

SOCIAL PROTEST FICTION AND THE QUEST FOR A NEW BLACK IDENTITY

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Submitted: 2026-05-11

Valued: 2026-05-29

Validated: 2026-06-14

Abstract: This paper looks into how racism builds up and dismantles the identities of the characters in the chosen novels. It seeks to demonstrate to what extent Twain's, Wright's and Morrison's selected works are social protest novels. In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Black Boy*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby*, whiteness is associated with beauty. In contrast, colour is associated with ugliness. Twain, Wright and Toni Morrison employ these images to stress the destruction of the black community's infatuation with whiteness. The absence of color is a stronger image of happiness and freedom.

Keywords: Construction; Deconstruction; Protest novels

Résumé : Cet article vise à examiner les théories basées sur la construction et reconstruction prônées par le racisme en termes d'analyse critique d'identités des personnages dans les œuvres sous-étudiées. Le texte vise également à démontrer à quel degré les œuvres de Twain, Wright et Morrison décrivent le comportement des Blancs vis-à-vis de leurs compatriotes Noirs. Dans les œuvres intitulées : *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Black Boy*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby*, le concept 'Blanc' fait allusion à l'intelligence. Par contre le terme 'Noir' est synonyme du sous-développement. Twain, Wright and Morrison ont utilisé ces couleurs susmentionnées pour exprimer la domination des Blancs sur Noirs

Mots clés: Construction; Reconstruction; Romans de contestation

Introduction : In *Black Boy*, there is no doubt about the significance of Wright's political, sociological and philosophical ideologies in American society. On a matter of race according

to, Standley Itoes Sakwe, “The image of the African American in American Fiction: A Study of William Faulkner’s *The Sound and The Fury* and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” (2017), quotes Rothenberg thus: “Race is a social construct; people then classify different races with “innate, biologically based different intellects, temperaments, and characters” (35). Similarly, Twain, Wright and Morrison focus on the theme of racism which is seen as a social construct. In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Black Boy*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby*, race can be viewed as an idea that human beings create themselves to classify both physical and cultural differences. We shall utilize a Freudian approach in elaborating our point of view.

Selected Books by Twain, Wright, and Morrison that Represent Social Protest Novels

A social novel or social problem/social protest novel is a novel that involves depicting social issues relating to gender and racial discrimination in the society. As usual, class prejudice is dramatized through its effect on the characters in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Black Boy*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby*. A couple of social issues that are highlighted in this literary work include poverty and factory conditions.

The social protest novel is one which places an emphasis on the idea of social change, while the proletarian novel is a political form of the social protest novel which may emphasize revolution. Some early examples are found in eighteenth century England. Social novels have been written throughout Europe and the United States. Although this subgenre of the novel is usually seen as having its origins in the nineteenth century, there were precursors in the eighteenth century. Social problems are an important aspect in the novels of Twain, Wright and Morrison including in particular poverty and the unhealthy living conditions associated with it.

The exploitation of ordinary people by money lenders, the corruption and incompetence of the legal system and the administration of the poor law (*The Complete Works of William Hazlitt* 24). In *Beloved*, Sethe claims what a slave is not allowed to claim (Family, children and motherhood). Morrison depicts Sethe as a pregnant slave who makes plans to run away from the farm with her husband named Halle (3). Sethe’s love is too “thick” for a slave. Her “thick” love cannot allow her children to suffer from slavery even if this means killing them. The

murder of her baby is a conscious decision that is an exertion of her will. Sethe's act displays the social status of a slave mother who is a carrier of both life and death (Kim 135).

Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is another early American social protest novel. Much of scholarship on *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has focused on its treatment of race. Twain's, Wright's and Morrison have said that their novels by humanizing their characters and exposing the fallacies of the racist assumptions of slavery are an attack on racism.

