

# CARIBBEAN SNOW AND ICE

## Exploring Literary Tropical-Arctic Island Relations

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**ABSTRACT:** This article discusses a rather unexpected connection between ice and islands, namely the occurrence of snow, ice, and coldness in Caribbean literature. The first part examines decolonising literary answers to the colonial tradition of snow and ice in Caribbean schooling: Kamau Brathwaite's study *History of the Voice* and Derek Walcott's Nobel Prize lecture *The Antilles, Fragments of Epic Memory* prepare for the different positions taken in V.S. Naipaul's novel *The Mimic Men*, Sam Selvon's short story 'The leaf in the wind', and Aimé Césaire's long prose poem *Cahier du retour au pays natal* as well as Stewart Brown's poem 'Whales'. The second part focuses on snow, ice, and coldness as reflections of the diaspora experience. It does so via close readings of 'M'a kai den sneu' by Curaçaoan poet Frank Martinus Arion, as well as *L'énigme du retour* by Haitian-Canadian novelist Dany Laferrière. The third part turns to the role of snow, ice, and coldness in furthering global relations and metafictional passages via a discussion of Kamau Brathwaite's poem 'Guanahani', Édouard Glissant's last novel *Ormerod*, and Derek Walcott's short essay 'Isla Incognita,' as well as his poem '18' from *The Prodigal*. Ultimately, the article argues that the poietic creation of literary spaces and places that include snow, ice, and coldness within Caribbean literature can serve emancipatory and globalising purposes.

**KEYWORDS:** poetics of snow and ice; island studies; tropical island; geopoetics; nissopoiesis; decolonial and postcolonial literature

### Introduction: From Palm-Fringed Beaches to Icy Plains

Tropical islands, particularly the "familiar sun-sea-and-sand imagery" used in Caribbean tourism promotion, may seem like an endlessly repeated cliché that hardly requires any further analysis" (Sheller, 2003: 36) and they are certainly devoid of snow and ice. Indeed, the tropical island icon – a small bulge of white sand with a palm tree on top of it, surrounded by a peaceful azure sea, and a clear sky – appears to be diametrically opposed to the island covered with snow. This is particularly so if that island loses its distinct spatiality or "its distinct identity" in frozen-over-waters, thus becoming "part of a wider landscape of snow and ice" (Riquet, 2016: 157). Nonetheless, snow, ice, and coldness are not foreign to Caribbean literature. Rather, a variety of uses of snow are discernible: the pale whiteness and damaging coldness of snow and ice occur as metaphors and comparisons, as intertextual and metafictional references. However, as they also exist

physically within fictional worlds, they serve as *geopoetic*<sup>1</sup> elements important for the construction of the respective fictional world with its islands.

Indeed, the Caribbean texts discussed in the following pages all share this one quality: they establish connections between snow and ice and the Caribbean archipelago. While this study takes a close look at the impact the presence of snow and ice has on the texts' acts of *nissopoiesis* and *nissopoietic* strategies, the processes of literary creation (ποίησις: *poiésis*) of an island (νῆσος: *nísos*) in the act of exposition,<sup>2</sup> its examples are ordered around three clusters: firstly snow as a colonial element, secondly snow as an evidence of exile or migration, and thirdly snow as an element of global relations.

## 1. Snow from the Colonial Canon: Deepest Feelings for the Well-known Unknown

From a historical point of view, the presence of snow and ice in the literary sphere of the tropics begins during the times of conquest and colonisation, when metaphors from the traditions and fashions dominant in the literary field of the respective colonial power were exploited by colonial writers, despite the radically different climate they experienced. Furthermore, with the advent of colonial schooling, pupils in the tropical colonies were confronted with a canon full of literary sceneries and metaphors based on flora, fauna, and meteorological aspects unavailable in the climate that surround(ed) them, snow and ice among them. These “normative images of Englishness” (Hegglund, 2012: 174) are critically exposed by Kamau Brathwaite in *History of the Voice*, where he writes:

*And in terms of what we write, our perceptual models, we are more conscious (in terms of sensibility) of the falling of snow... than the force of the hurricanes which take place every year. In other words, we haven't got the syllables, the syllabic intelligence, to describe the hurricane, which is our own experience, whereas we can describe the imported alien experience of the snowfall... This is why there were (are?) Caribbean children who, instead of writing in their 'creole' essays 'the snow was falling on the playing fields of Shropshire'... write: 'the snow was falling on the canefields': trying to have both cultures at the same time. (1984: 9)*

James S. Duncan and David Lambert argue that Brathwaite “chooses the idiom of an idealised but misplaced landscape of home to characterize and criticize the persistence of colonial mimicry in the postcolonial Caribbean – this is the ‘snow was falling in the cane fields’ way-of-thinking that he sees as typical of the educated West Indian imagination” (2004: 392). Judith L. Raitskin, who uses Brathwaite's example in the title of her investigation *Snow on the Cane Fields: Women's Writing and Creole Subjectivity* (1996), further shows how Antoinette in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) “cannot reconcile her hatred of England... with the Creole cultural love of England”, particularly “the mythical England of swans, roses, and snow” (1996: 149-150). Indeed, Brathwaite criticises

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<sup>1</sup> See Graziadei (2011) for a discussion of different uses of *geopoetics* and *geopoetics of the island* in particular.

<sup>2</sup> See Graziadei (2016) for the specific attention towards *nissopoiesis* that I developed by combining *geopoetics*' insights with those of island studies' *nissology* and postcolonial *nesology*. For a more general discussion of how islands emerge from texts see the two-part essay by the Island Poetics Research Group (cf Graziadei et al: 2017a; Graziadei et al: 2017b).

(post-)colonial literature curricula for diminishing the perceptual sensibility to the local surroundings and climate by insisting on a literary canon where water in the unknown state of snowflakes is much more persistent than recurring local wind phenomena. He points towards a specific example of creolisation via the combination of the literary experience of snow with a typical landscape of the “Expanded Caribbean” (Hulme, 2009: 42-45): here the pastoral element of snowfall no longer touches playing fields in a county in the West Midlands of England, but the monocultures of sugarcane once responsible for the massive forced import of enslaved Africans to the region. Similarly, in his 1992 Nobel lecture ‘The Antilles, Fragments of Epic Memory’, Derek Walcott credits “the literature of winter” with the presence of snow in the anglophone Caribbean imaginary (1993: 263). His perspective is, however, not primarily related to Caribbean island dwellers. Rather, he compares the Caribbean tourist who visits a continental urban center during the winter with tourists from temperate and subarctic climate zones who visit the Caribbean. While showing the textual prefiguration of both experiences via literature, he comments sarcastically on the discursive alignment of winter with seriousness and summer with superficiality.

