
Racial Trauma in Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go*

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Abstract:

Racial trauma is a prevailing issue in Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. The study examines how trauma operates negatively on Jones' psyche in the forms recurring haunting dreams. The complexity of the obnoxious consequences of race prejudice (or PTSD) on Jones requires to probe the psychological motives through trauma and memory theory along with psychoanalysis perspective. Himes' *magnum opus* emphasizes on the social and psychological degradation of Black individuals whose subconscious eventually succumb to American supremacist policies. Jones' shattered psyche, disturbed ego and turbulent social status reflect the social and psychological degradation inflicted upon Black individuals being *personae non gratae* in America.

Keywords: Racial trauma, social segregation, traumatic dream, unconscious mind, white supremacist.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Among the pressing and interesting issues in African American literature is the traumatic experiences of African American individuals notably in Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945). The theme of trauma discussed in the novel reflects the depth of crisis underwent by black community in the 1940s and 1950s. Traumatic experience constitutes one of the salient features of African American literature exemplified by Chester Himes's masterpiece *If He Hollers*. Though his humble literary beginnings emerged in prison for an armed robbery, Himes proved his creative talent with the publication of many detective stories. Soon after leaving America, Himes became one of the most prolific African American writers who conducted a consistent critique on race prejudice in America. In the novel, Himes examines the daily shortcomings of Bob Jones who tragically lost his job, girlfriend, and enrolled in the American forces to fight fascism in Europe in less. The paper focuses on how racial trauma operates negatively on Jones rendering the individual to be a mere shadow as well on the members of the community. The centrality of the literary value of the novel lies also in its crucial period of its publication in 1940 which witnesses a culminating point of racial tension in America.

Focusing on African American psychological traumas, Bob Jones, the author's alter ego, case is worth investigation along Cathy Caruth's theory trauma and memory. In fact, the acuity of the theory of trauma and its unhealed psychological wounds would disclose the extent of pain and oppression undergone by African American individuals. The research, therefore, attempts to imply Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis essential mind components, and endeavors to probe the effect of racial slurs on African American ego. Besides, the inability to operate properly on (superego) and monitor the diverse

psychological disorders in their ego would result in neurosis where trauma survivors easily fall victims to their instinctive drives (id) or social vices. Thus, the study attempts to question the psychological effect of white supremacists' ideology on Black psyche; and how far racial slur would engender traumatic experiences on helpless individuals. The research also attempts to diagnose the traumatic symptoms of the neurosis as *traumatic dreams*; and the lingering repercussions of post trauma effect known as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on Himes' Jones. Therefore, the argument in *If He Hollers* suggests that repetitive racial slurs engender severe traumatic scars in the form of a constant inner conflict, anxiety, and depression in African American individuals' minds. The interplay of Jones and the Southern white supremacists (peckerwoods) at workplace suggests the inter-racial tense atmosphere Black characters' are projected.

Conceptualizing Trauma

So as to conduct a well oriented examination of the Chester Himes' *If He Hollers* work, it is worth defining the term *trauma* to provide a better understanding of the topic at hand. Generally speaking, its meaning revolves around a "shock," that would induce in a traumatic effect on people in a form of paralysis as defense response to an ineluctable stimulus. The meaning of the term *trauma* for to the common people, as it is inculcated in the minds, that the term "trauma" is interchangeably used for the word "shock". Etymologically the term *trauma* is derived from the Greek word *Τραῦμα* (*traûmã*) which connotatively bears the meanings of a "wound," a "injury," or a "hurt". Denotatively the term means a "heavy blow," or a "shock,". In this sense both the connotative and denotative meanings of the term *trauma* help to examine and

understand psychological mindset of African American individuals.

In the Introduction of her reference book entitled *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), Cathy Caruth, one of the leading theoreticians of trauma and memory, refers to this primarily meaning adding that trauma is originally “an injury inflicted on the body,” but in trauma and memory theory terms “injury” must be also “understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind.” (Caruth, 1996: 03) To recapitulate, trauma is the psychological effect of any “emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape natural disaster,” (Basak, 2024: 857). According to American Psychoanalytic Association Guide *Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts*, trauma is “a medical term referring to a bodily injury and its effects,” (Auchincloss & Samberg, 2012: 272) exceeding the individual capacities for discharge or recovery. In the current research paper, we attempt to analyze how trauma operates individually and collectively on both Himes’ as an individual (his alter ego), and the way it might incapacitate them for resilience or any possible recovery.

