Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars
A Film by Zach Niles and Banker White
San Francisco, April 2007

Dear Colleague,

Africa remains a mysterious and misunderstood place to many Americans, as it was for both of us before we visited the continent for the first time in 1993 as part of a study abroad program through Middlebury College, where we met. It is a cradle of civilization and is home to incredible biodiversity, yet it lives with the ghost of slavery and is suffering from modern-day disease, famine and civil war.

We each had our own trepidations as we approached our trips, which were re-enforced by media coverage that seems to tell only horror stories from that part of the world. But our fears were misplaced and we each came back with only positive experiences. We had made good friends, learned a lot about ourselves and had fallen in love with the music of the countries we visited.

Returning home, however, we were faced only with questions about the perceived dangers and poverty that we had encountered. There was a general distrust of anything positive we would say. In many ways, this was the seed, planted more than a decade ago, that brought us to make *Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars*.

We are both musicians and knew from our earliest discussions that music would be our entry point to tell a story that illuminated a more human understanding of the place and people. Music is a universal language that speaks in emotion; it transcends culture, language and almost any other gulf that we create and define ourselves by. We knew we could not look away from the modern tragedies plaguing the continent, so instead we moved toward the idea of focusing on musicians and giving voice to individuals who had been affected. The refugee emergency in West Africa, fueled by prolonged wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia, was compelling because of the incredible size and cross section of the population that was involved.

In the summer of 2002, after spending a month playing music in refugee camps in Guinea, we met the Refugee All Stars band as they rehearsed in a mud hut in Sembakounya Refugee Camp, set deep in the Guinean countryside. During our travels we had met many talented musicians with compelling stories, but we felt a special connection to the band from our first meeting and jam session. They were diverse in age and character, from the roguish rhythm guitar player in his 50s to the orphaned teenage rapper, but they had a common bond born through a collective history of war, loss and displacement. Their love and support for one another made them a family.
From our very first interviews we knew their story would be a celebration not only of what is beautiful about Africa, but also what is beautiful about the human spirit: the strength to overcome adversity, the ability to forgive – and when you’ve found hope, the desire to share it with others.

This is our first film, and from the beginning, we would joke that Reuben (the band’s leader) knew what we were doing there more than we did. He often said, half seriously, that the band had been writing and practicing music just waiting for us to arrive. They immediately recognized this film as an opportunity for their stories and music to be heard abroad, and this project quickly turned into what could best be described as a creative collaboration between the production team and the band.

We became very good friends with the Refugee All Stars, a relationship that continues to this day. We hope that this closeness translates into a film that helps to create an emotional connection between the viewer and these musicians, whose circumstance and culture might easily let them be dismissed as “different” from us.

We hope that the experience of Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars will resonate for the viewer far beyond the scope of one band, one country or one war. Around the world, senseless conflicts continue to rip apart the lives of innocent civilians, but it can be difficult to feel real compassion when tragedy is seen from a distance. We believe that the story of the Refugee All Stars closes that distance and helps us look past our differences and embrace instead our common humanity. The idea that one life is worth less than another is at the root of many of the world’s woes. This film is an attempt to dispel, in our own way, this dangerous notion.

We are deeply grateful to all the members of the band and to their families for being so open with us and for having the courage to share some of the painful details of their lives with us. The band has told us that it has been empowering to present themselves in the way that they wish to be seen – not as helpless victims but as talented, loving and ambitious people who refuse to accept the injustices around them. We have come to see them as speaking not only for Sierra Leone’s refugees, but for persecuted, underprivileged and forgotten people worldwide.

We feel very lucky to have met the Refugee All Stars and cherish all that they have taught us. We are better people for having met them and we look forward to sharing their story with the world.

Zach Niles and Banker White
Filmmakers, Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars
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In contrast to the images of refugees as tragic icons of a war-torn world, *Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars*, about a reggae-inflected band born in the camps of West Africa, represents a real-life story of survival and hope. The six-member Refugee All Stars came together in Guinea after a decade of civil war (1991–2002) forced them from their native Sierra Leone. Traumatized by physical injuries and the brutal loss of family and community, they fight back with the only means they have — music.