*In serious cities, in grey, militant winter with its short afternoons, the days seem to pass by in buttoned overcoats, every building appears as a barracks with lights on in its windows, and when snow comes, one has the illusion of living in a Russian novel, in the 19th Century, because of the literature of winter. So, visitors to the Caribbean must feel that they are inhabiting a succession of postcards. Both climates are shaped by what we have read of them. For tourists, the sunshine cannot be serious. Winter adds depth and darkness to life as well as to literature, and in the unending summer of the tropics not even poverty or poetry (in the Antilles poverty is poetry with a V, une vie, a condition of life as well as of imagination) seems capable of being profound because the nature around it is so exultant, so resolutely ecstatic, like its music. A culture based on joy is bound to be shallow. Sadly, to sell itself, the Caribbean encourages the delights of mindlessness, of brilliant vacuity, as a place to flee not only winter but that seriousness that comes only out of culture with four seasons. So how can there be a people there, in the true sense of the word? (ibid).*

As becomes apparent by Walcott’s sarcasm, coldness and heat are not simply different temperatures and different climate zones, but have very different values within *post/colonial*<sup>3</sup> discourse dominated by the Global North. While fun and sun are projected as salubrious aspects of the tropics, they are unwanted within a climate of progress and capitalist civilisation.<sup>4</sup> In consequence, some of these alien and alienating imageries have been used ironically, satirically, and accusingly within the strategy of postcolonial *writing back* and its updates, be it decolonising and anti-imperial reconfigurations or criticisms of neoliberal extractivism, particularly of the tourism industry.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Chris Bongie uses *post/colonial* instead of *post-colonial* or *postcolonial* in order to stress the ambiguity of a condition in which “the colonial and the postcolonial appear uneasily as one, joined together and yet also divided in a relation of (dis)continuity.” (1998: 12-13)

<sup>4</sup> For a historical take on the changing value of the tropics and Caribbean islands and its tropical rain forests in particular, see Grove (1996: 35-72).

<sup>5</sup> On *writing back*: “Post-colonial counter-discursive strategies involve a mapping of the dominant discourse, a reading and exposing of its underlying assumptions, and the dis/mantling of these assumptions from the cross-cultural standpoint of the imperially subjectified ‘local’. [No] writer is

The positively connoted snow that Brathwaite argues to be part of the process of Caribbean creolisation and that Walcott considers part of the literature of winter and seriousness is exploited in V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*. In this novel, the protagonist from "the Caribbean island of Isabella" (1967: 8) lives in a London boarding house and his personal narration shows the disparaging difference between discursive and meteorological snow quite clearly:

*It was very cold. It went dark in the room, and I noticed that the light outside was strange. It was dead, but seemed to have an inner lividness. Then it began to drizzle. An unusual drizzle: I could see individual drops, I could hear them strike the window.*

*Hectic feminine footsteps thumped up the stairs. My door was pushed open; and Lieni, half her face washed and white and bare, a bit of cosmetic-smearing cottonwool in her hand, said breathlessly, 'I thought you would like to know. It's snowing.'*

*Snow!... At last; my element. And these were flakes, the airiest crushed ice. More than crushed: shivered. But the greater enchantment was the light... The flakes didn't pony float; they also spun. They touched the glass and turned to a film of melting ice. Below the livid grey sky roofs were white and shining black in patches. The bomb site was wholly white; every shrub, every discarded bottle, box and tin was defined. I had seen. Yet what was I to do with so complete beauty? (ibid: 8-9)*

Here, elements of irony and comedy capitalise on the lack of understanding for this weather occurrence. What the protagonist claims as his element is indeed completely unknown to him. This becomes apparent when he describes the drizzle as "unusual" and "drops" that "strike the window" until Lieni, the Maltese housekeeper, provides an explanation. With this new information, the description of the snowfall – already established as "cold", "dark", and strangely lit – is enhanced by peculiar movements and learned information about its substance. Yet all the precise information about the substance and behaviour of snow, as well as the new visual aspect it imparts on the city, counter his assertion that this is a long-awaited element of his. Furthermore, if snow was really his element, he would know that the changes it produces should feel comfortable and secure; however, he does not know how to process the reality of something he knows only due to his colonial education. Thereby the thrill of ecstasy is followed by paralysis.

Contrary to that, the protagonist in Sam Selvon's short story "The leaf in the wind" (1952) does something with snow, yet nothing expected or predictable, and by no means usual:

*And then the snow fell. I went out in it, turning up the collar of my coat. I went in the park and I scraped the snow off the ground and heaped it up. While I was doing that I thought it was a hell of a thing for me to be doing, but I went on all the same. There were a few children doing the same thing*

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simply 'writing back' to an English canonical text, but to the whole of the discursive field within which such a text operated and continues to operate in post-colonial worlds." (Tiffin, 1995: 98). See Sheller for "the myriad ways in which Western European and North American publics have unceasingly consumed the natural environment, commodities, human bodies, and cultures of the Caribbean over the past five hundred years" (2003: 3).

*and hurling snowballs, and they must have thought me queer, a grown man  
scraping snow into little heaps, because the way I was doing it was kind of  
thoughtful, not as if I was enjoying myself.* (1988: 56)

The contact with the known-yet-unknown element is paradoxical. The protagonist claims to scrape snow off the ground and heap it up without playfulness and without showing any kind of enjoyment. Therefore, the action takes on a rather earnest and thoughtful quality that contrasts with the children's games. The scene thus invites sad as well as comic readings and shows, again, an ambiguous relation between a West-Indian man and English snow.

