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Prisoners of Lexicon: Cultural Cisgenderism and Transgender Children¹

Natacha Kennedy

“I am not trapped by my body.
I am trapped by your beliefs.”
SASS ROGANDO SASOT

SUMMARY

This paper focuses on cultural cisgenderism and its effects on trans people and trans children in particular. Based on a sociological analysis of the key assumptions of the construct of cultural cisgenderism, the author examines how cultural cisgenderism impacts the development of self-perceptions in trans people and trans children, and clearly reveals in detail the different effects of the system of cultural cisgenderism. Cultural cisgenderism is here primarily contrasted with transphobia, in the hope of contributing to a better understanding of the problems that trans people face with cultural cisgenderism.

INTRODUCTION

Whilst trans people, and in particular, trans children often suffer from transphobia, that is, direct discrimination and prejudice², often it is not possible to (exclusively) put this down to an individual attitude of a particularly transphobic individual or group. In many cases the negative effect on trans people’s lives is systemic, ideological and cultural. Being clear about this, and giving it a name, >cultural cisgenderism< develops an understanding of this concept and may make it easier to identify and reduce its effects in a constructive way. This essay examines cultural cisgenderism and its effects on trans children and young people.

¹ | Original version in English. The author prefers to not to use the form trans`.

² | For instance, Mcdonough, K. (2013): Colorado school bans 6-year-old transgender child from girls' bathroom. In: Salon. URL: http://www.salon.com/2013/02/27/colorado_school_bans_6_year_old_transgender_child_from_girls_bathroom/ [07.05.2015].

Background

There is a growing body of evidence (eg: Kennedy 2008, Kennedy/Hellen 2010, Riley et al. 2012, Wyss 2004) to suggest that many trans people can trace their feeling of unhappiness or discomfort in their assigned genders back to early childhood. Additionally a significant proportion of trans people seem to have experienced an epiphany as transgender in their mid-teens despite the seemingly widespread belief that this represents an adult issue. However the numbers of apparent trans children (Kennedy 2008) still seem small compared to the estimated number of trans' adults.

There also appears to be a significant body of research, largely published by psychologists (Drescher/Byrne 2012, Green 1987, Money/Russo, 1979, Zuger 1984, Zucker/Bradley 1995) which suggests that between 70% and 98% of trans or gender non-conforming children becoming apparent prior to puberty do not become transgender adults. Yet if this is the case, where do all the transgender, transsexual and gender non-conforming adults come from? Kennedy and Hellen (2010: 2) estimated that between 90% and 95% of trans children are non-apparent. Non-apparent is defined as a trans' child not known to any adult as transgender. So why do these children conceal or suppress their sex/gender non-conformity?

Cultural Cisgenderism

Research carried out by Ansara and Hegarty (2011: 5) suggests that there exists a culture within psychology they characterize as cisgenderism. Their definition of cisgenderism in the area of psychology is as follows:

»...a prejudicial ideology, rather than an individual attitude, that is systemic, multi-level and reflected in authoritative cultural discourses. [...] Cisgenderism problematises the categorical distinction itself between classes of people as either *transgender* or *cisgender* (or as *gender variant* or *unmarked*)³ [...] We consider cisgenderism to be a form of *othering* that takes people categorised as 'transgender' as the *effect to be explained*.«

It is important here to emphasize the distinction they make between cisgenderism and transphobia; cisgenderism is clearly conceptualized as an ideology as opposed to an individual attitude. In this way, if it were viewed in Saussurian terms transphobia may be characterized as the parole to the langue of cisgen-

3 | Or, more in line with the terminology developed in this volume: variant sex/gender identity vs. unmarked sex/gender identity.

derism.⁴ In the case of the esoteric⁵ domain of psychology, cisgenderism also appears to be characterized as integral to discourses about trans' people. However it would be difficult to suggest that cisgenderism in society in general (which I refer to here as cultural cisgenderism) is reflected in authoritative cultural discourses as it is in psychology (or possibly indeed in associated esoteric domains such as neurology).

In order to understand the difference between cisgenderism in psychology and cultural cisgenderism and to come to a useful definition of cultural cisgenderism it is necessary to analyse the way cisgenderism works in psychology in comparison with the way it functions in society in general. I shall draw on Social Activity Method (Dowling 1997, 2009) in order to analyse this area through the sociological gaze. In this instance analysis will consist of consideration of levels of institutionalization and discursive saturation.

