

Gender (Re)configuration in Nigerian Literature through Time and Space

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Summary

This article underscores how time and space have influenced the question of gender – its construction, representation and re-interpretation – in contemporary Nigerian literature. It examines various positions of male writers, such as Cyprian Ekwensi and Chinua Achebe, whose works entrenched a conservative, patriarchal perspective of gender that valorises masculinity at the expense of femininity. On the other hand, women writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa and Zaynab Alkali produced fiction which countered the stereotypical representations of women pervasive in early Nigerian literature. Contemporary Nigerian women writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Lola Shoneyin and Chika Unigwe, writing from an unapologetically feminist point of view, have built on the work of the pioneer womanist writers to produce works of art that underline social transformation in Nigeria where gender hierarchy is constantly questioned and challenged. This discussion of the evolution of gender representation in Nigerian literature is pursued against the backdrop of theoretical understandings of time and space as intrinsically linked to re-imaginings of history and society.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel benadruk hoe tyd en ruimte die kwessie van geslag beïnvloed het – die samestelling, voorstelling en herinterpretasie daarvan – in hedendaagse Nigeriese literatuur. Die artikel ondersoek verskillende posisies van manlike skrywers, soos Cyprian Ekwensi en Chinua Achebe, wie se werke ingewortel is in 'n konserwatiewe, patriargale perspektief van geslag wat manlikheid ten koste van vroulikheid valoriseer. Aan die ander kant het vroulike skrywers soos Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa en Zaynab Alkali fiksie geskep wat omvattende teenargumente vir die stereotipiese voorstellings van vroue in die vroeë Nigeriese literatuur gebied het. Hedendaagse Nigeriese vroueskrwers soos Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Lola Shoneyin en Chika Unigwe, wat onbeskaamd vanuit 'n feministiese oogpunt skryf, het voortgebou op die werk van die baanbreker- swart feministiese skrywers om kunswerke voort te bring wat klem lê op maatskaplike transformasie in Nigerië, waar geslagshiërgargie voortdurend bevraagteken en betwis word. Hierdie bespreking van die evolusie van geslags-voorstelling in Nigeriese literatuur geskied teen die agtergrond van teoretiese insigte van tyd en plek – wesenlik verweef met die hervoorstellings van die geskiedenis en die samelewing.

Introduction

The concept of time is important in the critical study of literature and its application to human society. It facilitates the comprehension of literary texts and how they are intertwined to bring about various interpretations of subject matters in any work of art. Time also helps to underscore different understandings of society and philosophy. Consequently, Giles Deleuze's *Proust and Signs* (1972) and Russel West-Pavlov's *Temporalities* (2012) have explored time and space as constituting integral instruments aiding the planning and execution of activities around material production and social exchange in human society and literature.

The concept of time cannot be understood separately from understandings of society because, apart from being a "veritable entity", time is also a phenomenon that is extremely "dynamic of existence, the pulsating drive of the unceasing transformation of being itself" (West-Pavlov 2012: 3). It is also historical and ethical. This means that time is a phenomenon that transcends history, thoughts and existence in the transmission of ideas and values which are fundamental to human development. It is this consideration of time which West-Pavlov (2012) explores in his book. In line with this theorisation of time, this article looks at how time and space have shaped understandings of gender in Nigerian literature. In addition, the article applies time theories in questioning some constructions of gender and sexuality in contemporary Nigerian literature. It is appropriate at this point then to examine the selected time theories for connections and disconnections.

Historical Connections and Disconnections in the Theorisation of Time

Deleuze, in *Proust and Signs* (1972), investigates how signs facilitate the understanding of time. The book, written in twelve chapters, has a concluding section which examines different applications of time to art interpretation. What is relevant for this article is the notion that time lost is neither a memory of time that is involuntary nor a recollection, and consequently the "search for lost time" is not categorically the "lost time" in itself (Deleuze 1972: 3-7) but the "search for truth" (Deleuze 1972: 14). This search for truth, according to Deleuze, is essential because it is a sign that this is not time wasted in any capacity. In addition, the degree of the involved truth is also relative to time because the work of art can be subjected to different interpretations over time. Accordingly, time is not a product or subject of the past but a collective memory which transcends the future and has now become a certain type of sign which Julia Kristeva (2013) emphasises in her semiotic analysis.