In the francophone Caribbean literary tradition, the physical and metaphorical qualities of snow and coldness show – even earlier than the two examples discussed – a completely different quality that is free of polysemy. Within the more radical post-colonial counter-discourse of *Négritude*, Martinican poet Aimé Césaire (1913-2008) uses the alien whiteness and coldness of snow in order to point towards emotional and physical damage inflicted by the system of colonial domination, racism, and slavery. His 1939 *Cahier du retour au pays natal* is a long surrealist poem about the traumatic return from continental landscapes to the Caribbean homeland and, according to Mamadou Badiane, achieves both a refusal of Western culture and a resistance against France's continued intent to de-Africanise the formerly enslaved people of the Antilles (cf 2010: 167-171). In the poem, snow and ice are an important symbol for colonial injustice and part of an Alpine prison for the Haitian revolutionary hero Toussaint Louverture. Here, snow, ice, and coldness are elements of the Alpine climate but simultaneously express hatred, deceit, racism, and state terror.

*What is mine also: a little  
cell in the Jura,  
a little cell, the snow lines it with white bars  
the snow is a jailer mounting  
guard before a prison*

*What is mine  
a lonely man imprisoned in  
whiteness  
a lonely man defying the white  
screams of white death  
(TOUSSAINT, TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE)*

*a man who mesmerizes  
the white hawk of white death  
...  
death gallops in the prison like  
a white horse (Césaire 1983b: 47; 49)*

Indeed, Césaire's lyrical I claims and demands the return of a man imprisoned by white culture and power in a cell doubly secured by snow – a solitary man confronted with death in the wintry Alps. More specifically, the lyrical I claims ownership of the cell improved by snow, and the man imprisoned by different declensions of whiteness – be it cries, death, a sparrowhawk, or a horse. He calls for the return of Louverture because, he argues, that man belongs to him, the Caribbean Everyman, and he demands his return and retribution

for the theft, torture, and killing. This demand is based on a historical fact: the self-proclaimed Governor-General for Life of the island Hispaniola, Toussaint Louverture (or L'Ouverture), suffered imprisonment, isolation, and neglect at the hands of the Napoleonic prison guards and apparently starved and froze to death in the dungeons of a snow-covered alpine fortress (cf Beard, 1863: 283-286). The dying revolutionary leader ironically believed to act in the interests of the French Revolution until racism, as well as imperialism, proved to be stronger than the revolutionary spirit and its Rights of Man. Similarly, Césaire's emancipated demand of Louverture's return is not only connected to snow and ice and their insulating as well as enclosing qualities but, at the same time, to extreme physical as well as emotional coldness and its fatal consequences for the Haitian revolutionary-turned-autocrat and Bonaparte of the Caribbean. According to Francisco Aiello, the prominent imagery of whiteness resonates with the low temperatures that provoke the death of Louverture and alludes to the white man who suffocates the rebel gesture of the black man rising in defense of his dignity (see Aiello 2015: 13). One should, however, not forget to notice that animals are also included, be it a bird of prey as a metaphor of death or, in a comparison to death, the white horse that has otherwise been depicted carrying Christian saints as well as both Napoleon and Louverture.<sup>6</sup>

*Négritude's* tendency towards a revolutionary awareness (cf Sartre, 1948: XI-XII) and an "anti-racist racism" (ibid. XVI), that Jean Paul Sartre controversially distinguished as the only way to abolish racial differences, can still be detected in the second half of the 20th Century, such as in Stewart Brown's poem 'Whales' from 1974. Contrary to the imagery of a tourist paradise with friendly natives, the poem's lyrical voice uses the largest mammals to caricature tourists from the Northern American continent. The tourists on their seasonal route to the South, to the (sub-)tropical islands of the Caribbean, are actually big, white, climatically maladjusted, and physically helpless whales.

*Each Christmas they come  
White and blubbery from the frozen North,  
Strange bloated creatures pale as snow  
Cruising in vast, unnatural shoals.*

*Whales: the great white whales of myth  
And history in all their arrogant splendour.  
Flopped ungainly along the sea's edge  
Or hiding, blistered, under a shadowed palm,  
Incredibly ugly, somehow, in their difference.*

Here, a frozen state appears to be used to differentiate the North from the tropical coast, both climatically and culturally. Snow, on the other hand, is used in a simile to describe, once again, a pale skin colour that is not physically but discursively white. Indeed, both snow and freezing coldness are not actually present in this tropical beach resort, but winter and winter holidays seem responsible for the migration of strange and extremely different creatures. Once again, movement and transareal relations are central, but,

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<sup>6</sup> Bonaparte repeatedly used white and gray horses. One of the five versions of the famous painting 'Napoleon Crossing the Alps' (1801-1805) by Jacques-Louis David – the 1803 version – shows him directing his troops towards the Saint-Bernhard Pass on such a horse. Similarly, there exists a famous depiction of Toussaint Louverture on his horse Bel-Argent that was painted by Denis Alexandre Volozan on Saint-Domingue around 1800.

contrary to the other examples discussed so far, the movement is one *into* the tropics by tourists and it therefore forms part of the flipside of tropical stereotypes that Walcott also discusses: the exoticisation of the visitors to the tropics. This satirical critique of tourism and imperialism reaches critical heights via the dehumanisation and animalisation of the Other that leads towards a lust to kill – both well-studied supremacist and xenophobe strategies – motivated by social, economic, and racist elements:

*'Peace and love' we tell them  
the government says we must show respect  
so we smile, sing, play Sambo:  
secretly long for a black Ahab.*

'Whales' has been (re-)printed in the anthology *Caribbean Dispatches: Beyond the Tourist Dream* together with an explanation and recount of the effects the poem had (under the title 'Peace an' Love' - Bryce [ed], 2006: 43-45). According to Brown, the publication of the poem sparked angry replies by readers in North America, some of whom apparently cancelled future travels to the Caribbean due to its lyrical affront. There is, however, a complicating twist to this story: even though the lyrical voice is certainly situated in a tropical and non-white setting, and even though the Northern American readers took offence at it, Brown is himself a "frequent and much respected visitor to the Caribbean, much liked for his deep but modestly offered knowledge of the region and its literature" (nd: online); even more importantly, in his poet's portrait on the webpage of Trees Press he states that his "poetry never forgets that, however immersed it is in local sympathies, it remains the work of an Englishman abroad" (ibid).

