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Giorgio Agamben, J. G. Farrell's *The Singapore Grip*, and the Colonial *Dispositif*

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In his Afterword to The Singapore Grip*, J. G. Farrell thanks Giorgio and Ginevra Agamben for suggesting the phrase that became the title of his novel. What can we make of this surprising and unexpected connection between an Anglo-Irish author's novel about colonial Singapore on the eve of its fall to the Japanese army during World War II and Agamben's writings on biopolitics? Despite the serendipitous nature of the encounter between the two writers and the lack of any causal relation between their works, my paper argues that there is an unacknowledged affinity that allows us to open them up to what Agamben calls their* Entwicklungsfähigkeit*, "the locus and the moment wherein they are susceptible to development," thereby bringing out the biopolitical elements in Farrell's novel and turning Agamben's insights into* dispositifs *or biopolitical apparatuses in the direction of the analysis of colonial rule.*

Keywords: Giorgio Agamben, J. G. Farrell, *The Singapore Grip*, colonialism, biopolitics, *dispositif*, deactivation, *Entwicklungsfähigkeit*

J. G. Farrell's 1978 novel *The Singapore Grip*, the last of the "Empire Trilogy" (the other two are *Troubles* and *The Siege of Krishnapur*) is not a work one would immediately associate with Giorgio Agamben. You can thus imagine the surprise I experienced when I came across the following acknowledgment in the novel's Afterword: "I would also like to thank . . . Giorgio and Ginevra Agamben, from whom I first heard of the 'Singapore Grip.'"[1] This totally unexpected association between Farrell and Giorgio Agamben not only aroused my curiosity but also my desire to investigate further this surprising connection between an Anglo-Irish writer's novel about colonial Singapore on the eve of its fall to the Japanese imperial army during World War II and the Italian philosopher best known for his radical rethinking of political forms in the Western philosophical tradition.

From Serendipity to *Entwicklungsfähigkeit*

Farrell was a close friend of Sonia Orwell, George Orwell's widow, and often attended her parties. His biographer, Lavinia Greacen, notes, almost in passing, that

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1 J. G. Farrell, *The Singapore Grip* (New York: New York Review Books, 2005 [1978]), 569.

"The Singapore Grip of the title was . . . recounted to him in the buzz of Sonia Orwell's drawing room."[2] She does not say who was responsible for suggesting the title to Farrell. Moreover, she does not follow up Farrell's acknowledgment that he first heard of the Singapore Grip from the Agambens. We know that Farrell had started working on a new novel after winning the Booker Prize in 1973 for *The Siege of Krishnapur*. We also know that Giorgio Agamben traveled to London in the fall of 1974 "for a year of study in the library of the Warburg Institute."[3] It must have been sometime during his year in London that he and his wife, Ginevra, met Farrell at one of Sonia Orwell's parties where, according to Farrell, they chatted about the Singapore Grip.

In not following up on Farrell's acknowledgment of the Agambens, Graecen is not alone. Neither critics who have written on Farrell's novels (such as Ronald Binns, Ralph Crane and Jennifer Livett, Sam Goodman, John McLeod, and Michael Prusse to name a few)[4] nor Agamben himself and his many commentators have ever noted, as far as I know, Farrell's gnomic acknowledgment of his serendipitous encounter with the Agambens at Sonia Orwell's party. This is not surprising for at least two reasons. First, Farrell and Agamben hail from different intellectual milieus, and their work, accordingly, circulates among different readerships. The second and more important reason is that there is a problem in establishing a causal relation between Farrell's 1978 novel and Agamben's writings, which were not translated into English until much later. Agamben's first book to be translated into English was *Language and Death*, published in 1991 by the University of Minnesota Press.[5] I could not find any evidence that Farrell had read Agamben's early work in Italian. In any case, the writings on sovereignty, biopolitics, and the state of exception for which Agamben is best known in the English-speaking world were not published until the 1990s, long after the publication of *The Singapore Grip*. Without a trace of influence or any direct causal link between Farrell's novel about the decline of the British Empire and Agamben's much later writings on biopolitics, it is understandable why no Farrell critic or Agamben scholar has noticed Farrell's acknowledgment or commented on it.

Faced with this lack of direct influence or causal relation, is there any point in pursuing a comparison of Farrell's novel and Agamben's writings? One can of course answer that an Agambenian reading of Farrell's novel is as possible as a Freudian reading of *Hamlet* or a Foucauldian reading of any number of novels. Nevertheless, while Agamben is directly, if somewhat cryptically, acknowledged by Farrell, no critic has taken up that reference and provided an Agambenian reading of Farrell's novel.

2 Lavinia Greacen, *J. G. Farrell: The Making of a Writer* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 330.

3 Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), xviii.

4 See Ronald Binns, *J. G. Farrell* (London: Methuen, 1986); Ralph Crane and Jennifer Livett, *Troubled Pleasures: The Fiction J. G. Farrell* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997); Sam Goodman, " 'Skeletons of Solid Objects': Imperial Violence in J. G. Farrell's *Empire Trilogy*," *Violence and the Limits of Representation*, eds. Graham Matthews and Sam Goodman (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2013), 112–28; John McLeod, *J. G. Farrell* (Devon: Northcote, 2007); Michael C. Prusse, *"Tomorrow is Another Day": The Fictions of James Gordon Farrell* (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 1997). Sam Goodman mentions Agamben and Foucault in passing, but he is more interested in applying Martin Coward's theory of Urbicide and architectural violence to Farrell's novels.

5 Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen Pinkus and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1991).

Although commentaries on *The Singapore Grip* have noted its critique of colonial economic exploitation and its satirical portrayal of British imperial smugness, not one has pointed out that the biopolitical elements analyzed by Agamben in his writings can be found in Farrell's novel as well. Farrell's acknowledgment of Agamben has thus remained a merely fortuitous gesture that has gone unnoticed and unremarked. But I want to argue that the serendipitous encounter between Farrell and Agamben reveals an affinity unknown to both of them and to the critics and scholars who have written on their work.

