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An Interview with Amitav Ghosh

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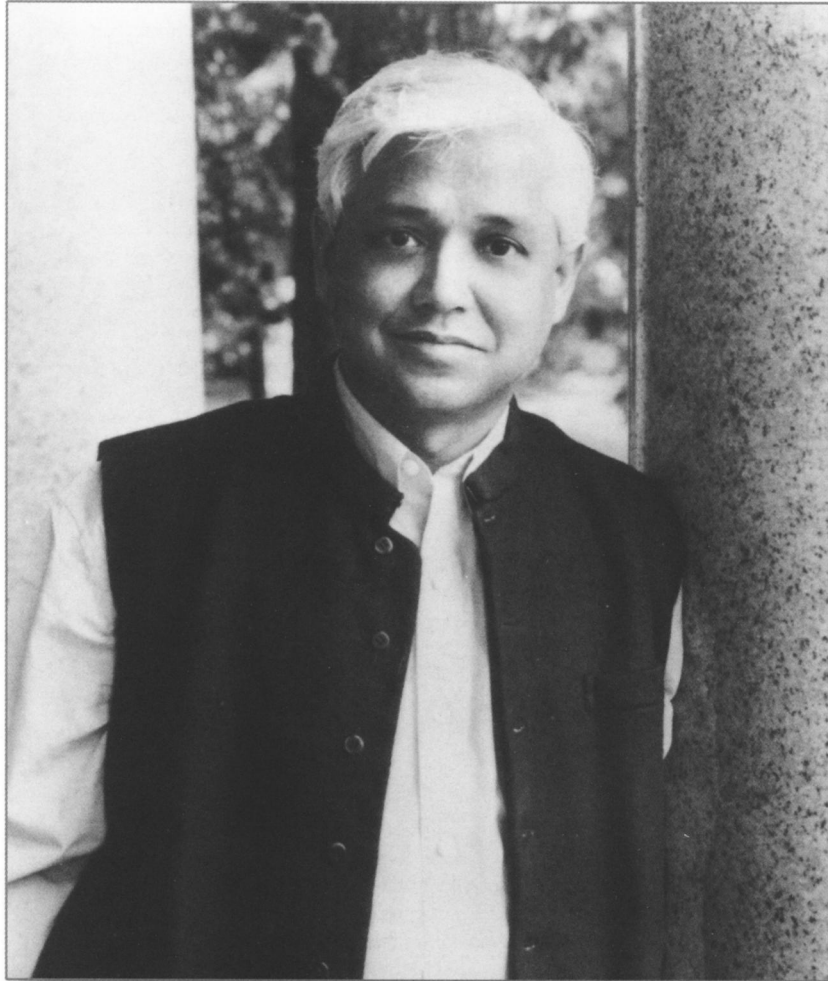


Photo: Jerry Bauer

# *An Interview with Amitav Ghosh*

FREDERICK LUIS ALDAMA

# Ghosh

IN 1986 AMITAV GHOSH published *Circle of Reason* and staked his claim as a major voice in postcolonial letters. Here he introduced his readers not just to the picaresque adventures of the potato-shape-headed protagonist, Alu, but to a hybrid storytelling style that mystifyingly wraps the time of history and space of everyday reality (Goa, Africa, Calcutta) in and around subjective experiences. Ghosh won France's prestigious Prix Medici Etranger for *Circle*, then penned the beautifully wrought, multiply plotted *Shadow Lines* (1988), in which he transformed gut feeling — he lived in Delhi at the time when Indira Gandhi was assassinated and Sikhs were slaughtered — into a story of a Bengali family ripped apart during the India/Pakistan partition. Here Ghosh writes outside the box, mixing a gritty realism with a surrealist flair to map the brutal consequences of cultural and political structures that restrict identity and the imagination. As he simultaneously moves his readers through twelfth-century Egyptian deserts and a contemporary Britain in *In an Antique Land* (1994), the double-helix narrative effect crisscrosses borders (genres and knowledge systems) to open up new cartographies of postcolonial identity and imaginings.

