

**Stories from the “Hem of Life”:
Contesting Marginality in Sandra Cisneros’s
The House on Mango Street and
Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye***

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With the publication of the twenty-fifth anniversary editions of *The House on Mango Street* in 2009 and *The Bluest Eye* in 1993, Sandra Cisneros and Toni Morrison both wrote essays for the new editions in which they look back on their first novels. Cisneros recalls that, as a twenty-three-year-old aspiring writer, her aim was to “write stories that ignore borders between genres, between written and spoken, between highbrow literature and children’s nursery rhymes, between New York and the imaginary village of Macondo, between the U.S. and Mexico” (xvi-xvii). Cisneros refers to a Mexican and Pan-Latin American heritage as the inspiration for her work, although her main intent was to communicate her experience as a Mexican American woman growing up in Chicago through language that transcends literary conventions and political borders. Similarly, in her essay, Morrison discusses her attempts to portray her distinct culture through her writing, commenting on her bid to articulate her meditation on internalized racism by means of a narrative that both reached and represented her community. Morrison notes that her use of a distinctive language “as well as my attempt to shape a silence while breaking it are attempts to transfigure the complexity and wealth of Black-American culture into a language worthy of the culture” (172).

Both writers show a keen awareness of the fact that to tell their stories, which have few precedents, they must create a distinct literary style, and their desire to write about their communities stems partly from their sense of exclusion from Euro-American literary texts. Cisneros has mentioned on numerous occasions the isolation she experienced as a student at the University of Iowa when she and her classmates were asked to read and comment on Gaston Bachelard’s *The*

Poetics of Space, and she could not relate to her classmates' stories of houses with attics and basements: "Well, I don't want to talk about the basement of my childhood because there were rats there! [Laughing] I don't want to go near those basements and we lived in third-floor flats and we didn't have an attic. Who in the hell had an attic!" (Torres 199). Morrison, like Cisneros, was inspired to write her first novel as a reaction to a literary tradition that did not represent her experience: "There were no books about me, I didn't exist in all the books I had read" (Matus 37). The adolescent narrators of *The House on Mango Street* and *The Bluest Eye* are acutely aware of their marginal positions in relation to mainstream U.S. society. Early in *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia MacTeer observes that she and her sister, Frieda, move about "on the hem of life" as a consequence of being "a minority in both caste and class" (11). Similarly, Esperanza Cordero exposes outsiders' racist attitudes toward her Mexican American neighborhood: "They think we're dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives" (28). By forming and transforming narratives based on the distinct languages of their cultures, these young female narrators learn to articulate their own identities and break a tradition of silence about the abuse of women in their cultures. Cisneros has commented that she sought to write about the "'ugliest' subjects [she] could find, the most un-'poetic'" (Cruz 915). Morrison's pronouncement on the importance of rejecting language that marginalizes minority groups is more definitive still. She observes in her 1993 Nobel Prize lecture, "Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge" (in Peterson 269).

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* looms large as an influence for women writers attempting to tell their stories. Woolf's treatise on the relationship between women's poverty and their lack of a literary tradition has been criticized, however, for its lack of attention to class differences and almost complete neglect of women of color. In fact, one critic has suggested that Cisneros's protagonist, Esperanza, a young girl growing up in a poor Chicago *barrio*, may well have been

prevented from finding her voice as a writer by “Woolf’s class and ethnic biases” (Doyle 7). Chicana writer and theorist Gloria Anzaldúa rejects Woolf’s premise entirely, urging women to write no matter what their circumstances: “Forget the room of one’s own—write in the kitchen, lock yourself up in the bathroom. Write on the bus or the welfare line, on the job or during meals, between sleeping and waking” (170). Woolf’s privileged position notwithstanding, however, her insistence on the importance of recording the minutiae of women’s lives continues to resonate with contemporary writers:

All the dinners are cooked; the plates and cups washed; the children sent to school and gone out in the world. Nothing remains of it all. All has vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it. And the novels, without meaning to, inevitably lie. All these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded. (89)

Morrison has clearly been influenced to some extent by Woolf’s work, as she wrote her master’s thesis on the theme of suicide in the writings of Woolf and William Faulkner (Peach 3). Although Cisneros had not read Woolf before writing *The House on Mango Street*, she nevertheless, like Woolf, used the metaphor of the house to represent physically the female writer’s claim for space in the literary world.