The result, as shown in *Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars*, a feature-length (80-minute) documentary, is a tableau of tragedy transformed by the band’s inspiring determination to sing and be heard. As an outreach tool, the film can help audiences broach issues including the impact of war and human resilience in the face of suffering, the power of music, the meaning of home and the meaning of family.
Sierra Leone

Created in the late 18th century by freed slaves from the British colonies in the West Indies, Sierra Leone gained independence in 1961. The West African nation, bordered by Liberia and Guinea, has the potential to generate wealth from the country’s diamond mines, but at this point, two-thirds of the population depends on subsistence farming for income, and the diamond profits have been used to fund armed conflict. The majority of Sierra Leoneans are Muslim, 10 percent are Christian, and a third are affiliated with indigenous, tribal religions.

Sources:

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The War

Sierra Leone’s civil war (1991–2002) began as a conflict between the ruling class, centered in Freetown, and rebel groups recruited from the nation’s persistently poor rural population. What started as an insurrection against a corrupt one-party government quickly degenerated into a movement dominated by young, impoverished men seeking opportunities to enrich themselves.

The Revolutionary United Front (RUF), led by former army officer Foday Sankoh and backed by Liberia’s controversial leader Charles Taylor, stood out from other rebel groups for its policy of deliberately targeting civilians. Many of the atrocities were carried out by child soldiers who had been forcibly recruited by the RUF.

In May 1997, the RUF, in conjunction with Johnny Paul Koroma’s Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), successfully overthrew then-President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah. A West African intervention force responded by entering Sierra Leone in February 1998, expelling Koroma’s AFRC, arresting Foday Sankoh and reinstating Kabbah. In January of the following year, the RUF and AFRC retaliated with an exceptionally brutal attack.

In July 1999, a peace pact was signed by the reinstated government of President Kabbah and the RUF, but an estimated 15,000 RUF gunmen refused to disarm and retained control of territory that included wealthy diamond areas. The UN sent a peacekeeping force, and in January 2002, the war was officially declared over.

The disarmament and rehabilitation of 70,000 combatants continued over the next two years. With pressure from the civilian population, the UN agreed to set up a war crimes court, and trials began in June 2004. Liberian president Charles Taylor, under international scrutiny for his role in the war in Sierra Leone, fled into exile in Nigeria in 2003, but was arrested in 2006 and brought to Sierra Leone for trial. Shortly thereafter, security concerns necessitated the relocation of Taylor’s trial to the Hague. While his trial was set to begin in April 2007, it has been rescheduled due to a request by the defense for additional time for preparation. Now the trial is scheduled for June 4th, 2007, during which opening statements by the prosecution will occur, followed by an 18-day adjournment. The former Liberian president is indicted on 11 counts of various human rights violations including mass murder, rape and the use of child soldiers.

In the May 2002 national elections, Kabbah’s Sierra Leonean People’s Party won a majority in parliament. The last UN peacekeepers withdrew from Sierra Leone at the end of 2005, although civilian UN officials remain to assist with the
transition toward stability. According to an announcement made by President Kabbah in December 2006, 90 percent of the nation’s debt will be forgiven by international creditors as Sierra Leone attempts to rebuild an economy and infrastructure left in ruins by the war.

Kabbah is required by law to step down at the end of his five-year term; elections are scheduled for July 28th, 2007, a decision that was made early on to express the dedication of the Kabbah administration to good governance. Observers expect the elections of 2007 to serve as a test of the nation’s political stability and the success of international intervention.

Sources:


Special Court for Sierra Leone. www.sc-sl.org/


Refugees

Sierra Leone’s civil war displaced more than 2 million people, about a third of the population. At least 50,000 people died in the fighting and an estimated 100,000 were mutilated.

