

“You Strike a Woman, You Strike a Rock”: Challenges in the “Good Talk” of Transnational Feminism

by Gugu Hlongwane

Abstract: In this article, I investigate the complexities and challenges of a Black feminist praxis that seeks to decenter Western epistemologies by interrogating definitions of transnational feminism as a radical theoretical framework. Ultimately, by privileging situated knowledges, the paper underscores the value of dialogue or “good talk” between women as they engage in anti-global movements. The article is concerned with what a discerning transnational feminism might look like in the midst of systemic racism, patriarchal normativity, and gender imperialism.

Keywords: Black feminist praxis; transnational; anti-global; Western epistemology; hetero-sexism; situated knowledges; dialogue

Résumé : Dans cet article, j'examine les complexités et les défis d'une praxis féministe noire qui cherche à décentrer les épistémologies occidentales en remettant en question les définitions du féminisme transnational en tant que cadre théorique radical. En définitive, en accordant une place privilégiée aux savoirs situés, l'article souligne la valeur du dialogue ou du « bon dialogue » entre les femmes lorsqu'elles s'engagent dans des mouvements antimondialisation. L'article s'intéresse à ce que pourrait être un féminisme transnational éclairé au cœur du racisme systémique, de la normativité patriarcale et de l'impérialisme de genre.

Mots clés : praxis féministe noire; transnational; antimondialisation; épistémologie occidentale; hétérosexisme; savoirs situés; dialogue

Author: Gugu Hlongwane is an Associate Professor of English (postcolonial literatures) at Saint Mary's University, Halifax. Her collection, *Electric Fences and Other Stories*, was published by Mawenzi House in 2016. She is currently working on a novel as well as a second collection of short stories. Her articles appear in *Muziki: Journal of Music Research in Africa*, *African Identities*, *Journal of Black Studies*, *Research in African Literatures*, *Alternation*, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, *Postcolonial Text*, and the *Journal of Literary Studies*.

Historically, feminists in the Global North have dictated the theoretical terms of engagement to women in both the Black diaspora and the Global South, thus threatening the erasure of important contributions. The relentlessness of structural racism has required a fierce, uncompromising stance, particularly from Black women, who have worked and continue to work tirelessly to decenter Western epistemologies. Activists and intellectuals in the Global North are beginning to understand how gender struggles cannot repeat the imperialism of the early waves of feminism. All struggles are necessarily political, intersectional, international, and local; to understand this is to celebrate the agency and dignity of women worldwide.

The Combahee River Collective, founded in Boston in 1974, insisted on the *particular* experiences of Black women, arguing that “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since [their] freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (Combahee River Collective 1977). Close to a century before the founding of the Combahee River Collective, suffragist and civil rights leader Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, at the “Address to the First National Conference of Colored Women” in 1895, assumed a hopeful tone in a toxic America of “limited opportunities” (Ruffin 2007). Ruffin’s “good talk,” in her words, “teach[es] an ignorant and suspicious world that our aims and interests are identical with those of all good aspiring women” (Ruffin 2007). The “good talk,” as opposed to “noisy protestations of what [Black people] were ... not,” attempts to crush anti-Black racism for the benefit “of women and men, for the benefit of all humanity” (Ruffin 2007). Yet, as Ruffin contended, “year after year southern women [in America] have protested against the admission of colored women into any national organization on the ground of ... [the] immorality of these women...” (Ruffin 2007). Vacillating between assertions of American and coloured identities, Ruffin insists that “we are not drawing the color line,” even as this line is necessarily drawn: the “good talk,” as Ruffin puts it, is occurring “among ourselves.” Gloria T. Hull et al. (1982) boldly encapsulated the realities of Black women’s historical exclusions and subsequent responses in the title of the landmark feminist anthology *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. Today, the struggle continues “to create transformative theories and practices that dismantle racism and its interlocking effects on hetero/sexism, classism, imperialism and other oppressive ideologies” (Hobson 2016, 2).