2. Bob Jones’ Racial Trauma in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*

Chester Himes’s turbulent life coincided with this extreme racial tension between the two communities due the sigma of color prejudice in America of the 1920s and 1930s. This period of time in American history if African Americans want to pursue peacefully their lives and avoid serious injury or death. They have either to be willingly obedient and submissively docile to the white man’s will (Uncle Tomism), or lurk under the surface of white’s might power and stay “in their place”. Like his alter ego Bob Jones, in the 1941 Chester Himes himself suffered from poverty, unemployment and from the blatant race prejudice. He moved with his wife, Jean Johnson, to California where he tried a number of part-time jobs. Having experienced shipbuilding industry during WWII, Himes reflects his own experience in Los

Angles through Bob Jones in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. The novel relates the predicament of Jones, a welder at the Atlas Shipyard Building Corporation, who suffers from the negative repercussions of race stigma. Consequently, in four days-time Jones loses his job, girlfriend, and ends up fighting fascism in Europe. From the outset of *If He Hollers*, Himes adopts a gradual approach to probe the gravity of traumatic experiences on Bob Jones who undergoes at the Atlas Shipyard Building Corporation a tense antagonistic relationship with the white folks.

Thus, *If He Hollers* asserts inter-racial tension in America 1940s as unsurmountable social and moral issue in a white predominant community. In a sense that Himes's Jones, an African American young man who displaced from Ohio to Los Angeles, realizes that "race was a handicap," to be recruited as Black leaderman at Atlas Corporation. Jones admits that he had moved to L. A because he had been "refused in Cleveland, Ohio, plenty of times." (Himes, 2002: 03). Jones repeatedly reiterates the whites' systematic refusal to procure a decent job ultimately rendered him vindictive towards the white's community. Infuriated at the white segregationist recruitment policies, Jones solemnly threatens: "If I kept on getting refused while boys were hired from the line behind me I'd hung somebody..." (Himes, 2002: 03) An indication that African American individuals suffered from economic deprivation and social exclusion which gradually generated into a form of psychological anxiety and penchant for violence. Stephen Soitos asserts this meaning in: "In Himes's fiction an individual's outrage at blatant prejudice and subtler violations of his personal integrity often lead to violence and social rebellion against dominant white authority figures and racist power structures." (Soitos, 2010: 477). According to Soitos, the recourse to violence, as a means of

retaliation stem from white systematic violation due to the deprivation of African American from job opportunities and participation in socio-economic life. It appears that Jones' rebellious spirit manifested itself in the aggressive penchant that emanates from a strong feeling of social rejection (stimulus) to generate in cases of social ego failures and sexual frustration. As the racially charged atmosphere gradually intensifies Jones' vulnerable social and psychological position in a series of introductory dreams, which might be interpreted as an indication of the profound complex social and racial traumas inflicted upon the protagonist.

Likewise, in his pungent social critique in *If He Hollers*, Himes initially presents Jones as a gullible Black youth to the social malaise that Jones realizes race prejudice's acuity to be a convoluted issue in America. This meaning is illustrated best through the protagonist's keen eye observing a great deal of hatred and aversion in the white faces when walking down L.A. streets. Jones squarely declares: "It was the look in the white people's faces when I walked down the streets. It was that crazy, wild-eyed, unleashed hatred..." (Himes, 2002: 13) Such white contemptuous "gaze" is a demeaning cold glance at the coloreds that engendered enormous negative impact on Bob Jones. Psychologically speaking, it induced in him an inseparable apprehension so much so that he continuously attempts to avoid the white mighty presence. Jones bitterly senses: "I could always feel race trouble, serious trouble," (Himes, 2002: 04) and in order to avoid any social contact with the 'supreme race,' Jones has to spring aside while walking beside the white folks. Though the physical contact with whites was significantly reduced, Jones suffers further from race prejudice, he describes how carries race trouble in his heart in: "I carried it as long as I could. I carried my muscle as high as my ears. But I couldn't keep on carrying it [...] the only place I felt safe was in bed asleep," But enduring the psychological race effects of racism had an enormous corporal cost so much so, "I lost twenty pounds in two weeks

and my hands got to trembling,” (Himes, 2002: 04) Jones squarely declares in the beginning of his narrative. However, this fear gradually metamorphosed into a phobia of white presence, an omnipresent trait in *If He Hollers* which would be discussed subsequently.

