annual national Vita Art awards in 1999, Vári produced a looped video, once again of her naked body, this time involved in eating and bingeing on what seems to be a piece of flesh. This flesh, one soon discovers, is made up of changing clips from news footage that then spills out in a pool behind her. She is in effect bingeing on all the conflicting histories that make up Africa and South Africa’s contemporary moment – in a fit of cannibalism she is craving this information into a hybrid self. Vári writes:

To acknowledge the gaps in our memories and to reconstruct the missing part of a history is almost as frightening as staring an apparition in the face, daring it to show itself while knowing that one couldn’t stand the sight. Often the things we can’t bear to face are the most telling witnesses of our personal and ideological origins. My new work constitutes a kind of ghost-hunt, tilling over the soil of public and private recollection to find the phantoms that could help to form a composite portrait of an itinerant ‘self’. My aim is to determine a sense of the future by giving a voice to the unmentionable and form the unimaginable.26

Searching for a new self, re-moulded in relation to past events, Vári’s work constitutes a testimony of the kind that Shoshana Felman has described:

As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be construed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference.27

In contrast to Vári, Kendell Geers has been much less introspective and much more direct in his approach to force a political consciousness onto his viewers. Geers has been involved in the struggle against apartheid for a number of years – to the point of living in exile in New York in order to evade military conscription in the late eighties – and many of his works deal insistently with issues of guilt which he once described as the ‘single most pervasive and strongest cultural force [operating] within the “New South Africa”’.28

During the Johannesburg Biennial in 1997 he planned to occupy, ‘in the name of art’, an historic Fort outside Pretoria, which was built just before the outbreak of the South African war of 1899-1902, to protect the newly established and independent Boer or Afrikaner Republic of Transvaal from the invading British forces. As such, the fort has been a symbol of Afrikaner militarism and resistance and is held dear by right wing Afrikaners. Geers’ occupation of the fort never took place, but in the late afternoon of the proposed day, an aeroplane circled above Pretoria trailing a banner bearing the word ‘GUILTY’ in four commonly-spoken South African languages – Afrikaans, English, Xhosa and Zulu – thereby taking guilt outside the white and specifically Afrikaners context where it is most commonly located by outsiders.

For Geers, his artistic intervention succeeded because it confronted people with the unspeakable in South African life: historical guilt, new guilt, renewed guilt, and of course, denial. He says:

People have told me not to scratch where it doesn’t itch, but that’s my job; I set out to draw attention to the unspoken, and not only in relation to Afrikaner nationalism. I’ve made a site-specific work that explores the mechanisms and depths of guilt.29


28 Geers, quoted from his webpage at http://www.icon.co.za/~kendell/home.htm

29 Ibid.
Geers continues this theme of speaking the unspoken in his next work, made for the 1999 Vita Art Awards. Calling this video installation *White Man’s Burden*, it invokes the 1899 poem by Rudyard Kipling in which Kipling referred to the colonising project as ‘the white man’s burden’, a moral obligation to civilise, educate and democratis the rest of the world. In an ironic reversal, Geers seems to suggest that the historical consequences of those colonial practices have changed the white man’s burden to one of guilt. He projects a single frame from the 1992 film *The Bad Lieutenant*, set on a loop to show the same image of the lead actor, Harvey Keitel, in front of a church altar screaming phrases like ‘I am sorry... I am so sorry... I did so many bad things... please forgive me...I did not know what I was doing, help me, please help me’, the voice is distorted slightly and the sound is set at extremely high audio levels. Geers has called it a contaminatory piece, the audio levels making it completely inescapable. Complaints from some of the other nominees on the Vita Art show that Geers’ work interfered with and destroyed the effect of their own, merely worked to reinforce his point – it became a work that forced the viewer violently into confrontation with itself and with the issue of guilt.30

As always, it is difficult and perhaps even undesirable to speculate about the artist’s intention in this work. Given Geers’ predilection for strong conceptual pieces that always seek to evoke controversy by testing the boundaries of art – the semen stained centre-fold, the hidden bomb at an art exhibition, the brick through the windowpane – it is difficult to read this work as a sincere comment on guilt. Nor do I think the artist wants us to. While the artist absents himself from his work – unlike Vári’s introspective mode – this work interpellates a specific kind of viewer: that segment of the white population plagued by guilt. Through the formal aspects of this work – the repetitive looped structure and the hyperbolic sound levels – the work becomes a metaphor for the inertia of guilt. The inescapable, domineering nature of the work is an attempt to mobilise the viewer out of this condition into one of animation, and ultimately activism.

Here, I would argue, performative witnessing is enacted: the viewer is forced into realising what has been described, in a different context, as ‘the anxiety of social responsibility’ by authors Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell in reference to Hiroshima:

> [The survivors] had found their survivor meaning in an animating relationship to guilt, a capacity to confront the source of that guilt in a manner that could lead to positive action. In that way self-condemnation can be transformed into the anxiety of social responsibility.31

Minnette Vári and Kendell Geers both create, through their work, a context for the trauma that is South Africa’s history, by focusing on whiteness. Moreover, more than just a context for trauma, but, I would argue, built into the very structure of these works – in the endless repetitive looped videos – their works enact the repetitive nature of trauma. Shoshana Felman has written strikingly in reference to Paul Celan’s later poetry that ‘the breakage of the verse enacts the breakage of the world’32 and perhaps these works by Geers and Vári enact something of the trauma South Africans live with in the demise of apartheid.

Felman describes a case of vicarious traumatisation when her graduate class broke into crisis after viewing confessions of Holocaust survivors: she makes the point that real teaching – that is, performative teaching that leads to change – takes place only through crisis.33 And this, I want to argue, is a kind of crisis

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30 The audio levels have been the centre of much controversy in this show. Some of the other artists on the show complained that Geers’ soundtrack interfered with their own works and he was asked to turn down the volume on his work. Since Geers saw the soundtrack as central to his piece, he removed his work prematurely from the show.


