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'Absent Sailor, Orphan Child: Seafarers' Orphanages and the Construction of the Maritime Family, C. 1874–1930'

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of juvenile institutional homes in the late nineteenth century was accompanied by increased provision for the destitute children of British sailors. Though they afforded charitable relief to mariners' families, these religiously affiliated institutions also reinforced a patriotic narrative centred on the linked figures of the British sailor and the orphan child. Using as a case-study the Royal Liverpool Seamen's Orphan Institution, formally opened in 1874, this article establishes how sailors and orphans featured within a significant public discourse, propagated through print culture, architecture, civic ceremonies, and the semi-public space of the orphanage chapel. Going beyond the institution's public rhetoric and records, and with a specific focus on the religious site of the chapel, the analysis further explores the lived experience and emotional lives of seafarers' orphans and their wider family circles. Drawing on first-person narratives, including family memoirs and a previously unused set of oral histories, it uncovers new facets of children's lives in the orphanage and the complex composition of maritime families c. 1874–1930. It contributes to research in the areas of seafarers' missions, children's history, women's history, the history of emotions, and life narratives from below.

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Introduction

In a column written in 1874 for the satirical provincial journal, the *Porcupine*, a local chaplain Drummond Anderson appealed to Liverpool readers to accompany him on a virtual tour of the homes of 'the sorrowful widows and fatherless children of our seamen'.[1] Using a common nautical analogy to depict conditions of poverty, Anderson's domestic vignettes set out scenes of urban 'shipwreck' – families rendered destitute by the death of a seafaring provider and widows eking out a subsistence wage in the absence of proper compensation from shipping companies.[2] The article seems to have piqued the

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*Submission for special issue: Mariners: Religion, Race and Empire in British Ports.

[1]Anderson, "Seamen's Orphanage," 217. Like a number of other provincial journals, the *Porcupine* combined satirical modes with trenchant sociopolitical activism; see Kilfoyle, "Political Life".

[2]Anderson, "Seamen's Orphanage," 217.

interest of local readers, and Anderson followed up a few weeks later with 'a few more leaves from the chaplain's diary'.[3] In that instalment, he offered case-studies that emphasised the global nature of seafaring catastrophes afflicting Liverpool's dockside neighbourhoods: a master mariner washed overboard in the Mediterranean; a chief cook on an African steamer dying of fever in Sierra Leone; a sailor whose ship had foundered in a hurricane at the island of St Thomas in the West Indies.[4] While the rhetorical practice of peering inside the homes of the poor was a standard mode in the Victorian press, Anderson's appeal more closely echoed the politician and shipping reformer Samuel Plimsoll's recent representation of the domestic interiors of destitute sailors' widows in *Our Seamen – An Appeal* (1873). Published the previous year, Plimsoll's influential exposé, addressed to 'fellow-Christians', laid bare British shipping companies' unscrupulous overloading of unseaworthy and heavily insured 'coffin' ships'.[5] Following Plimsoll in documenting the local and domestic ramifications of Britain's merchant trade, Anderson's accounts had a clear philanthropic purpose, since he was the first chaplain of the newly built Liverpool Seamen's Orphan Institution, an Anglican-sponsored orphanage for sailors' children situated in suburban Newsham Park (the title 'Royal' was added to its name in 1921 and is hereafter referred to as the RLSOI).[6] Founded by local shipowners, the institution was financially dependent on charitable donations from the public and Anderson therefore appealed to his readers and potential benefactors' Christian consciences by laying bare the human cost of Liverpool's economic success as the 'foremost commercial city of the empire'.[7] Anderson's accounts of sparse but tidy houses, poor but industrious women, emaciated but domesticated children, issued a clear message using the rhetorical tropes of Victorian social surveys and philanthropy: these were the homes of the 'blameless and deserving' poor who were thus worthy recipients of the munificence of the citizens of Liverpool.[8]

This article focuses on the RLSOI as a case-study of a celebrated institution within the landscape of charitable and religious missions for mariners in late-nineteenth century Liverpool, one of Britain's largest port cities as well as the location for some of the nation's direst poverty. It begins by exploring the discourse that propounded the figures of the 'absent sailor' and 'orphan child' as part of a wider national and patriotic narrative, with a specific focus on the orphanage chapel as a space in which the resident children most visibly assumed their public role as 'seafarers' orphans'. The article further reflects on the methodological challenges of going beyond dominant public-facing discourses surrounding child welfare institutions in this period. By drawing on a set of first-person narratives, including family memoirs and an unused set of oral histories, it examines the way in which personal documents can reveal new facets of children's experiences and those of the broader maritime family in the period 1874–1930, including the role of

[3]Anderson, "A Few More Leaves," 266.
[4]Ibid., 266.
[5]Plimsoll, *Our Seamen*, 86, 53. Dubbed the 'sailor's friend', Plimsoll's public and parliamentary campaigning contributed to the Merchant Shipping Act of 1876 and the implementation of the extant 'Plimsoll line' on the hull of seafaring vessels, designed to prevent the dangerous overloading of merchant ships.
[6]On Plimsoll's association with the *Porcupine*, including his role as an occasional contributor for the provincial journal, see Kilfoyle, "Political Life," 118.
[7]Anderson, "A Few More Leaves," 266.
[8]Ibid.

mothers and siblings. The article concludes by reflecting on the use of personal narratives in the context of the formation of a children's history 'from below' of orphanage life.