In the early 1980s, Francisco A. Lomelí wrote that Chicana writers had “been generally ignored or misunderstood and stigmatized as being less rigorous in their approach to producing literature” (29). In his analysis of the reasons for the eventual crossover success of *The House on Mango Street*, Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez observes that marketing strategies packaged Chicana and Chicano texts in book covers with a graphic style that “accentuates the childish, the nice, the colourful” (131), thus presenting them as unthreatening and pleasingly exotic. The use of such marketing strategies is complicated by the frequently contestatory and complex nature of the narratives themselves, however, which “give voice to unexpected and uncontainable social

problematics that break through the pleasing veneer of the ideal Latina postmodern commodity” (McCracken 39). Cisneros has noted that she has found reviews of her first novel that dismiss it because it is told from a child’s perspective frustrating, adding, “It’s really a book about the author’s search for identity and gender and class and ethnicity even though the persona is a young girl, twelve or so” (Torres 232-33). Moreover, Cisneros does not avoid the controversial topics of poverty, exclusion, and the abuse of women in a patriarchal society. As Norma Klahn notes, her writing continues a feminist tradition led by Chicanas in the 1960s who “asserted their right within the radicalized struggles for democracy and social justice to voice their experiences outside the laws of the fathers” (117). Read as a metafiction, Esperanza Cordero’s quest to find her voice and tell her story becomes a metaphor of the struggle of Chicana writers to be recognized and valued. Morrison also tells her story mainly from the viewpoint of a young girl, Claudia, but her novel, too, is far from childish and breaks a silence about contentious and even taboo subjects, such as domestic abuse, racism, and incest. On a metafictional level, *The Bluest Eye* also marks a sea change in African American literature in its shift away from portraying the African American community as a unified group. Like other black women writers who speak of the violence toward women in their communities, Morrison has had hostile reactions from many African American men, who see her engagement with difficult subjects as “sowing the seeds of division in what should be perceived, from a black nationalist perspective, as a homogenous community in the face of white oppression” (Peach 45). Thus Claudia’s narrative, which is inextricably interwoven with those of the women around her, becomes “an artistic, often poetic, exploration of the complex relations between individual and community” (Tirrell 13).

In each novel, the outcome of the story is less important than the manner in which it is recounted. The story outlined at the outset of each novel is essentially complete, so that it is not its conclusion that is important, but the manner in which it unfolds: “Since why is difficult to

handle, one must take refuge in how” (Morrison 4). *The House on Mango Street* opens with narrator Esperanza’s expression of disappointment at the latest house her family inhabits. Esperanza had longed for a “real house” with “stairs inside like the houses on T.V. And we’d have a basement and at least three washrooms. . . . Our house would be white with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence” (4). She refuses to accept her parents’ assurances that their situation is temporary, saying, “I know how these things go” (5). Her cynicism proves well founded, for her dream of an ideal house is not realized by the end of the novel. Similarly, in *The Bluest Eye* Claudia presents a succinct summary of the story of Pecola Breedlove that leaves no doubt as to how it concludes:

There were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father’s baby that the marigolds did not grow. . . . What is clear now is that all of that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth. Cholly Breedlove is dead; our innocence too. (4)

Esperanza and Claudia struggle to make sense of the world around them by negotiating the conversations they hear and the events they witness. By piecing together parental instructions, gossip, stories, advice from peers and elders, and other narratives, they attempt to find their own voices and document unrecorded histories and overlooked lives. In this chapter, I examine how the authors, by weaving together fragmented narratives and taboo themes and by using language in radical new ways, negotiate their position of marginality.

