

*The Politics of Desire: A Freudian Reading of Christos Tsiolkas's Dead
Europe*

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Abstract: This article articulates a psychoanalytic reading of Christos Tsiolkas's *Dead Europe* by analysing desire in relation to Melanie Klein's oral sadistic stage, a desire which, in the author's grim fairytale with Gothic-laden aesthetics, is metaphorically expressed through vampirism and cannibalism.

Keywords: Freudianism; Melanie Klein; ambivalence; desire; Christos Tsiolkas; *Dead Europe*; guilt; incorporation; cannibalism; vampirism; symbiotic union; homosexuality

With *Dead Europe* (2005) whose controversial subject-matter verges on the heretical, Christos Tsiolkas lived up to his reputation of being the *enfant terrible* of Australian fiction. On the tail of *Loaded* (1995) and *The Jesus Man* (1999), his third novel reads like a Grimm/ grim fairytale with Gothic-laden aesthetics, and one of the worst kinds at that, featuring "graphic depictions of degradation and abjection, in sex, violence, drug-taking and taboo-breaking of the most extreme kinds" (Goldsworthy 61). Admittedly, the novelist's dark thoughts and themes have a knack of deliberately confronting readers. But far from being gratuitous, his bloodcurdling and repellent subject matter¹ underpins a Freudian pattern which has been given literary expression in the novel.

Tsiolkas uses what Gérard Genette terms "internal focalisation" by presenting Isaac Raftis's story as seen through his own eyes. Isaac is depicted as a young and talented 36-year-old Australian photographer born of Greek parents, who has left his mother (Reveka) and gay ex-neo-Nazi partner (Colin) behind in Melbourne to open an exhibition in Athens. It has been a decade since Isaac has been in Greece and things have changed dramatically in post-Cold War Europe: the Wall has collapsed, communism is over, religious hatred and anti-Semitism beget conflicts, while capitalism and globalisation have taken over. Europe is, as the title puts it, dead, or if not quite dead, certainly decaying or on the decline. It has become a haunted and decadent land, corrupted by vice and plagued with cancerous evils. *Dead Europe*, which focuses on the adventures of a male individual who gradually develops a taste for vampirism in an Old World steeped in tradition and superstitions, falls within the purview of the fantastic. Parallel to the main plotline, moreover, is the story of Lucia and Michaelis Panagis who have been cursed. After visiting his mother's home village, Isaac – who feels that he has inherited this family curse – morphs into a vampire, thus causing the likely and the

unlikely to merge. As a result, readers in want of rational explanations are faced with the need to negotiate the place of this fantastic element.

Ambivalence, guilt and forbidden desire

From the outset of *Dead Europe*, readers are presented with a character who, despite being in a fulfilling relationship with a lover, has a lustful appetite for boys of various backgrounds. In Athens, Isaac is probing the “commercial availability of the body” (Tsiolkas qtd in Vernay 39) by paying a young Russian man for having had sex with him: “The experience of paying the youth for sex, while tantalising as fantasy – in fact, a fantasy in which I happily and often indulged in – in reality had proven clichéd” (29). But, out of guilt, he feels the urge to ring his lover back in Sydney: “I’m ringing to say I love you very, very much.”(29). This sense of guilt – clearly a leitmotif in the book² – stresses the forbidden quality of Isaac’s desire and is something he cannot suppress: “I was guilty that I was leaving him back home while I was heading off overseas, I was guilty that I was looking forward to the pleasure of time alone. I was guilty that I was travelling, adventuring, when the last six months it had been his money paying the bills” (45-6). In Freudian terms, it seems that Isaac – unable to curb his selfish desire to flirt and be sexually promiscuous – allows his id (i.e., the reservoir of repressed desires) to triumph over the superego (which acts as a form of censorship) by taking control over the ego. By repeatedly cheating on his partner Colin, Isaac gives vent to his libidinal drives. To make up for his regular misbehaving and to cope with his remorse-smitten conscience, the penalty for his transgressive deeds, Isaac feels the urge to phone his lover and reassure him of his love. But even Isaac’s attempt to mend his ways is egoistic since what matters most is the need for repentance in the guise of a love declaration, which is there to alleviate his mind, than the genuine need to speak with his lover as illustrated by the following scene. After having masturbated over “depraved fantasies” involving sex with teenagers, Isaac states: “Afterwards, exhausted and guilty, I rang Colin and left a message on our machine. That I loved him very much, that I missed him” (53).