The concept of an unknown or unconscious affinity between writers will no doubt be regarded as somewhat speculative. Affinity, used in this sense, may well allow us to relate anything to anything else. Scholarly standards must surely require knowledge to be based firmly on evidence of influence, causal determination, and interpretative certainty. But against these standards that aim for hermeneutic closure, Agamben has argued for the productive use of what he calls *Entwicklungsfähigkeit*:

> One of the methodological principles that I constantly follow in my investigations is to identify in the texts and contexts on which I work what Feuerbach used to call the philosophical element, that is to say, the point of their *Entwicklungsfähigkeit* (literally, capacity to be developed), the locus and the moment wherein they are susceptible to a development. Nevertheless, whenever we interpret and develop the text of an author in this way, there comes a moment when we are aware of our inability to proceed any further without contravening the most elementary rules of hermeneutics.[6]

Entwicklungsfähigkeit or the capacity for development is another way of describing the capacity to create openings for critical thought, thereby sustaining its potentiality. It is this methodological principle of development—a principle that contravenes hermeneutical rules—that I wish to adopt in reading together Agamben's work and Farrell's novel. Thus, despite their serendipitous association, it is their affinity, unknown to both writers, that provides us with the point of their *Entwicklungsfähigkeit*, "the locus and the moment wherein they are susceptible to development." Farrell's novel is susceptible to being read and developed along Agambenian lines while Agamben's Eurocentric work, read in proximity to Farrell's novel, invites not only a geopolitical extension but further development into a form of postcolonial criticism, a development recently illustrated by the essays in the edited collection *Agamben and Colonialism*.[7] Reading Farrell's novel and Agamben's writings together allows us to see how in their fortuitous association we may detect an unconscious affinity that opens them up to a mutual development that brings out the biopolitical and governmental elements in Farrell's novel while turning Agamben's powerful insights into biopolitical *dispositifs* in the direction of colonial rule.

The *Dispositif*, the Subject, and Bare Life

Agamben begins his book *Homo Sacer* by drawing the reader's attention to the fact that ancient Greece had two terms for the one word we use for "life": "*zoē*, which

6 Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?*, trans. David Kishik and Stephan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 12–13.

7 Marcelo Svirsky and Simone Bignall, eds., *Agamben and Colonialism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

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expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group."[8] According to Agamben, Aristotle had this distinction between *zoē* and *bios* in mind when he opposed "the simple fact of living (*to zēn*) to politically qualified life (*to eu zēn*)" with his remark "born with regard to life, but existing essentially with regard to the good life."[9] Aristotle's statement, Agamben argues, not only distinguishes between life and good life, but politicizes *zoē* by making it enter the *polis* so that it can become *bios*, the good life.[10] This politicization of life involves therefore a peculiar operation of inclusive exclusion in which simple or natural life is included in the *polis* as *bios* or good life only through its exclusion as *bare life*, an abject and disposable life about which I will have more to say.

One of the clearest descriptions of how natural life is politicized and turned into bare life occurs in a recent essay by Agamben. "The originary place of Western politics," he writes:

> consists of an *ex-ceptio*, an inclusive exclusion of human life in the form of bare life. Consider the peculiarities of this operation: life is not in itself political, it is what must be excluded and, at the same time, included by way of its own exclusion.[11]

Life is not political, but it must be politicized in order for it qualify as good life. But in politicizing life so that it qualifies as good life, the living being or natural life must be seen as harboring a deficit, an abject and disposable bare life that must be excluded so that life can be included in the *polis* as good life. The complexity of the operation that produces bare life out of the simple fact of living is evident when Agamben writes:

> It is important not to confuse bare life with natural life. Through its divisions and its capture in the *dispositif* of the exception, life assumes the form of bare life, life that was divided and separated from its form. . . . And it is this bare life . . . that, in the juridical-political machine of the West, acts as a threshold of articulation between *zoē* and *bios*, natural life and politically qualified life. And it will not be possible to think another dimension of life if we have not first managed to deactivate the *dispositif* of the exception of bare life.[12]

Natural life or the living being is thus no longer what it is in Western political society as it has been worked over by what Agamben calls the *dispositif* of exception, which operates as an apparatus or mechanism of inclusive exclusion. We will examine what Agamben means by *dispositif*, but, for now, what is clear is that the *dispositif* of exception, by dividing and separating natural life from itself, produces bare life whose exclusion allows for the capture or inclusion of life in the *polis* as politically qualified

8 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1.
9 Ibid., 2.
10 Ibid., 7.
11 Giorgio Agamben, "What Is a Destituent Power?," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32.1 (2014): 65.
12 Ibid., 66.

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life, a good life that is governable. The product of a *dispositif*, bare life is a powerful conceptual category that enables the articulation of natural life and politically qualified life, separating yet also linking them. No wonder then that Agamben can declare that life has been thoroughly politicized and that "from the outset, Western politics is biopolitical."[13]

Before proceeding to show how Agamben's account of Western biopolitics can be a useful critical resource for analyzing the operations of colonial rule in Farrell's novel, we need to ask what Agamben means by *dispositif*. What is this *dispositif* that divides and captures life, thereby politicizing it? Agamben's essay "What Is an Apparatus?" begins with a reflection on Michel Foucault's use of the term *dispositif*. Citing a 1977 interview in which Foucault briefly describes what he means by a *dispositif*, Agamben notes that "the term certainly refers, in its common Foucauldian use, to a set of practices and mechanisms (both linguistic and nonlinguistic, juridical, technical, and military) that aim to face an urgent need and to obtain an effect that is more or less immediate."[14] The Foucauldian *dispositif* is thus a heterogeneous network of governmental practices and mechanisms deployed with the strategic and instrumental aim of meeting a need or solving a problem. Unlike Foucault who sees the *dispositifs* as historically situated, however, Agamben proposes an ontological account in which they are "nothing less than a general and massive partitioning of beings into two large groups or classes: on the one hand, living beings (or substances), and on the other, apparatuses in which living beings are incessantly captured."[15] The *dispositif* or apparatus is thus "literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings."[16] For Agamben, the *dispositif* covers an extremely wide range of practices, institutions, and objects or technologies such as "prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confessions, factories, disciplines, juridical measures, . . . but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and . . . language itself."[17]