In 1996 Ghosh made several best-seller lists and picked up the Arthur C. Clarke Award for his Borgeesian science-fiction thriller, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, a novel that takes readers through labyrinths of time and place to unravel a mystery of purloined identity. In Ghosh's most ambitious novel to date, *The Glass Palace* (2000), he employs his trademark helical, quasi-historical/cultural voice to sink the reader deeply into the recreated cultural memory of twentieth-century Burma. Here a diverse cast of characters — royal, working-class, and bourgeois Indians, Bengalis, and Burmese — struggle to come to terms with new ways of living and identifying in a world violently shaken by grand historical drama like that of the British and Japanese invasions.

Ghosh's novels blur boundaries between genres — fiction and archival fieldwork — to complicate postcolonial identity. To this end, he also sidesteps inventing postcolonial characters cut from a victim-cookie-cutter mold, exploring the complex shading between the good and bad; he breathes life even into figures whom other writers might discard as abominable. In *The Glass Palace*, for example, he delves deeply into the complex psychology of those characters who, like their factual counterparts such as Ghosh's own father, fought for the British army to violently suppress their own and neighboring South Asian peoples. Ghosh's fiction mesh-

es time, space, and storytelling style to chart the vast spectrum of human experience and its various pathways of survival and self-preservation.

Today, Ghosh lives with his family in Brooklyn, where he writes essays for *New Republic*, *Kenyon Review*, and other journals, teaches creative writing at Queens College, and crafts his novels.

**Frederick Luis Aldama** I read your essay "March of the Novel Through History," where you relate your experience as a young boy surrounded by your grandfather's library of books. How do you recall your childhood and your early sense of becoming a writer?

**Amitav Ghosh** It was strange actually. You know, my parents moved around a lot. I mean our home was in Calcutta in some way, but we also moved around a lot. And I think in compensation what I did was I just read. I read a lot, and I lived very much within my own head and very much within my own imagination. You know, it's hard to account for one's childhood really. Being a child in India is something very special. And I'm sure this is true of many, many other places, but you're always surrounded by people. Every aspect of life spills over. I remember my childhood being mainly just being either in books or just watching a lot of grown-ups around me — you know, cousins and uncles and aunts. But then at the age of eleven I was sent away to a boarding school, and that was a completely different experience. It was in northern India. Of course, boarding school is just such a bizarre environment. And there you are, five hundred boys, and you're all stuck in this same school; if you think about it, it's really just the most bizarre form of education you can imagine, and yet it was a very good education, you know? Vikram Seth, the writer, was in the same school.

**FLA** These boarding schools can be strict. Did they allow for the creative possibility to grow?

**AG** I have to say they certainly did. They certainly did. I wrote and read a lot when I was in school. In boarding school, though, the jock was still the king. But there was a place for us who were readers and writers.

**FLA** You went on to study history at the University of Delhi. Was there a moment when you decided you were going to become a professional writer and not study history?

**AG** That was something I knew about myself fairly early in my life. But by the time I finished my B.A., when I was about eighteen or nineteen, I knew that I

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didn't want to go on in the academic world at all. I knew that I wanted to make my living by writing. In India in those days there was no such thing as a literary career as such, especially for someone who was writing in English as I was. So, I did what seemed to be the closest approximation of literature then. I joined a newspaper, where I worked while studying for an M.A. in anthropology. I was juggling those two things. Even at that age I knew that I wanted to earn my living by writing. I had no doubt about that. But exactly what kind of writing it would be, I didn't know.

**FLA** At a certain point you went to England?

**AG** I did unexpectedly well in my M.A., and I got a scholarship to study at Oxford and moved to England.

Suddenly there were lots of new opportunities. I was, what, twenty-one or twenty-two or something. I'd spent the last seven years living in Delhi, and it was just wonderful to be in a new place, and it was wonderfully liberating. I mean a new place, a new country, where you were just seeing different things. Oxford was intellectually, I must say, very sterile. But you met hundreds of interesting people, and so it was really delightful. It was really fun, though I have to say that I wasn't there that long. Altogether I spent three years at Oxford. And of that, for almost a year and a half I was away in Egypt and North Africa. So I wasn't there that much.

**FLA** What was the stream of events that led you to the United States?

**AG** It was chance in a way, you know? In 1988 I had an invitation to teach at the University of Virginia, so I went there and taught. While I was teaching there, I met my wife. Then I went back to India and we got married.