Hundreds of thousands of civilians from Sierra Leone found refuge in Guinea, primarily in camps run by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), including Dakaqbe, Farmoria, Kalia, Sembakounya and Boreah. With a tentative peace holding in Sierra Leone, and refugees coming to Guinea from conflicts elsewhere in Western Africa, the UNHCR has been actively repatriating Sierra Leoneans from the camps.

By mid-2004 UNHCR reported that fewer than 2,000 Sierra Leonean refugees remained in Guinea. Those who chose to stay will be integrated into Guinean society and will no longer receive UNHCR aid.

In 2000, Sierra Leone’s parliament officially established an independent Truth and Reconciliation Commission. With a mandate to create an impartial record of abuses and violations of human rights, it has conducted public hearings and taken testimony from more than 1,500 victims.

The chair of the commission, Bishop Joseph Christian Humper, described the work of his organization as “highly significant for the healing of a traumatized nation.” He said “the Report is all-inclusive in that it does not only expose perpetrators and identify victims but also serves as a mirror through which all Sierra Leoneans can and, indeed, are encouraged to examine their own roles in the conflict.” See the Resources section of this guide for a link to the full report.

Sources:


Sierra Leone. UNHCR Country Information. UNHCR. www.unhcr.org/country/sle.html
Reuben Koroma
*bandleader, songwriter, lead vocals, drums*
Before escaping to Guinea, Reuben, who is now in his mid-40s, lived near Sierra Leone’s capital, Freetown. He played with various bands (the Sierra Wailers, the Messiahs) in resort towns and at the Lungi International Airport, where he met his wife, Grace. A self-styled “Rasta man,” he was briefly detained by government forces as a suspected rebel because of his dreadlocked hair (which he has since cut). Upon his release, he and Grace fled the country, narrowly escaping a rebel attack. His original songs range in style from Goombay, Sierra Leone’s popular traditional music, to reggae.

Francis John Langba (Franco)
*rhythm guitar, harmony vocals, kongroma*
Franco is the oldest member of the Refugee All Stars. Although he was a nationally ranked boxer in his youth, Franco soon realized that music was his calling and subsequently dedicated himself to playing guitar and kongroma, a traditional Sierra Leonean instrument. He played guitar for several performing bands around Freetown, including the Sierra Wailers. One night after a performance, he was returning home to his wife and children when a rebel attack in the area blocked his passage and forced him to flee to the Guinean border.

Abdul Rahim Kamara (Arahim)
*harmony vocals, harmonica*
Arahim lived in Sembakounya Refugee Camp with his wife and two sons, working as a teacher in the camp’s school. Arahim’s father was a successful farmer who was killed by looting rebels during the war. These same rebels amputated Arahim’s arm at the shoulder and left him for dead. Miraculously, he survived and fled to Guinea. Arahim is a religious man who often will speak in Biblical parables to convey an idea or make a point. Ironically, while Arahim’s religious fervor is rooted in a Muslim upbringing, the Old Testament has become his scripture because he has never had an English version of the Koran.
Background Information

The Band

Mohammed Bangura
harmony vocals, percussion, harmonica

Once a taxi driver outside of Freetown, Mohammed’s life was forever changed when he and his family were captured during a brutal rebel attack and he was forced to witness the murder of his parents, his wife and his infant child. He barely escaped with his own life after he was tortured and his hand was amputated. Now in his thirties, Mohammed is one of the band’s two repositories of traditional Sierra Leonean music. (Franco is the other.)

Alhadji Jeffrey Camara (Black Nature)
vocals

Only 15 years old when the film was made, Alhadji, known more commonly by his nom de rap, Black Nature, is the youngest member of the Refugee All Stars. Orphaned by the war, Black Nature fled to Guinea only to be arrested and tortured by local police who accused him of being a rebel fighter. Now living with elderly friends of his family whom he refers to as his grandparents, Black Nature has become the adopted son of the Refugee All Stars.