Accordingly, Kristeva (2013: 60) identifies three types of semiotic approaches which are products of time, and these are an "attempt to logically

unify all knowledge, an attempt to find the core codes which drive all systems, and an interrogation of the entire history of the metaphysical concept of the sign". The first two approaches transcend the metaphysical, so she calls them "*metasemiology*" (Kristeva 2013: 61). Her third approach examines the history of the metaphysical concept of the sign and she calls it "analytical semiotics or *semanalysis*" (Kristeva 2013: 61). These are the three concepts which later became the basis of post-structuralist and deconstructionist notions of semiotics which feminist thinkers also exploited to question dominant representations of women's experiences. Semiotic interpretations of literature cover a variety of themes in post-colonial feminist studies, and is evident in the evaluation of various trends in women's studies which include how semiotic realities produce effects in the cultural, social, economic and political realities of society. Such realities are embedded in the collective memory of the semiotic signs in contemporary society rather than in knowledge as an ordinary product of metaphysics.

In *From Women's Time: Revolution of the Word*, Kristeva poses an interesting question: "if modernity is the first epoch in human history in which human beings attempt to live without religion ..., is not feminism in the process of becoming one?" (Kristeva 1981: 223-224). In other words, she questions if feminism is not in danger of becoming as restrictive as religion is. Kristeva critiques what she sees as an ominously "religious" or "totalitarian" feminism in Europe and America which seeks to outline a collective identity for women, rather than positing individual and potentially plural identities. In her work, she inaugurates a third generation of feminist thought on feminism. However, she is not so interested in a generational shift as in an epistemological shift where new knowledge about feminism exists but interacts closely with knowledge produced by previous generations of scholars. This new feminism uses the insights found in semiotics to challenge the long-held perception of male superiority (Kristeva 1981), and provides new spaces where women create their own language and explain their own views, thereby creating new images and identities in response to the patriarchal images of them prevalent in their societies.

Kristeva's ideas on semiotics coincide with ideas about time expressed by other scholars. Deleuze believes that "signs of art are immaterial" although signs are "superior to others" (Deleuze 1972: 52) in the world because time expresses the search for lost time which is presented "as a system of signs" (Deleuze 1972: 89), and West-Pavlov (2012: 4) conceptualises "time as manifold and a dynamic existence". What West-Pavlov is projecting is the idea that in any work of art, there are "multiple temporalities" as the work of art does not merely see "time as a manifold, multi-dimensional range of non-linear shifts and movements but more vigorously set[s] itself within an immanence in which time is the very dynamic of existence, the pulsating drive of the unceasing transformation of being itself" (Nikro, Zentrum and Orient 2013: 3-5).

Hayden White (1973) relates these experiences to historiography in order to understand how time and space influence the historical imagination, which relates to the argument later on how time and space influences the representation of women in Nigerian literature. White, an American philosopher of history, is well known for his reconfiguration of history as narrative, as opposed to its earlier configuration as fact. Contributing to 20th century debates on whether history was art or science, White positions historical work as writing which examines the past using the narrative as a verbal (linguistic) structure. According to White (1973), historical consciousness enables a closer appreciation of the historical knowledge which translates factual accounts into an imagined history through a work of art. In other words, a study of post-colonial cultures enables the post-colonial writer to create some historical experiences in order to transform art into reality (D'Amore 2010; Epstein 1988).

White's theory of history as a narrative phenomenon culminated in the development of the concept of *metahistory* which asserts that historical works generally take the form of a narrative. This is what White calls the "coherent and ordered representation of events or developments in sequential time" (White 1987: 4). He observes that such representations are historical explanations which are both "rhetorical and poetic by nature" (White 1987: 5). This has led to debates in the postmodernist understanding of the concept of historiography (see White 1973: 6; White 1978: 14; White 1987: 18). For example, postmodernism is sceptical about claims to certainty in the natural sciences, a scepticism which underpins historiography from the 18th century onward, and proceeds from certain insights produced in modern linguistics which accounts for the special attention given to language.