Even in such tense interracial environment at workplace, Jones succeeds to be placed at the position of a leaderman at Atlas Shipyard, a position which is normally reserved only for whites. It is through Jones’s daily interaction with the white people at work and in L.A downtown that Himes has meticulously illustrated the dull daily routine of African American individuals in 1940s. In Chapter II, Himes unequivocally describes Jones riding his 42 Buick Roadmaster to work with his black co-worker companions: Homer, Conway, Smitty, Johnson and Bigmeat. The group of colored people were late to work; Jones and his friends had a number of racial incidents on his way worth mentioning. While racing down L.A Fifty-Fourth, San Pedro, Avalon and Central streets, Jones’ nerves were tightening and to add to his misfortunes the traffic light caught him at Manchester where a white couple noticed the colored group in the car, instead of hurrying from the road the white men “just took their time, giving us [Jones and his friends] a look of cold hatred,” which inwardly induced Jones to exchange with them the same hostile cold glance and indignantly thinking “Goddamn ’em, I’ll grind ’em into the street,” (Himes, 2002: 13). In fact, despite Jones’s economic independence and his successful acquisition of “white” luxurious commodities as cars and leading a fancy lifestyle, “living within and chasing after this world of “whiteness,” management, [...] power, women,” (Walz, 2018: 109) the dominant white society would never permit his social integration. A social stigma formulated by white society which engendered a tense interracial

relationship based on hatred, antipathy and selfishness. It is in this sense that we may contextualize the white couple's contemptuous attitude, conversely their biased attitude would have been utterly changed if the driver is white; their apparent procrastination to cross the road is out of the realization that they are in front of a group of African American youths in a 42 Buick Roadmaster. Jones' inwardly senses the racial slur which gradually exacerbated his nerves, has also exchanged with them glances of hatred. As a result, Jones has almost run over the couple out of revenge, if not stopped by an abrupt gesture which echoes the extent of fear the white imposed on Blacks as a means of retaliation within a highly oppressive system.

Jones' racial bitter journey reaches climactic racial peak translated into an extremely violent confrontation with the white dominant community. In a sense that the amount of racial verbal and perceptual accumulation of the two folks collide to culminate one of the most violent scenes in *If He Hollers*. So as to duck the flagrant humiliation after his job deferment, Jones attempts to relish himself with a group of white workers playing the dice. From the very beginning of the play, the two white gamblers scornfully eyed Jones with "a cursing look" (Himes, 2002: 31) uttering provokingly white racial insults while playing as one of them bursts: "I shoot nigger lick,". However, in the game, Jones deftly proves his skilled at the dice for he easily wins over the two white workers. At the moment when Jones eventually decides to take his money and retreat from the game, the white rat-mouthed man says: "'You'll take hell, you nigger bastard,'" (Himes, 2002: 33) feeling confident with the presence of the other twelve white men at his side. Thus, a series of violent attacks and counterattacks erupts amongst Jones and two white men who were engaged in a ruthless fight. The madness and the fury portrayed in the brutal scuffle, ensued due to racist verbal altercation between Jones and the white man, reached a crescendo symbolizing a deep lingering racial crisis between the two communities. Such physical brutalities coupled with social

marginalization and economic deprivation were internalized in Jones' psyche so that they engender traumas manifested themselves in the form of repeatedly horrifying dreams.

