

The Streets Are Hers: The Second Wave of Feminism and the (Feminist) Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction in the works of Sara Paretsky and Sue Grafton

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I

This article aims to discuss the various representations of feminist ideology in the hard-boiled detective novels of Sara Paretsky and Sue Grafton, which is relevant, because until the 1970s the hard-boiled genre had been strictly male-centred. The traditional hard-boiled school was established in the 1920s and 1930s, which was then subverted in the 1980s by feminist authors such as Paretsky and Grafton. The hard-boiled formula was a 'reply' to the popular 'whodunit' detective fiction of the British Golden Age, produced by many notable authors, such as G. K. Chesterton, Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers and Margery Allingham. American writers, such as Raymond Chandler considered the British genre unrealistic and feminine, because of the neat solutions at the end of the novels and the passivity of the gentleman detectives.

It is worth noting that the circumstances in the USA were also quite different from the situation in Britain. In the U.S., the Prohibition, the Great Depression and the spreading gangsterism were the most important circumstances that shaped the American social, economic and political life. Hard-boiled novels were and still are highly realistic and socially critical, because they represent the American way of life unfiltered, but around the 1930s it was also a sexist and racist genre. People of colour are mostly minor characters in early hard-boiled novels, they appear as chauffeurs, maids and they are regularly addressed by derogatory terms, such as 'nigger'. Its sexist nature is proven by the representation of women, which was stereotypical and unvaried: women were either victims, helpers of men, or manipulative transgressors, called the *femme fatale*. The hard-boiled private eye was exclusively a heterosexual white male, an urban version of the frontier hero (created by James Fenimore Cooper) who is a strong-willed individual at the margins of society. Because of the disordered and amoral state of the society hard-boiled authors refrained from closing their novels on an optimistic note, or implying a definite long-term solution for maintaining order. The female PI is a combination of the gentleman detective and

the male hard-boiled private eye: while she demonstrates the intellectual capacity of the Golden Age detective, and physical prowess of the male PI, she is as marginalized in society as her American male counterpart.

As a result of the feminist revision of the hard-boiled school of detective fiction, the traditionally masculine genre is now capable of communicating a “feminist message” (Hamilton 41). Since the “second wave feminism was a fractious and multi-faceted movement” (Hamilton 41), female writers included differing agendas in their detective novels and thus diversified the characterization of the female sleuth. In this article, Sue Grafton’s protagonist, Kinsey Millhone is going to be analysed and compared with Paretsky’s V.I. Warshawski, in order to demonstrate how the varying “feminist message[s]” (Hamilton 41) manifest themselves in the representations of the two private eyes and their investigative methods. It can be stated that both Paretsky’s and Grafton’s strategies in the portrayal of their female protagonists reveal their own relation to the second wave of feminism and express their differing feminist views.

Accordingly, I argue that Warshawski embodies a more extreme type of feminist agenda, while Millhone harmonises more with the traditional ideology of the hard-boiled formula. Nevertheless, Johanna M. Smith claims that Warshawski “remains male-defined” while “Grafton’s novels de-masculinize hard-boiled detection by representing it simply as a job with Millhone simply the (female) person doing it” (81).

II

In this article, this contradiction will be explored more closely so as to demonstrate that Smith’s claim is not entirely applicable to Warshawski. To explore this issue and to justify my hypothesis, I have selected and analysed a number of novels, including Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* (1939), and in order to compare the male and female private detectives, Sue Grafton’s *A is for Alibi* (1982) for the purpose of demonstrating Millhone’s fundamental features as a female PI. Sara Paretsky’s *Indemnity Only* (1982) and *Bitter Medicine* (1987) are also included, since they finely represent Warshawski’s social connections and her struggle for professional authority within a patriarchal society. This article also discusses Paretsky’s *Killing Orders* (1985), because it explores V.I.’s and her best friend/substitute mother’s, Lotty Herschel’s relationship and *Body Work* (2010), since it foregrounds the discussion of the female body and with it Paretsky explores the

representation of the female body in detective fiction. I will also take a brief look at *Burn Marks* (1990), because this novel demonstrates Warshawski's resistance against men's ideal of women, which is a key characteristic of her feminist persona. I have selected "*C*" is for *Corpse* (1986) and "*E*" is for *Evidence* (1988) from Grafton, since the former novel foregrounds Millhone's femininity, namely her "maternal protectiveness" (Horsley, *Twentieth-Century* 274) and the latter one portrays Millhone's relationship with men as a disruption of the traditional family structure.