Documenting seafarers' orphanages

The RLSOI was one of a number of establishments providing relief to maritime families that had developed across the course of the nineteenth century; others included the London's Merchant Seamen's Orphanage (1827), the Sailors' Orphan Girls' Home (1829) and the Hull Seamen's General Orphanage (1865) as well as a number of small-scale 'homes' attached to religious missions.[9] The expansion of seamen's orphanages accompanied a growing public recognition of the dangers of the seafaring trade. For although more hidden from view than the factory or colliery, oceans were in fact industrial Britain's most dangerous workplace; according to Jonathan Hyslop, '[b]etween 1830 and 1900, one out of every five British mariners died at sea', while most sailors did not live beyond the age of 45.[10] As Plimsoll and Anderson demonstrated in their respective home visitations, the sudden loss of a household breadwinner, coupled with the inadequate and short-lived compensation paid out (if at all) by shipping companies, could devastate the maritime family, leading to destitution, family dispersal, and the perennial threat of the workhouse. Mariners' families were not, of course, unique in experiencing destitution and dependence on an uneven distribution of local welfare after the loss of a breadwinner. But what drew the ire of reformers was the perceived disparity between the national importance of the work and wealth generated by merchant seafarers, and the vulnerability of families left behind as a result of a trade that Plimsoll dubbed a 'widow-and-orphan manufacturing system'.[11]

Like other Victorian charitable institutions, seamen's orphanages occupied a peculiar place between private philanthropy, religious organisations, and the state.[12] Thus, while most were funded by private donations, their mission and ethos were entangled with broader ideologies relating to religion, nation, empire and the family.[13] But in marked contrast to the rhetoric of the Poor Law and many larger children's homes of the period, the public-facing literature and appeals for donations of seamen's orphanages emphasised children's links with their fathers and sought to rehabilitate the layered and sometimes maligned figure of the British sailor. Commonly portrayed in the national press as 'footloose Jack' – a freewheeling, childlike, pleasure-seeking traveller – mariners' missions seeking charitable donations thus reimagined the figure of the sailor in distinctly benevolent terms as a family man and responsible breadwinner.[14] Yet the paradox was that the myth of the self-sacrificial sailor was in some sense always already posthumous; it

[9]Higginbotham, *Children's Homes*, 119–29. These were, in turn, a subset of a range of profession-specific juvenile homes that proliferated from the 1850s onwards, alongside homes designated for the orphaned or needy children of police, teachers, licenced victuallers, railway servants, actors, church missionaries and the clergy (a ficitionalised version of the latter was famously immortalised as 'Lowood' in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847).

[10]Hyslop, "Steamship Empire," 57.

[11]Plimsoll, *Our Seamen*, 86.

[12]Abrams, *Orphan Country*, 26; and Sheldon, "Something in the Place of Home," 255.

[13]On the way that imperial and racial ideologies underpinned the construction of the British orphan figure, see Murdoch, *Imagined Orphans*; Hillel and Swain, *Child, Nation*.

[14]On mid-century initiatives that sought to 'domesticate' the sailor through a 'surrounding apparatus of both employer and state-based controls', see Fink, *Sweatshops at Sea*, 57. For a broader exploration of working-class sailor-fathers, see chapters 1 and 4 of Cuming, *Maritime Relations*.

was only the lost or absented sailor who could be properly redeemed as a good provider and earnest labourer.[15]

If the sailor was a mythologised figure in Victorian discourse, the sailor's orphan was doubly so.[16] Carefully distinguished from the 'street Arab', waif, stray or urchin, seamen's orphans were represented as legitimate objects of charity – both in the sense of being defined specifically in relation to their fathers' occupation and as the wholly 'innocent' victims of their fathers' dangerous labour. Figured in visual culture as white and British – despite the markedly multinational nature of seafaring in this period – the marine orphan thus occupied a relatively privileged position in the symbolic hierarchy of the infantile dispossessed. Through cultural representations, charitable appeals and civic ceremonies, the plight of 'Poor Jack Tar's orphans' was enacted through these ciphers of deserved charity.

A burgeoning scholarship has added depth and complexity to the cultural figure of the sailor through innovative use of a wide range of sources,[17] but the sailor's orphan remains largely confined to the two-dimensional portrayals that characterised their cultural and public representation. This article therefore seeks to add depth to our understanding of the maritime child so frequently seen and not heard in the historical record, other than through their well-known figuration as 'blank children' or 'little gaps in the decorous world'.[18] Fleshing out the particularities of the mariner's orphan also provides an opportunity to bring the category of age more fully into a consideration of seafaring life and labour by thinking about the lived experience of children.[19] For maritime cultural history has been strangely quiet on the subject of children in a number of ways: overlooking the significance that many sailors began their sea careers at a very young age and glossing over the fact that 'footloose' Jack was in reality frequently the provider for a family with young dependents.

The RLSOI is a useful case-study for two reasons: it was a flagship juvenile institution within Britain's 'second city of Empire' as the first orphanage in the city designed exclusively for the children of seamen, and because it was possible to locate first-person sources by a number of its former child residents. Children's voices and evidence of lived experience are notoriously hard to access in relation to the history of institutions and particularly so in the context of juvenile homes for working-class children.[20] This silence is all the more pronounced given the fact that large-scale institutions for children were usually adept at accounting for themselves; indeed, the context of their establishment and practices of governance meant that they kept detailed records narrating a powerful story of their origins, buildings, accounts and practices in documents preserved in archives. Yet rich and historically informative as those formal accounts can be, they provide remarkably little information about the experience of their young resident inmates. As Marta Gutman simply puts it in the context of her study of nineteenth-century children's charitable institutions in Oakland, California: 'visual and textual

[15]Key studies on working-class fathers as good or deficient providers include Strange, *Fatherhood*; Griffin, *Bread Winner*.
[16]On the cultural figuration of the Victorian orphan, see Auerbach, "Incarnations".
[17]Burton, "Myth of Bachelor Jack"; and Begiato, "Tears and the Manly Sailor".
[18]These well-known epithets for the Victorian orphan derive from Dickens, "Received: A Blank Child," 49.
[19]Maynes, "Age as a Category," 14; see also Maza, "Kids Aren't All Right"; Field and Syrett, "Chronological Age". For the critical implications of global historical studies of children, see Mukherjee, "Indian Child Migration"; and Hillel and Swain, *Child, Nation*.
[20]Pooley and Taylor, "Introduction."

documents tell only so much about human experience inside buildings'.[21] The turn to personal sources, such as autobiographies and oral histories, thus offers valuable access to childhood lived experience through retrospective accounts of care institutions and workhouses – although they can be difficult to locate at scale and are rarely conserved as part of formal institutional archives.[22] While these kinds of first-person accounts are adult-authored sources, affected by the passage of time, life experience and shifting emotional responses, as subjective sources they nevertheless have the potential to furnish what Alannah Tomkins terms a 'variegated emotional landscape for institutional residency'.[23] Recent scholarship by historians of childhood highlights the need to draw more specifically on child-authored sources, where they exist, such as letters, diaries and juvenile magazines, in order to enable what Maza calls 'history *through* childhood'. [24] Yet while these kinds of child-authored sources offer important new dimensions, the evidence they present has to be carefully interpreted in the context of juvenile institutions within which children's letters and writings were closely overseen, if not directly censored, by staff.[25]