### The Deep Snow and Cold Ice of Exile and Migration

Aimée Césaire went to Paris in 1931, the writers of the Windrush generation arrived in England in 1948, and in 1950 V.S. Naipaul went to Oxford on a Trinidad Government scholarship; some of their depictions of snow in the colonial center already point to the second reason for the presence of snow and ice in contemporary Caribbean literature: the migration of authors from the Caribbean to colder parts of the world. As physical evidence of exile and as a foreign spectacle, snow is, for example, already present in the exiled Cuban poet and journalist José Martí's sensationalist article 'Nueva York bajo la nieve' (1888,) where he reports a three-day paralysis of New York under extreme snow masses in March of that year. Similarly, texts I will turn to now, the poem and a novel in verse, depict distance, difference, and homesickness via huge amounts of snow.

Indeed, 'M'a kai den sneu' (1998) by the Curaçaoan poet, novelist, and language advocate Frank Martinus Arion (1936-2015) is an example of snow being used to create an insurmountable difference and distance between the emigrated islander and the home island. At the beginning, the poem appears to be concerned with a very small accident: "I fell in deep snow". The poem starts and ends with a stanza where the lyrical I has fallen into snow and does not expect rescue, but assistance, and improbable delivery from his entrapment by a lyrical you:

*I fell in deep snow  
If you cannot save me  
Then lie down beside me  
Help me weep. (1998: 533)*

In the first stanza, no further reason is given as to why a fall in (deep) snow would be so fatal and cause such sorrow that it leaves the lyrical I helpless. In the second stanza, however, impossible blackness is belatedly transforming the snow: it now signifies another culture, another language, another skin color, and the absence of emotional proximity in familial and linguistic terms. Actual migration to (and subsequent exile in) a cold land are thus directly linked to the pale whiteness of snow as a reference to so-called ‘white’ phenotype and culture that does not speak Papiamentu – “If only you spoke Papiamentu/ I would call you my lover” (ibid: lines 5-6). Here it becomes apparent that, contrary to what one might expect initially, it is not the deep snow that impedes movement. Rather, black racism impedes a return to the tropics: “Ask for a kiss that would save me/But you can never be black” (ibid: lines 7-8). Therefore, it is not simply Creole culture in the form of a very special language, Papiamentu,<sup>7</sup> that is responsible for the impossibility of the “you” to “save” the “I” but it is also race and racism. This excluding mechanism affects the lyrical I, who has married “a white woman” (line 11) and therefore “can’t return” to his “black homeland” (ibid: line 12) but lives helplessly in exile. The repetition of the first stanza at the end of the poem makes the transformation of snow even more pointedly visible and audible. Falling in deep snow has acquired new meaning by now: it stands for falling in love with a white person who does not have command over one’s language of emotional proximity and who will not be accepted in one’s country of origin. Contrary to the physical fall, this is surely a much more complicated situation that is rather impossible to solve and creates an insurmountable displacement and ostracism. Therefore, the fall into snow can be read as a symbol of distance that is both physical and emotional: physically we need a climate zone that allows for snow to not only fall but to pile up; at the same time, the *sneueu* has been re-signified: it is now not only a symbol for a different place but also a metaphor for a different culture and phenotype. Furthermore, the fall into this snow is an emotional fall into love and the sorrow of being exiled from one’s island of origin by racism.

Snow acquires a similarly distancing quality in *L’énigme du retour* (1953/2009) by Haitian-Canadian novelist Dany Laferrière, where it marks the place of migration as a place of alterity and existential danger by freezing to death. Yet ultimately, and due to his long stays in both places, the migrant protagonist sees himself as a synthesis between the hotness of the tropics and the coldness of his French Canadian exile. At the beginning of the novel, set at night, the first-person male protagonist receives a message about his father’s death. This message triggers, according to the title of the first chapter, “Lents préparatifs de départ” (‘Slow Preparations for Departure’ in the translation by David Homel). Early the next morning, he starts driving without destination (cf 2009: 13; cf 2018: 3). This aimless car ride through snow-covered Northern Canada produces colonial fantasies of discovery with sexual connotations: “L’impression de découvrir/ des territoires vierges” (2009: 14). “The feeling of discovering virgin territory” (2018: 4) of untouched snow is a well-established trope, but, here, the winter is exoticised from a tropical perspective: the protagonist – even though he has spent 33 years in Canada – has neither been acclimatised to the cold season nor familiarised with the continental vastness of this “[v]aste pays de glace” (2009: 14). Rather, the protagonist still has trouble in imagining what form the next summer will take in this “vast land of ice” (2018: 4). Indeed, during “[t]he realm of winter” he loses all direction because “[o]nly a native can find his way

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<sup>7</sup> “The language of the islands of Curaçao, Aruba and Bonaire, Papiamentu... has been viewed as the outstanding example of a creole which has risen to a position of considerable social respectability and official recognition” (Wood, 1972: 18). Papiamentu is probably based on an Afro-Portuguese Pidgin and has a lexicon of Iberian, Dutch, English, French, African, and Indian origins (cf Eckkrammer 2007: 79).



through this” and he seems still astonished to find himself “really... among those northern people” where he experiences the alienating “feeling of driving through” a cheap winter painting, a “[l]andscape within the landscape” (ibid: 7). This continental outside thus appears to be what Daniel Maximin has termed “l'ex-île”,<sup>8</sup> a climatic, topographic, biogeographic, and cultural alterity outside the home island, “an ex-isle, a loss of the particular” (Bongie 1998: 18). Laferrière’s protagonist is “aware of being in a world completely different” (2018: 6) from his own and seems to have little interest in acculturation. At the end of his aimless motorised excursion, when returning to Montreal, the mourning protagonist tries to lessen his exhaustion with a short siesta in the car by the side of the road. In his dream the tropical childhood memories blend with the contemporary corporeal experience:

*Childhood wells up behind closed eyelids.  
I wander beneath the tropical sun  
but it is cold as death.  
The need to piss wakes me up.  
A burning sensation before the liquid spurts out.*

*The same emotion every time  
I see the city in the distance.  
I take the tunnel under the river.  
We always forget that Montreal is an island. (Laferrière, 2018: 8)*

Hauntingly, strolling under the tropical sun of his childhood memories first appears to satisfy exoticist or nostalgic needs, but it is burdened with a paradoxical impossibility, an oxymoron: its temperature is cool, actually ‘cold as death’. Luckily, he wakes up due to micturition (ie the urge to urinate) rather than falling prey to a cold that “numbs before it kills” (2018: 7). The antagonistic structure of hot and cold already implicit in the act of relieving oneself in a snowscape becomes explicit as the protagonist notes a burning sensation that seems to point towards a sickness, either an infection, a sexually transmitted disease, or prostate cancer, and thus stresses the continued presence of death.