Efua Grace Ampomah
harmony vocals

Born in Ghana, Grace met Reuben while he was playing music at the international airport in Sierra Leone. Often referred to as “Mama Grace” or “Sister Grace,” she serves as surrogate mother of the band.
Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. If the mood seems tense, you may want to pose a general question and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion.

Unless you think participants are so uncomfortable that they can’t engage until they have had a break, don’t encourage people to leave the room between the film and the discussion. If you save your break for an appropriate moment during the discussion, you won’t lose the feeling of the film as you begin your dialogue.

One way to get a discussion going is to pose a general question such as

- If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, who would you ask and what would you ask them?
- What insights or inspiration did you gain from this film? What did you learn about the film’s subjects and/or about yourself?
- Did anything in this film surprise you? If so, what? Why was it surprising?
War

- The opening song of the film includes the lyrics: “When two elephants are fighting, the grass they will suffer.” What does this lyric say about the impact of war?
- In one of his raps, Black Nature says, “Because things that were hidden, the war has revealed.” What do you think he meant?
- Reuben: “War is complete separation, complete destruction, complete waste of resources. Is that a revolution?” Is war a valid way to have a revolution? Reuben says they need a “positive revolution.” What would a positive revolution look like?
- Black Nature says “I really don’t understand our African people. They are very rough. They want to destroy some children’s lives.” How would you explain the events in Sierra Leone to him?
- Reuben asks his audience, “If you stay in a refugee camp for five years, what do you think you will lose?” For those who have been in the camps for five or ten years (or for children, their entire lives), what do you think they have lost? What might people outside the camps, country or region do to help them regain the things they have lost?
- Prior to viewing the film, what did you know about the conflict in Sierra Leone? What were the sources of your information and how accurate were they? How would you characterize press coverage of conflicts in Sierra Leone or Africa in general? What is the impact of press coverage on the lives of people caught up in those conflicts?

Healing

- How does music help both band and audience members cope and heal?
- Once active conflict ended in Sierra Leone, the UNHCR needed to free up space in the refugee camps and devote resources elsewhere, so they encouraged everyone to return home. But in the film Mohamed is afraid to return to Sierra Leone: “When I walk around Sierra Leone I am going to see the one who did this to me. I’m not going to feel fine. I don’t think I will go to Sierra Leone again.” If you were Mohamed’s friend, what would you want the UNHCR (or other agencies or governments) to do for him? Should he be required to return home in exchange for aid? Why or why not? Should Guinea be required to give people like Mohamed permanent residency or citizenship? Why or why not?
- What relationships have the band members (and other refugees) lost? What relationships have they gained? How have those relationships helped them cope?
- One refugee describes his status by saying, “You don’t have no power even to be somebody that is to be respected in the community.” What might be done in refugee camps to restore or create opportunities to be respected?
- How does it feel to hear the stories of the band members and serve as a witness to their experience? What is the power of telling stories of atrocities? What is the impact of preserving memory of the atrocities or of forgetting or hiding them?
- Returning home to Magazine Wharf, a poor neighborhood in Freetown, Reuben observes, “No one would expect that a prominent person would come from this place.” How does poverty create low expectations? What can be done to increase the likelihood that every poor person has a reasonable chance to fulfill their potential?
- How do the people you meet in this film challenge or reinforce your image of Africa or Africans? Where do your ideas come from and what might you do to ensure that people in your community have accurate sources of information?
• Purchase a copy of the band’s CD, “Living Like a Refugee” (available at www.refugeeallstars.org) and/or hold a fundraiser for an organization helping refugees in Western Africa (for example, ninemillion.org, the International Rescue Committee or Save the Children).

• Investigate the relationship of so-called “blood diamonds” to the conflict in Sierra Leone. Publicize your findings and check to ensure that jewelry retailers in your community do not sell “conflict diamonds.” Be an educated consumer: from diamonds to coffee to clothing, be aware of where the products you are purchasing come from. Most products employing fair trade practices will have a fair trade certified label on the box.