In the case of the RLSOI, my search to locate personal sources necessitated a lateral and circuitous route through the broader corpus of working-class autobiographies and leads offered by archivists and local historians.[26] To date, the personal narratives I have gathered comprise the following: two separate memoirs written by the daughters of a Liverpool captain who died in a shipwreck and whose brother, Harry Cowper, subsequently entered the RLSOI in 1895;[27] and two memoirs by former RLSOI child inmates – an unpublished account by Frank Watmough (resident between 1904 and 1910), written as a 'family memoir' for his grandchildren, and a self-published account by George Bennett (resident 1937–45).[28] Adding to this slender cache of memoirs, I was able to draw on a set of overlooked cassette tape recordings consisting of oral history interviews with 'ex-orphans' (as they are called in the tapes) who attended the institution between 1911 and 1945, developed at a series of annual reunions held on the premises of the former orphanage.[29] By turns an amateur and 'found' oral history, the collective

[21]Gutman, *City for Children*, 285.
[22]On the use of autobiographies, see Humphries, "Care and Cruelty"; and on oral histories of state care, see Michell, "Oral Histories."
[23]Tomkins, "Poor Law Institutions," 295.
[24]Maza, "Kids," 1263. See also Moruzi, Musgrove and Leahy, eds, *Children's Voices*. Studies that draw on children's correspondence include: Soares, *A Home from Home?*; Mair, *Religion and Relationships*; Southart, "Girls are Wanted". On letters and testimony collected by the New Poor Law authorities that have been interpreted as forms of 'rebellious writing' by children, see King and Beardmore, "Contesting the Workhouse," 65–94.
[25]In the case of the RLSOI, child-authored sources have recently come to light in the form of copies of an in-house magazine, known as 'the Log', produced by children throughout the 1930s, and collected by local historian Steven Corcoran. But as RLSOI memoirist Bennett comments: 'Of course we must remember that the Log was supervised by teachers and therefore editors and writers had to be circumspect in what they wrote. No doubt on occasions they hid their innermost thoughts when commenting on contentious issues that perhaps required a more outspoken approach". *Orphans*, 80.
[26]On the use of non-institutional collections, specialist archives and digitised resources to furnish a history from below, see the contributions to O'Hagan's collected volume *Rebellious Writing*.
[27]For a more detailed account of the Cowper family, see Humphries, "Girls and their Families"; and Cuming, *Maritime Relations*.
[28]Watmough, "Grandad's School-Days"; and Bennett, *Orphans Without Tears*.
[29]Recorded interviews with past residents of the Royal Liverpool Seamen's Orphan Institution, Newsham Park, Liverpool, SA/7/107, transcript, The Archives Centre, Maritime Museum, National Museums Liverpool (NML). The interviewees began their accounts by providing their full names and dates of residency at the RLSOI in my transcripts that are now publicly available and open access at the NML archives; for these reasons I have chosen not to anonymise the accounts in this article. For a thought-provoking discussion of the use of individuals' names in the context of marginalised histories, see Farrell and McCormick, "Naming and Shaming?"

interviews were conducted by Norma Morris, an enterprising matron at the NHS hospital located on the site of the orphanage that had closed in 1949. Morris had developed a personal interest in the orphan reunions and set about interviewing the guests annually throughout the 1980s. Idiosyncratic in their composition – music from the reunion parties filters across the spoken testimony and the group interview setting means that the voices often overlap and intersect – these newly transcribed recordings offer an important form of testimony: a collective soundscape providing a counterpoint to both the lone voice of the written memoir and the ethos of conformity that marked institutional life.[30]

Together, these first-person sources comprise a relatively small, idiosyncratic and fragmented sample of subjective accounts within the context of a juvenile institution that accommodated thousands of children over more than 70 years. There are physically missing portions in both the textual and audio sources, and many of the narrators reflected themselves on the gaps in their memories as they looked back to their childhood years at the Liverpool orphanage. Nevertheless, I argue that they offer a rich source of evidence for accessing a view of institutional life by 'insiders', providing 'illuminating and emotional testimony as recalled through the remembered viewpoint of the child.

Patriotism, religion and everyday life in the orphanage

Funded by local Liverpool shipowners Ralph Brocklebank, Bryce Allan and James Beazley, on land donated by Liverpool city council, the Liverpool Seamen's Orphan Institution was an imposing building (Figure 1).[31] It was designed by the eminent Victorian architect Alfred Waterhouse, whose other buildings included the Natural History Museum and Manchester Town Hall, and at its peak in the 1890s accommodated over 300 children between the ages of six to fourteen. Like those other public structures, the architecture was designed to underline the orphanage's patriotic and civic status. This sense of prestige was further emphasised in the institutional fundraising literature, in which the RLSOI proclaimed itself to be a 'household word' in Liverpool and a model of its kind – no less, in fact, than 'a perfect institution'.[32] Underlining its patriotic and Christian mission, the premises were formally opened in 1874 by Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh (1844–1900) – the 'Sailor Prince' – in a ceremony led by the Archbishop of York and represented through lavish illustrations in the national press.[33] Sailors' orphans could be found scattered across other charitable institutions in Liverpool (including the Blue Coat Charity School and onboard the segregated training ships, including the Protestant *Akbar* and Catholic *Clarence*), but the RLSOI was the first bespoke institution in the city aimed at the mariner's orphan. While the orphanage was affiliated to the

[30]Examples of published oral histories of large-scale orphanages include Hamblin, *If Only These Walls Could Speak*, and Limbrick, *Children of the Homes*.

[31]The grade II listed building, which became a hospital after the orphanage closed in 1949, now lies abandoned and derelict in Newsham Park. Under private off-shore ownership, visitors can only gain access to the interior by joining privately-run 'ghost hunt' tours.

[32]*Report of the Liverpool Seamen's Institution, For the Year Ending 31st December, 1889* (Liverpool: Printed for the Institution, 1890), 25.

[33]For a detailed historical survey of the RLSOI, see Evans, *Mersey Mariners*, 107–20; "The Royal Liverpool Seamen's Orphan Institution: A Century of Progress, 1869–1969", 362.73 ROY, Liverpool Record Office.