Taking her cues from so-called Third World feminism, decolonial feminist Chandra Talpade Mohanty attempts a “good talk” premised on the understanding that the “connection between women as historical subjects and the representation of Woman produced by hegemonic discourses is not a relation of direct identity, or a relation of correspondence or simple implication. It is an arbitrary relation set up in particular cultural and historical contexts” (Mohanty 1988, 62). Writing along the same lines as Mohanty, Carol Boyce Davies invites an engagement of “African cultures on their own terms, as distinct from Western cultural impositions” (Boyce Davies 2015, 2), while simultaneously encouraging “women’s peace organizations and ... international connections between women” (Boyce Davies 2015, 20). Just as Mohanty—and likely Davies—accepts her subject position in the US academy today as being “inside” rather than “under” the Western gaze (Mohanty 2003, 221), Robin Maynard is cognizant of how, in the Global North, “transnational Black feminist subjects [are] challenge[d] ... to view how Black diaspora is continually made and remade due to the ongoing relationship between Western imperialism and dislocation impacting the Caribbean, Africa, and the rest of the global South” (Maynard 2019). Ultimately, for Maynard, “the fact of Western empire presents an ethical demand ... an outright refusal to be the (Black) handmaidens of imperialism, a rejection of the false promises of ‘Black capitalism’ as freedom, and a rejection of the policies of Western nation-states that continually unmake the lives of Black subjects across the global south” (Maynard 2019).

The “good talk” between women, therefore, requires honesty from transnational feminists in the Global North about how the world is actually designed. The reign of terror of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, popularly known as ICE, evidences the long tentacles of structural racism. That ICE resides in five Canadian cities (see Ali 2026) should give us pause about the narrative of “the Good Canadian.”

Dialogue has been the lifeline of Black and Brown women who, sometimes in “noisy protestations,” (Ruffin 2007) have used whatever material is at their disposal, including hairstyles, to communicate crucial messages. Anneeth Kaur Hundle et al. (2019) importantly ask the question, “What is the *Transnational* in Transnational Feminist Research?” The answer necessitates an acknowledgement of the inequities in women’s access to power and “the efforts required to work against the grain of the existing forms of canonical scholarship or heteropatriarchal nationalisms in research practice and scholarship.... The researcher’s positionality, as a tenet of feminist methodologies, is even more salient when working transnationally or adopting a transnational lens. The researcher’s social location vis-à-vis the subjects of feminist research raises questions relating to mobility, access and privilege, which are sometimes veiled by a transnational focus” (Hundle, Szeman, and Hoare 2019, 5).

There is a level of defiance from transnational feminists like Maynard and Hundle et al. that is very encouraging for women’s global autonomy. These feminists aren’t nervous about the conversations that must be had if the cycle of

fundamentalism and authoritarianism is to end. A discerning transnational feminism, therefore, should be far removed from mainstream feminism that, for Mikki Kendall, ignores “basic needs as a feminist issue. Food and security and access to quality education, safe neighbourhoods, a living wage, and medical care are all feminist issues” (Kendall 2020, xv).

Zehra F. Kabasakal Arat, who proposes the reclamation of Third World feminism as theoretical framework, foregrounds what is at stake in the very process of such a reclaiming. Arat contests “the erasure” of Third World feminism “and the repackaging of this feminist theory—which is informed by Third World women’s experiences, articulated by them, and grounded in the history and realities of some dominated geographies—as ‘transnational feminism’” (Arat 2025, 176). Arat is convinced that “if we do not point to the geographical origin of knowledge production but instead disperse the ownership under ‘transnational feminism,’ we disregard an already anonymous act of theory building to the extent of erasing the collective authorship as a geography ... and [thus] commit epistemic injustice against Third World women” (Arat 2025, 176).

High wire “theory building” can be a cutthroat, even toxic and divisive undertaking, but it need not be. When Chikwenye Ogunyemi, for instance, “arrived at the term ‘womanism’ independently” (Ogunyemi 1985, 72) or Alice Walker (1983, xi-xii), there were no “noisy proclamations” (Ruffin 2007) of “epistemic injustice” (Arat 2025). Ultimately, the fruits of the feminist struggle have yielded results in both public and private spheres, though there is still much ground to cover in bodily autonomy, reproductive rights, economic freedom and safety from violence.