Grafton's first novel featuring Kinsey Millhone was published in 1982 by the title "*A*" is for *Alibi*, which is the first book of the 'alphabet series' that continued until the author's death in 2017. Unlike Warshawski, Kinsey Millhone started her career as a cop, and she gradually became independent: after dropping out of college she joined the Santa Teresa police force, then she worked for an insurance company as an investigator. However, she soon decided to become a private detective mentored by a local PI Benjamin Byrd who also operates in Santa Teresa, which is a fictional city in contrast with Warshawski's Chicago. Millhone is "very closely modelled on the hard-boiled male" (Horsley, *Twentieth-Century* 272) since she has a past as a law enforcer and she is similar to Marlowe in terms of solitariness and way of talking, but at the same time her position disrupts traditional power relations.

This statement is supported by Maureen T. Reddy's following claim: "the whole notion of a woman in charge, and especially a woman presumably dedicated to ideals of law and order, works against traditional expectations" (*Sisters in Crime* 6). In addition to this, according to Maryam Soltan Beyad and Mohsen Jabbari, Millhone "is less overtly a feminist than she is a Chandlerian detective" (27). Her semblance to Philip Marlowe is notable in her introduction, which is very similar to Marlowe's own at the very beginning of "*A*" is for *Alibi*: "My name is Kinsey Millhone. I'm a private investigator, licensed by the state of California. I'm thirty-two years old, twice divorced, no kids" (Grafton 1). At the same time, she gives more details about herself than Marlowe in the course of the series and we learn that she was orphaned when she was five years old. She does not have good family relations, in the sense that "she resists her own actual family" (Horsley, *Twentieth-Century* 272), because she feels like they had abandoned her. While this aspect is one of the most controversial messages of the novels, because it can be seen as the undermining of familial values, she has established intimate relationships with her landlord, Henry Pitts and a Hungarian bar owner, Rosie who are quasi-parental figures for her. The roles of Henry and Rosie are also untraditional (not strictly feminine or masculine), because sometimes Henry cooks for Millhone and Rosie gives her advice in her cases (Reddy, *Sisters in Crime* 110).

Furthermore, in *"C" is for Corpse* (1986) she feels a "maternal protectiveness" (Horsley, *Twentieth-Century* 274) towards a young man, Bobby Calahan who hires her to find out who attempted to kill him by forcing him off the road. She becomes so emotionally involved that even after he is killed, she keeps investigating. Millhone opens the novel by saying that "I've never worked for a dead man before and I hope I won't have to do it again. This report is for him [Bobby Calahan], for whatever it's worth" (Grafton 14). During working on her cases, Millhone engages in physical violence and talks tough, in this way "asserting some measure of equality and defending female autonomy" (Horsley, *Twentieth-Century* 273), which is a feature she shares with her fellow female private eyes. Another common characteristic according to Horsley is that "there is a sense of essential female weakness she has to overcome if she wants to resist victimhood herself" (275). Female detectives seek romantic relationships, and this feminine urge makes them emotionally (and physically) vulnerable. This aspiration also causes a conflict, since their desire for independence can be perceived as a masculine notion.

On this note, in *"A" is for Alibi*, Millhone becomes emotionally involved with Charlie Scorsoni who nearly kills her in the end. It turns out that it was Scorsoni who killed Libby Glass and Sharon Napier to cover up that he was stealing from the law firm he shared with Laurence Fife. Libby Glass was the accountant of the law firm and when she found out the embezzlement, Scorsoni poisoned her. Sharon Napier was Fife's secretary and Scorsoni killed her as to prevent Millhone from questioning her. When Millhone wants to make sure of Scorsoni's guilt, the man attempts to stab her, but she has a gun, and "[blows] him away" (Grafton, *"A" is for Alibi* 150). The fact that she has to kill someone, even if to save her own life, disturbs her and she says it herself: "The day before yesterday I killed someone and the fact weighs heavily on my mind" (1). Killing can be seen as the most violent act and being true to the feminist ideology, it does not fill her with closure or satisfaction, but scars her. At the end of the novel she adds that "the shooting disturbs me still" (150) and that she will "never be the same" (150). This kind of introspection, emotional turmoil and uncertainty after an act of violence is typical for female detectives, because it is what makes them different from male detectives.