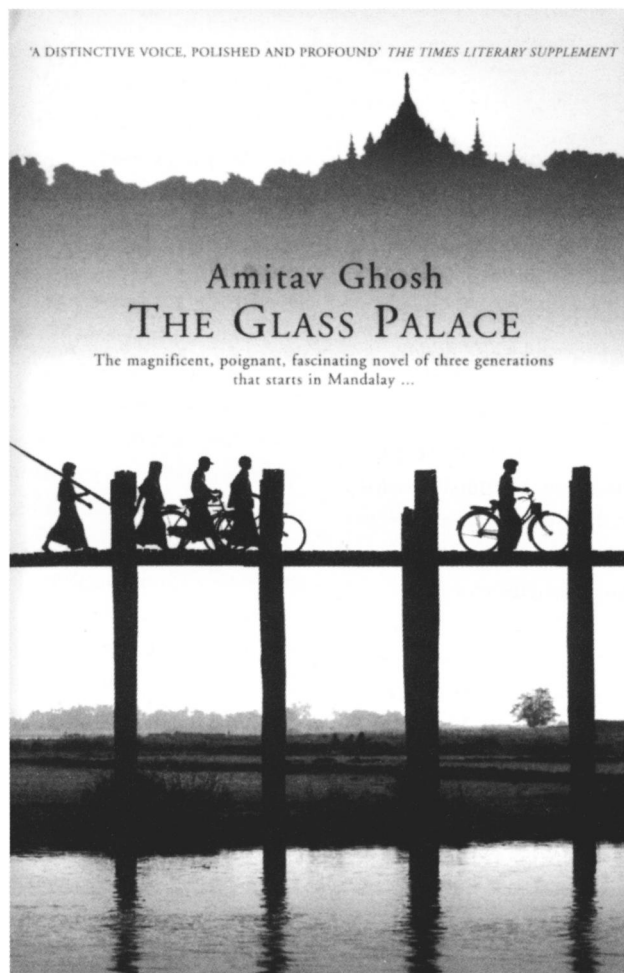
We lived in India until about 1993. And then she got a job in New York, so we moved to New York. She's a publisher, so she could only get work there. And I'm a writer, and I can work anywhere. So it was just chance really.

**FLA** In your latest novel, *The Glass Palace*, and also in your earlier novels you warp time and space; you also mix fiction and fact and write within a variety of creative generic modes.

**AG** Well, essentially, I haven't written in so many genres. I mean, I've written novels, and I've written nonfiction — my reportage. And frankly, I don't even think of them as different genres in some way. I know that the institutional structure of our world presses us to think of

fiction and nonfiction as being absolutely separate. And in some sense they are. I mean with nonfiction there is a domain of fact to which you have to refer and by which you are necessarily constrained. But I think the techniques one brings to bear upon nonfiction, certainly the techniques that I've brought to bear on nonfiction, essentially come from my fiction. You know what I mean? In the end it's about people's lives; it's about people's history; it's about people's destinies. When I write nonfiction, I'm really writing about characters and people, and when I'm writing fiction, I'm doing the same thing. So that shift isn't as great as it might appear to be.

At one point in my life I was doing anthropology. But I realized very early on that anthropology was not of interest to me in the end because it was about abstractions, the way you make people into abstractions and make them into, as it were, statistical irregularities. And in the end my real interest is in the predicament of



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individuals. And in this I don't think there is that much difference between fiction and nonfiction.

**FLA** In your first novels, *Circle of Reason* and then *Shadow Lines*, you use different storytelling voices — a magical then a gritty realism. Did your shift in storytelling voice make your initial push into the publishing world difficult?

**AG** No, not really. Actually, my first novel was sold when it was only half-written. The publisher really loved it and took to it; it really wasn't that difficult. I have to say that, contrary to what one may imagine, publishers want Indians — and I'm sure they want the South Africans and Latin Americans as well — to write in a kind of fantastical mode. I mean not that my book was very fantastical. It wasn't. I didn't even think of it as magical realist.