What is exciting about theory—or scholarship in general—is the opportunity not only to yearn but to trouble the knowledge under construction. Not all voices are immediately heard; many sound louder because of the position and power of microphones. A discerning transnational feminism, then, has to be one that, according to Mohanty, “acknowledges the fault lines, conflicts, differences, fears, and containment that borders represent. It acknowledges that there is no sense of a border, that the lines between and through nations, races, classes, sexualities, religions, and disabilities, are real—and that feminism without borders must envision change and social justice work across these lines of demarcation and division (Mohanty 2003, 2).

Rajna Kothari similarly regards a robust transnational feminism as one that must be distanced from “the modernist, competitive and ‘catching up’ orientation of the first generation of feminists [and] western conservationists for whom ‘the wretched of the earth,’ fast multiplying and making demands on the resource pool of the planet, are the source of environmental degradation, who they would like to exclude from access to natural resources which are, in fact, being far more rapaciously depleted by... the modern ‘development project’ than by the poor and the deprived” (Kothari 1989, ix).

The narrative of a lagging “Third World” is perpetuated by so-called radical thinkers who are too idle to venture beyond existing stereotypes. It seems easier to lead with the hackneyed—and unequivocally racist—perceptions of Africa, for instance, than with examples of African vibrancy and self-sufficiency that Chimamanda Adichie lists in her iconic Ted talk, “The Danger of a Single Story” (Adichie 2009).

A thriving transnational feminism should embrace both the “good talk” as well as “the mourning in our knowledges for what our words leave behind” (Romanyshyn 2007, 6). The notion that the terminology “Global South” offers a more neutral alternative to “Third World” evidences Adichie’s “single story.” Wealth and poverty are not determined by geography, nor are innovation and leadership. In fact, Mohanty observes how, “in the United States, women’s movements have become increasingly conservative, and much radical, antiracist feminist activism occurs outside the rubric of such movements” (Mohanty 2003, 221). Furthermore, she notes that “because social movements are crucial sites for the construction of knowledge, communities, and identities, it is very important for feminists to direct themselves toward them. The antiglobalization movements of the last five years have proven that one does not have to be a multinational corporation, controller of financial capital, or transnational governing institution to cross national borders. These movements form an important site for examining the construction of transborder democratic citizenship (Mohanty 2003, 248).

This means, for Mohanty, that “feminist activist teachers must struggle with themselves and each other to open the world with all its complexity to their students. Given the new multi-ethnic racial student bodies, teachers must also learn from their students. The differences and borders of each of our identities connect us to each other, more than they sever (Mohanty 2003, 250-251). This is precisely what the Canadian government sadly miscalculates in its draconian, anti-immigration Bill C-12, which, rather than supposedly strengthen Canada’s borders, robs classrooms of diversity, and escalates risk for female refugees in particular.

Black women, as Audre Lorde’s “sister outsider,” are in an unenviable position, “distrust[ing] everything in themselves” and each other (Lorde 1984, 102) while confronting the stinging effects of heteropatriarchal ideologies, trans-Atlantic slavery, colonialism, apartheid, neocolonialism, and many other social ills. Using a Maoist mountain metaphor, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, for instance, counts six mountains on the African woman’s back, one of which is the African woman herself, “shackled” as she is by negative self-perceptions and “centuries of the interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy” (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994, 36). The harsh reality of African women’s lives belies the romantic mother trope employed by nationalist poets like Leopold Senghor: “The African woman does not need to be liberated. She has been free for many thousands of years,” Senghor (1970) argues. As exhausted as African women are from the misrepresentations and erasures, they stubbornly fight for freedom *on their own terms*.

The voices of women from the Global South have always been essential and loud. On August 9, 1956, twenty thousand South African women across racial lines descended upon the Union Buildings in Pretoria for a “good talk” with the then-Prime Minister Hans Strijdom. At this march, the women submitted a petition against the racist apartheid legislation, “Pass Laws,” which controlled Black people’s freedom of movement. “*Wathinta abafazi, wathinta imbokodo*,” the women protested in isiZulu, a battle cry which translates, “You strike a woman, you strike a rock.” The official end of apartheid or racial segregation in 1994 is owed to the activist labour of South African women like these.