In this context institutionalization refers to the extent to which a practice is regular emergent on autopoeitic action. A strongly institutionalized practice (I+) is characterized as being very regular and consistent whereas a weakly institutionalized practice (I-) is irregular and inconsistent. Discursive saturation refers to the way practices may be distinguished in the way they deploy strategies which establish discursively available principles (Dowling 2009). A highly discursively saturated practice (DS+) is characterized as dependent, to a relatively large extent, on language. A weakly discursively saturated practice (DS-) in contrast, tends to rely to a much lower extent on language.

4 | grammar.about.com (2013): In linguistics, language as an abstract system of signs (the underlying structure of a language). URL: <http://grammar.about.com/od/il/g/langueterm.htm> [15.12.2013]. Saussure, F. de (1916): *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. by Wade Baskin, 1959. Bally/Sechehaye (ed.), New York: Philosophical Library. Interdependency of Langue and Parole »Saussure's Cours«: this aspect was incorporated for a metaphorical representation in the use of concepts more familiar to sociologists and others. While the terms »langue/parole« are no longer employed in linguistics they were recruited by sociologist and constitute a regularly used concept.

5 | *In sociology, esoteric refers to a highly specialized field that can only be accessed with a high degree of expertise; Dowling, P. (1998): The Sociology of Mathematical Education. London: Routledge Falmer.*

The relational space in fig 1 shows how these concepts can be used to situate cisgenderism in psychology relative to cultural cisgenderism.

Level of Institutionalisation

Level of Discursive Saturation	I+	I-
DS+	<i>Cisgenderism in psychology</i>	<i>Organized transphobia</i>
DS-	<i>Cultural cisgenderism</i>	<i>Reactive transphobia</i>

Fig 1. *Cisgenderism*; DS = *discursive saturation*; I = *institutionalisation*

As the relational space shows, cisgenderism in psychology and cultural cisgenderism are both strongly institutionalized practices. However whilst cisgenderism in psychology is characterized as relatively highly discursively saturated, cultural cisgenderism is relatively weakly discursively saturated. So, bearing in mind Ansara and Hegarty's definition of cisgenderism in psychology, we can now draw on that to work towards a definition of cultural cisgenderism.

Cultural cisgenderism may be characterized as a detrimental and predominantly tacitly held and communicated prejudicial ideology, rather than an individual attitude. It represents a systemic erasure and problematizing of trans' people and the distinction between trans' and cisgender people. It essentializes sex/gender as biologically determined, fixed at birth, immutable, natural and externally imposed on the individual. Here cultural cisgenderism appears in many ways to be an example of Bourdieu's (1977: 164) concept of doxa: »[...] the established cosmological and political order is perceived not as arbitrary, i.e. as one possible order among others, but as a self-evident and natural order which goes without saying and therefore goes unquestioned.«

The two right fields of the diagram show transphobia as a weakly institutionalized practice, since here it is not so much an ideology rather than a personal attitude. Transphobia appears to be largely due to cultural cisgenderism and is thus weakly discursively saturated. It primarily emerges from individual negative emotional reactions in situations that involve a trans' person. This is referred to in the lower right field as reactive transphobia. Organized transphobia (upper right field), as a discursively relatively strongly saturated, but at the same time weakly institutionalized transphobia, may at first appear to be a contradiction regarding the terms used here, but it is, for instance, exercised by politically extreme right-wing Christian groups and Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists

(TERFs). These groups, particularly the latter, are associations of transphobic individuals that rally around their common denominators of hate and phobia and that can generate a group identity or culture. But since the discourse of such groups is highly inconsistent and even contradictory, and because they represent extremist minority opinions and oppress and mistreat trans' persons and abuse us (Stryker 2008: 110), it would be inappropriate to regard these as constituting forms of cisgenderism. The difference between the transphobia of TERFs and the DS+ ideology of cisgenderism is that the former is a deliberate practice closed to rational arguments. Cisgenderism, on the other hand, is a culture or an ideology that seems to be substantially easier to combat with reasoned arguments. Cultural cisgenderism represents a tacit ideology, which, in this instance also appears to be manifest as an element of culture (Geertz 1973). It appears to be so well established in our Western European culture that it may be expressed and transmitted tacitly. As such it represents an unspoken discrimination against those whose gender expression or identity does not conform to the cultural ideal representing that to which they were assigned at birth.