Another social novel is Wright's *Native Son* (1940). It was one of the earliest successful attempts to explain the racial divide in America. It also made Wright the wealthiest black writer of his time and established him as a spokesperson for African Americans. Concerning the proletarian novel, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica, it comes out of the direct experience of the working class life and "is essentially an intended device of revolution," while works by middle-class novelists, like William Godwin's *Things As They Are*; or *The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794), and Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, though they are sympathetic to the hardships experienced by workers, are more concerned with the imposition of reform from above than revolution from within.

Aware of her creative responsibility for African-American people, Morrison says: "The work that I do frequently falls in the minds of most people into that realm of fiction called fantastic, mythic, magical or unbelievable" (112-113). Building on Freud's psychoanalytic thinking, Heinze Kohut in *Self Psychology* (1960) comes up with the bipolar self, thereby scientifically designating the double as an integral part of the psychological self (Par. 1). Contrasting with the Freudian double emerging in response to the ego's melancholic longing for an impossible past, Kohut's double is an internalized parent *imago*, crucial to the organization of the psychological self (Lei Wang 50).

Linda Krumholz in "Reading and Insight in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*" in *African-American Review* (2002), says that "Sethe is commenting on the circular, interruptive and intrusive nature of trauma's time. Her insistence on the literality and indestructibility of her individual memories suggests that they are actually "fragments of historical memory" (395). She clarifies the concept of the inescapable horror of slavery which implicates all American people of African origin (Blackness and Arts in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*." *Contemporary Literature* 263-92). Correspondingly, in "Giving Body to the World," Jean Wyatt invented the term

“spatialized time” to represent the aftershock of the slave trauma in *Beloved*. However, Kohut defines self-objects as those which are not experienced as separate from the self. Its prototype is the idealized parent imago which figures as one of the two poles of the nuclear self in Kohut’s paradigm (25).

To understand the split between the eye and the gaze in *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly’s wife (Pauline) regularly goes to the cinema in an attempt to shake off the degradation of poverty as her own internalized ugliness. In revisiting the American Gothic, Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject demonstrates how Gothic strategies expose the historical contradictions of race in works done by Twain and Morrison.

In Morrison’s *The Blue Eye*, Claudia’s abject writing exposes the deadly effects of mainstream mythology and internalized abjection in Pecola’s destruction, whereas, Twain and Wright made use of the Gothic to create an alternative world and suggest a means of healing the effects of slavery through the ghostly figure of their novels (*Literary Endeavour* 25). All these narratives exemplify the increasing power of the Gothic to create an alternative perspective on the racist history and culture of America (133-141). For many years, the Gothic idiom has served as an effective narrative strategy to deconstruct the existing master-narrative of Euro-American literature.

French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, in *Four Discourses* (2018), states that there are four basic types of discourse. These four discourses are called: *master, university, hysteric and analyst* discourses that relate dynamically to one another. For example, the discourse of the master is a struggle for mastery (Par. 1). He notes that these discourses focus on the idea of domination and penetration (Par. 2). This thought is based on Hegel’s master slave dialectic, while the discourse of the university is related to the provision and worship of objective knowledge usually in the unacknowledged service of some external master discourse. The discourse of the hysteric is the symptoms embodying and revealing resistance to the prevailing master discourse, while the discourse of the analyst is the deliberate subversion of the prevailing master discourse.

Lacan’s theory of the four discourses was initially developed in the twentieth century, perhaps in response to the events of social unrest during May 1968 in France, but also through his discovery of what he believed were deficiencies in the orthodox reading of the Oedipus

complex. The Four Discourses theory is presented in his seminars “L’Envers de la psychoses” and in “Radiophonie” (1970), where he started using “discourse” as a social bond which is founded on intersubjectivity (55-99). He uses the term discourse to stress the Trans individual nature of language that is, speech always implies another subject.

According to Jacques Lacan, discourse in the first place, refers to a point where speech and language intersect. He purports that the four discourses represent the four possible formulations of the symbolic network which social bonds can take and can be expressed as the permutations of a four-term configuration showing the relative positions between the agent and the other. Twain, Wright and Morrison make use of the four discourses to exteriorize their vision of the American society.