In conclusion, Millhone's "obsessive independence might seem 'masculine' or her emotional vulnerability 'feminine,' [thus] these conventions lose their gender coding" (Smith 81). Due to this balanced characterization, Grafton's detective is less judgemental of patriarchal institutions and heterosexual relationships. However, in *"E" is for Evidence*, she finds herself in a complicated situation when she sleeps with a married police officer, Jonah Robb after years of tension between them. In

the end, Robb seems to value stability given by his family more in contrast with the unstable nature of his relationship with Millhone. At last, he chooses his family over Millhone, betraying Millhone's feelings for him. She comments on her situation in the following way: "Being rejected is burdensome that way. You're left with emotional baggage you unload on everyone else. It's not just the fact of betrayal, but the person you become ... usually not very nice" (Grafton, *"E" is for Evidence* 143). In this case, "the woman detective becomes the *femme fatale*" (Wilson 151), because she is "the other woman" (151) who threatens the conventional family values.

According to Gill Plain, Warshawski is depicted as a "superwoman" (qtd. in Thompson 60) and a "feminist detective hero" (60) based on the way she is pushing her body's limits. However, Paretzky also emphasizes that even if Warshawski is a strong-willed person, the fact that her intellectual and physical capacities are limited, endorses her credibility (Thompson 61). Vic's authenticity is supported by her feminine interests and concerns as well: for instance, she pays attention to eating healthily, she is concerned about her weight and how she dresses. Moreover, in opposition to male detectives, she is actively trying to heal her body: when she is hurt, she takes a hot bath and medication so she can get back to work as soon as possible. When she is in pain, she turns to Lotty who helps Vic in all ways she can. However, their relationship is not unproblematic since both of them are head-strong women and this causes strains in their friendship. In *Killing Orders*, Lotty describes their connection as the following quote illustrates: "You have been the daughter I never had, V.I. As well as one of the best friends a woman could ever desire" (Paretzky 337). Despite their occasional conflicts, their affection toward each other runs deep and even though it is tested sometimes, they cannot deny it. Nonetheless, Paretzky "criticizes the potentially blind, self-delusional, and harmful myth of the universal sisterhood ... by showing us various sites where female friendship goes through crises and challenges" (Rhee 103).

For instance, in *Bitter Medicine* "V.I. struggles to feel any sympathy whatsoever for the stoical resignation to passive suffering of the archetypal Latino mother figure" (Horsley, *Twentieth-Century* 265). Usually, Vic is able to be compassionate to others, but she is firmly against the kind of female passivity that Consuelo's mother has demonstrated after her daughter's death. All of the above mentioned underpin Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones's claim that feminist detective fiction is a "reverse discourse" (92) since it provides "a critique of the formula by reproducing it with strategic differences, thus redirecting the trajectory of dominant discourse" (92). One other difference in Paretzky's novels is that there is an inclusive female community, whereas Marlowe's Los Angeles does not welcome Marlowe as a member.

He is described by Debasree Basu “as a man of the city but a man against the city” (198), because he is an inhabitant of L.A. and unavoidably a member of that society, but he also tries to fight against corruption that is inherent in the city. Moreover, Paretsky’s and Grafton’s “novels link a particular investigation to wider social problems that are usually related ... to women’s continuing oppression” (Reddy, “Women Detectives” 198), while Raymond Chandler avoids expressing a harsh social criticism of his time. The fact itself that a woman actively and physically fights back against violence, in this way denying further oppression, goes against gender norms.

On this note, Warshawski’s role is not just to expose the criminals, but also to show other women the way out of their oppressed state. Vic’s demonstration of independence and self-respect is to let other women know that it is their choice to decide how they want to live (Klein 230). Furthermore, Millhone’s and Warshawski’s tough-talking is also a reformation of the male-centred tradition as they use it “to express [their] emotions and sensibilities, and power over situations and circumstances” (200), while the male PI employs it to re-assert his “masculine ethos” (Horsley, *Twentieth-Century* 73). The hard-boiled detective has a “very direct, self-confident voice” (265) with which Paretsky endowed Warshawski for her “to speak, to say those things that people in power want to keep unsaid, unheard” (Paretsky, “The Detective as Speech” 17). In other words, Paretsky wanted to give voice to the female experience through her protagonist and to show that women can and should fight against oppression.