In developing his theory of history as narrative, White criticises historians in a number of ways. He questions their objectivity and also their claims to truth (White 1978). According to him, historical narratives should be seen as verbal fictions in which content and form are more related to content and form in literary works than to those found in the natural sciences (White 1978). He further observes that historical narratives emerge from some empirically verifiable facts or events; however, imaginative steps are required to make stories coherent and by implication this means that even historical events must be selected and then organised (White 1978). What White is saying is that if the intention of historiography is to objectively and truthfully reconstruct the past, then it is bound to fail because the process cannot be completed without the interpretation of the narratives through figurative strategies. Within this context, the time and space of the present influences how the past is reconstructed and re-interpreted.

Of course, historians found White's claims highly contentious and subsequently launched their criticisms of them. First, they claim that his arguments are too formalistic and that the inaccessibility of historical truth is not enough reason to study language (see Carr 1986; Bentley 1997; Gilderhus

2000). Second, they point out that his work undermines historians but it has nothing significant to offer them (Gilderhus 2000). Thompson (2004) is very critical of the way White handles historiography, for, to him, White is a prophet who, like other such prophets, produces a theology that has no foundation. He claims that White's theology is taken from a gospel that is driven from the 1968 hangover (Thompson 2004). What Thompson and other historians are saying is that White is projecting history from a narrative perspective that could be said to falsify the concept of truth. This, in their view, could lead to a relativism that is dangerous to historians and a misconception that there is no connection between the past and present in historical discourse (Thompson 2004).

Acknowledging that these criticisms of White's theory of history as narrative do stand solid from a historian's point of view, this article however finds useful White's idea that in reconstructing history the boundaries between the past and the present may get blurred and that the past is largely re-imagined through the lens of the present time and space. This lack of continuity or strict connection between the present and the past which White emphasises is what Deleuze (1972) and West-Pavlov (2012) both project as imaginary. Based on this theoretical framework of time and space as influential of representations of social realities, the next section now looks at how time and space have influenced configurations and reconfigurations of gender in Nigerian literature.

Time and Space in the (Re)configuration of Gender in Nigerian Literature

First generation writers in post-colonial Nigeria produced literary works that largely prioritised problems around corruption and economic breakdown over concerns with gender inequalities. The result was the representation of men in highly dominant and politically active roles which crystallised into displays of a hyper masculinity, in the course of which womanhood was greatly demeaned. A few examples are necessary here to demonstrate this point. In Cyprian Ekwensi's *People of the City* (1954), the action centres on the experiences of Amusa Sango, the journalist and popular musician, whose serial misfortune in the city propels the plot. Amusa is projected as an ambitious man whose quest for wealth has to be pursued amidst a very morally corrupting city. Women feature in this novel mainly as prostitutes and witches, as in the case of Aina and her mother. The novel shares its preoccupation with the immorality associated with the city and night life with some novels of English and American Literature. For example, it reflects a similar thematic preoccupation with Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1861) which explores men's quest for wealth and the shady practices associated with city life of the Victorian period in English history. This

intertextuality of Ekwensi's *People of the City* and Dickens' *Great Expectations* suggests the influence of time and space on male writers' representation of women, since women are mostly represented in these novels as morally corrupt as a result of their affiliation with the city. Whether in 19th century England or 20th century Nigeria, women are represented in literature by men from a patriarchal point of view which constructs morality as impossible for women. A hundred years after the publication of Dickens' celebrated novel, Ekwensi published *Jagua Nana's Daughter* (1961b), a sequel to his earlier novel *Jaguar Nana* (1961a). In *Jagua Nana's Daughter*, as in *Jaguar Nana*, Ekwensi depicts mainly uneducated women who pursue prostitution as a means of survival. He employs the city as a debased space to present women characters as prostitutes and sources of entertainment for men. Ekwensi's fiction is representative of dominant chauvinist trends during that period of time in Nigerian literature.