The discourse of the *master* is the basic discourse from which the other three derive. The dominant position is occupied by the master signifier, for example, Twain, Wright and Morrison represent the subject who thinks of black and white society in America, while Jim, Wright, Pecola and Jadine all represent the oppressed other. According to Zized Slavoj, the discourse of the University is caused by an anticlockwise quarter turn of the previous discourse (265-269). The dominant position is occupied by knowledge. An attempt at mastery can be traced behind the endeavors to impact neutral knowledge. For example, the domination of the white over the black to whom knowledge is transmitted. This hegemony is visible in modernity with science. We thus notice that African-American literature has been a challenge to American scholars who are interested in black literature.

Nevertheless, the discourse of hysteric is influenced by one quarter turn of the discourse of the master (Par. 9). It involves a divided subject taking up pole position. On the other hand, the discourse of knowledge results from the one, quarter turn of the discourse of the hysteric as did the creation of psychoanalysis whereby Freud made an interpretative turn of the discourse of his hysterical patients. The position of the writers should be that of an agent. Since the discourse is a several of that of the master, it is subversive to domination efforts.

Besides the four types of discourse, the three authors make use of the Gothic. The Gothic as a genre is not easy to be defined. It seems to elicit the deepest horror in readers and protagonists, yet it is precisely from the most horrifying moments of the Gothic that readers derive most pleasure. Gothic stories seem to declare the triumph of goodness and innocence over evil, yet

this triumph is short lived compared to the joy of horror. The evil force in many Gothic works seems strong enough to reverse the existing social order, yet the story typically ends by restoring the original order. Twain's text is far more ambivalent in its deployment of the Gothic. To some extent, Twain's position as a white male writer popular in the nineteenth century limited his power to expand the subversive use of the Gothic strategy.

Kim Hyejin in his *The Gothic as Counter-Discourse: Mark Twain, Charles Chesnutt and Toni Morrison* (2007) says:

Hunted by images of Sweet home, Sethe's eyes register a schoolteacher and his company as four horsemen, a sign of the apocalypse which would smash down her freedom. As soon as the four horsemen approach Seethe's house, she drags her children into a shed and attempts to kill all of them (143).

With regard to the above quotation, we argue that, from being a subject of marginal interest in the academic circle, the question of black identity was a troublesome issue within the American space in both nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Literary history has shunned and considered the Gothic as an inferior genre even though Gothic images are prevalent in both Euro and African-American literature.

Twain's, Wright's and Morrison's portrayal of their characters is compelling and their different characters possess tremendous power. Even though *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Black Boy*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby* manifest a subversive and sinister scheme, few critics have noticed the presence of Gothic elements in them.

Likewise, in *The Blackness of Darkness: The Negro and the Development of American Gothic* (1885), Fielder reads *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a dark mirror image of the world and as Twain's most Gothic book (92). Another social novel is Wright's *Native Son* (1940). It was one of the earliest successful attempts to explain the racial issue in America. It also made Wright the wealthiest black writer of the his time and established him as a spokesperson for African Americans. Concerning the proletarian novel, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica, it comes out of the direct experiences of the working class life and "is essentially an intended device of revolution," while by middle-class novelists, like William Godwin's *Things As They Are; or the Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794), and Charles Dicken's *Hard Times*, though they are sympathetic to the hardships experienced by workers, are more concerned with the imposition of reform from above than with revolution from within.

Aware of her creative responsibility for African- American people, Morrison says: “They work that I do frequently falls, in the minds of most people, into that realm of fiction called fantastic, mythic, magical or unbelievable” (112-113). Building on Freud’s *Psychoanalytic thinking*, Heinze Kohut in *Self- Psychology* (1960), comes up with the bipolar self, thereby scientifically designating the double as an integral part of the psychological self (par. 1). Contrasting with the Freudian double emerging in response to the ego’s melancholic longing for an impossible past, Kohut’s double is an internalized parent *imago*, crucial to the organization of the psychological self (Lei Wang 50). Zizek Slavajo’s M.A Dissertation entitled, “Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology.” In the same token, Morrison refers to the truth buried beneath the fact held by the white hermeneutics. For example, in *Beloved* Morrison uses “rememory” to address the inescapability of slavery as well as to provide possible ways of heading its scar.