3. Bob Jones' Traumatic Dreams

Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go* primarily probes the economic exclusion and social segregation of Bob Jones the protagonist in America's 1940s. The novel recounts Jones's disturbed social and work conditions as a leaderman at the Atlas Shipyard Corporation in Los Angeles. Himes deliberately stresses the precarious position African American individuals like Jones in armament factories during WWII, and at the same time disclosing the racial and tenuous atmosphere with white workers. However, Jones' turbulent journey also showcases the degenerated social interracial tension at work place and in L.A streets. As a modernist technique to expound his racial experience to demonstrate the extent of racial trauma that inflicted his characters, Himes employs the dreams as an effective means to reflect the psychological traumas endured by African American individuals as an effect of white supremacist segregationist policies in 1940s America.

In Freudian psychoanalysis literature, dreams are of paramount importance for they constitute the main source of knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind; and therefore, more information about the state of the dreamer's psyche. In his theory, Freud categorized the human mind into: the unconscious, preconscious and conscious. These systems are characterized by forms of mental functioning operating accordingly through two regulatory opposite principles: pleasure principle versus reality principle. In another sophisticated classification, Freud further describes the human psyche into three mind components: the id, ego and superego. The literature

defines id essentially as an unconscious instinctive part of personality encompassing instinct-driven or pleasant-seeking features responding to basic needs, urges and desires. Concerning the ego, this part of the conscious mind operates as mediator between id's instinctive drives and superego's moral constraints. In other words, the ego develops the rational of humans from childhood monitoring and regulating id unrealistic instinctive drives and the real external world. The ego generally operates as a decision-making following a safe and acceptable compromises responding to id's demands and superego's moral standards. As for superego, that stands for social standards and moral values develops during psychosexual period or what psychoanalysts call phallic stage between 3 and 5 or upward. Superego strives for an ideal behavior operating on morality principle seeking for a sociably acceptable behavior. It is the inner sound of reason or conscience providing the human unconscious what is right or wrong. The superego functions as regulating and controlling id's forbidden instinctive-drives as sex or aggression. It tentatively attempts to convince ego turning to the moral principle in cases of conflicts.

In Himes's *If He Hollers* the protagonist Jones is constantly haunted by fear of white repression internalized in African American individuals through systematic humiliation and intimidation. For instance, the internalization of traumatic experiences could be exemplified in the exclusion of colored people from jobs as illustrated by Jones' dream when he asked the two white men for a job, Himes internalizes white segregationist polices and recreated it as unfulfilled wish through Jones's dream at the outset of the novel:

They began laughing at me, scornfully and derisively. One said, 'He ain't got no tools,' and they laughed like hell. / I didn't mind their not giving me the job, but their laughing at me hurt. I felt small and humiliated and desperate, looking at the two big white men laughing at me... (Himes, 2002 :02)

The present dream, in fact, does not only dramatize Jones' plight, but also accentuate his psychologically scathed psyche. In a sense that in Jones' psyche denying him the job doesn't psychologically engender the hurt, but rather the sarcastic haughty laugh of the two white men. This traumatic dream known in psychanalysis "caused by the activation of specific regions of the brain that produces a hallucination generally of a visual type," (Auchincloss & Samberg, 2012: 62). In this context, the internalization of white domination operates on Jones' unconscious so much so that his ego could not function properly. This inability to function the mechanic defense system develop "traumatic neurosis". The source of the trauma is an internalized constant fear or fright form the white supremacists, while in dreams the censorship system is overwhelmed by daily residue or preoccupation. Therefore, the dreamer let go his wishes or unfulfilled desires.

Concerning the functioning of human unconscious responding to dreams, psychologists and psychoanalysts do not only attempt to concentrate on the dreamer's unconscious mind, but also to emphasizes on the trauma post dream. Cathy Caruth expounds this meaning "It is not the dream that surprises consciousness but, indeed, the very *waking* itself that constitute the surprise," (Caruth, 1996: 02). In a sense that the traumatic dream reflects this superiority of white race and the denigration of African American individuals through the sarcastic laughter in the dream. Besides, the symbolism of the dream is suggestive for Himes to convey the meaning of the stifling mighty white power; and the inabilities of African American individuals to resist its ineluctable psychological effects. The whole picture in the dream might also reflect African American individuals' humiliations and helplessness to confront the white men's pungent cynical attitudes; and how it operates on black individuals' psyche

oscillating between desired wishes for equal civil rights and the actual harsh oppressive reality.