Figure 1. 'Seamen's Orphanage. N.W. View, c. 1896', 352PSP/84/7/14. Courtesy of Liverpool Central Library and Archives.

Church of England, it admitted children of all religious denominations – an important point of inclusivity in a city marked by religious sectarianism.

The architecture of the orphanage was based on a traditional model of congregate design, formed around mass living, dining and sleeping areas.[34] Built to accommodate over 300 children at any given time, its regimen operated along lines that were typical of other 'barrack' style orphanages, albeit overlaid with distinctive quasi-maritime and militaristic overtones. Children were awoken by the ringing of a large ship's bell in the playground, while a bugle called them to various tasks. A whistle signalled the saying of grace before meals, after which the children began eating in the large, sex-segregated dining hall. Boys attended lessons in rooms named after imperial explorers and officers, including Drake, Rodney and Nelson. They saluted masters in the corridors, were identified by numbers and placed into different 'companies'. The children marched in crocodile file to meals and dressed in sailor suits to attend the chapel.[35] After another whistle sounded in the large dormitories to signal lights out, the children slept in beds at the foot of which they tied their

[34]In this sense, the newly-built RLSOI was behind the times. From the 1860s, smaller cottage-style residences were promoted as providing – at least in principle – a more familial and 'homely' environment for children taken into care; Murdoch, *Imagined Orphans*, 14–5.

[35]The sailor suit appears as an explicit example of the orphanage's nautical performativity; yet it is interesting to note that sailor suits were sometimes worn by children across various welfare institutions, including those unrelated to the professions of the sea. On the overlapping meanings of the juvenile sailor suit in the context of children's homes, see Rose, "What Was Uniform" and Soares *Home from Home?* 137–8.

belongings in neat bundles. In line with both small and large-scale children's orphanages of the period, principles of discipline, religion and domesticity were tightly intertwined: everyday routines centred around rote tasks, cleaning duties, religious and secular education, physical exercise, with some allowances for play.[36]

Marooned by a lake in Newsham Park, a suburb situated several miles from the centre of Liverpool, in a building marked by high walls and a decorative tower, the orphanage was not entirely unlike the 'total institution' of the ship at sea.[37] Thus, when the child residents of the 1930s set about to write an in-house magazine 'containing items of general interest for both boys and girls', it was, as autobiographer George Bennett recalled, 'aptly named the Log, after a ship's daily record of events while at sea'.[38] Bennett further deployed this nautical metaphor when he reflected on the children's damaging experience of sex segregation and ensuing family separation within the orphanage, remarking that boy and girl siblings 'might as well have been divided by the Pacific Ocean'.[39] As children of globe-wandering seafarers, their lives were ironically marked by acute forms of spatial insularity, segregation and separation from members of their own families. None of these routines were exclusive to maritime orphanages – the emphasis on discipline, silent meals and gender segregation formed a well-established feature of congregate-care institutional regimes well into the twentieth century. But these practices took on a peculiar significance in the context of a seamen's orphanage in which children were regularly dressed in sailor suits, sang hymns to the fallen sailor and were surrounded by the uncanny traces of a performative nautical culture. Additionally, the mythologised and absent sailor-father was inscribed within the built environment of the orphanage space: from an ornamental stone panel of a medieval ship that hung over one of the entrance pediments, to the Biblical inscription above the doorway that read 'In Thee the fatherless findeth mercy'.[40]

Sequestered in Newsham Park, the orphanage was physically separated from the port neighbourhoods whose families it chiefly served. But, like most institutions, it was not entirely 'total'. Aspects of the outside world filtered into the residential space, even if it might not have always seemed that way to the children who, by their own accounts, often felt overwhelmed by the culture of insularity and regimentation within the high boundary walls.[41] One of the key places serving as an important portal to the outside world was the space of the orphanage chapel. Built as an appendage to the main orphanage through a connecting corridor, the Anglican chapel formed an integral part of institutional life.[42] It hosted two religious services on a Sunday attended by the children and was advertised as open to members of the public as well as 'captains, officers and seamen'.[43] It was also

[36]On the broader intersection of religious and domestic ideology within institutions, see Hamlett, *At Home in the Institution*, 2–3; Alghrani, *Wayward Girls*, 101–28; Soares, *Home from Home?*

[37]Goffman, *Asylums*, 11. It is telling that Goffman makes frequent references to ships and Herman Melville's sea novel *White-Jacket* (1850) in his classic study of institutional life.

[38]Bennett, *Orphans Without Tears*, 71.

[39]Ibid., 37.

[40]Hosea, 14. 3 (New Revised Standard Version).

[41]Harry Collier (resident 1934–42) expressed this sentiment in the starkest of terms: 'Well, it was a feeling of a great big spacious building, overpowering because we were little kids and the building was . . . like a big institution. And we all felt insignificant'. Harry Collier, interview by Norma Morris, April 1989, SA/7/107, transcript, Archives Centre, NML.

[42]As noted by Hamlett, restored or newly-built chapels formed an important part of daily life across a range of Victorian institutions, including orphanages, asylums and private boarding schools. They were part of an architecture that 'self-consciously drew on older perceptions of the institution as a vehicle for patronly magnificence, and used the veneration of ancient buildings and rituals as a means of maintaining power and prestige'. *At Home in the Institution*, 161.

[43]*Report*, 20.

the site of ceremonial events, including the orphanage's Anniversary Service held each October and attended by the Mayor of Liverpool. Contemporary accounts in newspapers, and in the orphanage fundraising literature, made clear that the chapel was one means by which the wider public (on whose donations the orphanage depended) could view the child beneficiaries of their charity. More broadly, from its inception, the public chapel services were designed to boost church attendance among resident mariners in the neighbouring community, thereby bringing together the retired sailor and the unaffiliated orphan child in a type of symbolic reunion of abstract kin. In this way, the RLSOI adhered to a long tradition involving the ritual public display of orphans, ranging from urban church parades, Empire Day displays, to the parading of emigrant 'home children' before they boarded ships to Canada.[44]