Agamben's description of the ontological divide between the two classes of living beings and apparatuses is complicated, however, by his introduction of a third class between these two, namely, the class of subjects. A subject, he tells us, is that which "results from the relation and, so to speak, from the relentless fight between living beings and apparatuses."[18] We can assume that the subject is that which comes into existence when the living being is captured and worked over by a governmental *dispositif* or apparatus. As Nicholas Heron points out, the subject partakes of "a complex topology which defines the operation of capture in Agamben's work . . . [in which] every inclusion is also and at the same time an exclusion . . . an 'inclusive exclusion' in his phrase."[19] In order to be a subject (*bios* or politically qualified life), the living being (*zoē*) is included or captured by the *dispositif* even as it (the living

13 Ibid., 65.
14 Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?*, 8.
15 Ibid., 13.
16 Ibid., 14.
17 Ibid., 14.
18 Ibid., 14.
19 Nicholas Heron, "The Ungovernable," *Angelaki* 16.2 (2011): 169.

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being) is, at the same time, excluded as a nonsubject or, to use Agamben's terminology, a bare life. The *dispositif* is thus an apparatus of exception that captures and divides the living being into, at one and the same time, a subject (that is, a validated identity) and a bare life (that is, something disposable and abject). "The inclusive exclusion of the living being in a governmental *dispositif*," Heron notes, "is what grounds the possibility of a subject, . . . [and] the determination of a subject thus coincides with the production of bare life itself."[20]

In this reading of Agamben's work, the subject is produced and secured by an operation in which the living being is captured and worked over by the *dispositif*, which, by that very same operation, also produces bare life. Where there is subject, it seems there is also bare life (or, as we shall see, in terms of British colonial governance as portrayed in Farrell's novel, the colonial *dispositif* produces *both* the colonial subject and the bare life of the colonized, subjecting both colonizer and colonized to its rules). Such a view is no doubt rather bleak. Agamben indeed appears to reinforce this pessimistic conclusion when he observes that "today there is not even a single instant in which the life of individuals is not modeled, contaminated, or controlled by some apparatus."[21] But this is not Agamben's final word on the matter. Recall that for Agamben the subject is not only the product of the *dispositif*'s capture of the living being. The subject is also the site of a "relentless fight between living beings and apparatuses."[22] He repeats this motif of a hand-to-hand struggle or fight with apparatuses a number of times in his essay.[23] Moreover, even though governmental *dispositifs* are everywhere at work in our society shaping and validating living beings as subjects, these subjects still retain something of the living being that resists total capture and management by *dispositifs*. The subject that results from the relation of capture between *dispositif* and living being is also the subject in which a constant combat between the two is waged. Agamben can, therefore, also affirm that "The more apparatuses pervade and disseminate their power in every field of life, the more government will find itself faced with an elusive element, which seems to escape its grasp the more it docilely submits to it."[24] This elusive element that resists the subject's separation from the living being, thereby rendering the *dispositifs* inoperative, is what Agamben calls "the Ungovernable."[25] It seems, therefore, that the biopolitical capture and governance of life by *dispositifs* can never be total as the biopolitical subject still appears to retain a resistant element of the living being, a part of life that is "ungovernable."

The Colonial *Dispositif's* Grip

Though Agamben limits his account of the living being's biopolitical capture by *dispositifs*, and its concomitant struggle against them, to Western political society, it can be argued that his analysis of the biopolitical paradigm can be applied as well to

20 Ibid.:169
21 Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?*, 15.
22 Ibid., 14.
23 Ibid., 15 and 17.
24 Ibid., 23.
25 Ibid., 24.

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the colonial situation. In his essay "What Is a Paradigm?" Agamben remarks that in his work he employs what he calls "paradigms," which are actual historical examples that go beyond their historical specificity to make intelligible larger constellations of meaning or significance that may have eluded a narrower historical gaze.[26] His concept of the paradigm resembles Walter Benjamin's argument that the historian should grasp history as a constellation of meaningful isomorphic events rather than follow historicism's mode of linear or logical causality, which recounts "the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary."[27] As Agamben explains:

> In the course of my research, I have written on certain figures such as *Homo sacer*, the *Muselmann*, the state of exception, and the concentration camp. While these are all actual historical phenomena, I nonetheless treated them as paradigms whose role was to constitute and make intelligible a broader historical-problematic context.[28]

Similarly, the *dispositif* of exception as a Western biopolitical paradigm can nonetheless help to illuminate and make intelligible the workings of colonial rule as a form of biopolitical governance.

In *The Singapore Grip*, British colonialism in the Far East is described as a biopolitical *dispositif* (though neither term is of course used by Farrell) that seeks to govern and shape those living beings that have come under its jurisdictional rule. For the most part, British colonial policy, like Agamben's *dispositifs*, aimed to produce proper colonial subjects by seeking "to govern and guide them toward the good."[29] Thus to Walter Blackett, "chairman of the illustrious merchant and agency house of Blackett and Webb Limited,"[30] and the other British merchants and colonial administrators, it is colonial rule that has led to "the betterment of all races"[31] in Singapore and the other colonies. As Blackett explains to Matthew Webb, the son of his business partner and a young man whose idealism leads him to question colonial rule, it was British capital and civilization that brought prosperity and "a means of livelihood to the unhappy millions of Asiatics who had been faced by misery and destitution."[32] Blackett believes fully in the slogan he has adopted for the planned jubilee celebrations: "Continuity in Prosperity."[33] But the prosperity and well-being Blackett believes colonial rule has brought to millions of Asiatics depend on the workings of a colonial *dispositif* that has the power not only to "capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure"[34] the lives of its subjects, but also the power to render these very same Asiatics into disposable forms of bare life. Colonial biopolitics aims to improve lives by subjecting them to its imperatives, by turning them into properly qualified colonial subjects. At the same time, however, true

26 Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, trans. Luca D'Isanto and Kevin Attell (New York: Zone Books, 2009).
27 Walter Benjamin, "*Theses on the Philosophy of History*," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Shocken Books, 1969), 263.
28 Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 9.
29 Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?*, 13.
30 Farrell, *The Singapore Grip*, 42.
31 Ibid., 42.
32 Ibid., 156.
33 Ibid., 158.
34 Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?*, 14.