Analysis of Cultural Cisgenderism

This section attempts to elaborate the above characterization of cultural cisgenderism in a little more detail.

A Systemic Erasure

Cultural cisgenderism, as a tacit ideology, causes the marginalization of trans and other gender non-conforming people because it does not acknowledge their existence in both cultural discourse and social structures. Linking Paechter's analysis of the gender binary (2007) with Lave & Wenger's model of communities of practice (CoP, Lave/Wenger 1991) illustrates how, in particular for children, there may appear no means of conceptualizing any Sexes/genders outside male and female or the possibility of moving between sexes/genders. These gendered communities of practice also appear to encourage and reward the adoption of strongly stereotyped gender performances that are reinforced by external cultural input ranging from immediate family to the media. Trans people here are erased by their cultural non-existence. Indeed many trans people, despite identifying feelings of not fitting in from a young age, relate how they feel unable to express this in language (Kennedy/Hellen 2010); for example by not having acquired any trans-related vocabulary such as *transgender* or *transsexual*. This probably represents one of the most significant ways that cisgenderism exerts itself as an ideology, and, as I intend to argue later, one of the most significant hurdles for trans children and young people to overcome.

Cultural cisgenderism makes trans people systematically invisible, and this is problematic precisely for identifying and counting trans persons in general and trans children and adolescents in particular. Most estimates for the percentage of trans persons in a particular population are around one percent, even though this figure will vary in different cultural environments. However, the problem of counting a part of a population that is in its majority invisible is that the results will, in all probability, merely confirm the predominant view, i.e. that there are in fact very few trans' children. On the basis of these considerations, a small country such as Luxembourg will have a population of presumably at least 550 trans children, a figure only slightly smaller than the number of trans children currently receiving treatment at the Tavistock Institute in Britain. If the number of children treated at the institute can permit a statement according to the usual estimates for the percentage of trans persons of a population, then there should in fact be close to 70.000 trans' persons living in Britain.

Problematizing of trans people

The labeling of trans' people as problematic appears to be a feature of cisgenderist ideology. Since trans people have been studied in depth, by researchers such as Hirschfeld (1910) we have been characterized as inherently problematic. Indeed causes for all forms of sex/gender non-conformity have been explored with advocates of these ideas focusing particularly on neurological differences (Kruijver et al. 2000; Rametti et al. 2010), which effectively position trans people as 'brain intersex' despite these claims being significantly undermined by broader overviews of neurological research (Fine 2011; Jordan-Young 2011). However, this problematization is still likely to have effects on young trans people and trans' or gender non-conforming children themselves. Referral to psychologists or psychiatrists almost certainly results in trans children perceiving themselves as suffering from some kind of affliction that requires treatment or cure, this may go some way to explaining the apparently large number of so-called desisters, i.e. those that prefer to remain invisible rather than exposing themselves to stigmatization. Indeed while psychological explanations of why trans children under 12 more often than not appear to stop being trans are focused on, there are other, social explanations which are often overlooked.⁶ Possible reasons could be: pressure from the family through rejection, poor passing in terms of lack of recognition in the desired gender role, stigmatization, lack of understanding and acceptance.

6 | For example Ria Cooper who was effectively forced to detransition because of social pressures rather than ceasing to identify as transsexual. See Macaskill, G. (2012): »I was a boy ... then a girl ... now I want to be a boy again«: Agony of teen who is Britain's youngest sex-swap patient. URL: <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/britains-youngest-sex-swap-patient-wants-1403321> [29.11.2013].

The problematizing of the difference between cisgender and transgender people

Cisgenderism does not merely affect trans people, it affects everyone. It represents one of the main ways by which the gender binary and potentially everything stemming from it, such as male hegemony and misogyny, exerts its influence. Although it has different consequences for trans people, it still functions to prevent cisgender people, in particular those assigned male gender at birth, from expressing preferences for activities or items associated with any other sex/gender. It is important to stress that cisgenderism affects men and women differently, and men and women differently in different cultural environments. It is also important to emphasize that trans people identifying as trans for specific purposes, such as political organization in defence of, or in the struggle for human and civil rights, represents productive categorization, in other circumstances these categorizations are less so and potentially represent problematic distinctions.