According to Kathleen Gregory Klein, Paretsky’s feminist detective fiction is the best example for the successful subversion of the hard-boiled genre so far, because Paretsky recognized that there is much more to turning the hard-boiled genre into a feminist platform than just substituting the male PI with a feminist one (235). Klein considers Paretsky’s choices concerning the characterization of the female gumshoe, the structure of the plots and the overall atmosphere of the novels, the key factors that help balancing “the tensions between the demands of the detective novel and the feminist ideology” (230).

Unlike Kinsey, Warshawski ages realistically throughout the series, which makes her a “dynamic detective” (qtd. in Vanacker 101). Her development as a character is a shared quality with the *Bildungsroman* genre, as we can follow how the various experiences affect her emotionally and how her mindset transforms over time (Vanacker 102). Warshawski being in her fifties also gives Paretsky the opportunity to provide an evaluation of her detective’s character, its development and her feminist behaviour.

Furthermore, the latest Warshawski novels can be seen as “state of the nation” (103) novels, because through Vic, one can see how socio-economic circumstances

change as a result of modernization and how they affect her and her society. Moreover, one can gain an insight into how feminism itself became more inclusive. The second wave centred more around white, middle-class, heterosexual women, while the third wave promoted “a feminism of ‘multicultural inclusion, identity politics, and intersectionality’” (qtd. in Vanacker 105). This meant that people recognized the need for acknowledging the different identity markers, such as race, class and sexuality in order to include other women than white, middle class and heterosexual.

In *Body Work*, Vic’s niece, Petra Warshawski is a representative of the third wave feminists and her attitude often makes Vic dissatisfied and frustrated. V.I. is aware that it is the merit of her generation that Petra’s generation of women have the possibilities they have. For example, Vic’s following comment reveals that she thought Petra was ignorant of the issues of feminism: “In the seven months I’d spent around my cousin, this was the first time she’d revealed any awareness of women’s issues, in the arts or anywhere else” (Paretsky, *Body Work* 14). In *Body Work*, Petra Warshawski defends the actions of the “Body Artist” saying that it is her own choice what she does with her body. V.I.’s neighbour and father-figure Mr. Contreras and even V.I. herself see the artist’s actions as improper and disturbing. However, the fact that the artist willingly offers her skin to be painted on by the audience, is ironically a protest against the objectification of the female body.

Watching the Body Artist’s performance, Vic wonders about “Who was exploiter, who was exploited?” (22), because she finds it hard to understand how her performance would help women’s situation. Although later on, she comments “[w]hether we like it or not, we live in a world where the exposed female body is a turn-on. Music only suggests the erotic or the private self. The Body Artist forces you to see the private” (12). *Body Work* is Paretsky’s attempt to discover and discuss the female body and sexuality, but even in previous novels Warshawski is represented as a sexually active woman. According to Smith, both Warshawski and Millhone are portrayed as sexual beings, but “these women detectives seem free of the sexual difficulties male detectives groan under” (80).

Feminist authors wanted to normalize the depiction of female sexuality as to dismantle the highly popular trend of the 1930s that depicted sexual women as villainous and manipulative. In this sense, the female PI is similar to the *femme fatale* of the male-centred hard-boiled tradition. Even though sexuality has an important role, Warshawski is threatened with rape only once in Paretsky’s novels, in *Indemnity Only*, because “Paretsky wanted to avoid blending sex and violence in a way that pandered to a male, power-oriented sensationalism that objectifies

women” (Hamilton 56). The themes of prostitution, lesbianism and homophobia are more pronounced in *Body Work*, which presents the provocative and controversial occupation of the performance artist, Karen Buckley.

Paretsky writes: “The Artist was completely at ease ... [i]t was the audience that was disturbed” (*Body Work* 8) and even Vic is uncomfortable watching her. This suggests that the association of the naked female body with sexual desire is so close and deeply ingrained in contemporary society that even a feminist woman is affected by it. It is worth noting that Warshawski’s reaction to the performance has a homoerotic subtext: “The spotlight on the Artist’s breasts, the sense that this was a mannequin sitting there, not a woman, was both arousing and unpleasant, and I resented my body for responding to what my mind rejected” (8).