The curious spectacle of ancient mariner and young orphan inspired several observers writing in the orphanage's early years to record their visits to the chapel in whimsical accounts that featured in the local press. One self-professed 'rambler', for example, declared he had 'long promised [himself] the pleasure of attending the Sunday services' and duly recorded his trip to Newsham Park in its opening year. The writer marvelled at the 'architectural beauty' and 'chaste adornment' of the orphanage building, alongside the 'perfect cleanliness' of the procession of boys in Jack Tar suits and the touching spectacle of the 'weather-beaten and world-stained faces' of some of the local seafaring congregation.[45] In 1888, over a decade after the institution's opening, the chapel services were still drawing public interest, and a local journalist reflected on the popularity of these Sunday services and recommended their diverse 'attractions', from the inspiring singing, to the 'sunlight streaming in cheerily through the ivied windows', to the impressive sight of the children in sailor suits walking down the aisle 'with their measured tramp – tramp – tramp – tramp resounding throughout the whole building'.[46]

Yet, when considered from the point of view of its 'users', as recorded in the personal narratives of the memoirs and oral interviews, the chapel space accrues further levels of significance that complicate and add layers to those public accounts. For the Cowper sisters growing up in the late Victorian period, for example, the orphanage chapel functioned as a crucial node within the context of a dispersed family. Their brother, Harry, had entered the orphanage in 1895 at the age of ten following their father's drowning in a shipwreck off the coast of Cornwall. Agnes, Harry's elder sister, remarked in her autobiography that the widowed mother's decision to place one of her children in the RLSOI had been a difficult but essential choice in light of the starvation-levels of poverty the family experienced in the wake of Matthew Cowper's death. She explained: 'To have one of the five young dependants educated, clothed, fed and given a start in life was a great relief to my mother'.[47] Agnes was also keen to emphasise that Harry himself

[44]For an analysis of the 'theatrical' and voyeuristic display of young inmates in the Poor Law institution, see Foster, 'Christmas in the Workhouse'.
[45]"Sunday Service," 361–2.
[46]"Romance of Charity," 7.
[47]Cowper, *Backward Glance on Merseyside*, 68. The economic penury of the Cowper family before and particularly after the father's death highlights the complicated class relations of maritime families in this period. Matthew Cowper had risen to a position of relative status in his career as the captain of merchant vessels, yet this rank was less stable than it appeared; his career had been hampered by problems with alcohol and disputes with crew leading to demotion and increasingly irregular commissions. By 1886 the family had moved into a bigger two-bedroom house in a 'working-class suburb' of Toxteth Park built for the 'respectable' artisan classes who worked at the docks (Daisy Cowper, 'De Nobis'), but the captain's large number of dependents, combined with poor financial investments and a diminishing career,

appeared to have regarded the move as a respectable one for a captain's son who hoped to follow his late father's vocation; he declared himself 'pleased at the prospect of change, and departed in great spirits'.[48] It is in this context that Agnes recorded her brother Harry's first chapel service parade:

> On the following Sunday several of my family attended afternoon service at the orphanage church. We were impressed by the sight of the orphan children as, accompanied by their teachers, they slow-marched up the aisle to their seats in the chancel, all of them, boys and girls, wearing nautical uniform.[49]

Despite this appraisal, Agnes's account also provided a glimpse of Harry's feelings as he spotted his family in the pews:

> As they returned down the aisle at the close of the service, we received a smile of recognition from Harry, and though his lips quivered as he passed us, he held his head high like the brave little boy that he was.[50]

Agnes simultaneously recognised Harry's emotional reaction to seeing the family from whom he was separated and approved of his ability to publicly repress those feelings: it had not taken long for Harry to inculcate the qualities required to become the 'brave little boy' of empire who would enter the ranks of the merchant navy.[51] The remaining Cowper siblings who had stayed home with their mother subsequently dedicated themselves to the weekly ritual of a visit to the chapel in Newsham Park, a practice that combined the respectability of churchgoing with a visible demonstration of loyalty to their brother. A generally uncomplaining and stoic memoirist, Agnes emphasised the sustained regularity of those visits, precisely stipulating that in the four years that Harry spent at the orphanage, the family had only missed the service on three occasions. Nor did she shy away from pointing out the physical toll that these weekly visits took on the young members of the family, commenting: 'It was not a light task to walk from our home to Newsham Park and back again, a distance of seven miles, especially for a child [eight-year-old brother, Bert] who, throughout the period, was a delicate one'.[52]

Written 16 years after Agnes published her autobiography, the handwritten, unpublished memoir of Agnes's younger sister Daisy is a potent reminder of the subjective and varying nature of childhood memory, especially between siblings. For Daisy also recalled that first Sunday service at the orphanage when she was aged five, but in far less positive terms: 'I shall never forget the utter misery to me, comparable with little Marigo's [sic] funeral, of the first Sunday of Harry's sojourn there, when I was taken to see Harry'.[53] Daisy's account provides a striking counterpoint to her sister Agnes's version, centring on what she perceived as the dismal sight of her brother's institutional procession and her own unrepressed display of emotions:

meant that the family lived in precarious circumstances even before Cowper's untimely death at sea. Agnes recalled her mother's shock on discovering after the accident that the Liverpool shipping company would pay her husband's salary only 'up to the hour of his death' (*Backward Glance*, 67).

[48] Ibid., 68.

[49] Ibid., 68–9.

[50] Ibid., 69.

[51] Like many of the RLSOI boys, Harry went on to have a seafaring career. He remained especially close to Agnes throughout her life and had made plans to retire from service to live with his sister in a cottage on the coast of Devon when he died of a sudden illness in 1939; he was buried in Suva, Fiji.

[52] Ibid., 69.

[53] Daisy Cowper, "De Nobis," n.p.

> To begin with, the organ music had the even-yet saddening effect on me, then came the regular, slow, measured tread of approaching feet along a stone passage, and as I peeped, there, leading the procession, dressed like a sailor, was our Harry with another little sailor-boy the same size. Their heads, like every head in the school, were absolutely still, and only the eyes turned to glance a familiar face at a pew's end and: oh, he was so far from me and I wanted him desperately, so I did the only thing I could, under the circumstances, I lifted up my voice and howled, 'I want Harry', and was promptly hurried out.[54]

Harry Cowper did not leave a memoir, and his feelings are only recorded indirectly through his sisters' twin accounts. But he seems to have continued to assure them throughout his life that his time at the institution had served him well, reportedly telling them: 'I know you folks at home felt sorry for me, but there was no need for you to have done so, for we were all very happy. I am quite as proud of being brought up in the Liverpool Seamen's Orphanage as I would had I been sent to one of the public schools'.[55] Whether Harry's comments reflected his genuine appreciation of the higher standard of education offered at the orphanage or his inculcation of the institution's own form of self-accounting on this point, or whether it was an attempt to assuage his family's apparent sense of guilt and ambivalence with respect to his institutionalisation, can only be guessed at.

