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CHAPTER NINE

DANGEROUS BODIES: THE REGULATION AND CONTESTATION OF WOMEN'S SEXUALITY AT THE MOVIES IN VIRGINIA

MELISSA OOTEN

In 1922, the General Assembly of Virginia created a motion-picture censorship board to regulate out of popular culture images its cultural arbiters ruled detrimental to state officials' attempts to modernize and "clean up" the image of Virginia. On-screen depictions of women's sexuality repeatedly fell prey to the board's "protectionist" ideology, by which censors argued that their work "protected" society's most vulnerable citizens. In reality, such an ideology served as an extension of state power to keep subjective, realistic portrayals of these already marginalized citizens out of popular culture in order to justify their continued status as "second-class" citizens within the state.

Regulation of Sexuality in 1920s Virginia

The regulation of sexuality came to the forefront of Virginia's legislative agenda repeatedly during the 1920s. According to historian Philippa Holloway, Virginia's leaders of that decade "identified a broad spectrum of sexual behaviors and sex-related activities that they considered dangerous to public welfare" and thus initiated specific policies to control and curb the effects of deviant sexuality (27). Between 1922 and 1924, the General Assembly of Virginia passed three laws that expanded public intrusion into private sexual matters. First, the Assembly passed the Motion Picture Censorship Act, which allowed censors to view each movie requesting entrance into the state before it could be shown on any theater screen. Second, the state passed the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, which narrowed who could be "white" in the state of Virginia. Finally, in that same year, legislators passed the Virginia Sterilization Statute, which allowed the sterilization of any resident of the state's four mental institutions or the Lynchburg State Colony. Holloway points out the significance of such regulation in her assessment that "feeble-minded individuals were not

new to Virginia in the 1920s, but the suggestion that they could damage the Commonwealth was" (27, 32).

Not only did the government begin to expand its intrusion into citizens' sexual behaviors, but it also solidified white elites' belief that "certain kinds of sexual behavior presented dangers to the state and that government should undertake serious efforts to prevent these threats" (Holloway 30). For the first time, Virginia's elites began to view segments of the Commonwealth's citizenry as enough of a threat to their "progressive" vision to allocate state funds to censor the movies, regulate whiteness, and sterilize some of its poorest and least politically empowered citizens.

Sexual deviance has long been associated with social disorder, and the control of the sexual by Virginia's elites in the 1920s must be understood in the context of their broader mission to cultivate an orderly, efficient, economically prosperous, "modern" state in the 1920s. The General Assembly instituted statewide prohibition in 1914, and it was during this campaign that state elites began to support government efforts at moral reform (Holloway 8, 9, 14). The expansion of the government into the realm of sexuality was done in the name of economic progress. Touting "business progressivism," Virginia's elites promoted a "clean" state as a prosperous one, hoping to paint the state as "morally clean" in order to lure more business and economic prospects into the state. It became a driving interest of state officials to ensure that Virginia was not full of "degenerates" and that these socially and politically marginal citizens did not drain the state's coffers as welfare recipients. Virginia's elites "embraced a vision of progress that involved controlling disorderly individuals in the interests of efficiency and social order, and they passed sex-related legislation to promote this vision" (Holloway 67).

State officials in Virginia concerned themselves with cultivating an economically efficient state, not one based on social welfare programs, and they enlisted scientific "experts" across the state in their cause. For example, medical professionals throughout the state promoted eugenics-based sterilization as being in the best economic interest of the state. Once sterilized, these individuals could be "safely" released from state institutions (Holloway 33). These institutions, then, were not "for" the mentally ill. They instead functioned to "protect" Virginia society as a whole—and the state's treasury—by containing certain individuals until their "threat" was eliminated (that is, until they were rendered sterile and state authorities could be ensured that these individuals could not produce a "degenerate" child that could become a future economic burden on the state).