Feminist authors address another issue that concerns gender, which is the double standard that exists between the sexes. For instance, the female PI considers her career more important than maintaining a relationship, but her male partner protests. The male partner claims that a woman’s priority should be their relationship over her profession, but this does not necessarily apply to him (Reddy, *Sisters in Crime* 106). In *Indemnity Only*, Warshawski’s lover, Ralph Devereux admits that he did not consider V.I. a professional PI and it almost costs him his life, because his boss, Yardley Masters shoots him at the end of the novel. Ralph says the following when Vic visits him in the hospital: “No, but I should have listened to you. I couldn’t believe you knew what you were talking about. I guess deep down I didn’t take your detecting seriously. I thought it was a hobby, like Dorothy’s [his ex-wife’s] painting” (Paretsky, *Indemnity Only* 312).

Furthermore, in *Burn Marks*, Warshawski is in a relationship with Michael Furey, a corrupt cop who says the following to V.I.: “You’re not interested in the things a normal girl is” (Paretsky 409). His comment indicates that because of V.I.’s “refusal to conform to his ideal of woman” (Wilson 152) he feels that his masculinity is threatened. Warshawski’s unwillingness to change who she is for her lovers is a protest against the domination of men over women in romantic relationships and a choice to keep her authenticity intact. Paretsky aims to highlight gender equality with the help of V.I.’s character by claiming Vic has “the same freedoms that men have to act, to move, to make decisions, to fall in love, experience sex, even to be wrong” (*Age of Silence* 62).

Warshawski often refers to male detectives in general and to Philip Marlowe in particular and she often thinks about what Marlowe would do in her situation. These kind of musings suggest some self-irony and they also highlight how different Marlowe and Warshawski are. For example, in *Body Work* V.I. ponders what to say

why she was at the scene of a shooting: “When I was younger and more insouciant, I would have quoted the great Philip Marlowe and said, ‘Trouble is my business,’ but tonight I was cold and apprehensive. ‘I don’t know’” (Paretsky 4).

Warshawski’s response and sarcastic comment on Marlowe suggest that she realizes that her old habit of comparing herself to Marlowe was unfounded. Marlowe’s “greatness” comes from his ability to remain emotionally detached and resistant toward his environment. Now, however, she acknowledges that she is deeply affected by the violence inflicted on her and on others; the criminality and corruption of her Chicago; and even her own age leaves a mark on her not just physically, but also mentally. Warshawski’s reactions reflect Paretsky’s feminist ideology, while Chandler created Marlowe to continue “the glorification of masculine traits” (Klein 237) that were so popular in the 1930s.

In feminist detective fiction, the past of the protagonists plays a determining role in their characterization. Female sleuths carry “a kind of emotional baggage ... unknown to the hard-boiled, masculine, sturdy-individualist PI” (Smith 80). For instance, “many of Warshawski’s injuries are long-term, and memories of them often carry over into the next novel” (Irons 14). This contributes to the fact that female detectives are more deeply influenced by violence psychologically, than male ones and it is worth pointing out that the people who inflict pain on V.I. are exclusively male.

Additionally, Warshawski is defined by her past as a child of immigrant working class parents, as her father was Polish working as a cop and her mother was Italian. She grew up in the South Side of Chicago, which is the centre of the working-class and the different immigrant groups. As a result, she became conscious of class and race, which made her feel sympathy towards other blue-collar people and be tolerant with the members of other cultures. As her mother had Jewish predecessors, she also feels for her Jewish friends, Lotty Herschel and Max Lowenthal.

As for Millhone, when she was five years old she got into a car crash with her parents and she was the only survivor. She is still haunted by hearing her mother’s crying before she also passed away. The losing of her parents determined her life, because after their passing, she was raised by Aunt Gin who later got her the investigator job at the insurance company where she had worked. Both Warshawski and Millhone think about their mothers, but V.I.’s relationship with her mother is a more determining one. V.I. often wonders about what her mother would think about her being a private detective: she would be proud, because she is educated, has a job and is independent, but would not approve of her occupation. Moreover, there is a typical quality that female detectives possess: they do not follow “a hard-and-fast moral code” (Reddy, *Sisters in Crime* 118) like their male counterparts.