The fact that Cisneros’s novel speaks both to Chicana writers’ efforts to claim a literary space and to the adolescent protagonist’s desire to find a way of being means that the way in which Cisneros tells the story, what Claudia terms the “how,” is central to the understanding of her text. What at first appears to be an adolescent’s straightforward account of her and her neighbors’ lives is, in fact, a carefully crafted nar-

rative that is conversational but does not cite dialogues or report them in a direct manner. A close reading of the novel reveals countless markers of reported speech, with Cisneros insistently using the word “says,” which thus foreground Esperanza’s creation of her own narrative style by repeating, questioning, or dismissing conversations that she hears and engages with, leading to “a conceptual juxtaposition of action and reaction where the movement itself is the central topic” (Valdés 165-66). Esperanza is cast as much as a listener, and sometimes a reader, as she is as a narrator. Her image of the much longed-for ideal house that represents the realization of the American Dream is, in fact, filtered through her parents’ stories and dreams: “They always told us that one day we would move into a house, a real house” (4); “This was the house Papa talked about” (4); “This was the house Mama dreamed up” (4). The house on Mango Street, however, is “not the way they told it at all” (4). Esperanza’s deep disappointment at the gap between the imagined house of her and her family’s stories and dreams and the decrepit reality leads to her disillusionment with her parents’ narratives and her refusal to accept their reassurances that the house is a temporary measure.

Not only must Esperanza navigate a polyphony of voices and diverse, sometimes conflicting, points of view, but, as her reaction to her circumstances becomes more nuanced and mature, she must also decide to what extent she will accept the various versions of the stories she hears. The adults’ speech in the novel is generally portrayed as confusing, especially when they talk about sexuality. In “Hips,” Esperanza and the other girls explain the reason for the maturation of their bodies in an unintentionally humorous manner, with Rachel commenting that hips are “good for holding a baby when you’re cooking,” while the younger Nenny believes that “if you don’t get them you may turn into a man” (49). Their confusion over sexuality and maturity is compounded by the dearth of positive role models in their community. The women in Mango Street are trapped, often literally, in abusive marriages or have such limited opportunities that marriage is their only

hope for changing their lives. Marin longs to work downtown, because you “can meet someone in the subway who might marry you and take you to live in a big house far away” (26). This dream of escape through marriage is never realized in any of the stories Esperanza hears, however. Ruthie, whose marriage has broken up, is forced to return home and reverts to a second childhood of excessive dependence on her mother (68). Rafaela, meanwhile, is the victim of an obsessively possessive husband who locks her in their house for fear that “she will run away since she is too beautiful to look at” (79).

The danger of being too beautiful is echoed in the story of Esperanza’s most important peer role model, Sally. Sally’s versions of events are perhaps the ones that are most explicitly and consistently called into question. Her father beats her because “to be this beautiful is trouble” (81), yet for a time she displays a defiance that fascinates Esperanza, painting her eyes and pulling up her skirt at school until she prepares to return home as “a different Sally” (82). To escape her violent father, Sally marries a husband who is equally controlling and abusive. In the only vignette that directly refers to telling stories, “What Sally Said,” the repetition of the words “said” or “say” undermine the credibility of the excuses Sally makes for the bruises left by her father’s beatings: “He never hits me hard. She said her mama rubs lard on all the places where it hurts. Then at school she’d say she fell” (92). Although Sally is clearly the victim of her father’s violence, Esperanza is fascinated by her precocious sexuality and longs to emulate it by wearing black like her. Significantly, however, Esperanza’s mother sounds a warning note about Sally’s behavior, “my mother says to wear black so young is dangerous” (82), which will prove prophetic. In the vignette “Red Clowns,” Esperanza is betrayed by her friend, who leaves her alone with a group of boys that sexually abuse her. This experience is so traumatic that for the first time Esperanza does not want to narrate it, “Please don’t make me tell it all” (100). She situates her friend’s misleadingly positive stories about boys within the romantic myths perpetuated by popular culture:

Sally, you lied. It wasn't what you said at all. What he did. Where he touched me. I didn't want it, Sally. The way they said it, the way it's supposed to be, all the storybooks and movies, why did you lie to me? (99)