• Investigate the roots of conflicts in Sierra Leone (or other African nations). Include the historic impact of European colonialism, current U.S. foreign policy and the practices of multinational corporations. Discuss the circumstances that lead to civil war: poverty, hunger, lack of opportunity. Post the results of your investigation on relevant Web sites and share them with others in your community.

• Encourage students to discuss how music or art has helped them in their life. Ask students to create a piece of art or music that speaks to a personal experience.

• Help draw attention to ongoing tragedies in places like Darfur or Congo. Highlight the needs of refugees affected by those conflicts.

• Resettlement agencies, case workers, social workers and other volunteers provide a wide range of services for newcomers, including instruction on the basics of daily living and help locating housing, applying for aid, using public transportation, finding clothing and furniture, and much, much more. Hold a fundraiser for the institutions in your community that supply transition assistance to new immigrants. Check out the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants’ Web site (www.refugees.org/) for a list of resettlement agencies working in the U.S.

• Learn about the needs of the residents of a refugee camp and find a way to help. Check out the Resources section of this guide to find organizations that are working on these issues.
FILM-RELATED WEB SITES

Original Online Content on P.O.V. Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)

P.O.V.’s Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars Web site
www.pbs.org/pov/sierraleone

The Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars companion Web site offers a streaming video trailer of the film, an interview with filmmakers Zach Niles and Banker White (video, podcast and text); a list of related Web sites, organizations and books; a downloadable discussion guide and classroom activity; and the following special features:

ADDITIONAL SCENES AND FILM UPDATE

Watch an exclusive 18-minute video that picks up where the film left off. Follow the band back home to Sierra Leone and on tour with the filmmakers. Find out what happens to Reuben, Grace, Frank, Mohammed, Black Nature and the rest of the band when their record is released and they perform in the United States! Plus, get dates for the band’s current tour going on this summer in the U.S.

MAKE YOUR OWN MUSIC VIDEO

Reuben, Grace and the rest of Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars want you to create a music video for them. Use audio and video clips contributed by the filmmakers and the band available on the Eyespot Web site during June and July to mix your masterpiece. The band will choose their favorite videos, which will be featured on the P.O.V. Web site in August. Winners will receive a copy of the band’s first album, “Living Like a Refugee,” on CD and a Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars t-shirt.

IN SEARCH OF THE DURABLE SOLUTION

Read about the complex issues surrounding the rescue, protection, and resettlement of refugees in Africa and the United States, in five interviews with people working in the field.

What’s Your P.O.V.?

P.O.V.’s online Talking Back Tapestry is a colorful, interactive representation of your feelings about Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars. Listen to other P.O.V. viewers talk about the film and add your thoughts by calling 1-800-688-4768. www.pbs.org/pov/talkingback.html

Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars

Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars Web site
www.RefugeeAllStars.org

The filmmakers’ Web site includes downloadable versions of the band’s music (available for purchase), as well as background information on the conflict in Sierra Leone and the making of the film.

Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars MySpace Page
www.myspace.com/strasfilm

You can also find information about the band on their MySpace page:
www.myspace.com/therefugeeallstars

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Sierra Leone

SIERRA LEONE WEB
www.sierra-leone.org/
A convenient gateway to a broad range of information about Sierra Leone.

THE REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE: STATE HOUSE ONLINE
www.statehouse-sl.org/
The Web site of the Office of the President of Sierra Leone offers official government perspectives on events in Sierra Leone, as well as quick links to the country’s Constitution, descriptions of government structures, and President Kabbah’s speeches and press releases.

NATIONAL ORGANIZATION OF SIERRA LEONEANS IN NORTH AMERICA
www.noslina.org/index.php
The Web site of the National Organization of Sierra Leoneans in North America provides a way for Sierra Leoneans in the U.S. to connect with and help those remaining in Sierra Leone.

SIERRA LEONE’S CAMPAIGN FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE
www.slcgg.org
Sierra Leone’s Campaign for Good Governance is an independent watchdog group that provides up-to-date news reports on killings and progress towards human rights. The Web site also includes a set of links to related human rights services and organizations.

