

Unwed Mothers, Race, and Transgression in William Faulkner's Novels

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Abstract

As a modernist writer, William Faulkner is conflicted with the autonomy he can allow for his female characters, particularly unmarried mothers. Ideology about women during the early twentieth century, including the debates of birth control and the loss of the Southern Belle, influence the creation of Faulkner's female characters. The purpose of this paper is to explore how Faulkner's unmarried mothers transgress sexual boundaries imposed by patriarchal values in the novels *As I Lay Dying*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, *Absalom! Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses*. Faulkner's female characters can no longer strive towards the status of the Southern Belle as New South ideals emerge. Faulkner includes many unmarried mothers in his novels, as well as mixed race unmarried mothers. He leaves the impression that, through his novels, he attempts to make sense of females transgressing sexual and racial boundaries.

Are women bound only to child-bearing? In the early 1900s, Margaret Sanger and other women demanded an answer to this question through the debate of birth control as well as women's suffrage. As the birth control debate raged during the early 1900s, many Americans also feared the rise of promiscuity in adolescent girls of the white working class. Historian Mary Odem describes: "the first two decades of the twentieth century, public officials, business leaders, physicians, and social scientists, in addition to women reformers, expressed mounting concern about the apparent rise in sexual promiscuity among young working-class women in America" (*Delinquent Daughters* 96). In his novels, William Faulkner focuses on the rise of young female sexuality that dismayed doctors to female activists which would have been deplorable in the Old South, since middle-class or aristocratic women were supposed to be on a pedestal, striving toward the ideal of southern womanhood. Faulkner's female characters are often contradictory to the feminist reader when they pose a challenge to patriarchy and transgress. Since all of Faulkner's unwed mothers are incapable of reaching the desired status of the southern Belle, they reflect the nationwide ideology about the rise of promiscuity and birth control and the loss of the Southern Lady as well as the stereotypes of African American women.

Some of Faulkner's unmarried mothers challenge southern ladyhood, such as Addie Bundren, a long-time married woman and mother to five children, who is comparable to Faulkner's other unwed mothers who may or may not transgress traditional ideology. Addie relates to unmarried mothers because she is not the Southern Lady and she is not subservient to her husband. Addie also is not pious; her affair with the minister, Whitfield, results in the illegitimate child, Jewel. In Jill Bergman's analysis of Addie Bundren, she explains that it "is more productive to analyze the ways that the novel functions both a challenge to and support for the existing ideology of sexuality and motherhood" ("This Was the Answer to It': Sexuality and

Maternity in *As I Lay Dying*”). Bergman finds that Addie both challenges and supports patriarchal society and the natural role of motherhood, reflecting the time period of Faulkner’s writing and the debate about women’s sexuality. Bergman suggests Addie’s insecurity of language challenges “the shortcomings of a language that attempts to classify her solely as a mother” (“This Was the Answer to It’: Sexuality and Maternity in *As I Lay Dying*”). Addie defies patriarchal society by rejecting the language, but, at the same time, Bergman recognizes that Addie “realizes passion has a price: motherhood, pain, confinement, and death, and that the only answer available to her was for her to accept it, do her duty and, as her father recommended, get ready to die” (“This Was the Answer to It’: Sexuality and Maternity in *As I Lay Dying*”). Bergman analyzes Addie as a complex female character who feminist readers can celebrate or scrutinize, just like Faulkner’s unmarried mothers.

Bergman’s argument applies to Caddy, Dewey Dell, Lena Grove, as well as the unwed mothers of color in *Absalom! Absalom!* and “The Bear.” Through these women, especially the white women, Faulkner exhibits conflicting personality traits that can defy or uphold women’s limit to maternity, but scholars, including Bergman, have not considered the transgression, or lack thereof, of African American unwed mothers who are confined by race and are further bound to maternity than white women. Bergman’s argument, that Faulkner’s women challenge and support “the existing ideology of sexuality and motherhood” (“This Was the Answer to It’: Sexuality and Maternity in *As I Lay Dying*”), can be easily extended to Caddy, the closest character to southern Belle status, but when considering Tomasina, the character furthest away from southern Belle status due to slavery, racial background and an immediate death after fulfilling the role of motherhood, it is obvious that transgression for a woman of color in Faulkner’s novels is impossible.