When re-entering the city through a tunnel underneath the stream he recalls, once again, what one tends to forget: that Montreal is a snow-covered, urban river-island with a clearly endangered island status due to tunneling and bridging.<sup>9</sup> The suddenly repeated realisation that the city is actually an island dismantles the difference between *ex-île* and *île*, between *ex-isle* and island, and can be read as a pivotal part of his preparation for departure and return to the home island. It is, as we will see, the beginning of a wider strategy of using city islands bridged to the North American continent and a hamlet nicknamed “the Venice of Haiti” (ibid: 44) to accentuate the island status of some small geographic entities that are connected to bigger landmasses encircled by water – be it the Americas or Hispaniola. After his late return from the Canadian countryside the

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<sup>8</sup> The first narrative text accompanying the poems in *L'invention des désirades* bears the title ‘*Autres Dérades: L'Ex-Île*’ (2000: 118-123). It recounts the family’s transfer to France when the narrator is still a boy. The neologism is used to denominate the continental exile, but it also points towards the end of a paradisaical childhood.

<sup>9</sup> The stream refers most probably to the Saint Lawrence River at its confluence with the Ottawa River and the island is in reality an archipelago, the Archipel d’Hochelaga, also known as Montreal islands. For the “bridge effect” on islands see Baldacchino (ed) (2007).

autodiegetic narrator takes a bath and reads from *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, and this reading leads into the literary Antilles.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the self-characterisation as “aquatic animal” (Laferrière, 2018: 10) shows the narrator’s continued desire to be part of the community of what Antonio Benítez Rojo calls the “Peoples of the Sea”.<sup>11</sup> His dreams allow for direct passages “sans transition” that lead from a street corner in Montreal to Port-au-Prince (cf *ibid*: 22) while the voyage to his father’s funeral in Manhattan, via train by night, brings about a dream-like, seamless transition (cf *ibid*: 55) to another urban island that has a similarly questionable island status. In this alternative urban island exile, temperatures reach an unusual height, which leads his surprised uncle Zachée to read the climate – in a magical-realistic and anthropomorphising manner – as nature’s gift to his brother: “My Uncle [sic] Zachée maintains that nature is giving a gift to my father who hated the cold and compared it to the injustice of men” (*ibid*: 59). This combination of coldness and injustice leads the son’s thoughts to his readings of the *Cahier* and how it demands the corpse of the most famous leader of the Haitian Revolution, François-Dominique Toussaint Louverture:

*arrested by Napoleon, killed by the cold during the winter of 1803 in Fort de Joux, France. His lips trembling with contained rage the poet comes to demand, 150 years later, the frozen body of the hero of the slave revolt* (*ibid*: 43).

This association between coldness and colonial and racial injustice shows, as Yolaine Parisot argues, that in both Césaire’s and Laferrière’s text the poetics of perception are the founding principle for political consciousness (see Parisot 2016: 98). Meanwhile, the day of the funeral in a big church in Manhattan and the burial in Brooklyn – two parts of New York situated on different islands – presents a rather unusual and apocalyptic image of the city due to excessive rain and inundations. The flooding relates the place of burial with the place of birth in southwestern Haiti: “‘It’s like being in Baradères, my father’s native village/and the Venice of Haiti, or so they say’” (Laferrière, 2009: 62 – author’s translation).<sup>12</sup> The connections between related islands that the lyrical I has visited or plans to visit, extend to the “meta-archipelago” of the Caribbean. This archipelago has “the virtue of having neither boundary nor center” (Benitez Rojo, 1997: 4) and links Montreal, Manhattan, and Baradères via a transatlantic comparison with another city endangered by inundation (and mass tourism) situated in another archipelago on the other side of the Atlantic: La Serenissima, Venice.

In contrast to all these rapid changes between urban islands of North America, dream passages to the home island, and this globalising move to Venice, the actual return voyage to Haiti is a slow and transformative process. The first part of the book ends with a stanza, or three sentences, where the autodiegetic narrator positions himself climatically in-between coolness and hotness, in translation:

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<sup>10</sup> *L’énigme du retour* is related on multiple levels to this fundamental text of *Négritude*.

<sup>11</sup> The Peoples of the Sea’s “cultural discourse... attempts, through real or symbolic sacrifice, to neutralize violence and to refer society to the transhistorical codes of Nature” (1996: 17). In the case of *L’énigme* this amounts to “curl up in a ball” within “a round belly filled with water”, ie “the pink bathtub” (Laferrière, 2018: 14).

<sup>12</sup> “It’s like being in Baradères, my father’s native village/and the Venice of Haiti, or so they say” (2018: 44).

*One last look out of the airplane window.  
This cold white city  
where I've known my strongest passions.  
Now ice lives inside me  
almost as much as fire. (2018: 53)*

What is deconstructed in these lines are the essentialist and racist climate theories of colonialism and slavery that, as we already saw in Walcott's sarcastic take on the literature of winter, associated dark skin colors and hot climes with passion and laziness while claiming that light skin colors and cold climes are prone to reason and industriousness. How is this achieved? For one, "(t)his cold white city" cannot serve as a metaphor or symbol of calculated reason as it is a physical place where the lyrical I has lived his "strongest passions". The protagonist and his feelings cross the divide between the two semantic fields and destabilise them. When the antagonism between fire and ice returns in the following lines, it reappears as the binary opposition of a Global South and a Global North internalised in one person: after all those years in exile, the ice inhabits the lyrical I nearly as much as the fire of his early years. This internalisation of said difference confronts climatic attributions to race with the migrant condition and thus highlights "a third space – where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension" (Bhabha, 2012: 312), in-between and within the memory and the embodied experience of a protagonist who spent many years in two very different climates.