Unlike Twain, Wright and Morrison have also shown a difference in the significance related to the choice of the titles of their books. For example, Wright’s choice of the title makes it clear that his autobiography is a commentary on racism in America. He does not simply use the word “boy” but qualifies it with the word “black” to show that his childhood and growth are inseparable from the influence of racism in America. Wright identifies himself as “black” in the title. This is the way his childhood environment forced him to think of himself not as a person but always as a black person. Experts think that the word “boy” has racist resonances. It is closely associated with southern whites who wish to degrade blacks by implying that they are unable to grow into real men. The title lends itself to different interpretations and it can define Wright’s autobiography in many ways. The second edition of *Black Boy* contains an alternative title, *American Hunger* (1945), for example, which indicates that Wright wishes to emphasize the theme of literal and figurative hunger. In *American Hunger*, Wright describes himself as a defender of human emotions; precisely those shared by African Americans rather than a political writer. This book also reveals Wright’s experiences and hardships as a young African-American in Chicago. It begins with Wright’s journey from the South to the northern city of Chicago.

The author in *American Hunger* (1945) says: “Politics was not my games: the human heart was my game, but it was only in the realm of politics that I could see the depths of human heart” (372). In *American Hunger*, Wright portrays himself as a conveyer of human rights or emotions

which are shared by African-Americans rather than a political novelist. In the same way, Morrison's choice of the title *The Bluest eye* is meaningful. It implies the idea of inferiority. Pecola sees herself as inferior to whites who oppressed her in a conflicting manner. To be admitted among her community, she wants her eyes to turn blue. In other words, "Blue eyes" are to her, the symbol of beauty, which is an attainable 'beauty.'

Displacement and Identity Search

It appears from the analysis of displacement in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Black Boy*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby* seems to stress the fact that emotional ties with human beings may serve as a hindrance to separating oneself from the societal norms and carrying out any violence against them. Taking the Second World War as their historical context, the novels vividly portray the difficulties people had to face during their times. The cultural and personal background of Morrison and Wright in *Black Boy*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby* is reflected in their works.

Simron Jit Singh and Clemens M. Gunbulhel in an online source entitled "Environmental Relation and Biophysical Transition: the Case of Tricket Island" (2016), regard displacement as a form of survival (191-208). While, Octavia Butler *Kindred*, in *Race and Politics in the Post-Civil Right Era* (2013), captures the political tensions and turbulent social changes of the post-civil rights period which witnessed a renewed academic interest in the legacy of slavery and its representations with a specific focus on slave narratives as valuable historical testimonies.

As Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, in *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999) says, "writers of neo slave narratives mark the moment of a newly emergent black political subject by employing ideologically charged text and their political subjectivity" (6-7). Focusing on Jim's, Wright's, Pecola's and Jadine's displacement through space and time and their interracial relationships, this article demonstrates that the characters' displacements challenge and destabilize the notions of race and gender.

Both Twain and Wright are concerned with the enormous and crippling guilt that conscience can engender. Their perception of the ways in which conscience becomes the tool of organized hypocrisy led them to the hope, expressed through their characters, that moral decision, independent of the working of conscience is possible. In carrying out this similar idea, Twain

and Wright rely on Rousseauistic conceptions of freedom and moral spontaneity which, however inadequate in themselves, serve them as viable dramatic media.

Morrison, in her *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, says: “My curiosity has become an informal study of what I call American Africanism” (6-7). According to her, it is an investigation into the way in which a nonwhite, African-like presence or persona was constructed in the United States. It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessing of freedom.