There was no “good [political] talk” allowed in apartheid South Africa, though that “talk” flourished anyway. Speaking one’s mind invited the wrath of the state which brutally incarcerated and killed children; South Africa was a giant prison for Black South Africans denied the right to vote, move, love, write, organize and strike. Women like Ellen Kuzwayo and Emma Mashinini could pen autobiographies precisely because of the foundation of active citizenship laid by the women who, long before 1956, marched against Pass Laws in 1913, as well as the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW), that, in a milestone moment of 1954, drafted and adopted the Women’s Charter. Despite these remarkable strides, Black women in this part of the world have continued to be maligned. There is, of course, the devastating case of Saartjie, also known as Sara Baartman, a victim of sexual trafficking; prior to her death, Baartman was forced into “freak shows” across Europe; after her death, two centuries ago, Baartman’s brain and sexual organs were pickled and put on display at a Paris museum until 1974. There is also the icon of the apartheid struggle, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, who was the apartheid government’s demonized killjoy. She has also been the favourite scapegoat of misogynistic Black journalists like Mondli Makhanya. In his article titled “We Must Not Want to Be Winnie” (2018), Makhanya mockingly describes Madikizela-Mandela as a “wayward” woman who was “nowhere to be found” when her husband, Nelson Mandela, was liberated in 1990. “When she was eventually found,” Makhanya argues, “she was in a not-so-nice location, in not-so-good company and in a not-so-good state of mind,” thus delaying her husband’s “walk out of those gates” (Makhanya 2018). While Makhanya does acknowledge Madikizela-Mandela as “the primary voice of the anti-apartheid forces ... a pillar of strength” who “did not succumb to harassment, imprisonment and torture [but] just got stronger and more defiant,” (Makhanya 2018) there is no effort at all to humanize her for her flaws on the occasion of her passing in 2018.

Just as the Black Panther Movement relegated Black women in America to the fringes of the liberation struggle, South Africa’s Black Consciousness Movement was similarly chauvinistic and exclusionary. However, an honest, “good talk” should also expose the fissures between women. Desiree Lewis, writing about “the first South African conference on women and gender (held at the University of Natal in 1991),” (Lewis 1993, 535) observes how “black [South African] women were denied a voice both because of the preponderance of white academics and because of insidious ways in which the tone of the gathering and the orientation of most papers and discussions stressed black wo-

men's passivity and the role of 'enlightened' (white middle-class) feminism in their salvation" (Lewis 1993, 537). An opportunity for meaningful dialogue between women "became a self-glorifying monologue in which constructs of black (and especially black working-class) women merely bolstered the ruling group's sense of authority—blatantly revealed in the logo on delegates' folders: A tiny-headed, naked, burdened, bent-over Other, 'present' only as object for scrutiny by the self-defining, theorizing subject.... Balancing precariously on one leg, head poised in an attitude of appeal, her arms plaintively outstretched as she grips something enigmatically 'ethnic,' this constructive black woman begs her deliverance (Lewis 1993, 537).

Black women in South Africa have certainly been "burdened," but they have never been "tiny-headed" nor defeated, as Lewis contests above.

Kuzwayo's autobiography, *Call Me Woman* (1985), exemplifies bold action in a debilitating environment that legally classified Black women as minors. Kuzwayo, a social worker and activist, puts the South African apartheid government on trial (see Hlongwane 1995) as she also fights an abusive husband she later divorces. Her refusal to "wash ... dirty linen in public" (Kuzwayo 1985, 140), is quite strategic. Kuzwayo exposes her husband's "violence, arrogance, meanness and downright selfishness" (Kuzwayo 1985, 127) by the very act of publishing her autobiography. But, as a so-called minor under South Africa's racist and sexist laws, she has to seek her son's permission to travel to London. Ultimately, Kuzwayo crosses borders in her negotiation of both textual and physical spaces. In her autobiography, Kuzwayo pays tribute to "the many, many black women, old and young, who emerged uncorrupted regardless of the obstacles which blocked their way ... who have made both humble and outstanding marks in education, industry, commerce, social commitments, trade, sport, and in day-to-day family life (Kuzwayo 1985, 38). Kuzwayo's grit escapes Carmela J. Garritano, who argues that the autobiography:

Reveals its own textuality as it slips beneath its author's control. It is a text vitiated by contradictions and intersections. Kuzwayo seems to struggle between mythologizing a precolonial, rural, and pagan South African past and admonishing the backwardness of the remnants of such a past, between supporting the tenets of Christianity and recognizing Christianity's complicity in apartheid, between praising the power of community and extolling the virtues of individuality, and finally between defining women who act like men as subjects and, on the other hand, relegating women to the position of objects. (Garritano 1997, 63)

That Kuzwayo writes at all is a triumph, the contradictions above revealing of a woman erased as a "person" in the eyes of the law.