It becomes clear that this use of fire and ice does not follow the rich intertextual tradition available since Petrarch; instead of representing the inner emotional disruptions of a longing lover, these elements symbolise corporeal and social experiences in tropical and subarctic climes and in the respective francophone cultures of two very different islands. Consequently, the return to the tropics and the slow rapprochement to the capital, the narrator's family, the countryside, and the birthplace of his father bring sweat and forgotten memories to the fore: "Now my body is slowly warming. My memory is thawing: that little puddle of water in the bed" (Laferrière, 2018: 113). After eighteen chapters on the home island, the coldness of the *ex-île* is used metaphorically and it is the preserving, solidifying, immobilising, as well as insensitive quality of freezing that is applied to the mnemonic functions, emotions included. In the warmth of the tropics, state matter transforms again. The voyage to the homeland and the recovery of feelings and family isn't, however, unidirectional: the island hopping – from Montreal to Manhattan and Brooklyn, back to Montreal and from there to Haiti – does not end in his father's place of birth, Baradères, the Venice of Haiti. Rather, he projects his future in-between Port-au-Prince and Montreal; it is only outside of these emotional nodes that (social) death awaits: "Death would mean not being in either of those cities" (2009: 124).<sup>13</sup>

Snow, ice and coldness from the exile on the Northern American continent have therefore reached Haiti only via their embodied experience and via the metaphor of frozen memories that leave melting water on a Haitian bed. Furthermore, *L'Enigme du retour* shows another interplay between the tropics and the (sub)arctic seasons on Haiti that should be mentioned, even though it is not based on snow, ice, coldness, and a migratory experience, but on fruitless and leafless trees: during a terrible famine in the south of Haiti "people had to eat unripe fruit" and leaves and left the "trees stripped bare along the way", thereby creating a "kind of Caribbean winter" (2018: 199) in the evergreen tropics. Even

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<sup>13</sup> "Death would mean not being in either of those cities" (Laferrière, 2018: 97).

without the cold, then, the winter landscape continues to illustrate the “injustice of men” (2018: 42) already apparent in the book’s famous intertext by Aimé Césaire.

## Snow of the Earth: Global Relations and Metafictional Passages

The last example has already shown that some fictional worlds treat the island as a launching pad for archipelagic global geographies, movements, and relations.<sup>14</sup> They frustrate exoticist expectations of the tropics and, when this global take underlies decidedly Caribbean perspectives, the expectations can be inverted, thus exoticising winter, snow, and ice. The following example, the long poem ‘Guanahani’ (2005) by Barbadian poet and scholar Kamau Brathwaite (1930), intends neither, but achieves global interconnectedness in a *transareal* movement (cf Ette 2016). On this trajectory, clouds that look like ephemeral islands or ice-floes perceived from cruising altitudes, are a central part of the poem’s geopoetics.

Brathwaite usually intends to transcribe his orally conceived poetry with the possibilities of the digital era into his *Sycorax video-style*, a heretical style that challenges printers and readers with a whole range of fonts and font sizes (see Rigby, 2004: 262). In the case of his ‘Guanahani’ (2005), from the collection *Born to Slow Horses*, the poem’s subtitle is set in small, thin font and reads:

*flying over the Bahamas 12 Oct 1492 on AJ 016 over the US Easter Seaboard of  
Gauguin  
of Afghanistan 11:19am  
w/the pilot beaming us the news that the cold front from the North  
we are leaving is following us South bringing this kind of history. (ibid: 7,  
lines 1-3).*

The islands or archipelagos are thus perceived from an airplane’s perspective on a north to south trajectory. The flight and the mention of Afghanistan point towards the early 21st Century, around the five-hundred year anniversary of the Columbian voyages and at the time of the NATO invasion of Afghanistan in the wake of the 2001 terror attacks on the US.<sup>15</sup> The date, however, points towards the first contact between Arawak people and the Spanish ships that, according to Columbus’s logbook, took place on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1492 on Guanahani, the island in the Bahamas that gives the title to this poem.<sup>16</sup> The spatial movement in the poem performs a flight around the Earth over seven pages. It starts above the archipelago off the West Coast of the USA where the islands in the ocean are obfuscated by islands in the sky; not concrete islands, like the flying island of Laputa in the third part of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, but “clouds coming right down on the

<sup>14</sup> In the ‘Coloquio con Juan Ramón Jiménez’ (1937) Cuban author Lezama Lima thinks the island as an opening towards the unknown (cf Graziadei 2017a: 65-66). In Derek Walcott’s ‘Sicilian Suite’, a “mind with its pitiful searching for an exit/ from itself...” (2010: 16, part I lines 5-7) takes flight “past Pidgeon Island to Isola (to sacred Sicily)” (ibid: line 11).

<sup>15</sup> ‘Bermudas’ (Brathwaite 2005: 5-6), the poem before ‘Guanahani’ (ibid: 7-14), prepares this position as it is already situated on an airplane; for an analysis of the nissopoietic aspects of this poem, see Graziadei (2016: 244-246).

<sup>16</sup> The fateful contact ultimately even led to the fall into oblivion of the exact location of that very island of first contact due to physical and cultural genocide. For a discussion of the early controversies concerning Guanahani, originally named by Columbus after San Salvador, see Major (1871: 171-172).

water" (ibid: line 7) that look "like thousands of tiny floating islands in an ornage tint of water" (ibid: line 8). The optical illusion of islands on tinted water challenges orientation and the related adjective "ornage" challenges the reader with its oscillation between the color orange (of sunset and prison uniforms) and the French *orage*, tempest.<sup>17</sup> In the tradition of the imagined islands' constant repositioning at the margins of the rapidly expanding maps of the Age of Discovery, these islands are moving. In the previous line, this floating is established: the aerosols in the atmosphere look "like ice-floes" (ibid: line 7). Their sighting during a transatlantic movement echoes the famous maritime disaster of April 15<sup>th</sup> 1912: the sinking of RMS Titanic after a collision with an iceberg. Foreshadowing the "tiny floating islands", these "ice-floes" position the transatlantic flight perspective in a specific climate and mobility. Both islands and ice-floes are highly mobile optical illusions and, instead of showing more solidity than water, the quality of drift ice is just as ephemeral as the clouds that allow for their presence. These atmospheric islands and ice-floes are, however, framed by the devastating landfall of Columbus on Guanahani and the imprisonment of captured and abducted suspects of terrorism at the detention camp at a US naval base in the Guantánamo province of Cuba. They are thus not simply the beautiful scenery of a pleasurable flight, but they are, along with the mode of transportation that enables this observation, part of a history of violence, subjugation, abduction, extraction and imperialism.