The Cowper sisters' accounts reveal the degree to which the orphanage chapel functioned as a crucial space through which the child's original family and the surrogate 'home' of the institution intersected briefly in a wordless but meaningful exchange of embodied signs, a point that resonates throughout the later first-person sources. Memoirist Frank Watmough, for example, penned an account of what he euphemistically termed his 'school-days' at the RLSOI between 1904 and 1910 when he was in his nineties, and also vividly recalled marching to chapel services wearing 'our best clothes with our sailor collar on'.[56] Like the Cowper sisters, he recalled the significance of bodily comportment within the chapel and the power of small glances: 'as we marched along the aisle, we had to keep our heads facing to the front, and just give a smile if we happened to recognise them [the mothers]'.[57] The chapel visits are also frequently mentioned in the oral histories provided by the 'ex-orphans' gathered at the annual reunions in the 1980s, as they recalled routines and significant memories. Alec Robertson recalled packed church attendances on Sundays, bringing together parents as well as 'old boys and old girls' who had recently left the orphanage. Robertson's mother regularly travelled across the Mersey from New Ferry on the Wirral Peninsula for the ritual of a wordless exchange with her son:

[54]Ibid., n.p.

[55]Agnes Cowper, *Backward Glance*, 112. Harry's comment is echoed in Bennett's later memoir, in which he professed that as boys they had been 'proud of our old orphanage and felt superior to Dr. Barnado's [sic], the Bluecoat and similar organisations' (*Orphans Without Tears*, 219). Indeed, the RLSOI prided itself on offering an education in line with local educational standards, thus distinguishing itself from the Liverpool training ships that primarily channelled children into the merchant marine or navy. While some of the RLSOI boys, such as Harry Cowper, did follow their fathers into maritime trades, others entered white-collar professions. Among the two male memoirists referenced in this article, Watmough found work as a trainee draughtsman in a Liverpool architect's office while Bennett had a career as a compositor and proof-reader for local newspapers. However, this variety of vocational opportunity seems to have been mainly restricted to the boys; the oral evidence suggests that the majority of RLSOI girls followed the traditional female orphan's route into domestic service.

[56]Watmough, "Grandad's School-Days," 48. The slippage between the terms used by ex-residents of the RLSOI to describe their former 'home' is worth briefly noting here, ranging from 'school' to 'orphanage' to the ambiguous Scouse-diminutive 'orpho' (the latter used liberally by Morris's interviewees).

[57]Ibid., 49–50.

> She came every Sunday. And you weren't allowed to see them. You weren't allowed to talk to them. … All you did – you marched into church and you smiled at your visitors, your parents, whoever it was, and you marched out and you smiled at them, so there was no communication at all.[58]

For Fred Griffiths, who attended between 1915 and 1917, the chapel exchanges were one of the highlights of his time in the institution. He particularly looked forward to seeing his other siblings at church: 'I used to be delighted to see them from time to time, one or two of my brothers, come along to the church. It gave you a boost, to see them. Mind you, it used to give me a boost every week to see my mother, of course'. Yet it is important to note that Griffiths immediately followed this memory with an intimate reflection on his feelings of separation as a child by adding: 'But, anyhow, how they can part with kids, I don't know, when there's no need to'. In a manner typical of many of the interviewees, Griffiths was quick to minimise this personal disclosure, adding: 'Anyhow, it was just a passing thought'.[59]

A later ex-resident, Jim Vondy, implied in his oral account that there could be more than just glances exchanged at chapel:

> The only time I saw my mother was in the chapel. We used to go to chapel on a Sunday. The girls would sit on one side and the boys on the other, and the infants down the front. As you walked out, you'd see your mother at the back, and you'd see them passing the handkerchief, or something like that.[60]

While Vondy did not elaborate on the significance of 'passing the handkerchief', it suggests that some parents did manage to deliver a note, small gift or sweets. Like Griffiths, Vondy followed up the memory of seeing his mother in church with one of the most emotionally charged portions of his narrative:

> Like, to me, like I couldn't equate [sic] it – I couldn't equate being separated, you know. I just wondered which direction I lived in and I wanted to escape all the time, you know. Because I wasn't happy in this place, at such an early age. I thought it was a huge dungeon, you know.[61]

Echoing Griffiths's account, Vondy's words indicate that the chapel was the place of encounter and exchange – a crux effectively – in which the child's perception of the oddities and injustice of their circumstances became crystallised. In this sense, the experience and space of the chapel can be understood in terms of what Vallgårda, Alexander and Olsen have termed an 'emotional frontier', bringing into sharp contrast the expectations and habits of feeling associated with home and family, on the one hand, with the 'formation patterns' of institutional and religious protocols on the other.[62] The difficulty for the individual encountering this 'emotional frontier' is evident in the terms by which Vondy articulated his recalled sense that things simply did not make sense, or add up, as a child ('I couldn't equate it'). His words further characterise the orphanage in

[58]Expanding on what he perceived as the bewildering enforced separation of siblings, Robertson added: 'And that was the same with the girls and the boys. There was no communication. I *hardly* spoke to my sisters – during the first three or four years, I definitely never spoke to them. I used to smile at them for meals … they were in the dining room, on the other side'. Alec Robertson (1929–37), interview, 1990.
[59]Fred Griffiths (1915–17), interview, c. 1989, SA/7/107, transcript, Archives Centre, NML.
[60]Jim Vondy (1939–48), interview, 1985.
[61]Ibid.
[62]Vallgårda, Alexander and Olsen, "Emotions," 22–26.

relation to his emotional sense of confinement ('I thought it was a huge dungeon') while the account insists on childhood feelings of internal resistance ('I wanted to escape all the time'). As Vallgårda et al. further note, the navigation of emotional frontiers has precisely the potential to 'denaturalize certain ingrained types of feelings and practice . . . what had passed for authenticity is exposed'.[63] This is in line with a broader precept within the historical study of emotions, that emotional feelings express more than a physiological reaction and 'also involve an element of cognition and evaluative judgment'.[64] Griffiths' and Vondy's emotional digressions in the context of relating chapel rituals are therefore significant in themselves; they evoked memories that ran against the grain of the performative rituals that marked the chapel services, and their personal and emotional tenor further served to dislodge dominant institutional modes.