The appearance of Faulkner's unmarried mothers becomes more diverse because of society's changing ideologies. At first, the debate about female sexuality only concerned white women, as Regina Kunzel suggests: "Observers had commented on a disproportionately high black illegitimacy rate since the early twentieth century, but black unmarried mothers had not attracted a great deal of interest before the late 1930s" (*Fallen Women, Problem Girls* 157). Unmarried mothers of color were initially overlooked during the 1920s, and Faulkner, at first, focused on white unwed mothers like Caddy in 1929, at a time when society desired to fix the problem of white illegitimacy. However, after the 1930s, black unwed mothers received more of society's attention, which white people used to oppress them: "Evangelical women and social workers argued that the supposed lack of stigma surrounding illegitimacy in black communities justified the segregation of their homes" (71). As black unwed mothers came under scrutiny after the 1930s, the characterization of Faulkner's unwed mothers recedes down the social hierarchy, and he introduces Tomasina in 1940, indicating his anxiety over transgression, not of white women, but of women of mixed race.

Faulkner's first unwed mother, Caddy, reflects the fall of the Old South and at first glance, supports the male patriarchal system that binds women to nature and maternity specifically because she lacks a voice throughout *The Sound and the Fury*, and readers only know her through her brothers' eyes. Caddy should be a southern Belle of a relatively wealthy and prestigious family, but her loss of virginity denies her the Belle status as well as her family's gradual loss of wealth. Diane Roberts states that Caddy becomes "a curse, not a positive presence but an absence, a nonbeing whose name cannot be spoken within the sacrosanct precincts of the Compson mansion" (*Faulkner and Southern Womanhood* 112). Caddy becomes broken goods; although her family tries to send her into marriage, her husband finds out he is not

the father to her baby. Caddy denies her family the transaction of marriage because she had already given herself away to Dalton Ames; Caddy is in charge of her own marital transaction, not her family (112). Due to her promiscuity, the Compson family disowns their only daughter. For Quentin, Caddy's unmarried pregnancy would be more dignified if the baby was the product of incest, or if he killed both her and himself: "I held the point of the knife at her throat/ it won't take but a second just a second then I can do mine I can do mine then/...it won't take but a second I'll try not to hurt" (*The Sound and the Fury* 152). Throughout the contemplation of a joint suicide, readers do not witness a protest from Caddy, perhaps because she believes her brother will not go through with the murder, or maybe she knows she has no dignified alternatives to pregnancy. Faulkner does not give Caddy a voice, and when her brother threatens to kill both her and himself, she is passive to male authority.

While Caddy has no voice throughout *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner also does not allow Caddy to see her child because she is not a Southern Lady. Miss Quentin is left in a patriarchal household, headed by her uncle, Jason Compson. Caddy tries to catch glimpses of her daughter but Jason denies her access and responds to her with hatred: "You don't give a damn about anybody... Don't think that you can take advantage of this to come sneaking back... We don't even know your name at that house... You'd be better off if you were down there with him and Quentin" (202-3). Jason's hatred of Caddy shows she is denied, not only access to her daughter and a voice, but for her name to be spoken to her daughter; her family no longer acknowledges her as their own relative. Since Caddy is not married and is not the traditional mother with custody over her daughter, Jason does not allow her to communicate with her daughter. Any mail she sends is withheld by Jason or ignored by her daughter: "'Read the letter,' [Jason] says. 'I reckon it'll say.' [Miss Quentin] read it fast, in about two looks. 'It don't say,'

she says, looking up. She dropped the letter to the floor. ‘How much is it?’” (213). Not only do male characters degrade Caddy and see her as only a source of money, Caddy’s daughter only desires money from her. Caddy is not confined to motherhood; she is only confined to being a birth mother, with the denial of a relationship with her daughter, because of her lack of Southern Lady status.