Similarly, but without the presence of technology, wind creates global interconnectedness and relationality in Édouard Glissant's (1928-2011) last novel *Ormerod* (2003). These global atmospheric relations are closely linked to the act of oral storytelling: the breath of the narrator transforms into winds that roam the fictional world. In one instance, the wind travels the whole planet, collecting scents until reaching a large mass of 'land surrounded by water'. The narrating voice claims that Australia is an island that is an archipelago that is a continent. The latter is difficult to depart from as these atmospheric winds repose there after having run the Earth.

*Beverley Ormerod, slowly wipes the wind from her face, the snows of Ukraine  
the water of icebergs the caves in the Cevennes the red rocks of Tlemcen the  
fragile holes of the oceans which hollow out the yellow clay of the Yangtze the  
green oceanic coral all in this wind careful not to misplace or lose anything of  
its world. (2003: 204 – author's translation).*

The attentively collecting winds bring the scent of snow from the Ukraine and polar icebergs to a real-life person and fictional figure, Jamaican-born scholar of French Caribbean literature Beverley Ormerod, who resides in Perth, Australia, and whose surname serves as the novel's title. These particles, messages from all parts of its world, allow for relation, for the interrelation of one story with others, island stories within a developing archipelago. Continental snow and ice melting into the oceans are two elements needed for the literary creation of this global archipelago – in an act of archipelagopoiesis – within the philosophical frame of Glissant's concept of an All-World in relation.<sup>18</sup> Ice and snow, two forms of frozen crystalline water, represent the arctic and subarctic regions of this global relation via wind and a winding narration without full

<sup>17</sup> The permutation of letters heightens attention for anagrams and thus points to two more hidden aspects: 'on rage' and 'rage on'.

<sup>18</sup> According to his last two phases of philosophical thinking and the respective philosophical works *Traité du tout-monde* and *Philosophie de la relation*.

stops. They are not pivotal, but necessary elements in this fictional world of global dimensions.

Comparably interconnecting and globalising functions of snow can be found in Walcott's short essay 'Isla Incognita' – written in 1973<sup>19</sup> and published in 2005 – by St. Lucian poet, playwright, and painter Derek Walcott (1930-2017). Here, snow is not situated on the literary island but used to blend from the island to the mainlands. It has an important role in opening the island nissopoietically in order to communicate with the American continent and the global sphere of literature. Yet, at the same time, snow unfolds an even stronger intertextual, metafictional and globalising function. The short essay consists in a cautious circling around the question of island discovery and island nature. It spells out a caveat, a warning about the island icon and any easy answer to the question:

*from a Latin text at school. Quales est natura insulae? What is the nature of the island? It has stuck in here for over thirty-five years. I do not know if I am ready to answer it. (ibid: 52).*

At the beginning of the essay, Walcott proposes to "(e)rase everything, even the name of this island, if it is to be rediscovered. It is the only way to begin" (Walcott, 2005: 51). The surprising demand points to the "blank spaces on the earth" (Conrad, 1990: 5), or rather on the map of colonial desire, as formulated by Marlow at the very beginning of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*,<sup>20</sup> and to the island as maritime egg of creativity and new beginnings that Gilles Deleuze proposes in 'Causes et raisons des îles désertes'.<sup>21</sup> Yet Walcott instantly doubts if total erasure is possible at all and comes to the conclusion that one cannot even pretend to never have seen the island before: "for how can we tell whether our feeling on seeing that rock and its bay, is nostalgia or revelation?" (2005: 51). Sarcastic references to colonial and imperial desires and his own experiences meet in the deconstruction of the tourist trope of the tropical island, particularly when he stresses that his "favourite stretch of beach... between the road to Cumana village and the ocean... doesn't give a damn" (ibid: 52) and that everything is unchanging there. However, his list of things that remain the same is suddenly interrupted by a possibility of change, a change that needs to be wanted by the addressee:

*The sand will remain, and the bent, rusted trees. And the spume that, if you want a change now, can become snow and whiten this next page to a snowdrift. If the reader concentrates, says Pasternak, about here, a snowstorm should begin. Let it begin!*

*SNOWFIELDS OF OHIO. Foreign domesticity and the barns, and these too possessed by an absent, or invisible race, white hidden within white. How deep*

<sup>19</sup> Archived at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine.

<sup>20</sup> "Now when I was a chap I had a passion for maps... At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say; 'When I grow up I will go there.'" (Conrad, 1990: 5).

<sup>21</sup> Deleuze wrote this early essay in the 1950s for a special number on desert islands by the magazine *Nouveau Fémina*, but it was not published then (see Deleuze and Lapoujade, 2002: 17). The island imagination central for Deleuze is the human-made re-creation of an island-egg. In the making-of *L'empreinte à Crusoé* Martinican author Patrick Chamoiseau argues that Deleuze's island as an egg of the sea generates an idea of closure, shelter, and gestation. Chamoiseau goes on to say that "on the island everything can surprise, because everything can begin, or better, re-begin" (2012: 214).

*is this ancient fear of cold, bite of the dog on the bone itself, shaking it off like the wind... The long-frozen sea of humps crested with trees unrolls toward the carfront, the snow flurries whirl in surprise, with "ain't you a little bit out of your ambience, nigger?"... The sadness of occupation, poetry, is connection with these fields, its tone is the ground-level whine of a crippled wind through stubble, the noise of snow tires and the soundless white of wires. (Walcott, 2005: 53)*

The list of all the geopoetical elements that “will remain” ends abruptly when Walcott refers to the foam of the sea. Here, the essayist addresses the reader and offers this potentially bored person the possibility for a change right there in the act of reading: transforming matter, namely H<sub>2</sub>O, from a liquid to a solid state, from water to snow, from wave to snowdrift, while remaining within the same color range: white. The idea of snow, and even of a snowstorm created by the reader’s will, concentration, and imagination, at the expense of the fictional island, is attributed to Russian poet, playwright, and translator Boris Leonidovich Pasternak (1890-1960): the transformation of matter is therefore inspired by the north of Eurasia and its literatures. However, in ‘Isla Incognita’, spume and snow cross from the level of the fictional island world to intertextual and metafictional levels: Russia, Trinidad, and Ohio are located on the same page of the same book. The actual page turns blank for a few lines right after the reader of Pasternak orders the snowstorm to begin and, indeed, the whiteness of bleached paper performs the opacity of a snowdrift.