Across the recorded memories, some former residents recalled other dimensions of the chapel: as a place of music, for example, providing a positive distraction from the routines of orphanage life. In this vein, Eric Collier described some of his most vivid memories of the RLSOI in the 1930s as singing in the chapel choir every Sunday, which he described as an 'uplifting experience'.[65] Choir singing further offered a conduit to events outside the orphanage walls, and the interviewees enthusiastically recalled performing at a 'Blue Water' evening of sea shanty singing at St George's Hall in Liverpool city centre, as well as performances given at the funerals of local shipowners. Few commented in detail, or wholly positive terms, on what was ostensibly the chapel's primary function as a place of religious learning and experience. Griffiths, for example, spoke quite frankly about his sense of the negative impact of religious instruction:

> I think we had religion shoved down our throats somewhat, when we were in the Seamen's Orphanage. I don't know what it done to some, but it tended to keep me away from church rather than going to church. Although I went pretty regularly to the services at the Orphanage because my brother was there, and I used to go and see him whilst I was there, after we left that was it, so far as I was concerned.[66]

For him as for others, the chapel was a way of maintaining contact with a family member, but it did not inculcate any profound religious feeling in childhood.

As shown by the earlier Cowper accounts, the child's entrance into an orphanage shaped not only the lives of the children but significantly framed the life course and routines of the maritime family beyond the walls of the institution. Some of the first-person sources suggest that this was an insight acquired retrospectively by the former child inmates of the RLSOI. In his memoir, Bennett, for example, emphasised the hidden economic cost to mothers who maintained the routine of chapel visits:

> Only in recent years have old boys fully appreciated the sacrifices mothers made in order to visit their children or leave parcels for them. Ralph Robinson's mother, who lived on the Wirral, had to visit a moneylender or a pawnbroker before being able to afford the journey across the Mersey. And Bill Collier realised much later the sacrifices his mother made – including walking many miles to save tram fares – so that she could attend our Sunday

[63]Ibid., 25.
[64]Chatterjee, Krishnan, Robb, "Feeling Modern," 540.
[65]Eric Collier (1934–39), interview, 1985.
[66]Griffiths, interview. In her study of Scottish care institutions, Abrams cites a former child inmate of Aberlour Orphanage whose words closely echo Griffiths: 'Forcing religion down the throat does not do any good, it certainly put me off'. *Orphan Country*, 100.

> chapel services, and maybe leave Bill and brothers Eric and Harry a small treat at the front door.[67]

Bennett was raising an important point about the economic and physical toll of visits on single-parent families on the 'outside' – an aspect mostly hidden from view to the child inmates and, as he implies, sometimes only reckoned with later in adulthood. But Bennett's interjection is all the more striking because he was not, in fact, the recipient of the kind of maternal munificence that he details in the autobiography. For despite the Biblical epithet about the 'fatherless' carved in stone at the orphanage entrance, Bennett did in fact have a father, although his mother was dead. Bennett senior was a merchant sailor left to raise four boys on his own in a one-roomed house in Country Durham after his wife died in childbirth; following his wife's death, he placed the boys at the orphanage before setting out to trade on board ships in the Asia-Pacific region. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Bennett recalled being perplexed by the inscription that greeted him on his disorienting arrival to the orphanage.[68] When Bennett's father eventually returned from overseas to pay his sons a visit after seven years, he appeared to them as a stranger. Bennett's family situation was unusual though not unique, and his testimony exposes the structural and emotional complexities of global maritime families associated with seamen's orphanages in this period.

Conclusion: Fragments, images, words and silences

I want to end this article with two concluding points, followed by a caveat. The first point is about the type of evidence that can be gleaned from 'insider' institutional accounts that attempt to recapture the child's point of view in the context of residential care experience. As I noted at the start, seafarers' orphans, such as the child inmates of the RLSOI, were in one sense public figures: they were on view at chapel and civic parades to Exchange Flags (the site of Liverpool's former cotton exchange) and they featured in the broader cultural imaginary of the orphan child found in public appeals and philanthropic literature. But the first-person sources examined here emphasise that the orphan residents were themselves watchful agents in childhood: like children more generally, they were careful observers of the spaces around them and had an acutely embodied sense of their own place – or dislocation – within their temporary home. The sources from the RLSOI show, for example, that children readily understood the rituals of the chapel; but as well as participating in those quotidian practices, they also took what they could and made small adaptations that benefitted them – through glances, smiles, gestures, exchanges or even through the sheer pleasure of singing for its own sake.[69] These actions might be interpreted as examples of 'secondary adjustments', user 'tactics',

[67] Bennett, *Orphans Without Tears*, 55.

[68] Recalling the day he entered the orphanage (a key narrative trope across orphan life stories), Bennett wrote: 'Etched in the stonework above the short flight of steps leading to the front door were the words "In Thee the fatherless findeth mercy", meaningless to a seven-year-old Durham boy overwhelmed by so much that was strange and imposing'. Bennett, *Orphans Without Tears*, 35.

[69] Other examples of chapel-deviance can be found across the wider corpus of orphanage memoirs. Among these, Gloria Urquhart describes how she learned a sign language developed by 'older and much wiser children' to distract from long sermons while resident at Rothwell Children's Home in the 1950s; *Nobody's Child*, 23.

or acts of resistance that disrupt official norms and spatial practices[70] – but they are also more straightforwardly a crucial reminder of what Gutman describes, within the context of children's orphanages, as 'the unpredictable relationships between people and places'.[71] That buildings do not always function in the way they are intended is a commonplace for theorists of space and place, but it is one worth reinstating in the context of institutions for vulnerable children, which generally provided so little room for acts of choice, individuality or divergence from proscribed routines.