SIERRA LEONE: TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION REPORT
www.trc.sierraleone.org/drwebsite/publish/index.shtml
This Web site contains the official report of Sierra Leone’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

THE SPECIAL COURT FOR SIERRA LEONE
www.sc-sl.org/
The Web site of the Special Court for Sierra Leone reports on who has been charged with atrocities as well as the nature of the specific charges and the status of specific court cases.

UNUNITED NATIONS MISSION IN SIERRA LEONE
This Web site provides an account of the Sierra Leonean peace process from the perspective of the United Nations.

CRY FREETOWN
www.cryfreetown.org
The Web site of a film documenting the 1999 rebel attack in Freetown includes an excellent set of links representing diverse groups, as well as general background on the conflict, including information on the diamond trade.

AFROPOP WORLDWIDE
The Web site for this public-radio series introduces people to a wide range of world music and includes an interview with Reuben Koroma and a review of the band’s CD.

ALLAFRICA.COM
www.allafrica.com
For current news stories on events in Sierra Leone and other African nations.

FOR GENERAL INFORMATION ON SIERRA LEONE, CHECK ANY OF THESE SITES:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country_profiles/1061561.stm
www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5475.htm
Human Rights

**NINEMILLION.ORG**
http://ninemillion.org/

There are roughly nine million refugee children living in the world today. Ninemillion.org is a UNHCR (The UN Refugee Agency) led campaign to raise awareness and funds for education and sport programs for refugee youth, many of whom are forced to spend years of their young lives away from home with little hope of returning. What happens to them now, during their years as refugees, is up to all of us.

**UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES**
www.unhcr.org

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees coordinates international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide. For the status of specific projects related to this film, search for “Guinea” and “Sierra Leone.”

**LE CENTRE CANADIEN D’ETUDE ET DE COOPÉRATION INTERNATIONALE (CECI)**
www.ceci.ca/

The Canadian Center for International Study and Cooperation is a Canadian non-governmental organization that helps fight poverty throughout the world. CECI donated instruments to the Refugee All-Stars.

**INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE**
www.theirc.org

The International Rescue Committee helps people fleeing persecution and war. Its Web site includes a reference library with documents related to refugee issues.

**WITNESS**
www.witness.org

Witness uses video and online technologies to publicize human rights violations. The site includes references to several important pieces related to Sierra Leone (search for “Sierra Leone” on the site’s home page).

**HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH**
www.hrw.org

Human Rights Watch is a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting human rights around the globe. Its Web site includes annual assessments of “hotspots,” including a range of reports on Sierra Leone.

**SAVE THE CHILDREN**
www.savethechildren.org/

Save the Children works in more than 50 countries, including the United States, and serves more than 37 million children and 24 million adults working to save and improve children’s lives, including parents, community members, local organizations and government agencies. Through their site you can sponsor a child, learn how to get your own child involved, and view an interactive map displaying their programs around the world.

**THE ISHMAEL BEAH FOUNDATION**
www.beahfound.org/

The Ishmael Beah Foundation is a private, independent institution dedicated to helping former child soldiers reintegrate into society and improve their lives. The Foundation aims at creating and financing educational and vocational opportunities for children and youth who have been affected by war, so that they can be empowered to choose a life free of conflict. The Foundation will focus its efforts in closely monitoring children during and after the rehabilitation phase to prevent them from re-entering the cycle of conflict and violence.
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How to Buy the Film

To order Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars, go to www.refugeeallstars.org

P.O.V. 20

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P.O.V. Interactive

www.pbs.org/pov

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American Documentary, Inc.

www.americandocumentary.org

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is a limited-edition DVD collection produced in partnership with Docurama. The collection contains 15 titles reflecting the range and diversity of P.O.V. films, including the series’ inaugural broadcast, American Tongues, by Louis Alvarez and Andrew Kolker.

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