Nadine Gordimer, in the autobiography's preface, dismisses Kuzwayo as "not [being] a writer," though "she has the memory and the gift of unselfconscious expression that enable her to tell her story as no-one else could" (Gordimer 1985, xi). Whereas Gordimer expects an "exotically revealing" and "simple" narrative (Gordimer 1985, xi-xii), Lewis Nkosi challenges these elitist and patronizing positions, arguing that "black writing has always existed in a limbo of nearly complete disablement which makes it impossible to speak about it in the same breath as white South African literature" (Nkosi 1994, 39). Apartheid was a crime against humanity, hardly a policy of "good neighborliness" as apartheid architect and Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd (1958-1966) characterized it (Verwoerd n.d.). Apartheid's inherent hatred is also on full display in the vitriolic question, "What is the use of teaching the Bantu [Black] child mathematics when he cannot use it into practice?" (UNESCO). Based on the universal pronoun employed above, Verwoerd, here, imagines Black schools, no matter how ill-equipped and dysfunctional, as exclusively male domains.

In order to survive, Black women have had to advocate for themselves, continuously recalculating and reevaluating their brutal realities. Like Kuzwayo, Emma Mashinini, Secretary of the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa, launched a literary strike against the apartheid government (see Hlongwane 1995), recruiting local and international audiences in her autobiography *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life* (1989). Mashinini not only writes against the grain, but also maneuvers around the bombs placed at union headquarters by the *actual* terrorists, the South African government. Both Kuzwayo and Mashinini were imprisoned for their political activism:

Kuzwayo was detained for five months in 1976, and Mashinini's incarceration in 1981 included almost six months in solitary confinement.

It was *The Women's Press* in London that provided outlets for Kuzwayo and Mashinini's "talk." As Courtney L. Thompson asserts:

The resistance of African women activists to state power also had international ramifications. The delineations of struggle expressed in their narratives enhance our understanding of the formative role that African women assumed as actors in struggles for social justice that reached beyond the borders of their nations. In an effort to combat exclusion from the political, economic, and social sectors, African women activists contested practices and legislation designed to subordinate them and undermine their interests; their resistance to subordination and the deprivation of their civil rights reflect their efforts to coalesce and empower themselves. Given the international backdrop, these actions accentuated the ways in which the struggles that blacks confronted in African nations were linked to broader diasporic struggles for human rights in other parts of the world. (Thompson 2018, 38)

Zimbabwean writer, Tsitsi Dangarembga, nonetheless describes the challenges of writing "while black and female" (Dangarembga 2022, 64) as akin to using words to "raise the blade of the guillotine, reach for the dismembered parts, and rejoin them to the rest of [her] being, while the monster of empire practised through patriarchy snaps at [her] heels" (Dangarembga 2022, 64). These "snaps" have kept Black women on the run as "existential refugees" (Dangarembga 2022, 3) even with feminist allyship.

There is an assumption, perhaps even an expectation, that transnationalism will take "a postcolonial trajectory, and a North-South axis of geopolitical orientation" (Hundle, Szeman and Hoare 2019, 6). The reality is that, in many instances, Black women in the Global South have served as beacons of knowledge and safety for each other. After all, it was neighbouring African countries that sheltered exiled South African freedom fighters during apartheid, which is why the recent and ongoing xenophobic attacks against Africans from outside South Africa have been particularly distressing.