At the crux of this study is the fact that, throughout the twentieth century, state officials in Virginia expanded the state's sexually coercive regulations in order to cultivate an image of the state (as exemplified by both its public

officials and its citizens) as moderate and progressive, especially in economic terms. Understanding state officials' regulation of citizens' sexual behavior, especially of its poor residents and/or citizens of color, cannot be detached from its program to lure lucrative economic and industrial development into the state (Holloway 213). To this end, censors began to regulate a medium of popular culture—films, in this case—in order to protect their own elite status as cultural arbiters, and they attempted to confine certain images of “the other”—in terms of races, classes, and “deviant” sexualities “other” than their own white, middle-class heterosexuality—to shore up their entrenched power and authority. In essence, these censors engaged in a cultural war in which they and the societal contingent they represented actively worked to prevent authority that was established politically and economically—placing themselves and their constituents at the top of the hierarchy—from being undermined or contradicted by images viewed in popular culture by mass, diverse audiences. Thus, the battle the censors fought was one to maintain their own cultural authority as white, politically empowered elites.

The issue of sexual knowledge—who controls it and who has access to it—operates at the core of these debates over sexuality among both censors and citizens. In order to entrench themselves as the chief controllers of sexual knowledge, censors employed the rubric of “protection” to regulate popular culture and to protect their own elite status as cultural arbiters and protectors. These emergent and contested sexual discourses that came to surround the censors' “protective” actions involved inextricably linked subtexts of gender, race, and class. While censors spoke about forbidding certain images of white women and African Americans to “protect” them, they actually censored these images as a mechanism to control how these individuals were depicted on film as an extension of the control state officials already issued over their African-American, working-class, and female citizens (D'Emilio and Freedman 106; Pernick 109).

The Censorship of Sexuality at the Movies Through Sex-Hygiene Films

Sexual topics on film presented a particular set of problems for Virginia's movie censors. The medium of film itself furthered the propulsion of sexuality into the public eye, pushing the effort for governmental regulation. Film and its connection with potentially provocative displays of female sexuality—initially portrayals of prostitutes, glimpses of bare legs and thighs, sexually evocative dialogue, and later full nudity—combined to invite a particularly potent attack by movies' detractors (Ullman 109; Staiger 180). The censorship board's debates revolved around who controlled, and who would have access to, sexual

knowledge. While not officially involved in sexual education, the censors judged whether the medium of film constituted an "appropriate" venue for educating (and controlling) the public with regard to issues of sexuality and whether individual movie efforts were aimed at sexual education or exploiting the gaps in censorship laws to allow for showing sexual situations on film in order to turn a quick profit. Individual censors had to decide whether each individual film educated the public or cultivated prurient interests in its viewers. Since most of these films fell into the loosely defined genre of "sex-hygiene films," it would be through these films that censors pointed their regulation of displays of on-screen sexuality.

The term "sex hygiene" refers to the promotion of practicing hygienic, "healthy" sexual relations for both individual good and the good of the community. Sex-hygiene campaigns began as part of much broader Progressive-era reform efforts to scientifically "clean up" society as a whole under the rubric of social hygiene. As reformers sought to control venereal disease as a health problem, sex-hygiene films, which addressed a range of health issues such as pregnancy and venereal disease, were born. Sex-hygiene films as a genre began in the 1910s as a direct result of—and often in association with—campaigns against venereal disease (Pernick 120). The history of sex-hygiene films involves productions created by both "legitimate" medical and public-health institutions as well as those produced by "exploitation" filmmakers who masked their products as educative sex-hygiene works in order to secure the censors' approval of their films. While medical and public-health officials billed their fare as strictly educational, "exploitation" filmmakers were much more intent on earning a profit from audiences seeking a bit of nudity and on-screen discussions of sex.

Sex-hygiene offerings that filmmakers brought before Virginia's censors for approval function as a lens through which to study censors' and citizens' responses to depictions and discussions of sexuality in popular culture. The board's heavy-handed regulation of such films also illustrates how the board used the rubric of protectionist ideology to undermine subjective on-screen representations of sexuality for certain groups of people, including people of color, working-class individuals, and, especially, women.

Nearly all of the sex-hygiene films seeking entrance into Virginia concerned the question of who was to be blamed for sexual deviance. A brief look at the titles of these films—*Wasted Lives* (1925), *Wages of Sin* (1929), *Girls of the Underworld* (1940), *Because of Eve* (1948)—suggests that women overwhelmingly bore the blame for venereal disease, promiscuity, and pregnancy outside of marriage, while other titles such as *Is Your Daughter Safe?* (1927) and *Unguarded Girls* (1929) connoted women's vulnerability and their need for male patriarchal authority and protection. For example, the mainstream

Chadwick Pictures produced the film *Is Your Daughter Safe?*, a “white slave traffic” film. As such, it portrayed urban men in the prostitution trade luring innocent girls into work at “houses of ill repute.” Since these films often linked sex education to questions of morality, blame—specifically, who was to blame for sexual deviance—was always a consideration, and it fell heavily upon women.