When considered within the context of Sally's betrayal, the vignette in which Esperanza tells of Sally's abusive marriage has more than a hint of bitterness: "She is happy, except sometimes her husband gets angry . . . she sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission" (101-02). Sally maintains the tradition of silence about violence and domestic abuse upheld by her own parents and by other women in the novel. There is a strong element of disappointment if not judgment here, as Esperanza realizes that Sally has succumbed to a world of confinement and lies and that she must find other role models. It is at this point that she turns to writing as both a means of communicating her experience and a way of escaping the oppression that dominates the lives of the women in her neighborhood. From here on, her role models are women who are writers or who appreciate writing, and it is through their encouragement that she finds the courage to prepare to leave Mango Street, though she acknowledges that she will always carry it with her in her writing.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia also attempts to find her way in a complex, often threatening world by weaving a story that will help her make sense of her experiences. She is a more obviously self-conscious narrator than Esperanza, for she looks back on her childhood from an adult's perspective and directly comments on her efforts to shape adults' comments into a cohesive narrative: "We . . . considered all speech a code to be broken by us, and all gestures subject to careful analysis" (150). The adults in Claudia's world deal sternly with children, "Adults do not talk to us—they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information" (5). Not surprisingly, their messages are frequently misunderstood, sometimes to hilarious effect. Maureen Peal, the "high-yellow dream child" (47) who inspires ferocious jealousy in Claudia, attempts to imitate her teacher's author-

ity by dismissing their classmate Bay Boy as “incorrigible” (51). Similarly, the sudden arrival of Pecola’s first period is confidently explained by Claudia’s older sister Frieda as “ministratin’” (19). The girls are so utterly confused by sexuality that when they learn that Pecola is pregnant by her own father, Cholly, they are not shocked: “The process of having a baby by any male was incomprehensible to us—at least she knew her father” (149-50). Disturbingly, what most strikes them about the overheard snippets of adult conversation about Pecola’s plight is the utter lack of compassion for her: “They were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story. But we listened for the one who would say, ‘Poor little girl,’ or, ‘Poor baby,’ but there was only head-wagging where those words should have been” (149).

The disappointments or unreliability of adults’ narratives is a salient theme in the novel. When Claudia and Frieda see their beloved lodger, the charming and generous Mr. Henry, consort with the prostitutes the Maginot Line and China in their home, they are well aware that his explanation that they are members of his Bible class is not to be believed, as it is prefaced by “the grown-up getting-ready-to-lie laugh. A heh-heh that we knew well” (61). The girls have learned that the women are pariahs in their community, as Claudia observes that the Maginot Line was “the one my mother said she ‘wouldn’t let eat out of one of her plates.’ That was the one church women never allowed their eyes to rest on” (60). Claudia and Frieda depend more on the way in which the stories are told than on the words with which they are told for clues as to how to interpret them, since they “do not, cannot, know the meanings of all their words, for we are nine and ten years old. So we watch their faces, their hands, their feet, and listen for truth in timbre” (10). When Frieda is sexually molested by Mr. Henry, she, like Esperanza, struggles to describe the experience to her puzzled sister:

“Did you get a whipping?”

She shook her head no.

“Then why you crying?”

“Because.”

“Because what?”

“Mr. Henry.”

“What’d he do?”

“Daddy beat him up.” (76)

Sexuality and sex are almost unspeakable, and the only possible reaction to Mr. Henry’s abuse is violence, thus suggesting a cycle of violence and abuse taken to the extreme by Cholly. The sexual trauma he suffered as an adolescent by being spied on and mocked by white men during his first sexual encounter leads him to express his inability to communicate with his daughter by raping her, “What could he do for her—ever? What give her? What say to her?” (127).

The girls take the narratives they overhear and blend them into their own discourse with their peers. Pecking orders of respectability based on moral codes segue into those based on race. The self-directed racism embodied by Geraldine, who asserts that “colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud” (67), is reflected in the children’s awareness of racially determined hierarchies of beauty. Maureen tells Pecola that the light-skinned star of the ironically titled film *Imitation of Life* “hates her mother ‘cause she is black and ugly” (52). This summary is doubly ironic, as Maureen recounts a plot based on racist notions of beauty to Pecola in an effort to cheer her up after she has been viciously taunted by boys chanting, “Black e mo Black e mo Ya daddy sleeps nekked” (50). Despite her attempts to be kind to Pecola, Maureen instinctively resorts to racist epithets when she falls out with Claudia and Frieda, shouting, “I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos” (56). Unlike *The House on Mango Street*, which ends on a note of hope as Esperanza overcomes the unreliable, contradictory, and sometimes damaging narratives that she negotiates,