32 Felman, Education and Crisis, op cit, p 32.

33 Felman, Education and Crisis, op cit, pp 13-60.
Kendell Geers, White Man's Burden, 1999, video installation, dimensions variable, courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

white people should be striving to attain, indeed, to desire, in South Africa: a crisis of traumatisation – sometimes vicarious, sometimes direct – which is one way to be white, right now, in South Africa.
PERFORMING WHITE MASCULINITIES

There are, of course, many other ways to be critically white. Performance artists Steven Cohen and Peet Pienaar both direct their work toward traditional notions of white masculinity - the one area perhaps challenged most by the transition to a democratic society in South Africa. Affirmative action, gender equity legislation, a reconfiguration of government and a rights-based constitution have meant an unsettling of received notions about white authority and dominance in the new South Africa.

Steven Cohen conceives of performance as a strategy for change, an artistic tool with which he aims to disrupt the comfort zones of the South African public. While foregrounding his queerness, he stages performances in excessive theatrical drag at various public events - at a rugby match, a right-wing political rally and a voting station in South Africa's second democratic elections in 1998. His costumes are always an eclectic mix of various incongruous elements ranging from tutus showing naked buttocks to his trademark twelve-inch high glittering platforms shoes, from gas masks and elephant horns trailing behind him, to elaborate and grotesque make-up. For him these evocative public interventions present a way to confront the prejudices of a straight society. Cohen says:

I’d like to be a catalyst that provokes transformation in people’s thinking; to dislodge them from their fixed state. But my work is also a celebration.36

That is, a celebration of his queerness - a strategy which seems to be informed by Judith Butler’s formulation of the political potential of queer performativity. In her essay ‘Gender is Burning’37 Butler shows how a term of abjection such as ‘queer’ is reworked into political affiliation by a group of Latino and African-American drag queens in Harlem, documented in the film Paris is Burning. Butler asks an important question, of relevance to Cohen’s work:

If one comes into discursive life through being called or hailed in injurious terms, how might one occupy that interpellation by which one is already occupied to direct the possibilities of resignification against the aims of violation?38

Pointing to the ambivalence inherent in this process of resignification, Butler warns that

One does not stand at an instrumental distance from the terms by which one experiences violation. Occupied by such terms and yet occupying oneself risks a complicity, a repetition, a relapse into injury, but it is also the occasion to work the mobilizing power of injury, of an interpellation one never chose.37

Bravely taking this risk of complicity, Cohen uses his performances and public interventions as powerful ways to confront homophobic prejudices. These include sometimes rather obscene interventions that attempt to challenge the general public’s prejudices about gays - like the time Cohen trailed a banner during a gay pride march reading ‘Give us your children, what we can’t fuck, we’ll eat’ deliberately playing with popular stereotypes of homosexual men as paedophiles; or, when he drinks from his own enema during a performance to signify that ‘queer self-acceptance is an acquired taste.’

This last act took place during a recent performance entitled, Limping into the African Renaissance (2000), during which Cohen danced to the South African
anthem *Nkosi Sikelel iAfrika*, hindered by a prosthetic leg on one foot and muzzled by a black cock. This dance is followed by a film segment in which Cohen, with prosthetic leg, limps along a rural public road in Swaziland unable to keep up with a 78-year-old black woman wearing a globe of the world on her head. Invoking South African president Thabo Mbeki's catchy notion of the emerging African Renaissance, Cohen uses the prosthetic leg to signify the position of an outsider in it, someone trying to keep up with everyone else but hindered by an added burden. As the programme notes explain: 'It is hard for a white, Jewish queer, limping into the African renaissance, to find self-acceptance through a national or religious identity.' Here Cohen comments on his struggle to find association and integration in the normative context of the new South Africa, being an outsider on three counts – he is white, Jewish and queer. Nevertheless, his public interventions reveal his continual negotiation of this position.

In contrast to Cohen, Peet Pienaar follows a less spectacular strategy in his questioning of white masculinities. He directs his attention to one area associated with white – and specifically Afrikaner – masculinity, namely that of rugby. Himself Afrikaans-speaking and a past rugby player, Pienaar chooses to foreground the social construction of this modality of masculinity not by performing drag, like Cohen, but in fact by performing the very masculinity he wants to question: he imitates mainstream masculinity. Performing male is always, as Judith Halberstam reminds us in an article on drag kings, 'performing less' since male is the less spectacular gender (as Butler has put it.) Pienaar literally 'performs less' by standing completely motionless – like a statue on a pedestal – in either rugby uniform with rugby ball in hand, or in business suit, or some other male uniform at various sites. The artifice of the identity he is imitating becomes so patently obvious in this staged setting that the 'naturalness' of normative masculinity is effectively questioned.

Standing in the Springbok uniform of the national rugby team in malls, in front of art galleries, or at big sports events, Pienaar's simulated statues are, like Cohen in provocative drag, open to ambivalent interpretation: It is not immediately clear whether his motionless appearances are a parody or a celebration of that which he imitates. As Judith Butler has warned, these processes of subversion could easily be read as appropriations as well. One could argue that it is precisely their white license and historical privilege that afford these artists their position of inquiry (and a certain deviance, in the case of Cohen). Read in this way, the political efficacy of their work is severely compromised. On the other hand, it is possible to see both Pienaar and Cohen's work as challenges to received notions about what it has always meant to be white and male in South Africa. And in this way, their work – like that of Geers, Vãri, and many others sharing similar concerns – presents ways of rethinking, reformulating and negotiating entry into a unified South African nation.

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