I really discovered that this was an issue when I wrote my second book [*Shadow Lines*], which was much more in a realist mode to deal with real events and real characters. *Shadow Lines* is very restrained in its tone, because it was a response to some very ghastly events that were happening in India at the time. Though it's regarded in India as a modern classic and is taught in schools, there was much more reluctance among Western publishers with this novel. That was really a lesson to me in a way, you know? And I suddenly realized that the ordinary view one has is that magical realism is something that comes out of the non-European world, if you like. There's a peculiar ambiguity there, and I think it's partly an ambiguity of commerce, because when there was the great Latin American boom, Western publishers did really well out of it, and they were seeking to reproduce that. I remember my French publisher said to me quite explicitly, "You know, we don't want any more *intériorisme*."

So when I talk about it, I think there is something deeply demeaning about that. I mean, the vision is that if you're from the Third World, you don't really have an interior state; we're all over the top, acting wildly and so on. And that's not the case. I mean, it's certainly not the case about myself, and it's not the case about my friends.

**FLA** By the time you wrote *In an Antique Land*, did you feel that you'd been able to open the publisher's eyes to a different way for an Indian to write?

**AG** Yes and no. Certainly within India *Shadow Lines* has had consistent success. It must be in its thirtieth printing; its sales have just continually risen, and it's had an

extraordinary sort of career. But it's out of print in England. It's out of print in America. So it's a curious thing, you know? I mean, I'm one of the very few Indian writers in English whose reputation and career has always been sustained by India. And I have a much, much bigger audience in India than I have anywhere else. I think it is true that the Western publisher looks to the non-Western writer to write in a way which to some degree they also want to be able to dictate the terms of. It's certainly true, I think, that they expect that the woman Asian author write somewhat in the mode of Isabel Allende, because that's something they know there's a market for.

**FLA** The playful tone and characterization in your first novel, *Circle of Reason*, struck me as strongly influenced by Salman Rushdie's writing. What do you make of your place within a South Asian diaspora canon that solidified after *Midnight's Children* won the Booker Prize in 1981?

**AG** You have to remember that when *Midnight's Children* appeared, it was a certain moment when really we could look away from traditional modes of narration and toward something else. It was a global moment when everybody was doing that. I think the important issue in the end must be that a writer has to be able to say what he wants to say in the way that he wants to say it. That really is the key issue. For me personally, however, I must say that García Márquez was much more important to my writing.

**FLA** In *The Glass Palace* you use the form of the nineteenth-century dynastic European novel to tell the story of Burma's history. Why the impulse to use this literary form to tell this story?

**AG** Some people have commented on that. To me, if anything, the book is written in a form that is mimicking a memoir. The book was started as a family memoir, a project in chronicling a family history. In a formal sense, that is where the integrity of the book hinges and where the long interpolations about history come in. It clearly assumes a narrative voice which is outside the text as such; it is told in a tone of recall because there are very self-conscious anachronisms. Inasmuch as there is a formal model for it, I think it's much more the contemporary memoir than the nineteenth-century novel.

**FLA** In *The Glass Palace* there is the activist character Uma. Can you speak a little bit about her?

**AG** You know, in every book you come across characters who just go in their own direction. In Uma's case it

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really was like that. I speak not only about Uma as a very particular person, but also to the general background of that sort of activist woman in India. There's a very strong genealogy and history, dating back to the late nineteenth century, in which Indian women played a very important part in the national movement. In particular, there was one woman called Madame Pikaigi Kama, who moved from India to Britain. She's mentioned several times in *The Glass Palace*. She became very involved in the nationalist cause and in opposing imperialism. So, there were these many models. I've really become completely fascinated by the part that Indian émigrés in the U.S. played at the turn of the century in generating a certain anti-imperialism and certain ways of resisting colonialism. Often their mentors in this were the Irish. It's an extraordinary fact, I think, that Indians marched in the St. Patrick's Day parade in New York, you know? So there was a general ethos of anticolonialism at that period in certain enclaves of American society. That is why Uma travels to New York to acquire her activist spirit.