In my 2005 interview with him, Tsiolkas declared he was “interested in those positions of ambivalence, opposition and contradiction and exploring the political and intellectual consequences of contradictions” (Tsiolkas qtd in Vernay 39). Unsurprisingly, *Dead Europe* is driven by a guilt-ridden and neurotic protagonist who appears to be a bundle of contradictions. Isaac’s contradictory behaviour is highlighted when Andreas, another casual partner, asks about Colin and his having “an open marriage” (99), to which Isaac angrily retorts: “Fuck you, I was trying to be honest. I love Colin. I love him very much and we have been together a long time. I wish I was strong enough not to need sex from other people. [...] I love Colin I repeated” (99). To some extent, these issues reflect the author’s stated concerns with the struggle between lust and love: “I have to deal with them which is why I write about these contradictions, what does pornography and love mean, what is the difference between love and sex, and I think that whether you’re single or a couple, we’re all trying to deal with this in our lives” (Tsiolkas qtd in Vernay 40). By the end of the novel, the contradictions have been solved by mere acceptance of hosting conflicting desires. When imparting his orgiastic plans in the Netherlands, in the liberal city of Amsterdam, Isaac says:

I will enter a porn cinema and have sex with three men, a German, an Italian and a Korean: I wish to have my fill of bodies, to consume and devour. [...]

I will then call Colin and tell him that I will be home within a week. I will feel no guilt, I will experience no shame. He will tell me he loves me. (302)

The concluding pages of *Dead Europe* make it clear that the narrative is the verbalisation of the narrator's psychic battle to set desire free from the fetters of the superego. In the end, Isaac has dismissed both morality and guilt by vanquishing censorship:

I can turn over the sleeping senseless Nikolai, rip down his trousers, fuck him, bite him. Feed off him. I realise without emotion that there seems no trace of morality left in my appetites. I don't care. I feel grand. That's the word for it. I feel grand. *Ontopofthefuckingworld, man*. I feel alive. (372)

These last two excerpts betray the pervasive cannibalistic streak in Isaac's lovemaking which contributes to building up the character's ambivalence. Fittingly, Sigmund Freud perceived orality as both a loving and aggressive experience. Incorporating is a means of possessing and withholding an object, while simultaneously being a sure way of annihilating it. In Karl Abraham's definition, incorporation is tantamount to the destruction of the object accompanied by ambivalence in the object relation, ambivalence being defined as libido and aggressiveness directed towards the same object.

Fulfilled desire: incorporation and the destruction of the object

Common to incorporation and the oral stage is the mouth, which "is every child's first erogenous zone. According to Freud, orality provides the child with his first set of defence mechanisms for resolving anxieties caused by his differences with the outside world. When something bothers him – and that "bothering" ranges from irritation to arousal – he eats it. Incorporating what you love is a sure way of seeing that it never escapes from you" (Crain 35-6). So incorporation can be construed to some extent as the fulfilment of desire.

In 1924, Karl Abraham (1877-1925) – a close collaborator of the godfather of psychoanalysis – brought a major contribution to Freud's theory of psychosexual development in which erotic pleasure and desire appear as shifting.³ Abraham's clever insight was to introduce a distinction in the oral stage by subdividing it into two phases: the first in which the pleasure-seeking activities of sucking and swallowing are defined as methods of incorporation aimed at obtaining oral gratification, and the second "cannibalistic stage" which begins with the eruption of teeth allowing for frequent biting and the emergence of ambivalence, since the positive attachment to mother is counterbalanced with feelings of hatred for her. In this "oral-sadistic" phase, "the individual incorporates the object and so destroys it" (Abraham 451).