The essentialising of gender as biologically determined, fixed at birth and immutable

Current ideology of gender appears to conceive of gender in an essentialist way. Even within the trans community this cultural influence can be detected⁷ being employed as an apparent means of legitimation, the effectiveness of which is far from established. Messner (2000) illustrated a tendency by adults to essentialize sex/gender in young children even when few, if any, innate differences were apparent. Adults seemed to pick up on small elements of gendered behaviour, which were often themselves culturally induced, and interpret these as essential.

If sex/gender is commonly viewed as essential then it is likely that anyone who fails to conform to the rules of sex/gender will be considered to be suffering from some kind of problem. However, Kane (2006) showed how parents, especially fathers, whose children identified as trans or sex/gender non-conforming, and particularly male-assigned children, appeared to change their ideology to a social constructivist one, blaming themselves for failing to bring their child up in a sufficiently sexed/gendered way. In both instances trans and sex/gender non-conforming children are likely to find it difficult to assert their genders in the face of de-legitimation.

Sex/Gender as externally imposed

We characterize gender as assigned at birth and we also use the phrase >gender attribution< when we describe the way others assign gender to someone they encounter. Many trans persons understand gender as something assigned at birth. The phrase 'gender attribution' also denotes the way others assign a particular gender to someone they encounter. In both cases the active agent is the other

7 | For instance: Blog: Women born transsexual. URL: <http://womenborntranssexual.com/about/> [29.11.2013].

person, the person doing the gendering is not the person who is being gendered. In this situation they are culturally positioned as the passive individual. Culturally, gendering is something done to us by others. This represents a significant problem for those whose sex/gender identity or expression differs from the one they were assigned at birth. It is also likely to result in significant difficulties in terms of self-intelligibility for children in this position. If, at a very young age one is continually told that one is a boy, when one does not feel like a boy that is likely to result in confusion and potential psychological or emotional problems. Yet this cultural imposition of gender, when combined with other characteristics of cultural cisgenderism, in particular the systemic erasure and essentialising of gender represents a formidable epistemological, cultural and social hurdle for trans children to overcome.

However it is not solely the external imposition of gender that represents a significant problem for trans people; it is the way this external imposition of gender is not perceived as problematic. Examples of this may be difficult to find since cultural cisgenderism is a largely tacit, DS- (weakly discursively saturated) practice. The following extract, however, from an article in the Daily Mail about a trans' child represents a good example. It can be understood as an instance of the culture or ideology of cisgenderism speaking through the voice of one individual:

»The grandmother of a five-year-old boy who is now living as a girl has admitted she would rather he were back to his old self than going around in pink dresses. For more than a year Zach Avery from Purfleet, Essex, has worn his long fair hair done up in bunches and insisted on living his life as a member of the opposite sex. But Jill Recknell, from Alderney in the Channel Islands, who is in her mid-50s, confessed she cannot accept that her grandson has suddenly become a granddaughter. Mrs Recknell added she was upset by Zach's parents' decision to go public, telling the People: ›I'd rather see him kicking a football than parading in a pink dress.‹ But Mrs Recknell says, although she loves her grandchildren no matter what, Zach will always be a boy to her – ›the sex he was born with and is on his birth certificate.‹ « (Daily Mail 1st March 2012).

In this example, the cisgenderist ideology of externally imposing one's own sex/gender attribution on another is evident on two levels. Firstly the Daily Mail follows its apparently normal editorial policy of employing the gender of the individual as assigned at birth. This is in direct conflict with the Trans Media Watch Style Guide⁸ and could thus be argued to represent deliberate transphobia, especially since this misgendering, i.e. the incorrect attribution of sex/gender, seems to be edi-

6 | Trans Media Watch: MEDIA STYLE GUIDE. URL:<http://www.transmediawatch.org/Documents/Media%20Style%20Guide.pdf> [29.11.2013].

torial policy for many newspapers like the Daily Mail. However, it is difficult to characterize the coercive misgendering of Zach by her grandmother as anything other than a manifestation of cisgenderism.