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to the structure of biopolitics, disposable bare lives are also produced. Colonial rule distinguishes and demarcates proper colonial subjects from those other lives that fall outside its jurisdiction, lives that are unprotected by colonial law and can, like Agamben's *homo sacer*, be killed but not sacrificed, lives open to destruction precisely because they have not been politically validated or redeemed by the colonial *dispositif*. The aim of colonial biopolitics to improve life is thus also a thanatopolitics that allows life's destruction, a problematic conjunction captured concisely in the Pauline epigraph to *Homo Sacer*: "And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death."[35] In what follows, we will see how British colonial rule, as portrayed in *The Singapore Grip*, is a biopolitics that functions simultaneously as a thanatopolitics.

The aim of colonial rule, though partially acknowledged as motivated by self-profit, is described by Walter Blackett, in language resembling that of governmental biopolitics, as the improvement of the living condition of millions of destitute Asiatics: "Over this great area of the globe, covered in steaming swamp and mountain and horrid, horrid jungle, a few determined pioneers, armed only with a little capital and a great creative vision, set the mark of civilization, bringing prosperity to themselves, certainly . . . , but above all, a means of livelihood to the unhappy millions of Asiatics who had been faced by misery and destitution until their coming!"[36] Even old Mr. Webb, Walter's mentor and business partner, in his own eccentric way, believes in the biopolitical improvement of colonial subjects. He invites "young Chinese of both sexes for nude physical training and gymnastics 'to build up their bodies' " because he believes that "if China were ever to rise again and redeem itself from the shattered and decadent nation it had become, it would be thanks to mental and physical alertness and a generous helping of vegetables."[37] The satirically comic description of old Webb's belief should not distract us, however, from the biopolitical similarity between his aim of improvement and Blackett's version of "Continuity in Prosperity."[38]

The means of livelihood that colonial rule opened up for colonial subjects came, however, at a greater cost than its purported aim of improvement. What Blackett sees as economic improvement and development required a set of disciplinary *dispositifs* that radically restructured and destroyed the traditional lifeways of colonial subjects. Burmese peasants, for example, were subjected to the apparatuses of money, cash exchange, and debt, which, in turn, led to the modern *dispositifs* of wage labor and seasonal work through the division of labor. The reader is given a detailed account of what this set of *dispositifs* achieved in colonial Burma:

> Cheaper methods could now be introduced by the use of seasonal workers, the trusty "division of labour" which . . . had conferred such benefits in prosperity on mankind. To put it bluntly, you no longer had to support a man and his family all year round, you could now bring him in to do a specific job like planting or harvesting. The traditional village communities were broken up and the Burmese had to learn to travel about looking for seasonal or coolie work, from the producer's point of view a much more efficient and

35 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, ix.
36 Farrell, *The Singapore Grip*, 156.
37 Ibid., 41.
38 Ibid., 42.

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> much cheaper system. "The rice-growing delta had been turned into what someone called 'a factory without chimneys,' " summed up Walter with satisfaction.[39]

Colonial biopolitics not only transformed native peasants into itinerant wage laborers, it also spatially divided the colonizer from the colonized. A *dispositif* or apparatus based on principles of hygiene, proper sanitation, and healthy living allowed the colonial authorities to distinguish between their own properly inhabited spaces that followed those principles and the spaces of the native masses that are condemned as "densely packed,"[40] insalubrious, crime ridden,[41] impoverished, and disease infested. The "elegant European suburb of Tanglin" in Singapore, with "its winding, tree-lined streets and bungalows" in which its European inhabitants led "a peaceful and leisurely life,"[42] is contrasted to the Chinese quarter with its crowded tenements, "smell of drains," "peeling paint," "huddled shapes," and dimly lit and poorly ventilated spaces "riddled with malnutrition and tuberculosis."[43] Matthew Webb, visiting his Eurasian lover, Vera Chiang, who lives in such a tenement, asks himself, "Could someone live justly in Tanglin while at the same time people lived in this wretched tenement . . . ?"[44] It is an insightful question that raises the issue of inequality, poverty, and economic justice, but it ignores the fact that colonial biopolitics requires precisely a *dispositif* of public health and hygiene that measures the difference between the clean and healthy Europeans who live in Tanglin and the filthy, diseased masses of the Chinese tenements, between what Agamben would call *bios* and bare life. Matthew's question is not seen by the colonial regime as one directed at inequality and injustice, but proof of a deficit of hygiene and sanitary knowledge among the colonized and, therefore, reason for forceful intervention and reform by medical and municipal authorities. In her illuminating discussion of the power relations that played out between the British colonial administration and the native populations in the urban environment of colonial Singapore, the geographer Brenda Yeoh convincingly shows how municipal strategies for sanitary reform depended on characterizing the problem of ill health as caused primarily by the unsanitary habits and customs of Asian natives:

> In the colonial explanatory scheme, these traits were attributed to the basic nature of Asians and their intrinsic racial peculiarities rather than to the inequalities and contradictions inherent in colonial society itself. One of the local dailies, for example, alleged that responsibility for the insanitary conditions of Singapore did not lie at the door of the municipal and government officials but instead, "blame [lay] primarily with the Chinese residents, who [were] filthy in their habits beyond all European conception of filthiness. . . ." Disease was hence the *natural* consequence of racial characteristics and could be divorced from the social and political context of colonialism.[45]

39 Ibid., 46–47.
40 Ibid., 12.
41 Ibid., 10.
42 Ibid., 11.
43 Ibid., 391.
44 Ibid., 391.
45 Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2003), 100–01.