Hence, the centrality of the dream in *If He Hollers* is of paramount importance that served Himes's purpose in disclosing Bob Jones's racial predicament. The author projects Jones in a highly racist milieu which inwardly had impacted negatively on his ego, to the point that such subjugation in an extremely racial milieu compelled Jones to abscond this reality. For Jones' superego ideals of justice and equality could never be attained in LA which might explain his "safety" at bed when Jones unequivocally asserts: "

Pursuing Jones' plight, one might deduce that the protagonist mind's inability to operate on functioning defense mechanism engender an unavoidable rationalizing failure. Therefore, the unconscious inability of his ego to endure to strong various stimuli turns fear into physical pain. Himes explicitly describes Jones' aftermath dream and how fear steals through his body: "It came to my head first, somewhere back of my closed eyes, moved slowly underneath my skull to the base of my brain, cold and hollow. It seeped down my spine, into my arms, spread through my groin with an almost sexual torture," (Himes, 2002: 02) Jones' startling return to consciousness seems more terrible even than the traumatic dream itself. This is argued best in Caruth's dream theory as: "It is not only the dream that surprises consciousness but, indeed, the very *waking* itself that constitutes the surprise, (Caruth, 1996: 64) that is ultimately exposing Jones to a severe psychological PTSD shock immediately after his waking. As a survivor of the traumatic experience, Jones' suffers further from the effects of the "inner struggle with his racial immediate milieu in an endless vicious circle. For Jones has a whole day ahead to deal with racist attitudes of his white workers and leaderman.

In fact, the dream does not only represent recollections of images or ideas that the dreamer recalls when waking, but rather disclose a troubled psyche or unbalanced unconsciousness of the

dreamer. Among the evocative dreams in the novel, that occurs just prior to Jones' and Alice's humiliation on the road at the hand of two white policemen. Jones dreams that he was in the middle of the road and two poor peckerwoods (white Southern racists) were beating him at intervals with a rubber hose, while the police were passively watching the scene and laughing. In this manifest dream, Jones feels more pain as in the previous dream. Jones explains his feelings: "I was sore and numb from the beating and felt like vomiting; I was sick in the stomach [...] I was trying to get up on my hands and knees but they were beating me across the back of my head ..." (Himes, 2002: 69) Jones' tenuous relation at work has degenerated notably with his white superiors, so much so that he also has seen in his dream the president of the shipyard corporation ordering the Southern woodpeckers to intensify the floggings with the rubber hose, while Jones lay flat motionless on his stomach. In this symbolic scene might evoke the inability of race victims to retaliate or even to defend themselves against their oppressors. Besides, the dream clearly underlines the Jones' daily routine suffering from the racist Southern peckerwoods refuse to cooperate and fulfilling some work tasks. Himes' idea of re-presenting the picture of police brutality in *If He Hollers*, stems from his own experience when he committed an armed robbery in his youth. In his autobiographical accounts entitled *The Quality of Hurt*, Himes recounts the brutal treatment at the police station to obtain a confession at the hand of two white policemen who: "handcuffed my feet together and my hands behind my back, hang me upside ... Then they ... began beating me about the ribs..." (Himes, *The Quality of Hurt*, 1972: 56). This typical picture (white police flogging a black man) of police brutality does not only the legal impunity police elements enjoy, but also the recurrence of Black floggings as widespread 'practice' in

America. Being mercilessly punished in the police station, Himes himself has internalized this typical picture of Black oppression to the extent that he has re-created it in his works. As white oppressive instrument, police's recourse to exert excessive force on suspects or even on innocents, does not only alienate African American individuals from society, but also worsens their dramas and traumas.

In the same vein, revealing repeatedly Jones' traumatic experience at work through manifest or traumatic dreams is highly suggestive for Himes who dramatizes Jones' plight through this social comment on race prejudice; and also alarms both communities of the lingering social malaise of the race problem in America. Himes' deliberately emphasizes on traumatic dreams and the inability of the survivor to respond to the strong stimuli (race prejudice) reflect African American individuals' precarious psychological and social status. As in the beginning of the novel, Himes concludes Chapter XXII with another startling dream. In his last dream, Jones dreams of shooting his white manager Johnny Stoddart in front of his wife, an act which relieves him and makes him feel free and happy for the first time. Himes's Jones boastfully describes the elimination of his nasty white manager while feeling "a crazy exultation, as if I had conquered the world" (Himes, 2002: 197). Jones' dreams goes further in a policeman pursuit down the city, but at his question of the reason of the murder, Jones immediately blurts out: "He called me a nigger."