In *Dead Europe* instances of incorporation appear for the first time in the parallel tale involving Michaelis Panagis who has been talked by his wife Lucia into killing the Hebrew boy he was meant to protect. This sacrifice would allegedly stop the curse which prevented his wife from having a baby. Unsettled by his foul deed which cannot be undone, his lycanthropic visions, or "evil hallucinations" (128) as the narrator puts it, highlight the cruelty of his beastly murder while paving the way for the motif of incorporation in the novel:

He dreamt that he was a wolf, running in a pack, his body slick and grey. At first the dream was pleasing and arousing. But soon the pack came across the Hebrew boy's bloodied corpse and they attacked the boy with a ravenous ferocious lust. Michaelis awoke screaming, the taste of blood and meat and flesh still in his mouth, on his lips, on his breath. (128)

This carnivorous scene foreshadows the illustration of Abraham's cannibalistic stage. Parallel to this nightmare is that of Isaac (157) which features a snake with its fangs, in this case anticipating vampirism: "I scratched at the toothmarks left behind by the old man but I could not draw blood" (158).

Vampirism and the cannibalistic stage

As the narrative unfolds, Isaac's hematophilia (love for blood) increases to the point of flirting with vampirism and incorporation. When Isaac meets gay Milos, he is lusting so much after this young photograph model that he fantasizes about bloody animalistic rapport:

I smelt his youthful pungent sweat, the bitterness of semen. I closed my eyes and now I was fucking him harder, he was bleeding. And as I imagined blood I felt waves of excitement and my thrashings became delirious as I imagined his face, bloodied and bruised. I could lick the blood, taste the blood, eat the blood, and as I imagined this, I roared out my orgasm. (192)

Incorporation as the result of desire becomes apparent further on when Isaac confesses: "I was hungry for him but it didn't feel like lust. It was more like the instinct of hunger. I wanted him annihilated" (196). As well as bringing pleasure by penetrating oneself with an object, incorporation is a three-stage process, which primarily aims at destroying this object while assimilating its characteristics. This form of appropriation is available through a mechanism of identification known as introjection.⁴

Homosexual activity increasingly becomes animalistic in *Dead Europe* and blood-centred, as Victorian vampire fiction would have it.⁵ Half-way through the book, Isaac Raftis details his Sade-like fantasy of having sexual intercourse with a teenager:

I'd turn him over and I'd be just cock, just a cock ripping into the guts of the young boy. I would know – it would not just be a fantasy, not a guilty dream but reality – the anguish and the terror, and yes, the sweetness of fucking a child, of tearing into him, of making him bleed. (229)

Once he reaches Eastern Europe, the cradle of vampires, Isaac fittingly morphs into a bloodthirsty predator. He meets in Prague a menstruating girl whom he detects olfactorily:

It was then that I sensed her. She had taken the seat on the other side of the aisle from me. Her stink was powerful and I knew at once that she was bleeding. The smell itself seemed to have a coarse corporeal solidity to it; the only word to describe it would be velvet. I could smell the velvet in her cunt. (256)

This sequence is the turning point in the narrative where Isaac Raftis embodies a male literary avatar of “the *lamia*, or *succuba*, a wicked old hag who appears beautiful to a tricked lover only to ensnare him and then suck his life-blood in order to maintain her youth and beauty” (Gibson). From then on, the oral-sadistic stage will be all-pervasive in the diegesis but does not systematically stand for the cannibalistic expression of homosexual desire.⁶ Isaac admits “[i]t was agony not to push her against the wall, rip off her dress and devour her” (257). The following lines overleaf are admittedly revolting and not for the faint-hearted. However desecrating to women they may be, they are a clear giveaway of the narrator’s hematomania (obsession with blood).⁷ The female blood, mixed in this passage with other bodily fluids, is for Isaac at once rejuvenating and revitalizing (“her blood pumped through me and calmed the agonies in my belly and head and I knew I was alive” 258). As Isaac is literally feeding on that woman, he becomes increasingly alienated from his self:

I understand that the sexual encounter with the woman on the train had nothing to do with lust, and everything to do with nourishing myself on her blood and her spirit. None of this shames me. Of course, I can give it no clear sense or meaning. This journey seems to be taking me further away from myself, from all my certainties, from even a sense of my own origins. (259-60)

In certain respects, vampirism and the sucking of blood can be interpreted as a foretaste of cannibalism, which is now and again alluded to and increasingly turning into an addiction. Suffering from withdrawal symptoms, Isaac rummages through the bathroom wastepaper basket and finds “two strips of bloodied bandage. I suckled on them as relentlessly and as intensely as a nursing baby would at its mother’s breast” (361).

At the end of the novel, blood-starved Isaac has reached a point where he is indiscriminate of objects of incorporation: human as well as non-human will serve. When he comes across a ginger cat, the “vivid carnal smell” (362) of which he olfactorily detects, desire-driven Isaac crudely describes his blood lust: “My intention was to grab its neck, break it, and to immediately bite into it and drink the dying blood. I don’t believe that there was anything rational or conscious in this intention. It was an instinct” (362). Isaac may be voicing here Tsiolkas’s view of desire, a clear echo of Freud’s conception. As outlined by Tsiolkas when interviewed: “I have to deal with them which is why I write about these contradictions, what does pornography and love mean, what is the difference between love and sex, and I think that whether you’re single or a couple, we’re all trying to deal with this in our lives” (Tsiolkas qtd in Vernay, “An Interview”, 40). By relating desire to the instinctual life, he turns it into an indestructible and insatiable drive which can at best be sublimated, if not simply repressed, when it cannot meet satisfaction. Once the individual motivated by the pleasure principle has indulged in instant gratification, desire shifts onto the representation of another object, thus condemning the subject to a never-ending quest for fulfilment.

Tsiolkas’s interpretation of desire skilfully avoids the pitfalls of assimilating desire with willpower or need as Stoics and Epicureans were misled to believe. When defined as want, as a gap to be filled, desire appears for what it is, something to which the individual *unwittingly* yields. When unsatisfied, desire is from a psychoanalytic

perspective fantasy-generating. Anika's bleeding has tantalized Isaac's taste buds and craving for blood: "I want more of her: she is such a slight figure in my arms, this old body, this frail spent body. I could snap her in two, I could devour all of her" (297). However, the devouring of the object remains a fantasy which cannot be enacted because of its illegal and taboo-breaking quality. As a result, cannibalism is sealed into an out-of-reach sphere that only allows for its mental representation. As Wilfred Bion (1897-1979) observes in *Cogitations*: "The dominance of the visual image is related to inaccessibility – peculiar to objects of memory and desire ... The sense of sight seems to bring objects into reach when not within scope of other senses" (Bion qtd in Phillips 206-7). When envisaged as a cannibalistic feast, male-male intimacy is locked into the realm of the imagination. Within this context, taboos function as a means of safeguarding desire through want.

When fulfilled, Isaac's irrepressible craving for blood is both sexually arousing and thirst-quenching. As in the Prague episode, he detects in England another menstruating woman thanks to her "pungent smell": "She was bleeding. My cock was immediately erect, my stomach churned and twisted, and I swivelled my stool towards the bar to hide my erection. [...] I could hear nothing but the sound of her blood, trickling, coursing, calling" (366).