My second point relates to what this evidence reveals about the wider construction of the maritime family in need between the late-Victorian and interwar period. The reminiscences centring on the orphanage chapel surveyed here highlight a crucial feature about maritime families, obscured by the dominant and mythic binary of the absent sailor and the orphan child with which this article began. For it is clear from institutional registers in the official archive, and from personal sources such as memoirs, that the majority of children entering the RLSOI – in line with orphanages more generally throughout England – came from single-parent families, usually, though not always, headed by a mother, whose limited earning capacity impelled the use of institutions as a safety net, stopgap, or a source of education and training for their children.[72] In this way, the personal sources underscore the extent to which the idea of the orphaned 'blank child' was, of course, a complete misnomer; many children entering the RLSOI were emotionally aligned to a living parent, siblings and wider kin, as well as to the place of a specific home on the outside. First-person narratives show how emotional ties to families and home did not simply fall away as they entered institutions but actively shaped the way in which the children viewed, reacted to and sometimes resisted institutional spaces and routines. As Fred Griffiths concluded in his narrative spoken into a tape-recorder: '[The orphanage] was a good place . . . for the destitute. But for those that had led a pretty sheltered life – ah, it was not good at all. I'm not moaning, but it's just a fact of life'.[73]

I have argued that the RLSOI, like other seamen's orphanages, deployed the dual iconography of the absent sailor and orphan child through publicity, architecture, ornament, ceremonies, everyday routines and chapel services. But this symbolic binary was insufficient to account for the more intricate relations of local and global entanglements within which the British sailor's orphan was implicated. It is important to stress that the emotional relationships children maintained with family on the outside, including their mothers, were by no means straightforward, particularly in the context of familial separation; and this article has tried to ward against simplification in its consideration of the care decisions made by families and charities in the context of the abject inner-city poverty that existed in Liverpool throughout this period. Nevertheless, the

[70]On 'secondary adjustments' within institutions, see Goffman, *Asylums*, 56; for 'tactics', see De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 37–8. Small acts of resistance and rebellion by children in institutions are explored in King and Beardmore, "Contesting the Workhouse," 89; Hamlett, *At Home in the Institution*, 10–11. For a rich exploration of the complex category of 'agency' for histories of childhood, see Olsen et al., "Critical Conversation".

[71]Gutman, *City of Children*, 3.

[72]On the living parents of a majority of English orphans, see Murdoch, *Imagined Orphans*, 73–79. For analysis of how parents used institutions such as orphanages as part of a set of survival strategies, including to access training and education for their children, see Abrams, *Orphan Country*, 91–4; Murdoch, *Imagined Orphans*, 69–70; and Lees, "Survival of the Unfit," 86–87.

[73]Griffiths, interview.

sidelining of mothers from official narratives of orphanages such as the RLSOI was not incidental, but reflected the broader invisibility of working women's lives and a longstanding denigration of the working-class family and its models of economic survival and kinship relations.[74] Significantly, it is first-person accounts from below that bring mothers and siblings back into narratives of orphanage life – albeit through a focus on the chapel space that ostensibly represented the broader Christian 'family' – adding an important layer to our understanding of welfare institutions from the point of view of its users.

The personal accounts I have drawn on in the second part of this article are fragments of a fragmented archive; they do not tell – or purport to tell – the whole story. Indeed, my emphasis on the problematic nature of subjective recall is one that can could itself be developed 'from below'. For the narrators were themselves often thoughtful and self-reflexive about the partiality of their narratives and the strange workings of memory. Daisy Cowper, for instance, evocatively characterised memory as something shifting and unstable – resulting in what she called a 'kaleidoscope of recollections'[75] – while Frank Watmough valiantly completed a 10,000-word manuscript of his time at the RLSOI in his nineties, only to weary of his task at the end:

> Writing these memoirs has been more difficult than I at first thought. It is a long time to look back to, now and then a window opens, and I can see a few incidents which happened during those years, but there must be a lot I cannot recall.[76]

Yet, taken together, the memoirs and tapes manage to provide vivid – indeed kaleidoscopic – accounts of place and child-centred ways of seeing that offer detailed, sometimes disruptive, and often unsettling, evidence that can help to deepen our comprehension of maritime institutions and how they operated at the level of children's lived experience.

First person narrative sources, where they exist, are indispensable in providing historical accounts from below and offer rich material with which to furnish an emotional history of childhood that '[allows] us to access children's agency and children's voices in a new way'.[77] But I want to end this article with a caveat. Autobiographical sources might appear as a kind of 'holy grail' in the context of documentation relating to institutions for vulnerable and often voiceless children, promising the unfiltered and personal account so often absent from official archives. I, too, wanted to recover first-person voices from one particular children's institution as a means of reading against the grain of the mass of standard, repetitive and quite often predictable accounts of Victorian and Edwardian orphanages compiled by administrators, journalists, visitors and philanthropists. Deciphering the voices from matron-turned-oral-historian Norma Morris's recorded interviews only heightened my sense that oral accounts, like autobiographies, had the power to bring to light a chorus of nuanced and layered views of a world paradoxically governed by rote tasks and routine.

Yet it is not, in fact, a first-person document but an official, staged and quite small photograph from the RLSOI archive that allows us to see a young girl of colour standing smiling at the centre of the top row of a class of girls sporting institutional cropped

[74]Taylor, "Conceptualising the 'Perfect' Family"; and Alghrani, *Wayward Girls*.
[75]Daisy Cowper, "De Nobis," n.p.
[76]Watmough, "Grandad's School-Days," 67–8.
[77]Olsen, "Introduction," 3.

Figure 2. Undated photograph of girls at the Royal Liverpool Seamen's Orphan Institution, DX/66/8/5, Archives Centre, National Museums Liverpool. Reproduced with kind permission of the RLSOI registered charity and NML.

haircuts, in an undated image from around the 1890s [Figure 2]. Without a name or a specific date to go on, there is little way of gleaning more about the girl's identity and family circumstances, about her experience of life at Newsham Park, or her treatment as one of what appears to have been from all appearances a very small number of children of colour in a Liverpool care institution in the late nineteenth century. She is visible and yet enveloped in silence. As Saidiya Hartman and Caroline Bressey have shown, the lives of working-class black girls whose voices are not always documented through first-person records need to be accessed and reconstructed in different ways so that their images and historical presence do not pass into obscurity, remaining 'mystery and blur'.[78] So while first-person narratives outside of the formal archive offer the promise of individualised portraits, it is clear that a wide-ranging and creative use of a polyphony of sources will continue to be needed in order to provide a fuller picture of both children's experiences in care, and the scattered, global and complex maritime family of this period.

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[78]Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 6. See also Bressey, "Forgotten Histories."

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