Although Caddy is denied a voice and is essentially only a birth mother to Miss Quentin, Caddy not only controls her brother’s thoughts, but she escapes patriarchal society and is the only Compson child to depart with the ruin of the Old South. Caddy may not speak through her own voice throughout the novel, but she is the object of her brothers’ turmoil, the source that the novel revolves around. Minrose C. Gwin explains how powerful Caddy is as she “traverses the spaces between presence and absence, text and nontext, the conscious and the unconscious... within the bounded text of male discourse [which] expands our sense of female energy and power...” (*The Feminine and Faulkner* 37). Caddy’s power is displayed throughout the male discourse, as Gwin mentions, and it is in the male discourse that readers discover Caddy’s control, even as a child. Just as Caddy dominates the male narrative, she possesses control over her older brothers as a child: “‘Let them mind me tonight, Father.’ Caddy said... Father said. ‘You all mind Caddy, then’” (*The Sound and the Fury* 24). Caddy persuades her father to give her what she wants, which gives her authority over her three brothers, foreshadowing that she will not exist as a passive, traditional Southern Lady. Caddy’s power grants her the capability to escape her family and the south, which she perceives as a child: “‘Now I guess you’re satisfied.’ Quentin said. ‘We’ll both get whipped now.’ ‘I don’t care.’ Caddy said. ‘I’ll run away...I’ll run away and never come back’” (19). As an adult, Caddy may be cheated out of being a mother, but she is the only Compson aware of his or her abilities to escape the decaying south. Quentin sees

no alternative to life but to commit suicide, Jason must work a dead-end job to support the family, and Benjy cannot survive on his own or take care of himself, but Caddy does not remain subservient to the trauma of the Old South.

Dewey Dell, unlike Caddy, poses a challenge for the feminist reader because she seems to only support the beliefs of unwed mothers and female sexuality during the early 1900s, and she is naturally destined, as her name suggest, to nature. Her sexual promiscuity begins on a whim; her decision to have sex is made based on the chance that her bag of cotton will be full: “if it don’t mean for me to do it the sack will not be full... but if the sack is full, I cannot help it. It will be that I had to do it all the time... And so it was full when we came to the end of the row and I could not help it” (*As I Lay Dying* 26). Dewey Dell forfeits any control over her body, leaving the control to “it,” or fate. Nature surrounds her so much that even her conception begins in nature. Dewey Dell’s pregnancy, as Deborah Clarke explains, “denies her control over her own life and her own body... By denying her body she denies her identity” (*Robbing the Mother* 45). It can be argued that, because she allows fate to make the decision about her sexual promiscuity, from conception throughout the rest of her pregnancy her body remains under control by other male characters, which therefore, means her identity does not exist.

Throughout the rest of the novel, Dewey Dell’s confinement to pregnancy gives her no escape because men control her body; men in congress make birth control and abortion illegal, but Dewey Dell also cannot protest, leaving her at the mercy of patriarchy. Although her mother, as Bergman notes, does challenge patriarchy, in part by “observing the shortcomings of a language that attempts to classify her solely as a mother” (“This Was the Answer to It: Sexuality and Maternity in *As I Lay Dying*”), Dewey Dell does not challenge the patriarchal system like Addie, because her mother may have never educated her about pregnancy in the first

place. When Dewey Dell encounters Peabody, the man capable of freeing her from her unwanted pregnancy, she stares at him, longing for him to understand her pain, but she cannot speak: “He could do everything for me if he just would... It’s because I am alone... And he could do so much for me, and then I would not be alone. Then I could be all right alone” (*As I Lay Dying* 56-7). Peabody can deny Dewey Dell her wish to abort her child, but Dewey Dell cannot think of the words to take the risk. Clarke also discusses her silence in her book: “More than her brothers... she has great difficulty speaking... Dewey Dell’s silence... defines her feminine status. Only Darl can read her mind, though she vainly hopes that Dr. Peabody will cross the language barrier and answer her unspoken request” (*Robbing the Mother* 44). Interestingly, Faulkner gives the reader few glimpses into Dewey Dell’s mind, and when we are allotted that chance, Dewey Dell accredits fate with the control of her body and we witness her inability to successfully communicate her wants and needs aloud. When Dewey Dell does meet MacGowan, who claims he can help her and end her pregnancy, she is taken advantage of in a basement of a pharmacy after hours: “A man comes to the door. He looks at Dewey Dell... He locks the door. Dewey Dell is inside. Then the light winks out...She looks at me. ‘It aint going to work,’ she says. ‘That son of a bitch.’” (*As I Lay Dying* 240-1). Unfortunately, it is assumed that the man rapes Dewey Dell, but she does not realize she is taken advantage of until it is too late. Once again, a male character controls Dewey Dell’s body, upholding the male patriarchal system. Because she cannot articulate words or question the patriarchal system, Dewey Dell’s maternity persists inevitably.