Overwhelmingly, these films presented women as one of two extremes: either good or bad, the classic virgin or whore binary. Filmmakers and Virginia’s censors alike sought to codify and promote the idea of strictly dichotomous behavior in women. Thus, both cultural entertainment and state actors mutually reinforced the construct that women were either sexually pure or sexually corrupt and “deviant.” It did not seem to matter particularly to the censors whether women were corrupted by their own actions or from the lack of protection by a male or socially imposed authority. These films, however, sometimes offered “redemption” for corrupt or deviant women who showed regret for their actions and righted their wrongs over the course of the film. The Motion Picture Production Code, a form of industrial self-censorship that began to be rigidly enforced in 1934, would assure “redemption” by requiring any immoral behavior to be properly punished on screen in a Hollywood production.

The Ideology of Protection

As white, middle- to upper-class, politically connected elites working in a state-funded government agency, Virginia’s censors sought to enshrine their own power by using the rubric of “protection” to regulate on-screen sexuality. In terms of protecting women, their actions followed two strains of logic. They argued that by censoring women’s sexual actions on the screen, they were protecting both women’s physical and moral well-being. First, they suggested that films portraying women as sexually promiscuous and desirous of sex presented women in a negative light and contained the potential to subject women to physical violence. Presumably, male audience members would interpret women being portrayed as sexually available on the screen to mean that all women were sexually available and, thus, these men would become sexual predators. Second, censors argued that they protected women’s morality by not allowing images that would “sully” women’s collective reputation to be viewed on the screen, including scenes of live births. Such tactics worked to further the censors’ efforts to present only “moral” material at the movies and to craft an image of a state in which promiscuous white women, and certainly prostitutes, did not exist—not even on the movie screen.

Virginia’s censors reviewed dozens of sex-hygiene films and completely rejected several of them from exhibition within the state. The subject matter of

the films included abortion, childbirth, female endangerment (both physical and the endangerment of one's reputation and perceived morals), reproduction, sexual relations, and venereal disease. Many of these films dealt with some or all of these issues, along with other prominent issues of the day such as eugenics, sterilization, and medical malpractice.

As stated earlier, control of sexual knowledge functioned as the central controversy surrounding sex-hygiene films in two ways. First, while filmmakers of sex hygiene films—both “legitimate” and “exploitation” producers—promoted their films as educational, historian Allan Brandt reminds us that “the necessity for sexual control underpinned all educational efforts” (31). Sexual-education programs sought to “properly” educate the public by emphasizing restraint and promoting what educators deemed to be the “correct” ordering of sexual relations between men and women. In short, sexual-education programs “destroyed the conspiracy of silence—a seemingly radical act—to uphold the conservative sexual mores of their time” (Brandt 31). Second, the censors’ regulation of these films represented their attempts to control Virginians’ access to certain kinds of sexual knowledge. The question of what sorts of sexual knowledge the films attempted to “educate” the public about and how the films treated such “education” concerned the censors from the board’s inception.

Race and Class Frameworks

Furthermore, sex-hygiene films operated within raced and classed frameworks that consistently located sexual deviance and defined sexual deviants outside of the white middle class. Film theorist Annette Kuhn has shown that the content of many early venereal-disease films portrayed sexually active, working-class white women as the source of venereal disease (Kuhn 63). These working-class women, either as prostitutes or simply as “sexually accessible” women, inflicted their “working-class” diseases upon middle- to upper-class white men. Filmmakers not only located disease in the bodies of working-class women, but they also portrayed working-class, sexually active women as dangerous disease-carriers who threatened the middle-class family while suggesting that middle-class men who had sex with these women were simply victims of working-class women’s deviant sexuality.