That period in Nigerian literary history ushered in Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1965) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) and led to the unbridled literary creation of loose women and prostitutes who struggle for survival. Elsie of *A Man of the People* is a girlfriend of both Chief Nanga the corrupt politician and Odili the revolutionary man struggling to save his country from corrupt practices and ethnic divisions. Similarly, Beatrice, a first-class-degree holder in English in the novel *Anthills of the Savannah* is involved in 'subtle' prostitution by sleeping with General Sam, the Military Head of State of the imaginary Kangan State, in order to secure favours from him and procure a means of livelihood for herself. Like Elsie, she is equally projected as a loose woman, and not even her education can rescue her from this precarious lifestyle.

This kind of writing, by Ekwensi and Achebe, in which women are assigned fixed gender roles, constitutes the dominant narrative of African literature during that time in Nigerian literature. In Achebe's canonical novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which has been highly praised for its denunciation of colonialism, the representation of women is still highly problematic as women play second fiddle to men and remain under their control throughout the novel. Judging this kind of representation from our present time means it cannot be excused because, as White (1978) argues, even in historical accounts of the past historians make conscious choices about what they select and organise into historical reality. Similarly, in recreating the history of colonialism in Nigeria, Achebe consciously selected what he thought was relevant in telling his story about the origins of African colonial oppression. Achebe, who is a first-generation post-colonial writer in Nigeria, presents in his novel only that aspect of African culture that epitomises patriarchy and mutes the institutions of women's power that were equally pervasive in precolonial Igbo society. To fairly critique the image of women in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, it is expedient to critically examine Okonkwo's treatment of women from his private residence to the public sphere in the Umuofia

community. Okonkwo's assertive role in the novel and his hyper masculine display of power over his wives, while the wives remain largely subjected and bartered women, is indicative of gender hierarchy and the dominance of patriarchal ideologies which Kristeva (1981) challenges in her semiotic feminist discourse on misrepresentations of women in art and society.

Things Fall Apart is a classical text that can be used to illustrate the ways in which time and space limit the construction of women's identities to images. Women characters like Ezinma, Ojuigo and Ekwefi represent types of womanhood within Igbo society. Ekwefi is assigned the role of a second wife to Okonkwo, and though vicious and brave she cannot break out of the confines of her assigned role. Her only daughter, Ezinma, is projected as an "Ogbanje", meaning a child that has supernatural power to do and undo things. That supernatural perception constitutes her image throughout the novel. According to West-Parlov in *Space in Theory: Kristeva, Foucault, Deleuze* (2009: 252), such image-representation is an identity creation which Kristeva, Foucault and Deleuze are very critical about. They are critical of it because it underscores various negative identities that fundamentally emerge out of practices of differentiation. West-Pavlov explains identity as follows:

[I]dentity needs to be understood not as an expression of being, but as slowing down of being, a selection or fluttering of being so as to produce a lowest common denominator suitable for social change and intercourse.

(2009: 199)

West-Pavlov's statement can be interpreted to mean that in creating negative identities for women in literature, writers are not expressing the full range of women's being but are rather reducing women to types and archetypes. Nigerian writers, male and female, tend to genderise their characters by limiting their creation to the dictates of the time in which they wrote. In addition, women characters are made to speak and act in conformity with the constraints of their social spaces. Space, therefore, becomes an instrument used by writers to justify gender hierarchy in their literary works. The centrality of space in gendered representations of women is explained by West-Pavlov in the following quotation:

[S]pace as a paradigm of intelligent enquiry is critical here because to situate a cultural artefact in space is to bring it down to earth, to re-orient reflections towards questions of contexts of materiality, of relationship, of causality and interaction. Meaning is thus a function of the space in which it emerges. Truth and falsehood are replaced by space as a matrix of meaning.

(2009: 23)

The concepts of truth and falsehood are often the instruments used by female Nigerian writers in their attempt to re-write the canon of Nigerian literature, to recreate women in literature from women's perspectives, to denounce the

one-dimensional images of women pervasive in male writing, and to re-imagine women as complex human beings with multiple identities. Truth and falsehood which manifest in time and space are employed as narratological strategies by these women writers when they empower their female characters to retell the history of colonialism from their own perspectives. Prominent examples of women writers whose responses to male writers' image-representation has been unapologetic include Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa.

In Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), the character, Nnu Ego leaves her husband with whom she could not have children and moves in to live with Nnaife for whom she has finally been able to conceive. Emecheta uses Nnu Ego in this novel to portray a different version of womanhood in Nigerian literature, one that does not reproduce stereotypes of women as passive to oppression. In the spirit of a more gender-conscious re-writing of women, Emecheta projects her heroine as a woman who is critical of the oppressive structures within her society and assertive about her individuality. Her fiction helped in establishing a new tradition of women's writing that takes feminist concerns into consideration as women navigate colonialism and modernity. Since men's writing created largely spaces where women suffer oppression as a result of patriarchy and misconceptions about masculinity, women's writing countered that by creating spaces where women have a voice and can make decisions for their own good ultimately. What is evident here is a situation in which the passage of time brings about a transformation in the representation of women in Nigerian literature. In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2006), we are presented with dynamic female characters, such as Kambili, Mama and Auntie Ifeoma, who in various ways enforce social transformation within the world of the text, even if it is just by changing characters' attitudes about African belief systems. In contrast to the one-dimensional characters represented in Ekwensi and Achebe's fiction, these are not women who simply allow themselves to be corrupted by "the ways of the city" but who in fact highlight the interlacing of moral values across city and village spaces. Like Achebe, Adichie recreates the history of colonialism in Igbo land and its devastating effects on the Igbo cosmology through narrative. However, the distinct difference between her and Achebe is that in her fiction the historical is imagined through the lens of a present that is sharply critical of the masculinisation of colonial history. This is in line with White's idea (1978) that the present influences the way history is re-imagined.

Nigerian women's literature from the first generation of writers has sought to respond back to men's literature by projecting some of the ideas emphasised by Judith Butler around cultural performativity when she states that "gender is culturally motivated and it is not a biologically motivated phenomenon" (Butler 1990: 10). Butler explains that gender must not be seen as biologically determined but rather constructed for "social and behavioural

relevance” (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1990: 2). Butler’s ideas remind us of West-Pavlov’s view that identity configuration, which goes hand-in-hand with gender classification, “is not an expression of being” but rather a reduction of human beings to certain fixed categories for the purpose of “social change or intercourse” (West-Pavlov 2009: 199-120). This means then that gender identity is not predicated on one’s being female or male, but is socially constructed for the purpose of shaping society. Consequently, in order to illuminate the gender biases inherent in the roles assigned to women in their textual spaces, Nigerian women writers such as Adichie and Emecheta have interwoven into their narratives African feminist ideas. They have expressed a particular brand of African feminism known as womanism first popularised by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi in her article “Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English” (1985). In this article, Ogunyemi critiques the trajectory of African-American womanism posited by Alice Walker and argues that Walker’s womanist views are parochial because of their embodiment of racial separatism and lack of tolerance for men. She then postulates an African womanism which is gender inclusive in that it positions men as partners in the multiple struggles African women face, including struggles against colonialism, militarism and authoritarianism. Thus, Nigerian women have redefined feminism from within their specific cultural spaces and we see in their writing the convergence of multiple temporalities as they offer different perspectives on gender relations in Nigeria.

Other prominent female writers in post-colonial Nigeria are Zaynab Alkali who wrote *The Stillborn* (1984) and Karen King-Aribisala who wrote *Kicking Tongues* (1998). These writers have used different settings in their fictions to reflect different types of male oppressive tendencies at different times in Nigeria’s history and to project women’s varied resistance to these tendencies in accordance with their specific times and spaces. They have created in their works strong and courageous characters who can perform assertiveness and device overt and subtle mechanisms for challenging the dogged attitudes of men in Nigerian society. While attempting to correct the stereotypical images of women dominant in male writing, literature by these women also attempts to establish some literary affinity with male writers by exploring similar subject matters. Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* (1966), for example, orchestrates the plight of rural women visible in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, though it differs from Achebe’s novel in that it foregrounds women’s efforts to attain personal freedoms from patriarchal domination and from cultures where childlessness and adultery are dubbed women’s problems and therefore used doggedly to cripple women socially. Li, the protagonist in Zaynab Alkali’s *The Stillborn*, epitomises women’s quest for social and moral freedom in a patriarchal setting and their desire to strive assiduously to become better humans than just wives and mothers. Therefore, these writers have not discarded history in representing women in literature, but in rewriting the male canon they have

reorganised historical material with more imaginative positivity about women than was visible in men's literature.