Pecola's story ends in tragedy. She succumbs to madness after the death of her baby and is unable to use words to escape her trauma, instead constructing imagined dialogues that underline her mental collapse. She believes that she has realized her dream of having blue eyes and interprets her mother's inability to look directly at her as jealousy: "Ever since I got my blue eyes, she look away from me all of the time" (154). If words cannot save Pecola, however, Claudia's narrative breaks the silence surrounding the devastating effects of marginalization, racism, and sexual abuse and thus means that the pattern of abuse represented by her story will be exposed.

Besides the fragmented nature of their narratives and their controversial themes, *The House on Mango Street* and *The Bluest Eye* are notable for their use of nonstandard and nonliterary language. Having convinced her mother to let her eat her lunch in the school canteen, Esperanza reproduces the letter of permission in which her mother asks the Sister Superior to excuse her from going home "because she lives too far away and she gets tired. As you can see she is very skinny. I hope to God she does not faint" (45). While the inappropriate language and overly familiar tone of the letter is comic, the letter also points to Esperanza's mother's lack of education, which is confirmed later in the novel when she tells her daughter that she did not finish school because she was ashamed of her poor clothes (91). A key aspect of the novel's nontraditional language lies in its use of Spanish, or code-switching. Esperanza's mother "can speak two languages" (90), and when Esperanza's father tells her that her grandfather has died, he says, "Your *abuelito* is dead," referring to his father in Spanish and using the diminutive form "*ito*" to convey his love for him (56). While Esperanza's father's use of Spanish suggests how integral it is to communication and identity among Chicano families, outside the home the use of Spanish speaks of exclusion and difference. As Ilan Stavans points out, "Even though *el español* is very much a U.S. tongue and its increasing political power is unquestionable, entrance into the American Dream requires a fluency, however limited, in Shakespeare's language" (163).

In “Geraldo No Last Name,” Marin witnesses the death of a recently arrived immigrant in a hit and run. She describes him as a “wetback” and a “brazer” (66), a corruption of “bracero,” the term used to describe Mexican migrant workers who moved to the United States during World War II. Her pejorative descriptions of Geraldo indicate her reluctance to be associated with someone from a group doubly marginalized by the members’ ethnicity and undocumented status. Perhaps the most poignant vignette to deal with the difficulties of language is “No Speak English,” which centers on the recently arrived Mamacita, whose English is limited to “*He not here* for when the landlord comes, *No speak English* if anybody else comes” (77). The isolation and loneliness that result from her inability to understand or speak the dominant language intensify at the end of the vignette. Horrified to hear her baby son singing along to a Pepsi commercial, Mamacita repeats her phrase: “No Speak English, she says to the child who is singing in the language that sounds like tin” (78). Terrified that her isolation will be complete if she cannot communicate with her son, her declaration becomes a plea.

A final noteworthy aspect of the novel’s unconventional use of language lies in its intertextual references. Esperanza repeatedly refers to stories that are not normally considered to be literary, such as lullabies or skipping rhymes. The vignette “There Was an Old Woman She Had so Many Children She Didn’t Know What to Do” appropriates the title of the children’s rhyme and recasts the story in a contemporary environment devoid of charm or fantasy, as the woman in question becomes Rosa Vargas, “who is tired all the time from buttoning and bottling and babying, and who cries every day for the man who left without even leaving a dollar for bologna or a note explaining how come” (29). When Esperanza and her friends wear high-heeled shoes for the first time, they compare themselves to Cinderella (40), while Rafaela “leans out the window and leans on her elbow and dreams her hair is like Rapunzel’s” (79). Following Martín-Rodríguez, it is clear that the numerous parallels drawn between the women of Mango Street and fairy-tale characters directly or obliquely underline the women’s

confinement and subaltern role in their society (77). More importantly, however, they constitute a defiant statement that popular cultural and folkloric sources can be just as resonant and multifaceted as the “high-brow literature” Cisneros refers to in her twenty-fifth anniversary essay.