Such depictions, however, did not concern Virginia’s censors, for their work implicitly promoted the idea of the morally pure and “clean” white, middle-class populace. Censors were concerned that some sex-hygiene films purporting to be educational might actually only be using the vehicle of the educative sex-hygiene film as a method to depict nudity and explicit sexual discussions, and they found their security in preventing scenes and dialogue they considered to be sexually explicit. In 1927, the board reviewed the film *Is Your Daughter*

Safe? In response to this film and others like it, the state health commissioner, himself an opponent of increased sexual education, wrote to inform the board that such pictures often alleged to be educational but were instead shrewd money-making schemes “capitalizing [on] salaciousness” (VBMP n.pag.). The board ultimately refused to allow *Is Your Daughter Safe?* to play in the state, concluding that “while purporting to be a health film, and to point a strong moral, [the film] embodies so many features that are obscene and indecent that it is offensive, and in our opinion could do no possible good and might do harm” (VBMP n. pag.). Thus, the film’s potential for offensiveness overrode any educational value it might contain.

Sex-hygiene films in general addressed a range of topics relating to sexuality and reproduction (Schaefer 5). During the early to mid-1920s, the production and distribution of sex-hygiene films, especially those produced by “legitimate” ventures, declined due to public concerns over the appropriateness of the topic and the rise of censorship boards. The films came back into vogue in the late 1920s, especially “exploitation” ones, with a string of films—*Is Your Daughter Safe?*, *Unguarded Girls*, *The Road to Ruin*—issuing warnings about the “new” dangers urban life posed to young women’s morality. For the most part, these films positioned an idea of rural purity against urban corruption, promoted the idea that unchecked desire (especially for women) could be deadly, and usually placed “fallen” women (single women engaging in sexual relations outside of marriage) into disease-ridden houses of prostitution while offering no similar repercussions for single men engaging in sex (Schaefer 173, 177). In addition, while such films portrayed “fallen” women as decidedly working-class, single men who patronized houses of prostitution were nearly always middle-class men “slumming” in behavior and in neighborhoods “beneath” what their privileged racial and class status entitled them. According to these films, had working-class women acting as temptresses not lured middle-class men to them, then such diseases would be an affair solely of the working class.

Keeping the Middle Class “Pure”

Censors often weighed the class element of certain films in relation to whom they, as censors, would be policing. For example, one of the censors’ reasons for censoring the 1929 sex-hygiene film *Unwelcome Children* was that “it might incite some classes to crime” (VBMP n. pag.). The board ultimately condemned the film because it “treated of things forbidden in the medical practice and represented the youth of today in such a way that the showing...might do incalculable harm” (VBMP n. pag.). The board described the film as “a photoplay with a clearly defined, well-acted plot,” but they were concerned that it addressed “such delicate questions as eugenics, birth control and abortion,

contraceptives and the like. It is the unanimous opinion of the members of this division that these questions, whatever their merit, are not fit material for exploitation on the motion picture screen" (VBMP n. pag.). The board was also concerned with "a most repulsive scene, the rape of a young woman social worker by an imbecile whom she has befriended" (VBMP n. pag.). The scene was made worse, according to the censors, because "on this hideous crime the plot hinges; to eliminate it would destroy the continuity of the story and make it senseless" (VBMP n. pag.). Yet they refused to leave the rape scene in the film, which in itself is significant. According to scholar Sabine Sielke, representations of rape found in literature and popular culture often function as rhetorical devices to address other social, political, or economic concerns. Sielke argues that "narratives of sexual violence ponder...the power dynamics of a particular culture" (2). The censors likely found the rape aesthetically repulsive; however, I would argue that their reason for censoring it, and the entire film, was politically motivated. They did not want to acknowledge the existence of sexual violence in their culture and in their state, and they worked to keep it out of the public mind as much as possible, thus contributing to the continued culture of silence surrounding the sexual assault of women and the lack of state services available to victims of such crimes. Furthermore, this rape scene would have been especially troublesome to the censors if the assaulted woman had become pregnant with a child fathered by an individual the censors defined to be an "imbecile." Such a circumstance would have proven to be a potent situation indeed in a state that refused abortion services to women yet simultaneously sought to systematically use sterilization to prevent mentally ill or poor children from ever being born.