Their “tendency to think contextually” (119) and their female solidarity makes them more adaptable to particular situations which makes them morally more flexible than the male PI.

In this vein, as private detectives, they prioritize their clients and their interests, even if they get into a conflict with the police as a result. For example, Marlowe is serious about protecting his client, which is clear in *The Big Sleep* when he tells Mr. Sternwood the following: “I do my best to protect you and I may break a few rules, but I break them in your favour. The client comes first, unless he’s crooked” (Chandler 231). However, Chandler does not uncover corruption in high places, which is the opposite of what Warshawski achieves after each solved case. For instance, in *Indemnity Only*, she proves the guilt of Yardley Masters, the vice-president of the Claim Department of a successful insurance company called Ajax. Because of her gender, V.I. is often underestimated by men and even by Masters, because unlike her male predecessors she does not enjoy an equal standing with the male criminals in terms of gender, and they are usually of a higher social standing as well (Irons 14).

On the one hand, Warshawski perceives crime as an epidemic that affects the whole city and in a wider sense, Illinois (Horsley, *Twentieth-Century* 270). On the other hand, Millhone’s cases are never extended to the whole of society, but blamed on one corrupted individual. As a result, Grafton’s novels are socio-politically less critical than Paretsky’s, and they do not criticize society as a whole, since Millhone is an “individual solving individual crimes” (272). One of the most notable similarities between V.I. and Millhone is that both of them carry guns and use them if they have to. Their handling of guns serves the purpose of the demystification of the gun, “moving it from the realm of the symbolic, where it signifies male power and control, to the actual” (Reddy, *Sisters in Crime* 99). The female PI is usually reluctant to use a gun, but if she has to she uses it to protect herself or others. In this way, feminist writers put the gun in a new light, because they transformed it into “something that can be wielded by either women or men, that can be used responsibly or irresponsibly” (99).

Making the gun available for women and normalizing it as a tool that simply comes with the profession of the private eye, breaks down “the stereotypes of women becoming distraught under pressure, being the weaker sex both emotionally and physically, and requiring male protection” (113). This dismantling of gender roles is especially notable in Millhone’s personality, because she “combines conventional ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ so as to blur the distinction between them” (Smith 81). The comparison of Millhone and Warshawski shows that Millhone is less feminine than Warshawski, which is noticeable in the different ways they dress, because

Warshawski likes fashionable clothes, which are not always comfortable during an investigation, while Millhone rather focuses on keeping her attire practical and comfortable. The lack of personal possessions with sentimental value in the case of Millhone is another sign that Warshawski is more sensitive, especially when it comes to her mother's Venetian glasses. In addition, Warshawski has people and dogs that are dependent on her, while Millhone avoids such commitments. According to Klein, Warshawski is a "self-defined feminist[s] for whom this identification is a conscious act and apparently consistent feature of [her] behaviour" (202). On the other hand, Millhone does have "feminist inclinations" (202), but she does not explicitly define herself as a feminist (202).

III

In conclusion, it can be stated that both Paretsky and Grafton left their mark on the feminist sub-genre of hard-boiled detective fiction, regardless of their positions within the second wave of feminism. Paretsky created a model of the feminist private detective who is not just a female version of Marlowe, but a hard-boiled protagonist who embodies the two competing ideologies without producing inconsistencies in Warshawski's personality. On the other hand, Grafton rather followed the guidelines established by Chandler, which does not mean that Kinsey Millhone is less popular than her fellow PI. Grafton took a less radical approach to transforming the hard-boiled detective, though Millhone does share the most relevant feminist characteristics, for example the emphasis of the female experience, the depiction of female sexuality, the importance of the detective's past, the physical and psychological influence of violence on the private eye, and the threats men pose to the female gumshoe personally and professionally.

All of these elements promote the separation of the feminist hard-boiled detective fiction from the male-dominated traditional hard-boiled school. The distinction between the two traditions is based on what the author intends to focus on: Chandler is generally preoccupied with the relationship between the male private eye and the police, while Paretsky highlights the gendered struggle of the female detective with patriarchal institutions.

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