Unlike Dewey Dell, Lena is a promising character for the feminist reader. Diane Roberts observes Lena as “like Dewey Dell... nearly inarticulate; she accepts the dictates of her body... order defines Lena... as born to get pregnant” (*Faulkner and Southern Womanhood* 202-3). It

can be argued that, although Lena may accept her pregnancy, she does challenge patriarchal society. From the beginning of the novel, Lena is realistic about her social status:

The brother was twenty years her senior. She hardly remembered him at all when she came to live with him. He lived in a four room and unpainted house with his labor- and child ridden wife. For almost half of every year the sister-in-law was either lying or recovering [from pregnancy]. During this time Lena did all the housework and took care of the other children. Later she told herself, 'I reckon that's why I got one so quick myself (*Light in August* 3).

Aware that her town has nothing to offer her, Lena knew that, eventually, she would be pregnant like her sister-in-law. Just like Dewey Dell was likely not educated by Addie about pregnancy, Lena obviously had no mother figure throughout her adolescence and lacked education about reproduction. Like Caddy, though, Lena abandons the patriarchal household. Lena's pregnancy gives her the incentive to escape her family, and she has no concern about how others view her: "she'll walk the public country herself without shame because she knows that folks, menfolks, will take care of her. She don't care nothing about womenfolks" (12). Lena never asks for help throughout the novel; she is strong enough to travel, eight or nine months pregnant, without worry and without a desire to conform to southern society. Lena is resilient and capable of herself; she does not seem to characterize the stereotypical unwed mother of the early 1900s. Social workers in the early twentieth century contributed adolescent pregnancy to feeble-mindedness: "feeble-mindedness in men seemed to correlate with criminal... the feeble-minded woman was highly likely to engage in "promiscuous" behaviors. Most attributed this tendency to the abnormally passive and yielding nature of the feeble-minded woman" (Kunzel 53). Lena has one goal: to find the father of her child, and her courage to do so, while

paying no attention to the disapproval of others, proves that she is indeed not “passive and yielding” (53). She challenges the views of unmarried, young mothers in the early 1900s. She is ultimately successful in finding the father to her child, despite his disinterest in becoming a father, because she has a strong willpower, not because she is feeble-minded.

One complication Lena does cause for the feminist reader is, like Caddy, she is primarily seen throughout the male perspective, but it is possible to look past the male perspective to see Lena as a character with a role larger than being a mother. Readers find that Lena does not care how others view her, not through Lena’s voice, but through the voice of a man, Armistead: “she’ll walk the public country herself without shame” (*Light in August* 12). The end of the novel, which puts Lena back to where the novel began, travelling the countryside, also gives a male perspective of Lena: “I reckon she knew that when she settled down this time, it would likely be for the rest of her life. That’s what I think” (480). Not surprisingly, the male perspective assumes Lena wants to settle down and get married, because that is the perceivably proper role for a woman and mother in the 1900s. However, even though this novel primarily examines the crucible of race and Joe Christmas’s struggle, the socially stigmatized unwed mother, Lena Grove, triumphs in the novel and is able to get the last word: “My, my. A body does get around” (480). A reader can assume that Faulkner created Lena to give an optimistic ending, characterizing resilience, to a gothic novel about racial tragedy.

Lena is from poor family, and in *Absalom! Absalom!*, two of the four unwed mothers are of white low social class, but, unlike Lena, these women do not endure or move on from their role as mothers. Thomas Sutpen, who treats women merely as commodities necessary for his future, grew up remembering his sister’s pregnancy: “one of the older girls who had left the cabin unmarried was still unmarried when they finally stopped, though she had become a mother

before they lost the last blue mountain range” (*Absalom! Absalom!* 224). Sutpen does not offer any criticism about his sister’s unmarried pregnancy, but for a family in poverty, her unwed pregnancy is established as a fact of life. Likewise, Sutpen is also indifferent to Milly’s pregnancy, although he fathers the baby. Sutpen does not treat Milly with love or kindness: “Well, Milly; too bad you’re not a mare too. Then I could give you a decent stall in the stable” (286). Sutpen treats Milly merely as a breeder, but so does Wash Jones, Milly’s father, who used his daughter as a commodity, trading her ability to procreate for access to Sutpen’s wealth and high status. After Sutpen denies Jones the status he desires, not only does Jones kill Sutpen, but he also kills his daughter and grandchild. Milly was bound to her maternity, compared to a breeding horse, with no chance to escape maternity. She offers no verbal protest and she does not ever get to speak in the novel. Milly and Sutpen’s sister, in no way, challenge traditional views of women; they are only seen as mothers.