Selling "Exploitation" Sex-Hygiene Films

Board members believed they had good reasons to look at sex-hygiene films suspiciously. By 1919, independent producers and distributors working outside of Hollywood produced cheap films addressing "forbidden" subjects and using "salacious" modes of depiction—sex, venereal disease, vice, prostitution, drug use, and nudity—and independently distributed them nationwide. Film scholar Eric Schaefer calls these films, which began being produced in the 1920s and continued through 1959, "classic exploitation films." This term refers to early "exploitation" films, ones that used over-the-top promotional techniques to gain an audience because they contained no identifiable celebrities and no recognizable, traditional genres (Schaefer 4). Such film distributors relied upon creating a carnivalesque atmosphere to promote such offerings, as the topics of these movies were often "forbidden" by Hollywood's self-censorship controls. "Classic" exploitation films were characterized as a whole by their "forbidden"

topics, low budgets, independent distribution methods, and their exhibition in theaters not owned by Hollywood studios (Schaefer 5, 6).

Nearly all sex-hygiene films, both "legitimate" and "exploitation" ones, utilized scenes in hospitals and clinics to show characters on the screen (and, by proxy, theater audiences) the effects of venereal disease or the course of pregnancy. Reliance on such scenes attempted to embody the medical authority associated with these institutions to help endorse the films as educational while complicating the question of whether they also functioned as entertainment. To further the idea that these films functioned strictly as educational endeavors, they typically contained one or more "square-ups." In a "square-up," a film displayed a rolling title that talked about morality and the importance of viewers watching such "educational" films as a way to further both individual and public morals. In reality, these square-ups also validated the audiences' viewing of potentially "illicit" material by emphasizing the social and moral value of doing so. Film distributors billed these motion pictures as an appropriate means to extend sexual education into public, commercial venues in an effort to reach individuals outside of the sexual-education programs being established in school systems.

Distributors of "exploitation" sex-hygiene films, however, developed techniques specific to their films in order to counter efforts to censor their products. "Hot" and "cold" versions of these films—including "hot" and "cold" advertising campaigns—existed, and producers marketed them according to the existence or absence of a censorship board or a conservative audience base (Schaefer 73). "Hot" and "cold" versions were alternate varieties of the same film that differed in the amount of censorable material they contained, especially nudity. Distributors used "hot" versions in states and locales without heavy censorship laws; they often included graphic scenes of childbirth and the effects of venereal disease on the body through the use of partial or complete nudity. Marketers exhibited "cold" prints, or self-censored versions of the film, in markets known for their strict censorship boards. Then, at individual "cold" showings, the roadshowman could illegally exhibit a "hot" reel of film at the movie's end if he so desired (Schaefer 73, 74, 79).

A continual problem confronted by the censors involved their duty to control not only a film's sexual content but also the sexual content of its advertisements. Presuming that many more people would be exposed to film advertisements than would actually see the film, censors wanted to be certain that advertisements did not emphasize the explicit sexual content of the films to lure in more audience members. With regard to the film *Unguarded Girls*, for example, the censors insisted that the film's distributors "must not advertise in any way the scene which shows Mary Foster lying on a couch in a state of semi-nudity" (VBMP n. pag.). When the censors approved the movie, they made sure

its distribution company knew that their "action in this matter does not mean that the picture met our unqualified approval" but rather that they could not pinpoint a specific law that the picture violated and were, therefore, forced to approve it (VBMP n. pag.). The censors offered detailed instructions about what must not be shown in the film's advertisements, which can be summarized by their mandate that advertisements "must abstain from any suggestion that it will satisfy those looking for salacious entertainment" (VBMP n. pag.). The board spent two full days deliberating the fate of *Unguarded Girls* before they ultimately accepted it. However, when they found a different version of the film being shown than the one they approved (perhaps an unscreened "hot" version whereas the board had approved a "cold" one), they ordered a round of additional cuts. They required the film's makers to cut a "close-up scene as girl crosses her legs making an indecent exposure of her person," "both scenes in the house of ill fame in which couple are shown in passionate embrace," and "the entire series of scenes in house of ill fame in which couple are shown on couch" (VBMP n. pag.). When advertisements began appearing for the film, several individuals wrote to the board and included clipped advertisements they found to be offensive with their letters. In response to a scathing letter written by Reverend W. B. Jett of Petersburg, which condemned the board's approval of the film, the board attempted to "convince [the reverend] that we are trying hard to keep the motion pictures within decent bounds" (VBMP n. pag.).