With the beginning of the next paragraph, this white space turns into the snowfields of the humid continental climate of a Midwestern US state. Ohio (in winter) is constructed as the total opposite, noted as “overpoweringly strange” (2005: 53), where even the snowflakes are racist and surprised to see a dark face. It is a place where “some have never seen the sea. Can’t imagine the islands” (ibid: 54), and whose poetry reflects its wintry soundscape. This struggling position in Ohio’s winter is evidently projected from a perspective accustomed to the tropics. In the space of a few paragraphs, it is inverted into a perspective accustomed with cold climates perceiving the tropical climate. After explaining that the moods of people in the tropics “are as barometric as those of temperate men”, but that the “subtle few (climatic) distinctions... are so imperceptible to strangers or transients, they make landscape and people seem monotonous” (ibid: 55), Walcott goes on to reason in a highly ironic and hyperbolic way. This denigrating, belittling, and excluding discourse is personified by two exemplary figures: “I miss the changes,’ the tourist says. ‘Snow was my element,’ says the character in a West Indian novel” (ibid: 55). In this scene, which reflects the colonial tradition and its imperial and capitalist updates, the absence of seasons and of winter are signs of homesickness, emblematic of an existence outside of one’s element and comfort zone. At the same time, they refer back to the acculturated migrants from the Caribbean to the English ‘mother country’ as analysed at the beginning of this article with the examples of Sam Selvon’s ‘The leaf in the wind’ and V. S. Naipaul’s *Mimic Men*.

Thus, Walcott uses snow from various perspectives in order to highlight a difference in experience between people accustomed to the tropics and people accustomed to four seasons, but, foremost and more importantly, he uses it to point to the textual aspect of literary geopoetics and the bleached cellulose of paper. One further technique already visible in this essay’s rapid change from spume to snow, becomes more prominent in his late poems, the oscillation or cross-fading between the elements. For example, at the end

of his penultimate book of poetry *The Prodigal* (2004), in poem '18', "we" are in a ship above "(i)mmensurable and unplummetable fathoms" (2004: 102, part III line 2), when long awaited dolphins suddenly appear and are cross-faded with a memory about skiers in the Alps:

*They shot out of the glacial swell like skiers  
hurtling themselves out of that Alpine surf  
with its own crests and plungings, spuming slopes  
from which the dolphins seraphically soared  
to the harps of ringing wires and humming ropes.* (ibid: 104-105, part IV lines 5-9).

Here, the surfing on the same matter blends dolphins, skiers and angels in an oscillation between these two places on Earth and on the horizon of death. The fast-paced assemblage and translation of very different or distant locales and people via similes appears to be part of the Saint Lucian poet's strategy to overcome regional situatedness and turn, in an act of self-decolonisation, from Caribbean poet to poet of world literature.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

The textual examples from contemporary Caribbean literature discussed in this article show a simultaneous presence of snow and/or ice and (tropical) islands. Their interrelation is based on comparisons, metaphors, intertextual references, and metafictional play, but also on combined experiences within a fictional world of global dimensions, and spatial oscillations, *transarchipelagic* as well as *transareal* movements that go back to the first phase of accelerated globalisation.<sup>23</sup>

While none of the texts seems to be "writing back" to a "canonical text", most seem to write back "to the whole of the discursive field" (Tiffin 1995: 98) and add a tropical voice to the valuation of coldness. In 'Guanahani', Ormerod, and poem '18', the ice-floe and Alpine ski piste are not physically present, but the counter-discursive strategies in *The Mimic Men*, 'The leaf in the wind', 'M'a kai den sneu', 'Isla Incognita', and *L'Énigme du retour* explore the embodied experience of snow and ice due to migration, exile, captivity, or voyaging. The archipelagic relations that accompany it are marked by the protagonists' or lyrical voices' negotiation of climatic, social, political, racial, aesthetic, and epistemological differences. But the examples reach well beyond evidencing migration and travel as they use snow, ice, and cold to illustrate imaginative powers, spiritual insights, fear, pain, forbidden love, racism, homesickness, injustice, oppression, and death. Arguably, these uses of snow, ice, and coldness – but also winter – counter the displacement of the region "from the main narratives of modernity" and "the shores that... now appear only in tourist brochures, or in occasional disaster tales involving hurricanes, boat-people, drug barons, dictators, or revolutions" to return to their "indisputable narrative position at the origin of the plot of Western modernity" (Sheller, 2003: 1). Here, snow and ice are just as readily

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<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of (both Mediterranean and Caribbean) "islands in translation" see Graziadei (2013). For a discussion of the *nissopoiesis* of *The Prodigal* and *White Egrets*, see Graziadei (2017a: 315-338).

<sup>23</sup> In *TransArea*, Ottmar Ette argues that literature "has always distinguished itself by its transareal and transcultural manner of emergence and impact" (2016: 5) and that during "the first phase of accelerated globalization, archipelagic and transarchipelagic connections take on a tremendous significance" (2016: 11).



available as every other state of water for the creation of islands in archipelagic relation and the presence and influence of these elements can be read as part of an effort to deconstruct the iconic fixedness of the tropical island and its 'local' writers. The poietic creation of literary spaces and places that include snow, ice, and coldness can therefore also serve emancipatory and globalising purposes: the fictional worlds that treat the island as a launching pad for archipelagic global geographies, movements, and relations appear to frustrate exoticist expectations and simultaneously position the authors less as regional writers but, similarly to some Hispano-American novelists from the neo-vanguards *McOndo* and *grupo del crack* (Graziadei, 2008), simply as writers of this Earth with a right to create literary worlds as they please.

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