The emphasis on Jazz and its multimodality found within the novel helps us consider its relevance in the current century when the systemic “traditional” racism we are more familiar with has evolved into a subtler injustice, an injustice repeatedly occurring in the visual realms. What is most intriguing is the question of what it means to have a shared imagination with interracial sex at its core and how each individual responds to this undeniable intimacy. A shared imagination becomes problematic when the bodies sharing an image embody differing images themselves meaning there is a power differential between the beholders.

Chavers Doris Mariah Linda in her Ph.D thesis entitled: “Violent Disruptions: Richard Wright and William Faulkner’s Racial Imagination” (2013), posits that:

Existentialism can be judged on the basis of the justification it provides for the subjective impasses that do, indeed, result there from a freedom that is never so authentically affirmed as when it is within the walls of a prison. A personality that achieves self-realization only in suicide and a consciousness of the other that can only be satisfied by Hegelian murder (52).

The above mentioned statement leads to the quest for identity based on freedom. Here, Chevers examines the relationship between the individual and his/her community. The relevance of this statement lies in its relation to self-reliance. Jim, Wright, Pecola and Jadine, in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Black Boy*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby* claim in terms of self-autonomy.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the racial imagination is still a driving force for the novel, only this time we are privy to how the racial imaginary informs an actual not-white/inter racial body when we read the life of Pecola. The body and narrative of Pecola portray the working of the racial imaginary on the part of her white counterparts and how she confronts the inner tensions, while in *Black Boy*, Wright dwells on the possible topics related to the Great Depression, poverty, and racism.

Jim Crow laws, urban and suburban life and the Communist party. The main character in Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* undergoes a total moral transformation upon having to make life defining decisions throughout his journey for a new life. Huck, for example, emerges in the novel with an inferiority complex caused by living with a drunken father. It is this point where Huck is first seen without any concept of morality. He is later assisted by the guidance of Jim, a runaway slave who owns a sense of morality. Throughout Huck's adventures, he is put into numerous situations where he must look within himself and use his own judgment to make fundamental decisions that will affect the morals which Huck will carry with him throughout his life.

Adventures of Huckleberry finn, Black boy, the Blue eye and Tar Baby illustrate to the reader that rugged individualism is as important an American belief as freedom for all. It is relevant to state that *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Black boy, the Bluest eye Tar Baby* have had some tremendous important on the literary and educational communities in America. In part, our study of these novels leads us to explore all the characters and the ways in which their adventures unfolded in the American society. When comparing both Wright and Huck as protagonists in *Black boy* and *Adventure of Huckleberry Finn*, it is interesting to notice that, like Wright, Huck survived a period of enslavement during the nineteenth century. In all sorts of ways, both Twain and Wright weave stories that reveal the hypocrisies of this civilized society.

Morrison confronts the hypocrisy of slavery through the characters of Pecola and Jadine, whereas Twain confronts it through Huck and Jim. In terms of common stories, both Twain and Wright really do illustrate what they view as the shaky moral foundation of their time period and the way people really miss the mark and lose their sense of humanity. Of course, we do not mean to suggest that all African Americans "look" black. However, the experience of being one skin tone lies at the very core of what it means to be African-American. American ethnic groups centered their identities on a notion of putative skin color, a phenomenon that attests to the centrality of color.

One consequence of color prejudice and its location in the body, then, is the experience of black people of being reduced in their bodies. Another consequence is that one's claim to individuality is constantly vulnerable to being erased. The argument for black exceptionalism

is usually not articulated in mixed company in the interest of interracial solidarity. The claim of black exceptionalism presents both a political challenge to LatCrit theory. As an intellectual claim, black exceptionalism answers Pereira's criticism of the black-white paradigm by responding to that paradigm, though wrongly making "other non-whites" invisible, rightly places black people at the center of any analysis of American culture or American white supremacy. In its strongest form black exceptionalism argues that what "white" people have done to "black" people is at the heart of the story of America. The story of "race" itself is the story of the construction of blackness and whiteness.