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What is interesting to note is that the colonial government's biopolitical mission to improve the lives of its colonial subjects—by deploying, in the name of public health and hygiene, the *dispositifs* of urban surveillance and the passage of municipal laws and measures aimed at reforming and disciplining an ignorant native populace—depended ironically on defining those very subjects as abject and filthy forms of bare life, diseased lives already given to death. The reform measures of colonial biopolitics are thus intimately tied to a thanatopolitics that has already framed the colonized under the sign of destitution, disease, and death. Biopolitical improvement requires a thanatopolitics that is dedicated to combating and destroying that which has already been consigned to morbidity and death. The narrator of Farrell's novel seems to recognize this intimate conjunction of biopolitics and thanatopolitics in the following ironic observation on how it would take Japanese bombs to dislodge disease from the congested tenement houses in Singapore's Chinatown: "In a dark space . . . lies a tenement divided into tiny cubicles, each of which contains a number of huddled figures sleeping on the floor. Many of the cubicles possess neither window nor water supply (it will take high explosive, in the end, to loosen the grip of tuberculosis and malaria on them)."[46] Farrell's narrator appears to recognize that the impoverished residents of Chinatown's tenements are already forms of bare life that can be delivered from the grip of disease only by the destruction of their inhabitation and their already impoverished lives.

We again see how a thanatopolitics is required to support and undergird colonial biopolitics in the comparison that Walter Blackett draws between British-ruled Singapore and Shanghai: "We in Singapore may have our share of overcrowding and child-labour and slums, but at least it's not like Shanghai!" The narrator further informs us that "For Walter, Shanghai was a constant reminder, a sort of *memento mori*, of the harsh world which lay outside the limits of British rule."[47] Shanghai is a *memento mori* because, without the benefit of British biopolitical governance that would ensure the good health and secure livelihood of the populace, it is a place of death: "There existed . . . a macabre thermometer to the state of health and well-being of the Shanghai population (of other cities in China, too): namely, the 'exposed corpse.' Even in relatively good times, such was the precarious level of life in China, vast numbers of 'exposed corpses' would be collected on the streets."[48] Shanghai as necropolis proves the vitality of the colonial biopolitics practiced in Singapore, just as the "exposed corpse" is a "grim *doppelgänger*"[49] that accompanies the productive Singaporean worker. As Walter Blackett triumphantly declares: "Our workers in Singapore may sometimes find it hard to make ends meet but at least they don't have that sort of thing [the "exposed corpse"] to cope with. And why not? Because men like old Webb saw fit to devote their lives . . . to the building up of businesses which would actually produce some wealth!"[50]

The biopolitical *dispositif* that Blackett sees as ensuring economic development and prosperity in colonial Singapore is, however, shown in Farrell's novel as again

46 Farrell, *The Singapore Grip*, 217.
47 Ibid., 78.
48 Ibid., 78.
49 Ibid., 79.
50 Ibid., 79.

accompanied by a merciless thanatopolitics. This conjunction of biopolitics and thanatopolitics is brilliantly rendered in a scene set in the "death houses" in Singapore. Visiting one of these houses, where the dying are brought to await their death, Matthew is confronted by its cadaverous inhabitants who inform him that their livelihood as native smallholders of rubber trees in the Malayan hinterland was taken away from them by large British-owned rubber estates like those belonging to Blackett and Webb. They accuse the colonial government of passing laws and regulations that favor the large British plantations while squeezing out the native smallholders. One of the dying men shows Matthew the editorial opinion page of *The Planter* in which the (British) writer bluntly states: "It is the honest unbiased opinion of many leading men outside the rubber industry that the less the smallholder has to do with rubber the better it will be in the long run for himself and for all the others engaged in rubber production."[51] What this scene in the death house clearly reveals is the intimate conjunction once again of a colonial biopolitics based on the *dispositif* of law and economic regulation with a thanatopolitics that destroys native smallholdings and condemns their owners to Singapore's death houses. The biopolitical initiatives that lead to the vitality and prosperity of the colonial economy are, the novel tells us, the same forces that render the Burmese peasant and the Malayan smallholder into forms of bare life, into the dying or the dead.

But even in death, Farrell's novel humorously insists, the colonial *dispositif* cannot be evaded. Biopolitics and thanatopolitics are so conjoined, like Siamese twins, that even death must still come under the governance of life. In a scene that juxtaposes Dr. Brownley's preparation of a chemical mixture to embalm the corpse of Solomon Langfield, a business rival of Walter Blackett, with a passionate debate between Matthew and his American friend, James Ehrendorf, on whether European colonialism confers economic benefits or is merely exploitative, the novel presents us with another conjunction of the biopolitical and the thanatopolitical. Just as colonial biopolitical policies promise, in Matthew's words, "beneficial-sounding things like railways and experimental rice-growing stations"[52] that result only in European commercial profit and the death of precolonial ways of life, so Solomon Langfield, one of those European beneficiaries of colonial biopolitics, even in death, is preserved and given a symbolic life by a European medical procedure. The colonial *dispositif* thus governs both life and death, or better, it confuses life and death. As Dr. Brownley unwittingly remarks, embalming Langfield is "a matter of life and death."[53]

What all these biopolitical/thanatopolitical examples from Farrell's novel show is the almost inescapable governmental power of the colonial *dispositif*, its grip, so to speak, over both life and death in the colony. This brings us, at last, to the title of the novel, *The Singapore Grip*. One of the running jokes in this often humorous novel is Matthew's puzzlement as to what is referred to exactly by the enigmatic phrase, "the Singapore Grip." On arrival in Singapore, Matthew is told by one of the RAF aircrew to watch out for "the Singapore Grip."[54] But nobody tells him what it is. So he starts to