Yet in both instances it is apparently considered unproblematic externally to impose someone else's sex/gender identity on a trans' person. Whilst we may have to accept the possibility that Mrs Recknell may have been misquoted or encouraged to deliberately misgender Zach, the apparently banal way the Daily Mail journalist deliberately misgendered her, and the way Recknell has decided to take it upon herself to decide Zach's gender is indicative and illustrative of the way society views the means by which people are gendered. Both Recknell and the editor of the Daily Mail clearly feel that it is appropriate to apply their own coercive attribution of gender to a child and they do not appear the least defensive about it. In addition it has to be acknowledged that the effect of this and other instances of cisgenderism is to de-legitimize trans people and reinforce their unintelligibility to themselves and others.

The next section explores how the concept of cisgenderism might affect the lives of young trans people in terms of their life narratives.

Sex/Gender as Narrative

Bakhtin's (1981: 84-258) concept of chronotope theorized the nature of narrative. It characterized narrative as comprising time (chronos) and space (tope). However Vice (1997) argues, with particular reference to the movie »Thelma and Louise« (Scott 1991), that narrative is also sexed/gendered. So instead of narrative being conceptualized as

space x time

as Bakhtin does, she argues that narrative should be conceptualized as

space x time x sex/gender

Vice's case is that »Thelma and Louise« represents a qualitatively different type of road movie from previous examples of this genre because the main characters are women. It is easy to see why this was never explored by Bakhtin; as a man, the default sex/gender, the idea that narrative could be any different from the way he perceived it from his gendered point of view would have been difficult to identify. However if we accept Vice's argument that narrative is gendered then it is arguable that, for most people there exist more-or-less ready-made life narratives for both genders within the gender binary. Whilst these may be quite diverse and have changed significantly in the course of history they rarely include trans life narratives.

Adult trans people may have different narratives available to them insofar as they can either live alternative lifestyles or change a male life narrative to a female one or vice versa. Indeed this is a familiar concept since it used to be the advice given to all those undergoing gender confirmation surgery. Post-operative transsexual people were often advised not only relocate to a different part of the country (something potentially quite difficult in small states such as Luxembourg) but to create a retrospective life narrative as though they had always been cisgender. This is something Stone (1991) questioned when she advocated post-transsexualism and that transsexual people should live their lives as openly transsexual people. The problem, for young trans' people and trans' children, is that as a result of the function of cisgenderism there are no life narratives immediately available to them, no narratives of children becoming another gender and growing up and living happy and fulfilled lives in anything other than the sex/gender assigned at birth. Whilst there are narratives of adult trans' people's lives (e.g. Morris 1974, Davidson 2012, Drummond 2012) there are none easily available for children unless one knows where to look on the internet.⁹

Cisgenderism as culture

Life narratives are determined by culture, and in a culture influenced by cisgenderist ideology available life narratives will also be cisgenderist and will exclude the possibilities of trans narratives. This does not merely affect the intelligibility of trans' people to others but trans' people's intelligibility to themselves.

Stryker (2006) suggested that the exclusion of trans' people from European culture stemmed from cultural developments roughly 500 years ago that resulted in the cultural primacy of the material over the spiritual/psychological. This is exemplified by the recent discovery of a 5,000 year-old transsexual¹⁰ in a grave in Prague, where a body with male DNA was interred in the same way a woman would have been, strongly suggesting that transgender people have been accepted in past cultures in Europe. However it is possible that the tendency to culturally exclude trans people also stems from what Douglas (1966: 24) identified as a cultural desire for purity: »We can conclude that holiness is exemplified by completeness. Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong. And holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused.« As such it appears that people's attitudes to categorization have become one-dimensional and, when it comes to human beings, the desire

9 | 11-year-old transgender girl Jazz. URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AeI02L4HneE> [05.07.2015]

10 | URL: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/howaboutthat/8433527/First-homosexual-cave-man-found.html> [05.07.2015]

to categorize one-dimensionally may result in problems for people who do not fit easily into one single category, or who appear to move between categories. The theories of Stryker and Douglas would both seem to go some way to explaining the way transgender people experience this cultural erasure as a result of cisgenderism. In a media-saturated world it is likely that it becomes magnified and so, when trans children become apparent it is more likely that they will be treated as problematic.