By the end of the book, the protagonist is gradually losing his physical powers. He is wan, all skin and bone, and enfeebled. Blood is no longer life-giving and a symbol for vitality but a factor of death, disease and contamination: "Until Sam had got home, I'd sat in the dark lounge room, shivering and listening to the growling metamorphosis of my blood. I knew now that it was indeed my blood that was transforming me, making me ill" (360). Feeling possessed, the protagonist is driven to feed on blood to the point of being fulfilled, but "[t]he taste of the blood has changed, lost its potency, become stale" (381). Readers are left with subtle pointers that Isaac is slipping away in London as a result of being AIDS-infected: "The doctors had nothing reassuring to say. We are sorry, we have done all the necessary blood tests but we don't know what it is that is causing his immune system to malfunction. We are sorry, he is dying." (396-7).

In the penultimate page of the novel, Tsiolkas gives an uninspired twist to the plotline by resuscitating Isaac from the underworld following an incongruous pact which Isaac's mother addresses to God: "If you save my son, Lord, the Devil can have my soul" (409). While this confusion of God and Satan falls short of understanding the tenets of Catholicism, it fails to foster the postmodern anxiety around blood and contamination that has hitherto been skilfully articulated in *Dead Europe* around folklore mythology. The nexus of desire, life energy, lust, vampirism and incorporation which crystallized around the exchange of bodily fluids, notably blood (blood as a potent symbol for nutriment, life, rejuvenation, and man's libido⁸), has been given short shrift with one single sentence: "Isaac returned to the world but as he did they all noticed that his appearance had changed forever" (410). While this ending accords with a hematophagous protagonist condemned to a vampiric existence by preying upon and blood-sucking any living creature to triumph over death, it is at variance with the now misleading hints pointing at AIDS infection, given that there is as yet no cure for it.⁹

Symbiotic union and the attachment to mother.

If *Loaded* was clearly a book about the inability to love (Vernay 41-5), *Dead Europe* is an attempt to pinpoint the nature of love which Tsiolkas has ambivalently described as “that Romantic notion of your other half, that there is someone out here on the planet who will fulfil your desire of communion” along with “pornographic elements” which stem from “lust and sexual desires” (Tsiolkas qtd in Vernay 40). In this respect, Tsiolkas’s “desire of communion” reveals his understanding of love as a yearning for psychic symbiotic union. In Freudian terms, Isaac is being depicted as an oral sadist who compensates for the deprivation of the maternal in his early childhood thanks to Gothic fantasies of mock breast feeding, milk-draining, and breast sucking in an ambivalent attempt to take pleasure while destroying the object.

As early as infancy, the child has an ambivalent relationship to the mother who exerts both fascination and repulsion. Fascination because the child tries to re-establish the lost symbiotic union on a psychological level by incorporating the mother’s breast. In Abraham’s words, “the act of sucking is one of incorporation, but one which does not put an end to the existence of the object. The child is not yet able to distinguish between its own self and the external object. There is yet no differentiation made between the sucking child and the suckling breast” (Abraham 450). Repulsion because the fear of being eaten by mother is inherent to the cannibalistic stage of infantile libidinal organisation.

Building on Karl Abraham’s research, Austrian child analyst Melanie Klein posited that the oral-sadistic stage is the apex of the child’s infantile sadism that originates before the “cannibalistic stage”. According to Klein, aggressiveness characterizes the earliest phase of the oral stage, whereby sucking up and draining are destructive activities which ultimately weaken the mother. She observed that: “In the very first months of the baby’s existence it has sadistic impulses directed, not only against its mother’s breast, but also against the inside of her body: scooping it out, devouring the contents, destroying it by every means which sadism can suggest.”⁹ It appears that incorporation and sadism are closely related, if not interrelated, and may partake of psychic symbiotic union. Erich Fromm reminds readers that “*Symbiotic union* has its biological pattern in the relationship between the pregnant mother and the foetus. They are two, and yet one. They live ‘together’ (*sym-biosis*), they need each other. [...] In the *psychic* symbiotic union, the two bodies are independent, but the same kind of attachment exists psychologically” (Fromm 15). Fromm further adds that “[t]he active form of symbiotic fusion is domination or [...] sadism. The sadistic person wants to escape from his aloneness and his sense of imprisonment by making another person part and parcel of himself. He inflates and enhances himself by incorporating another person, who worships him” (Fromm 16).