51 Ibid., 347.
52 Ibid., 438.
53 Ibid., 438.
54 Ibid., 101.

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puzzle it out for himself. At first he thinks it is some kind of illness,[55] an assumption seconded by his French friend Dupigny who says that it is a kind of influenza, "*la grippe de Singapour*."[56] But Ehrendorf says it refers to a kind of native suitcase or grip made out of rattan.[57] Joan Blackett, Walter's daughter, authoritatively declares, however, that it is a "double-bladed hairpin which some women used to curl their hair after they had washed it."[58] At one point in the novel, Matthew thinks "the Singapore Grip" refers to some Chinese secret society handshake.[59] Finally, Ehrendorf reports on the meaning that is generally accepted for the expression "the Singapore Grip": it "refers to the ability acquired by certain ladies of Singapore to control their autonomous vaginal muscles, apparently with delightful results."[60] Matthew, however, denies this explanation and comes up with his own meaning for "the Singapore Grip," a meaning supported by the novel itself: "It's the grip of our Western culture and economy on the Far East. . . . It's the stranglehold of capital on the traditional cultures of Malaya, China, Burma, Java, Indo-China and even India herself! It's the doing of things *our* way."[61] As we have seen in the novel's many examples of biopolitical and thanatopolitical governance and control, the colonial *dispositif* enfolds all within its rule in both a vital embrace and a deadly stranglehold.

With the invading imperial Japanese army on the doorstep of Singapore, Ehrendorf thinks that the colonial grip is about to be "pried loose."[62] But he's only partially correct as the British colonial grip will be pried loose only to be replaced by the Japanese imperial grip. The invading Japanese troops are in fact gripped by their own biopolitical *dispositif*. We are presented with the example of Private Kikuchi who has to follow the rules of a *dispositif* that takes the form of a pamphlet called "Read This Alone—And The War Can Be Won." The pamphlet urges the troops to carry out the Emperor's will, fight European oppression, and promote Japan's leadership in the East. The ideological pronouncements are further accompanied by biopolitical instructions on how the troops can stay healthy, how they should treat the natives, and how they should care for their weapons:

> [Private Kikuchi] has read about . . . how to avoid sea-sickness in various ways, by keeping a high morale, by practising the Respiration Method, by use of bicarbonate and Jintan pills, and by willpower. He has learned how to cherish his weapons, what to eat, to treat natives with consideration but caution, remembering that they all suffer from venereal diseases, how to mount machine-guns in the bow of the landing-craft and to plunge without hesitation into the water when ordered.[63]

The pamphlet is thus a biopolitical *dispositif*, a survival manual designed to teach the troops how to act and how to live. But Private Kikuchi is taught how to live so that he

55 Ibid., 198.
56 Ibid., 206.
57 Ibid., 200.
58 Ibid., 200.
59 Ibid., 389.
60 Ibid., 498.
61 Ibid., 498.
62 Ibid., 499.
63 Ibid., 216.

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can, like his heroic uncle Kikuchi, kill the Emperor's enemies and die a glorious death for him.[64] Japanese imperial biopolitics, like British colonial biopolitics, is thus once again seen to be closely linked to death.

What *The Singapore Grip* describes, in the examples we have looked at (although the novel does not use the Agambenian terms we have employed), is the way in which governmental *dispositifs* or apparatuses have turned British, Japanese, and colonized natives alike into biopolitical subjects who are at once exposed to life and death. Though Farrell's novel recognizes that colonizer and colonized are unequally positioned with regard to power, they are both nonetheless subjected to biopolitical *dispositifs* and their intertwined logic of life and death. British colonialists like Blackett and Langfield and Japanese imperialists like Private Kikuchi may see themselves as separate and different from the natives they rule, but they cannot escape the biopolitical *dispositifs* that subject them to the same logic that governs the bare lives of the colonized. Colonial biopolitical aims that are meant to promote development, prosperity, well-being, and a healthy life are inevitably hitched to a thanatopolitics in which these aims are seen to be inseparable from both the colonizers and the bare lives they both create and hope to redeem. The biopolitical *dispositif* puts all its subjects, colonizer and colonized alike, under threat of death and destruction. To recall again the Pauline epigraph to *Homo Sacer*, "And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death."

Deactivating the Colonial *Dispositif*'s Grip

A hurried reading of Agamben's work might lead one to think that his discussion of biopolitical *dispositifs* is irredeemably bleak. If biopolitical *dispositifs* aimed at the good life are also linked to the death that awaits bare life, then, surely, we can all be seen as natural living beings invariably captured by and subjected to these *dispositifs* that equally mete out life and death. We will do well to remember, however, that Agamben's ontological schema includes not just living beings and *dispositifs* or apparatuses, but also a third term—namely, the subject who, it is important to stress, is not necessarily a product of capture by the *dispositif*, but the site of a "relentless fight between living beings and apparatuses [*dispositifs*]."[65] The subject can of course be a living being captured by a *dispositif*, but it can also resist its capture and subjectification by deactivating or making inoperative the *dispositif*.

For Agamben, as we have seen, the *dispositifs* are biopolitical apparatuses because they take life itself as their object with the aim of improving or augmenting it. In doing so, they transform living beings into politically determined identities, thus foreclosing the potentiality that humans possess because they "neither are nor have to be any essence, any nature, or any specific destiny."[66] Against biopolitical *dispositifs* that work to shape and control human life, thereby denying the potentiality that is the sign of human freedom, Agamben proposes a counter-strategy that affirms the inoperativity of the human, its ability to deactivate *dispositifs* by not going along with their work or

64 Ibid., 216–17.

65 Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?*, 14.

66 Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: Univeristy of Minnesota Press, 2000), 94.