White women in *Absalom! Absalom!* are commodified and used as breeders, and so are mixed race unmarried mothers, like Eulalia Bon, whom Faulkner shifts his focus to. As an overseer of a plantation, Sutpen saves the estate by pacifying a slave revolt, resulting in his engagement to Eulalia, a woman passing as white. After he discovers her true race, he leaves her: “I found that she was not and could never be, through no fault of her own, adjunctive or incremental to the design which I had in mind, so I provided for her and put her aside” (240). Although Sutpen marries a woman from a wealthy family, giving him status, and bears him a son who he desires, Eulalia Bon is not “incremental to the design” (240) because of her race, her “fault” (240), which, in reality, is racially imperceptible. In the era Sutpen lives in, whites possess superiority over blacks, so he is able to feel he has “[repaired] whatever injustice [he] might be considered to have done” (264) without any guilt from his conscience. To Sutpen, his

marriage to Eulalia was a failed attempt to bore a male heir, not because she could not give him a son, but because of her race.

In the eyes of Quentin and Shreve, though, Eulalia Bon does have the possibility of transgressing, but their conversation about her is merely hypothetical. However, their conversation allows Eulalia Bon to be the only mixed race unwed mother that Faulkner allows, hypothetically or not, to escape the Tragic Mulatta figure. Diane Roberts characterizes Eulalia Bon as “a construct of the white romantic mind, possibly (if we believe Quentin and Shreve) a mulatta embittered by her “drop” of black blood” (*Faulkner and Southern Womanhood* 90). Through Quentin and Shreve’s minds, Eulalia Bon is seen as a woman, destined to get revenge for her husband abandoning her and their child. They see her, not as a sexualized mixed race woman or a subservient and compliant southern woman, but as a woman “embittered” (90), using strategic plans to spite her ex-husband by using her child as her means: “Maybe she was grooming him for that hour and moment which she couldn’t foresee but that she knew would arrive some day because it would have to arrive... the moment when he (Bon) would stand side by side... with his father” (*Absalom! Absalom!* 296). Somehow, Charles Bon mysteriously found his father, after moving to from the West Indies to the United States, and to Quentin and Shreve, the only explanation for the coincidence is through Eulalia’s anticipating preparation. They imagine her training Charles Bon, telling him ““He is your father. He cast you and me aside and denied you his name. Now go”” (297). Although she does not have her own autonomy to get revenge against Sutpen, the two characters think that she used her role as a mother to teach her child to spite the father that abandoned him. The only transgression Faulkner allows for a black unmarried mother is hypothetical, but through Quentin and Shreve’s mind, Eulalia Bon is the

opposite of the traditional southern woman, since she is mixed race, vengeful, and not subservient.

Similar to how Sutpen treats his ex-wife, Eulalia, Charles Bon also looks upon his relationship with the octoroon mistress as not legal binding, meaning that he treats her only as a sexual object, the Tragic Mulatta. Sutpen does not possess sentimental feelings toward his abandoned wife or son, just like Charles Bon disregards his marriage as an actual, binding ceremony: “That ceremony... meaningless as a child’s game... rooted in nothing of economics... since the very fact we acquiesced, suffered the farce, was her proof... of that which the ceremony itself could never force; vesting no new rights in no one” (117-8). As the marriage ceremony cannot religiously bind the couple together for life, neither can the law because, as Bon declares, “this woman, this child, are niggers...” (118). The octoroon mistress is not taken seriously, and the marriage to her exists as a “farce” (118), or a joke. Her sham marriage and her child’s illegitimacy forces her into single motherhood and condemns her to the stereotype of the Tragic Mulatta because of her mixed race; she was used, not for a marital transaction, but for a sexual object. Roberts describes the status of the octoroon mistress as a Tragic Mulatta figure: “black sexual instability was created to underscore the convenience of regarding black women as less than human... The sexual accessibility white men ascribed to black women reflected their legal relationship: master to chattel” (*Faulkner and Southern Womanhood* 74). Faulkner’s black unmarried mothers bind women to maternity, but they are further oppressed than white woman because they character’s think of them as “less than human” (74) or sexual objects.