Bofua, in "American Transcendentalism in the Age of Globalisation: A Study of Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* and Major Essays" posits that Emerson's essay, "Self-Reliance," is based on the ideas of individualism that is espoused by the Transcendentalists" (75). To shed light on this statement, we have to refer to critics' definitions of race. Race definitions operate to define the "have-not" and to mask the correlation between race and the "haves" American social discourse attaches negative characteristics by groups, for example, he is poor because he is a lazy spic. We do not attach success by racial group. Success is the reward of individual characteristic, for example, he is rich because he works hard and he is ruthless. We do not acknowledge that as statistical reality, he is rich because he is a white male. Race redefinitions go to the heart of our conception of equality.

In both Wright's and Morrison's novels, slavery haunts all African American's works display their endeavors to deal with the cultural trauma in order to restore African-American identity. By emphasizing the importance of a border-dissolving ancestral presence, Wright and Morrison display a devotion to liberate black people from the splitting white power structure in their black oriented writings. As earlier mentioned, grounded in the ethical fields of slavery, Morrison's and Wright's *The Bluest Eye*, *Tar Baby* and *Black Boy* are relevant to postcolonial studies since some important aspects that connect their fictions are their attention to the unfathomable weight of the past on the present as well as the future.

Trudier Harris, in *Fiction and Folklore: The Novel of Toni Morrison* (1991), points out that "Morrison transforms historical folk materials. In the process, she creates literary folklore. Morrison restructures folkloric forms in literary, psychoanalytic patterns" (7). However, in *Trauma Fiction* (2004), Anne Whitehead sees Morrison's fiction and black literature more

broadly, as it constructs a counter-narrative which asserts what the historical or literary record has forgotten. Morrison's writing overlaps with psychoanalysis in excavating a buried past and bringing repressed material back to consciousness (154-155).

Thinkers observe Morrison's inclination to delve into the history of American slavery in these terms reflects her obsession with unearthing the unspeakable horror and hardships of slavery. In her works, her characters' obsessive engaging with the death tainted darkness and silence is interpretable as their efforts to extract meaning from the cultural history.

It is known that racism and oppression are one of the major aspect in black American literature. This study attempts to make readers realize these themes in Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Wright's *Black Boy*, Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby* by analyzing the concept of historical perspective of the black writing narrative and the effects of racism and oppression which include poverty, hunger and assaults and the way through which blacks reacted to racism. We claim that black American literature was written to oppose racism and oppression in all its ramifications and, also to make blacks gain self-pride and a new identity that differs from the one that has been bestowed on them by the mainstream white American culture.

This section has shown that racism relates to racial discrimination. The term racism usually denotes race-based prejudice, violence, dislike, discrimination and oppression. The concept of racism is derived from the word "race" and it is believed that one race is inferior to another, which justifies the unequal treatment of the members of the same society (*Racism and Oppression in Black American Literature: An Example of Richard Wright's Black Boy* 182).

This chapter has also probed into the way the three authors combat racism by exposing the horrible experiences that the black slaves went through. These experiences and the attempts used by blacks to reconstruct a new identity are experiences and the attempts used by blacks to reconstruct a new identity are recounted by Twain, Wright and Morrison in their social protest novels.

Conclusion: In conclusion, this article entitled "Social Protest Fiction and the Quest for a New Black Identity" has discussed how the concept way racism shapes and re-shapes the identity of the characters in the novels chosen. It has depicted Twain's, Wright's and Morrison's works as social protest novels. This article has described the novels of Twain, Wright, and Morrison as a protest fiction. This discuss has been on Western Civilization and Black Culture. Often

Western Civilization affects Black Culture; in order to maintain harmony between the two cultures, blacks fight for equality and recognition.

To conclude, the efforts made by the three novels of, Twain, Wright, and Morrison have been to create ambiguity in racial demarcations through the focus on establishing a healthy association with one's African-American heritage as a means to solve the problem of blacks being unable to overcome their qualitatively unchanged conditions and survival in the post-slavery America. As for findings, the authors' lack of exploration also piqued the authors' interest based on the problems associated with the quest for individual progressed memories affected Black's search for their identity in America. In this context, racism has constructed and reconstructed the identities of the characters in the selected novels.

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