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functioning properly, by being, in short, inoperative. For Agamben politics must be based on human inoperativity:

> Politics is that which corresponds to the essential inoperability of humankind, to the radical being-without-work of human communities. There is politics because human beings are *argōs*—beings that cannot be defined by any proper operation—that is, beings of pure potentiality that no identity or vocation can possibly exhaust.[67]

In one of the best introductions to Agamben's work, Sergei Prozorov describes concisely Agamben's politics of inoperativity as seeking "to restore and radicalise freedom by suspending the operation of the apparatuses [*dispositifs*], thus making room for the potential through opening existing realities to new forms of use. By rendering the apparatuses inoperative or, which often amounts to the same thing, by becoming inoperative within them, one reclaims one's potentiality 'not to' and hence enhances one's freedom."[68]

One can discern in Farrell's novel a politics of inoperativity at work to loosen the grip of the colonial *dispositif*. Like Agamben's *dispositif* of the exception that captures and divides the living being into politically validated life and bare life, the colonial *dispositif* is essentially an apparatus of division that works along racial lines to separate the colonizer from the colonized. This is most apparent in the novel, as we have seen, in the spatial division between the European quarters and the native (mostly Chinese) tenements. But the novel also presents us with a heterotopic space in which the colonial *dispositif* of separation is made inoperative. This space is the dance floor of the amusement park in Singapore called "The Great World." Matthew sees on the dance floor a "bewildering array of races and types,"[69] and this prompts him to explain why such a sight pleases him:

> *This was the way Geneva should have been!* Instead of that grim segregation by nationality they should have all spent their evenings like this, dancing the tango or the quick-step or the *ronggeng* or whatever it was with each other: Italians with Abyssinians, British with Japanese, Germans with Frenchmen and so on. If there had been a real feeling of brotherhood in Geneva such as there was here (the Palais des Nations turned into a *palais de danse*) the Disarmament Conference would not have got stuck in the mud the way it did![70]

Unlike the "segregation by nationality" Matthew witnessed in Geneva that led to the failure of the Disarmament Conference of 1932, and the racialized spatial division imposed by the British colonial *dispositif*, the Great World is a heterotopia in which divisions of race, nationality, and gender no longer operate. In the Great World's zone of indistinction everyone dances with everyone, and the rigidities of division give way to

67 Ibid., 141.
68 Sergei Prozorov, *Agamben and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 37–38.
69 Farrell, *The Singapore Grip*, 181.
70 Ibid., 182.

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the pleasures of dance. The *dispositif* of exception, in this space at least, is deactivated even though its power may remain operative in the rest of colonial Singapore.

Similarly, the colonial *dispositif* that divides the races is deactivated in the friendship between two characters in Farrell's novel—Major Archer and Mr. Wu. The identities ascribed to them by the colonial *dispositif*—Major Archer as retired British soldier and Mr. Wu as Chinese businessman—are made inoperative as they mutually identify the other as already coexistent in their own self before the *dispositif*'s division of the human being into races, nationalities, or vocations. We are told that each "recognized in the other a person so much after his own heart that it swiftly became clear to Mr. Wu that the Major was simply an English Mr. Wu, and to the Major that Mr. Wu was nothing less than a Chinese Major."[71] We are also told that it is a friendship not based on their participating in a common endeavor or having an interest in the same object given that they can barely communicate with each other: "[Mr. Wu] and the Major got on like a house on fire, a friendship conducted as much with smiles as with words because while Mr. Wu's grasp of English was loose the Major, for his part, could get no purchase on Cantonese at all."[72] What is interesting about this friendship is that it is not based on communicative intersubjectivity. Major Archer remains Major Archer and Mr. Wu remains Mr. Wu. But the colonial *dispositif* that divides them into racial identities is deactivated not by the bringing together or fusing of the identities already established by the *dispositif* but by an original sharing that precedes the division, what Agamben in an essay called "The Friend" (an essay wholly relevant to our discussion of friendship in Farrell's novel) describes as "a sharing that is purely existential, a con-division [a division that is always already a sharing] that, so to speak, lacks an object: friendship, as the con-sentiment [joint sensation] of the pure fact of being."[73] Mr. Wu and Major Archer remain who they are, separate in their respective identities; moreover, without a language in common, they cannot communicate properly with each other. But their friendship is based on a sharing that goes beyond identity (their identities are already con-divided or shared in division because Mr. Wu is the Chinese Major and Major Archer is the English Mr. Wu) or having any object in common. "Friends," Agamben reminds us, "do not share some*thing* (birth, law, place, taste): they are shared by the experience of friendship. Friendship is the con-division that precedes every division, since what has to be shared is the very fact of existence, life itself."[74] Thus Major Archer and Mr. Wu can sit in "companionable silence,"[75] no longer in the grip of their respective linguistic *dispositifs*, simply enjoying the joint sensation of what Agamben calls "the pure fact of being." And in doing so, they deactivate the colonial *dispositif* of division by forming a friendship that questions that division, a friendship based on the con-division or sharing of the pure fact of being before its capture by cultural, governmental, and linguistic *dispositifs*.

Another example of how the colonial *dispositif* can be rendered inoperative occurs when the man responsible for defending Singapore against the invading Japanese

71 Ibid., 271.
72 Ibid., 271.
73 Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?*, 36.
74 Ibid., 36.
75 Farrell, *The Singapore Grip*, 272.