One of the most vibrant aspects of *The Bluest Eye* is Morrison’s ability to capture the distinctive colloquial language of her characters. The earthy, lively dialogues that pepper the text lend much-needed humor to her darkly pessimistic account of poverty and sexual abuse. One of the earliest dialogues overheard by Claudia conveys the reactions of the women in the community to the news that Della Jones’s husband left her because she was too clean: “Old dog. Ain’t that nasty!” “You telling me. What kind of reasoning is that?” “No kind. Some men just dogs” (8). The social hierarchies the community rigidly imposes on itself, which deem homelessness to be the worst possible indicator of dysfunction, doom Pecola from the outset. She comes to live with the MacTeer family because, as Claudia explains, “Mama didn’t know ‘what got into people,’ but that old Dog Breedlove had burned up his house, gone upside his wife’s head, and everybody, as a result, was outdoors” (11). As well as gossip, a frequently cited source is biblical language. Cholly’s Aunt Jimmy, overcome by illness, “nodded in drowsy appreciation as the words from First Corinthians droned over her” (106). Language—such as folkloric traditions maintained through the telling of ghost stories and, above all, the musical heritage passed down through the singing and playing of jazz and blues—also leads to a sense of social cohesion. Music even manages to bridge the divisions between churchgoing women, such as Claudia’s mother, and the prostitutes.

The range of intertextual references in the novel is far-reaching, including the aforementioned songs, biblical references, and films. While Morrison mentions some canonical literary texts, such as *Hamlet* and *Othello*, the most notable use of another text is the reference to a children’s primer about the ideal American family. Even before the

novel's opening passage, the dream of an ideal family has been deconstructed and destroyed as the story of Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane playing happily against the backdrop of a pretty green and white house with a red door collapses into a jumble of letters so chaotic the story becomes almost impossible to read. The neat, clear description of the ideal home is rendered meaningless. Thus the chasm between the American Dream represented by the primer and the harsh reality that Pecola inhabits is thrown into sharp relief from the beginning, just as Esperanza's dream of a perfect house is never realized.

The fragmented narratives woven together by Morrison's and Cisneros's narrators are radical in content and form. Carol Clark D'Lugo's comments on twentieth-century Mexican literature provide a useful framework for understanding the work of both authors: "The nation's fragmented social and political reality is consistently exposed in novels that dramatize a lack of cohesion, urban atomization, or disparities in class, race and gender" (1). Both *The House on Mango Street* and *The Bluest Eye* focus on characters written out of Euro-American literature because of their marginalization as women of color living in disadvantaged areas. And both authors express this condition of alienation from the mainstream through fragmented texts that represent a history that has barely been noted and that engage the reader in a process of rewriting history "by turning the passive experience of reception into an activity" (Tyrkkö 277). The use of the vernacular and nonliterary texts to articulate this experience of isolation and marginalization constitutes a rejection of the supremacy of Western texts, for, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has noted, while African American literature shares some features of these texts, "Black formal repetition always repeats with a difference, a black difference that manifests itself in the specific language use. And the repository that contains the language that is the source—and the reflection—of black difference is the black English vernacular tradition" (xxii-xxiii). Similarly, in her analysis of Latina/o writing, Lourdes Torres observes, "Using Spanish in an English language text serves to legitimize the much-maligned practice of

mixing codes in vernacular speech” (76). The use of popular language thus challenges what Bourdieu has termed “a sort of censorship of the expressive context” found in the so-called high culture represented by museums, opera, and theatre (34). Cisneros and Morrison celebrate the uniqueness of their culture but they also, to borrow Cherríe Moraga’s term, insist on the “specificity of the oppression” faced by women of color (Moraga and Anzaldúa 29). *The House on Mango Street* challenges the abuse of women that results from the upholding of Mexican patriarchal norms, while *The Bluest Eye* rejects the self-directed racism that is a legacy of slavery. Paradoxically, by facing these oppressions head-on, Cisneros and Morrison show how subjects considered to be the antithesis of poetic expression become a source of inspiration for transformative texts that make the margin the center and forge a new type of literary discourse.

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