All struggles have their fault lines, instances when the "good talk" deteriorates to "trash talk" such as when Ogundipe indicts Nigerian men who abandon their families in Nigeria for Black South African women: women who are disparaged as promiscuous, gun-toting, man-stealers, the only upstanding Black South African woman of note being Kuzwayo. Ogundipe-Leslie's transnational feminist work remains vital despite these glitches, her book title *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994) stressing the value of *re-creation*. South African feminist, Pumla Gqola (2013), in prioritizing re-creation, writes: "As real as the policing of women's bodies is in South Africa, and the world, it is possible for women to think of themselves—of ourselves—differently. It is important that a critique of power not end with reaction, but that it goes further to imagine something new, more exciting, more pleasurable. Picture what we can *create* if we dare give ourselves permission to imagine freely (Gqola 2013, 2)."

But survival mode need not invite Helena Andrews' "Bitch" as "the New Black." Celebrating another woman's pain, as Andrews does, even in a "sadistic" moment (Andrews 2010, 96), is a low but human struggle. Lorde observes how "women have not developed tools for facing anger constructively" (Lorde 1984, 130). As a result, that anger ends up misdirected at Black women who "are not the root cause nor the source of that pool of anger" (Lorde 1984, 145). We have to find better channels to ease generational trauma and fragilities.

Ogundipe urges us to continue the "good talk" as long as "the black indigenous African [remains] the international 'dirty secret'... left out of world discourses and disqualified from speaking for themselves or from being recognised in the gathering of the world's peoples as minds and agents of culture and history" (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994, 2). Black women, globally speaking, have always refused to be "dirty secrets," never muting their volume especially in oppressive times.

Boyce Davies reiterates Ogundipe's point about the "tendency in Western academic contexts, borne of U.S. and European hegemony, to assume that what is said in Euro- American universities is *only what has been said* or *only what matters*. As well, the ways that research is conducted, the subject positions and locations of those conducting the research, and the types of questions engaged are often set, in the West" (Boyce Davies 1994, xi). There is actually an embarrassment of riches outside of established canons; the entire Global South is talking and writing stories for themselves and for the greater good.

South African women's voices of resistance reverberated around the world when president Jacob Zuma was acquitted of rape in 2006, a case Gqola (2016) interrogates in her book, *Rape: A South African Nightmare*. Feminist work is daily work, Mbali Mazibuko reminds us, the work occurring "in the street[s] and on the web ... it can be explicit or implicit ... it can entail revolutionary violence, classroom politicking" (Mazibuko 2020). Moreover, Mazibuko argues that, in a climate of white privilege, "the university is not at all the pot of gold at the end of the [South Africa] rainbow nation." Instead, the university works against "gender non-conforming, non-binary... poor students... thinkers [and] women." Yet optimism must remain. Lauren Berlant argues that "because optimism is ambitious, at any moment... feel[ing] like anything, including nothing" (Berlant 2011, 2), we must accept the possibility that "any action of making a claim on the present involves bruising processes of detachment from anchors in the world, along with optimistic projections of a world that is worth our attachment to it" (Berlant 2011, 263). Women know enough about bruising as well as the attachments that must be maintained, at all costs, for the sake of the coming generations. In South Africa, the tradition of fighting and talking has been laid by the matriarchs, whose record, to borrow Gordimer's patronizing language, is neither "simple" nor "unsubconscious" (Gordimer 1985, xi-xii).

When South African women marched in 1956, they chanted the aforementioned slogan which, in full, translates to, "You strike a woman, you strike a rock. You will die." In her chapter, "The Fetishization of Fierce," Mikki Kendall observed how "the term *fierce* ... carries its own highly specialised baggage" (Kendall 2020, 127). In other words, the price of that fierceness, for women in particular, needs greater attention (Kendall 2020, 132). What were the costs for the Combahee River Collective, named after the June 1863 Combahee River Raid, and Harriet Tubman, the woman at the helm of it? What were the costs of being sturdy as rocks for Madikizela-Mandela, Kuzwayo, and Mashinini?

The South African women's slogan is telling, nonetheless, coming as it does from Africa, "the cradle of humankind," the site of beginnings. The continent of Africa is also the bastion of unspeakable thefts and deaths. The South African woman's slogan, then, elevates all women as keepers of culture. The antagonization of women, whether by others or by themselves, risks the death of culture not only in South Africa but around the world.

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