**FLA** Interestingly, Uma ultimately reconciles with her opposite, the capitalist entrepreneur Rajkumar.

**AG** Yes. To me, Rajkumar is someone I deeply sympathize with in many ways. In the phenomenon of diaspora, in the phenomenon of colonialism, one might respond by saying, "OK, I'm going to resist collectively. I'm going to make common cause with other people from my nation," or whatever. But there's another response, which is to say, "Everyone's my enemy except my own family. I have to look out for myself. I have to look out for me and mine, and everything else around me is my enemy. And it doesn't matter what I do to them. I've got to get ahead, I've got to provide for me and mine." I think the latter is perhaps a more common response than the nationalist response, in a way. Essentially, what you do is you make your family your nation, your domain of autonomy. That's where you locate your individuality, your sovereignty. And I think in some ways Rajkumar is like that. He's completely ruthless. He's completely amoral in some ways outside his family. And yet he's a loving father as well.

**FLA** Rajkumar is a product of a new, turn-of-the-twentieth-century era. Although he's illiterate, he lives in a world that allows him to use his street smarts and capitalist spirit to lift himself up by his bootstraps.

**AG** That's right. You saw so many of those figures in that period, you know — people who pulled themselves

up by their bootstraps and who were very, very clever and who figured out how to handle the world. And they made their fortunes. Part of it was just mimicry, part of it was just getting along, part of it was sycophancy, part of it was this ruthlessness and cunning. I find those things weirdly interesting.

**FLA** Is there a sense of hopefulness when Uma and Rajkumar finally come together, a sense that their different ways of seeing the world blur and bleed into one another?

**AG** That's very well put. Yes, I hadn't thought of it like that. It's strange how a book works. You can't always account for it, you know? One night I woke up, and this final scene — this is when I was just halfway through the book — suddenly I saw this scene, and I knew the next morning I would have to get up and write it. And that's what I did. This was way before the book was finished, but I knew that this scene would be the end of the book.

**FLA** Is that how you write — spontaneously? Do you have a writing routine?

**AG** Yes. Yes, absolutely. I try to keep to some kind of schedule, and I try to work so that I know that I'll be at my desk for a certain number of hours a day. So, it's not common for me to interrupt my usual narrative flow by suddenly one day writing the end of the book. But I just saw the scene. It happens from time to time. You see something, and you know that this is it. And then you just have to get it done.

**FLA** So how do you manage to balance writing with teaching and having a family life?

**AG** Well, writing prose takes a long time and takes a lot of work. For this book I just literally switched off the phone. I turned off my e-mail. My children have always been very cooperative in my writing, you know? And my wife works, so I've in some sense always been there at home with them. But they've always been very understanding, and they know that I work in my room, and they can't disturb me during that time. But I find that that experience in itself enriches my work. To be able to see things through the eyes of children. I mean it bleeds into your own life, as it were. Once my work is over, then I have time for them.

**FLA** Clearly, travel and ethnographic research (of sorts) enrich your writing.

**AG** *The Glass Palace* was like an odyssey, you know? It took months and months of very organized travel, be-

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cause I realized at some point that my book was about much more than just individual characters. It was also about the history of the Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia, which is an epic history, a very extraordinary history. I realized that the only way I could learn about this was really by talking to people. So, I traveled to Malaysia, literally going from compound to compound, finding people who lived through this time, talking to them about the past. I traveled in Burma. I traveled in India. I traveled in Thailand. I traveled on the Burmese/Thai border. I spent time with the insurgents who are fighting the Burmese Army. I went into the jungle with them. I was shot at by the Burmese Army, which was quite an experience.

So it really was a very rewarding odyssey, because usually when a writer sits down to write a book, the material that goes into the book comes almost entirely out of his own head. But I'm the kind of writer, I think — and I find this increasingly to be the case — who is interested more and more by life and the world. And that's where my imagination engages with real life, with the lives people lead. So with this book especially, I was meeting the sorts of people I would never have met before: insurgents who have lived in the jungle for fifty years; plantation workers who served as slave labor for the Japanese and are nearing the end of their lives.