CONCLUSIONS

Kennedy and Hellen (2010) identified one of the key factors inhibiting young trans' people from coming out or becoming aware of their sex/gender identities as this lack of vocabulary. Typically, trans people learn trans-related vocabulary (trans, transgender, transsexual) at an average age of 15 years 6 months. This is clearly not merely an instance of simply learning a new item of lexicon; it represents the key to an entire new world. Not merely does it enable children to categorize themselves and begin to identify with a particular group but it represents a revelation in the way they think of themselves. This was repeatedly identified as an important moment:

- »I never had the trans words to use.«
- »I never put a name to it and wasn't even aware of the names TV, TS etc.«
- »Reading about someone who did so in a magazine when I was 12 and feeling astonished that I wasn't alone.«
- »I guess back then I felt a freak because there was no-one I knew who was like me.«

This inability to access trans-related vocabulary; a direct result of the cultural erasure of trans' people which is a feature of cisgenderism, represents a significant barrier to many, if not most, young trans' people and trans' children. Since cisgenderism functions as a *DS-* (*weakly discursively saturated practice*) ideology, the erasure of trans' people requires merely that we are not named. The inability to express one's feelings or identity in language represents, for many at least, a potentially significant obstacle to any kind of self-intelligibility. Whilst it is possible that some young children may be able to express their gender non-conformity with language such as »I am a girl.« Or »I am not a girl.« it is perhaps less likely that they will be understood by parents, who may put it down to a phase they may

be going through, or simple confusion. However the advent of groups of parents of trans children coalescing via the internet has perhaps resulted in more of these children being understood and subsequently helped and supported than previously, as parents of children displaying gender non-conforming behaviour are able to access help and support. Yet the problem remains of trans' children and young people whose parents are unable to find help sites such as Mermaids¹¹ or, possibly more likely, who do not want their child to be transgender. These children, like many others, effectively remain the prisoners of cisgenderism until they acquire a trans-related word in their lexicon. For these children the communities of trans people online and their wealth of information, support and signposting of services, remain hidden, like a mountain in the mist, until one of these keywords unlocks the online transgender networks for them. Locating any information or social network on the internet is determined by language. Once a trans-related word is learned, young trans people's lives can be transformed very quickly. This might come from a resultant epiphany, which enables the understanding of previous feelings of not fitting in, or the understanding that they are not alone and that there are others who are like them. The acquisition of this vocabulary is, however, currently likely to occur in an arbitrary manner, often depending on young people's access to popular media (which is often presented in a negative way). However these lexical keys remain the crucial determinant of at what age and how, trans' or sex/gender-non-conforming children can begin to make sense of their lives and start to map out for themselves a future life narrative which might suit them. The exclusion of this crucial word by cisgenderist culture from access by children represents the one of the most destructive elements of epistemological gentle violence experienced by trans people and potentially remains a factor negatively impacting on mental health, self-confidence academic success and social integration.

The emergence of trans people as a group able to begin to exert its own group identity and engage in self-support, signposting of information and political pressure to obtain human and civil rights has occurred concurrently with the development and spread of the internet (Whittle 1998). It has become a vital medium for possibly the first group in human history to establish itself and coalesce predominantly via the internet. However, this demonstrates that it is still heavily dependent on users knowing the appropriate vocabulary to access it. Ensuring that trans children have access to this vocabulary is essential, so that they can realize that they are not alone and can access support from other young trans people online even if they cannot themselves come out at home or

11 | British parents association Mermaids: family and individual support for teens and children with gender identity issues. URL: <http://www.mermaidsuk.org.uk> [15.12.2013].

at school. Since trans children are very likely to remain non-apparent It should therefore be the most basic requirement of any equal opportunities policies in schools including primary schools, that these keywords are made available to all children even if school staff do not know whether or not any given class contains any trans children.

This paper has set out to establish and characterize the concept of cultural cisgenderism and its effects on trans children and young people. Although trans children still suffer from transphobia² it is important to recognize that prejudicial individual attitudes do not constitute the only problem for trans people; the ideology of cisgenderism, prevalent throughout society, is responsible for many problems, and has been exemplified here particularly by its effects of children and young people.

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