Contemporary female writers in Nigeria, writing at a historical present which positions them as third generation writers, navigate the past, present and the future to present in their writing the full spectrum of oppressions women experience as gendered subjects. Similarly, they explore in their fiction the multiple spaces within which women experience these oppressions. On the one hand, they seem to establish some continuity with subjects dominant in past literature such as men's quest for wealth, but on the other hand they enforce a break from that past by engendering feminist spaces where men's quest for wealth is only visible because it is interlinked with women's quest for human dignity. Chika Unigwe in *On Black Sisters' Street* (2010) presents transnational spaces criss-crossing Africa and Europe to project the independent aspirations of African women subjected to dehumanisation not just by patriarchy but also by war, poverty and culturally de-capacitating practices. In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010), Lola Shoneyin departs from Achebe's masculinist representation of women in polygynous marriages as weak and passive and rather depicts women characters who are dynamic, strong, assertive, ingenious and downright subversive as they negotiate their individual freedoms within a polygynous marriage. From their vantage point as third generation *feminist* writers – a significant departure from the womanist point, these writers are unapologetic in their castigation of patriarchy and visibly vocal in their call for the social transformation of the conditions of African women.

The current status of the representation of women in Nigerian literature seems to suggest that with the passage of time comes real social transformation in not only male writer's thinking about women but also in their recreation of women in fictional writing. In contemporary times, writers such as Helon Habila and Ahmed Yerima have emerged to position themselves as writing for a women's cause where gender relations have to be defined not on the terms of patriarchy but on the basis of a recognition of our common humanity. Helon Habila, for example, positions himself as a male feminist writer who uses his novels not only to castigate male excesses but also to reconfigure the position of women and their relevance in the social transformation of Nigeria. His *Oil on Water* (2010) probes into social and economic problems ravaging Nigeria and the need for men to work in partnership with women in finding viable and concrete solutions to the problems facing post-colonial Nigeria. *Waiting for an Angel* (2004) creates a new history of Nigeria under the dictatorial regime of General Sani Abacha in the 1990s and in this historical re-imagination it deploys signs, as Kristeva (2013) argues, to reposition women as significant actors in change processes. *Measuring Time* (2007), as the title suggests, is a novel that explores different historical periods in Nigeria and along with that comes an exposition of gender relations within these different temporalities. Habila's non-fiction

book *Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamic Militancy in Nigeria* (2016) presents a journalistic appraisal of the sectarian violence perpetuated by the Boko Haram militant group operating from northern Nigeria, particularly its kidnapping of 217 Chibok school girls in April 2014. This book which is based on interviews with girls and women abducted by Boko Haram not only gives an insider female perspective to gender violence but also foregrounds the courage of those who were able to escape. Thus, in terms of gender configuration in Nigerian literature, it can be argued that over historical time and space male writers have moved from representing women mainly as entrapped in victimisation to representing them as subjects imbued with personal trans-formative abilities.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the evolution of representations of gender in Nigerian literature over time and space. It has shown how time and space have influenced gender configuration in post-colonial Nigerian literature. The study evaluated ideas about time by West-Pavlov (2009; 2012), Deleuze (1972), Kristeva (1981; 2013) and White (1973; 1978; 1987) in order to frame its argument that representations of gender in Nigerian literature have largely been influenced by time and space. Evidence from the existing body of literary works has been cited to illustrate how representations of women in the early male-domination literature were largely stereotypical and biased, a problem to which women reacted vehemently by producing literature that offered more self-empowering possibilities for Nigerian women. The emergence of Nigerian feminist and womanist literature in the 1980s and 1990s marked a turning point in Nigerian literature as it shows that history was re-imagined differently by women to foreground their own interpretations of what colonialism *did* and *did not do* to African women. It is clear from the representation of women in contemporary Nigerian literature, including male feminist literature, that the thinking of writers around gender has emancipated through time and space.

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