As free blacks, racist stereotypes, like the Tragic Mulatta, bind Eulalia Bon and the octoroon mistress to maternity, and Faulkner redevelops this stereotype in “The Bear,” of *Go*

Down, Moses. Tomasina, the slave girl, fathered by Carothers McCaslin, is, in turn, raped by Carothers McCaslin, producing the illegitimate child, Tomey's Turl. Isaac discovers the taboo relationship which McCaslin does not recognize: "Carothers... while capitalizing almost every noun and verb, made no effort to punctuate... just as he made no effort either to explain or obfuscate the thousand-dollar legacy to the son of an unmarried slave girl" ("The Bear" 257). Carothers, who made no distinction between items or people of importance in his writing, gave no legitimacy to his child or slave mistress. When Tomasina gives birth, her mother, Eunice, commits suicide, causing Isaac to believe that she too, had had affairs with McCaslin. By her suicide, Eunice could be seen as enacting "a protest beyond being merely a sentimental object. She refuses to collude any longer in a system that reduces her to a "nigger"" (Roberts 84). Eunice may protest, but her protest ultimately ends her life. However, Tomasina has no chance to protest; she is characterized as a submissive slave woman, and with her motherhood role filled, she dies on the bed she gave birth on.

Tomasina can be compared to the other, white or black, unmarried mothers throughout Faulkner's novels. In relation to Caddy, Tomasina assumes control of the rest of the narrative of "The Bear;" as Quentin, Benjy, and Jason obsess over Caddy's promiscuity, the tragedy behind Tomasina's life haunts Isaac, and his findings cause him to disown his inheritance of land, which he calls cursed: "This whole land, the whole South, is cursed, and all of us who derive from it, whom it ever suckled, white and black both, lie under the curse" ("The Bear" 266). Tomasina may not endure throughout the novel like Lena Grove in *Light in August*, but Isaac, like Lena Grove, is one of Faulkner's promising characters; he not only is disturbed by his grandfather's mistreatments of slaves, he realizes Tomasina experienced a terrible misfortune: that she was taken advantage of and raped, like Dewey Dell in *As I Lay Dying*, binding her to maternity.

Similar to how Sutpen “provide[s] for” (240) his ex-wife, McCaslin, in his mind, compensates Tomasina’s children with “the thousand-dollar legacy” (257), but money does not erase vice, as Isaac contemplates years later. Isaac’s struggle with the legacy of McCaslin and Tomisina, could, in fact, mirror Faulkner’s struggles with race and the morality of slavery.

William Faulkner’s depiction of white unwed mothers throughout his novels may not offer a distinct objection or adherence to the ideology of women or mothers and his stance on the matter may not change throughout his work as an author. Later in his life, his unmarried mother characters no longer focus on white unwed mothers; eventually Faulkner turns his attention to mixed race unwed mothers and a slave mother in his 1940 work, “The Bear” from *Go Down, Moses*. Faulkner depicts his worries that with the fall of the Old South, women no longer strive towards the Belle status and they become more likely to have children out of wedlock. As readers, we also recognize Faulkner’s battle with transgression. If Faulkner would have been a devout supporter of women’s rights, his white women would always challenge patriarchal society and would never exist as bound to maternity. The fact that some of his white unwed mothers, like Caddy and Lena, are read, by some scholars, through a feminist lens, signifies that he was conflicted on his own views of women. However, the octoroon mistress and Tomasina are not given any chance to transgress their bounds and Eulalia Bon only acquires transgression of racial boundaries hypothetically through male eyes. Mixed race unwed mothers have more barriers to overcome; they are bound to maternity, bound to the stereotype of the Tragic Mulatta, and bound to submissiveness. William Faulkner, a man who grew up in the south and frequently pondered the Old South legacy in his novels, shows his internalized attempts to make sense of New South ideals, the loss of the Southern Belle, and the new freedom of black women.

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