Eventually, Himes' recourse to use dreams is for the sole purpose to unveil the unfulfilled wishes of Bob Jones who suffers at work from racism and chased away by the police for an allegedly rape case. The last dream of Johnny's murder could be understood as subtle desire to eliminate all white racists in America. Then the dream itself confirms the complex existential crisis of African American individual survivors of traumatic racial experiences. Jones's inner psyche reflects the racial complex of a whole oppressed community. However, in the case

of Jones, it is obvious that the protagonist wishes to annihilate the power and domination of white man through the symbolical act of killing his manager. From psychiatric point of view, dreams reflect an abnormal mental activity and the outcome of dreams could be interpreted and analyzed (Venukapalli, 2023). However, dreams unveil some inner unknown truths or facts hardly trusted by the human unconsciousness. Through Jones dreams one might consider them as problem-solving instrument, for they do not only set clearly Jones' goals, desires, and even future hopes, but also provide us with the dreamers' personality and lifestyle as a representative type character of his community.

4. CONCLUSION

Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go* constitutes a social commentary and critique of the segregationist policies adopted by white supremacists in 1930s and 1940s America. As its title suggests, Himes' plight with race prejudice does not only exemplify his own traumatic experience, but also serve as an archetype model for African American individuals who suffered from white supremacist segregationist policies known as Jim Crow laws. His journey for better life and work chances in different parts of the country plunges the protagonist in an outright confrontation with racial slurs inflicted upon the black community.

Likewise, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* examines the predicament of Himes' alter ego, Bob Jones, who could not resist social and economic stifling white conditions. Himes's protagonist attempts to defy a system based on social segregation and political privation of African individuals. Jones' traumatic experience at work place at the hand of peckerwoods manifested "white" animosity and antipathy through various forms of verbal

and physical violence. Thus, the novel traces back the misfortunes of an African American youth who came to Los Angeles' armament factories during II World War for job opportunities. Though, his manual capacities and sincere devotion to work, white peckerwoods refused to cooperate with him, bullied and brutally aggressed him. Towards the end of Jones's traumatic experience, the white police men harassed him and found that he was suspected of raping a white woman, an allegedly false charge which eventually justice swapped it for serving the American army in Europe.

Through Himes's social realistic fiction made readers not only realize the obnoxious effect of racist measures which compelled Himes' volunteer exile to Europe, but also make them aware of the arduous struggle African American individuals undergone for their civil rights. In this sense, *If He Hollers* captures the very social and economic ills of the black community. In Jones' melodrama, Himes' recourse to employ the means of dreams for the sole purpose to display the protagonist unfulfilled dreams and pressing desires. In psychoanalysis, dreams reveal the unconscious mind of people, notably the interaction of the ego, id and superego. The outcome of conflict between Jones' id and superego has induced his neurosis, a constant urge to satisfy his id needs and a severe depression for the lack to meet the expectations of his superego's values. Worse still, in the aftermath of traumatic dreams engenders terrible physical pain and psychological hurt. In psychoanalysis the severe repercussion posttraumatic stress disorder or PTSD induces extreme physical hurt that steals from his toes through the spine, kidneys, to his upper body parts.

To conclude, Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go* examines the socio-political situation of African American with its daily pitfalls and shortcomings. Himes' protagonist, Bob Jones, epitomizes African America traumatic racial experience to the point that undergoing through this traumatic experience made him hollers out of pain. However, the white segregationist

system let Jones to go to for war instead. Jones's possibility for resilience is a far-fetched goal, for his traumatic experience at home ended in the beginning of another living trauma of war with fascism in Europe. His fate is unknown as the fate of hundreds of thousands of segregated Black regiments sent to the front. Thus, racial trauma operates negatively on individual and collective levels on the ego of helpless African American individuals.

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