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army, General Arthur Percival (an actual historical character who appears in fictionalized form in *The Singapore Grip)*, suffers a psychological disturbance and begins to doubt the reality of the Governor, the Governor's wife, his staff, and everyone in the Singapore Club.[76] The narrator tells us:

> It had suddenly dawned on Percival that he was the victim of a cruel and elaborate charade: that the moment he left the Governor's presence the fellow would cease to exist. . . . Could it really be that Churchill, Wavell, Gordon Bennett, even his own staff, had no real substance, that they were merely phantasms sent to test and torment him, incredibly lifelike but with no more reality than the flickering images one saw on a cinema screen?. . . What evidence was there they continued to exist when he was not looking at them? Why, he doubted whether the Governor, relying on the dignity of his office to deter Percival from touching him, even bothered to cloak himself with a tactile as well as visual semblance. He could probably poke a finger through him![77]

General Percival's sudden experience of cognitive dissonance can of course be attributed to the stresses of military command caused by the knowledge of imminent defeat at the hands of the enemy. But this crisis, which has him doubting the existence of his superiors and questioning the authority of rank that is the very foundation of military discipline, can also be seen, in Agambenian terms, as a suspension or deactivation of the colony's military *dispositif*, a making inoperative of its functioning. In his study of Agamben's politics, Prozorov remarks that the notion of inoperativity does not mean that the subject abandons all activity. The subject "continues to inhabit the world with its apparatuses of government but subtracts itself from its intra-worldly identities and roles that are constituted by these apparatuses."[78] General Percival's cognitive disturbance is precisely a subtraction of his identity as military commander conferred on him by a governmental *dispositif*. This subtraction—in which he remains a senior officer but doesn't act like one, and in which hierarchy remains but its reality is doubted—deactivates, even if only momentarily, the colonial war machine.

To be sure, the forms of deactivation of colonial *dispositifs* in Farrell's novel may appear rather banal in their emphasis on such ordinary events as social interaction on the dance floor, friendship, and psychological breakdown. But it is important to remember that neither Farrell nor Agamben call for extraordinary or spectacular forms of resistance against colonialism or the state. Rather what they advocate is a subtle desubjectification that subtracts the subject from the identities conferred on it by biopolitical *dispositifs* (identities such as that of English military officer, Chinese businessman, or native dancer). As Prozorov notes: "Such a subtraction requires neither the exodus from the world . . . nor the violent destruction of the world. . . . [W]e may conclude that this displacement consists precisely in the subtraction of the subject from its prescribed place in the world that makes it possible [in J. M. Coetzee's words] to 'reside in the world without becoming a term in it.' "[79] Thus a banal gesture

76 Ibid., 553.
77 Ibid., 553–54.
78 Prozorov, *Agamben and Politics: A Critical Introduction*, 144.
79 Ibid., 144–45.

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that results in the slightest displacement may give rise to something elusive and ungovernable, which is why Agamben can claim that "In the eyes of authority—and maybe rightly so—nothing looks more like a terrorist than the ordinary man."[80]

At the end of Farrell's novel we notice a metafictional suspension of itself and its realist representation of British colonial rule in Singapore through an exposure of the operations of the fiction-making machine. The narrator openly addresses and asks the reader to imagine the presence of a female and a male character whose identities he is not sure of. He also arbitrarily changes the season of the scene from summer to winter and then back to summer again. Though realist details such as a green sweater, grey hair, and "*The Times* for 10 December 1976"[81] are given, we can be sure of nothing else except that the narrator tells us to suppose this and imagine that. The concluding paragraph of the novel, in which the narrator directly addresses us, breaks the fourth wall, so to speak, through a Brechtian *Verfremsdungeffekt*:

> In any case there is really nothing more to be said. And so, if you have been reading in a deck-chair on the lawn, it is time to go inside and make the tea. And if you have been reading in bed, why, it is time to put out the light now and go to sleep. Tomorrow is another day, as they say, as they say.[82]

The conclusion of *The Singapore Grip* thus rejects conventional narrative closure and leaves the fate of its characters unknowable and inaccessible. We don't know if Matthew survives internment and Vera the Japanese occupation; we don't know if the woman described at the end is Kate Blackett, Walter's younger daughter, or whether she is married to Ehrendorf, or if the man mentioned is indeed Ehrendorf. Moreover, the narrator through his metafictional revelation at the end questions his own narrative and suspends the fiction-making operation. But the novel's inconclusiveness, its hermeneutic inaccessibility, allows for a kind of freedom as it refuses to be a literary *dispositif* that will capture the reader in its fiction. Instead of closure as actualization and capture, we have nonclosure as potentiality and escape. Challenging narrative completion, Farrell's novel opens up new possibilities: "Tomorrow is another day, as they say." It circumvents the *dispositif* as an apparatus of capture by positioning the reader in "the right relationship with ignorance."[83] By making the fate of its main characters inaccessible and by ending deliberately on an inconclusive note, the novel resembles what Agamben calls "the art of living," which is "the capacity to keep ourselves in harmonious relationship with that which escapes us."[84] And that which escapes us and our *dispositifs* that always seek to capture and shape everything into meaning and order is what Agamben calls "the Ungovernable" which, for him, is also "the beginning of every politics."[85]

Like the inconclusive ending of *The Singapore Grip*, my discussion of the relationship between Farrell's novel and Agamben's writings, even though it appears to

80 Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?*, 23.
81 Farrell, *The Singapore Grip*, 567.
82 Ibid., 568.
83 Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 114.
84 Ibid., 114.
85 Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?*, 24.

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read the novel conclusively through the latter's philosophical lens, is ultimately speculative and, hence, also inconclusive. It has not made any clearer what prompted Farrell to acknowledge Giorgio and Ginevra Agamben as the couple who suggested the title of his novel, or what exactly was said, or what the Agambens meant by "the Singapore Grip" when they chatted with Farrell at one of Sonia Orwell's parties. But it is precisely the inaccessibility of that conversation and of what it actually meant that opens up the possibility of speculation, of saying something further about Farrell's acknowledgment. Although there is no hermeneutic certainty or narrative closure and although we can have no firm grip on the relationship between Farrell's novel and Agamben's work, based as that relationship is on the most tenuous and serendipitous of acknowledgments, there is, nonetheless, in Farrell's acknowledgment, the trace of an affinity, the possibility of an *Entwicklungsfähigkeit*, a potentiality or capacity to develop another line of thought, such as I have tried to do through the unlikely pairing of Farrell's novel about the end of British colonialism in Singapore and Agamben's work on biopolitics and *dispositifs*.

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