At some point in writing this book, I felt that I'd been entrusted with the story, a story that was beyond me and greater than me. I really felt that I was trying to represent an enormous multiplicity of experience and of history. For me, at some point it became very important that this book encapsulate in it the ways in which people cope with defeat, because this has really been our history for a long, long time: the absolute fact of defeat and the absolute fact of trying to articulate defeat to yourself and trying to build a culture around the centrality of defeat. This is not just a fact for us; it's a fact for the indigenous peoples in the Americas, in Australia, and wherever you go. But around defeat there's love, there's laughter, there's happiness, you know? There are children. There are relationships. There's betrayal. There's faithfulness. This is what life is, and I want my book to be true to that.

**FLA** In your novels generally, there's a strong connection between an individual's experience of defeat and happiness and his place within the national historical record. Is the family a mirror of nation?

**AG** I think one of the reasons for that kind of analysis is that it's become fashionable now, since Jameson and so

on, to talk about Third World novels as being essentially about nation and nation building. I think that's just a load of rubbish. Many of my books, if not all of my books, have really been centered on families. To me, the family is the central unit, because it's *not* about the nation, you know? Families can actually span nations. *The Glass Palace* actually ranges between what are now many different nations, so it's absolutely not about a nation or one nation or whatever. The fact that it has been structured around the family is absolutely essential to its narration. It is explicitly not about a nation, as it were. And I think it is not just me. I think the reason why you see so many Indian books essentially centered on the family is precisely because the nation is not, as it were, the central imaginative unit. So I think Jameson and Bhabha and all the others are completely wrong about this. That is a very lopsided and ultimately not an alert reading.

I think this way of writing about the contemporary world goes back to Proust, you know? With Proust, again, it's essentially the family that pulls in the threads of nationhood and politics and individuality. That's very much an available tradition within modernism. I mean, the family certainly is absolutely critical to my narration. And so that's why I said to you, this book has the form of the family memoir, because I do think that it gives you a narrative form that can transcend the national. It's evident that a book like this can't be written within the borders of the national. How can it be written within the borders? I see especially in American writing today the nation as being absolutely fundamental to the imaginative life of writers, you know? I mean, half the books you open that are by American writers are American — an American romance, or *American Beauty* — or it's about a generation, which is really just a subset of "nation," because that generation is imagined nationally. But it's not at all the case with writers from my part of the world.

**FLA** You portray characters who struggle with their identity, between being Indian nationals and as Indians serving foreign rulers. Can you speak to such characters like Arjun in *The Glass Palace*? Is there an element of autobiography here?

**AG** My father was in the British-Indian Army, and he stayed loyal to the British-Indian Army until the end. Arjun, as you know, does not. In a way, Arjun recognizes that he doesn't believe in the collective promise. For him, it's his personal sense of betrayal that makes him do what he does. You see, what he discovers in the course of this narrative is that he had imagined himself

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to be something that he was not. He had seen himself in a certain way, and then he comes to realize that what he saw himself as was a lie. It's not nationalism for him.

For his friend Hardayal, it is nationalism. It is the promise of truth and duty and freedom, et cetera. Arjun explicitly does not believe in any of this. For him, it's entirely the idea that he has been formed and shaped by the manipulative hand in such a way that he himself has ceased to understand who he is or what he is. It's the unbearable pain of this that makes him do what he does.

**FLA** In your novels generally, your plots seem to move in a regressive-progressive manner. What's your sense of the temporal motion at work in your novels?

**AG** Time interests me very much. I think it's the central element in narrative. All narratives are really the unfolding of events in time. Yet within that broad parameter there are so many things you can do with it. I think my interest in time really comes from two sources. One was Ford Madox Ford's book *The Good Soldier*, which was a very powerful early influence. The other was Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, which had a powerful influence on my thinking about narrative. In each of my books you'll see that time as a problem is approached very differently. In *Circle of Reason* each part follows a

different ordering of time. *Shadow Lines* deals with time in a completely different way. My idea was to collapse space in the way that Ford Madox Ford collapses time. In *In an Antique Land* the structure is really that of a double helix, where you have a moment in the twelfth century and a moment in the twentieth century being pulled together solely by a single narrative that has no interactions. This book is very straightforwardly linear, just as I wanted to write it. With *The Glass Palace* I really felt that the story is so important and so powerful that it's one of those instances where, as John Gardner says, "the writer has to get out of the way." That's his main job, almost. **WLT**

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