In order to "sell" the respectability of their films to censors, distributors of sex-hygiene films created separate showings for men and women, recommending that fathers attend with their sons and mothers with their daughters as an educational outing. Sex segregation was key to "protecting" the audience (as well as film distributors, whose films often would not have been allowed screenings in co-ed settings) because same-sex viewings cast the screenings in an air of "respectability." Segregating audiences by sex was a common approach of sex educators by the 1930s. State officials, including censors, believed that sex segregation of audiences made the showing of such films "respectable" because the fear of intermingling individuals of different sexes in the audience was removed, a concern that individuals had voiced about the movies from their inception. Also, sex segregation supposedly allowed distributors to show reels of childbirth scenes and the effects of venereal disease on women's bodies only to female audiences, while showing reels chronicling the effects of venereal disease on men's bodies only to male audiences. In other words, distributors used segregated audiences as a means to convince censors that viewers of one sex would not have the opportunity to view partially nude bodies of the opposite sex even though, once inside a theater, movie exhibitors could theoretically show whatever reels they chose. Producers of these films also used "adults only" widely in their advertising, both as an

attempt to appease censors (by arguing that no children would see the film) and as a signal to alert potential audience members that these films contained titillating material. Such strategies could be skillfully blended together by movie distributors to generate customer interest by suggesting that these films contained material that was too illicit for men and women to view in the same room and entirely unsuitable for children (Kuhn 68). Thus, distributors used conventional defenses of their films to actually attract a larger audience.

Conclusion

World War II marked a watershed in the history of sex-hygiene filmmaking. "Exploitation" sex-hygiene films waned as mainstream Hollywood productions began to include sexual topics and material the industry had previously forbidden. At the same time, sex-education campaigns had firmly entered many of the nation's schools, making "legitimate" sex-hygiene films increasingly seem unnecessary. These changes—the saturation of sexual issues and nudity in Hollywood films, solid sexual-education efforts in public schools, and a Supreme Court committed to extending the First Amendment's free speech protections to the movies—increasingly hampered censors' efforts at heavy censorship in the postwar era. And with sex-education campaigns in the hands of public-health officials and professional educators, the censors' role in controlling the dissemination of sexual knowledge waned. Hollywood's producers and the industry's censors also lost some of their ability to attack exploitation films because of the increasingly open production of films showcasing "deviant" behavior by "mainstream" Hollywood studios. Such films submitted to the Production Code Administration would still be denied a seal, but the stakes simply seemed smaller in the more permissive atmosphere of postwar American culture (Schaefer 163).

In the end, most proponents of sex-hygiene films believed that corrupt minds would seek out the obscene in such films—characterized by those powerful enough to do the defining as sexually suggestive or bawdy language, actions of heterosexual contact that might simulate or suggest sex (such as dancing), and women defined as "scantly clad"—but that the obscenity of some should not prohibit the film from being distributed. In other words, if the film functioned as educative to some, then it should be shown. The Circuit Court of Richmond struck down the censors' banning of films by stating:

If [the viewer's] mind tends toward obscenity or indecency, he may see [the obscene], but if his mind is not so bent he will see something that is educational and wonderful. (Sova 165)

The court thus declared that the potential for voyeurism should not be used to condemn a film in light of the positive effects it might have on conscientious viewers.

Taken as a whole, Virginian censors' regulation of sex-hygiene films spoke directly to the idea of "protection." As legally empowered actors of the state, Virginia's censors sought to "protect" certain standards of morality. Their decisions served as barriers against "pollution"—in this case, pollution from the "taint" of women's sexual expression and, in race films, against the pollution of interracial mixing or African-American advancement in a society hierarchically positioning white elites at the top. Simultaneously, censors reasoned that they suppressed certain films or scenes from films in order to protect the vulnerable in society, namely African Americans, women, and youths. In other words, they "protected" everyone but the most powerful—white elites—through the regulatory practice of film censorship. However, in 1965, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a priori film censorship was illegal; as a result, censorship boards such as Virginia's could no longer require distributors to submit their films for censorial approval before they were allowed exhibition in the state. With such submission, and the accompanying fees, now voluntary, arguments of citizen "protection" and control of sexual knowledge were no longer enough to keep Virginia's film censorship board afloat. State agents censored their last films in 1965. Censorship then shifted to local and municipal authorities.

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