Once psychoanalytically-oriented readers have put the novel down, the final sentence of which illustrates the symbiotic union of mother and son (“Not alone, but together. You and I, together, for all the time, for all of eternity.” 411), it would be unsurprising if they perceived Isaac as a sadistic character who has suffered the anxiety of separateness at various levels throughout the novel (geographic or physical separateness from his mother, his lover Colin, and homeland, while not being able to connect with an alienating Europe) and has finally resolved his contradictions, which express themselves through ambivalence thanks to this fusion with the mother figure. This anxiety of unresolved separateness is further complicated by the excessive attachment to mother as

well as a childish streak, both of which supposedly characterize homosexuality according to some theorists. As Fromm has it:

Very often if the masculine character traits of a man are weakened because emotionally he has remained a child, he will try to compensate for this lack by the exclusive emphasis on his male role in sex. The result is the Don Juan, who needs to prove his male prowess in sex because he is unsure of his masculinity in a characterological sense. When the paralysis of masculinity is more extreme, sadism (the use of force) becomes the main – a perverted – substitute for masculinity. (Fromm 29)

Ultimately, Isaac offers his mother support, purportedly to be finally repaid with what is expected from “men who in their emotional development have remained stuck in an infantile attachment to mother. These men still feel like children; they want mother’s protection, love, warmth, care, and admiration” (Fromm 74).

Conclusion

The psychoanalytic moral to this ghastly ghoulish tale is that Isaac has incorporated his mother’s unconditional love through symbiotic union and has returned to a state of Freudian narcissism, highlighting his extreme sense of insecurity which transpires throughout *Dead Europe*, insecurity being the driving force behind Isaac’s desire. By meshing homosexual desire with the vampire fiction genre, Tsiolkas has taken up the Victorian Gothic trope which presents homosexuality as a curse in his exploration of the politics of desire, while his status as a major author arguably brings aspects of gay culture to the attention of more readers than would be exposed to them from other sources. Child psychotherapist Adam Phillips notes that “[w]hatever cannot be transformed, psychically processed, reiterates itself” (Phillips 153). Suffice it to say that *Loaded*, *The Jesus Man*, *Dead Europe* and more recently *The Slap* (2008) have raised so many similar issues on gay identity that it is licit to posit that homosexual desire seems to be the driving force behind Tsiolkas’s desire to write.

Notes

1. Vampirism, coprophilia, zoophilia, hustler sex, teenage prostitution, paedophilia, incestuous sex, racism and anti-Semitism for instance.
2. See pages 29, 45, 53, further cited below, and the following excerpt on pp.102-3: “I also awoke to that poisoning combination of guilt, regret and a hangover that can so often be the result of casual sex. My first thought on awakening was that I missed Colin [...]”. He then says, “I want to ring Colin.”
3. A theory which basically falls into five clear-cut stages: the oral stage, the anal stage, the phallic stage, the latency period and the genital stage.
4. Introjection is a term introduced in 1909 by Sándor Ferenczi (1873-1933).
5. Studies have shown that *The Vampyre* by John William Polidori (1795-1821), first published in 1819, and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, released in 1897, were dealing with repressed homosexuality and unspeakable desires. It has been argued that blood – being a byword for semen in the Victorian era – along with the exchange of bodily fluids partake of a “spermatic economy” which hints at homosexual practice. See William Hughes, *Beyond Dracula: Bram Stoker’s Fiction and Its Cultural Context* (New York: Palgrave, 2000). These vampire tales from the pre-Freudian era broadened people’s

perception of gender identity by featuring peripheral characters living on the margins of society and struck with the curse of not being like anyone, of not belonging to the norm. People could read between the lines the difficulty of accepting one's homosexuality in a predominantly heterocentric culture. See also Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who built her concept of "homosexual panic" around nineteenth century Gothic fiction in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

6. Such a depiction of homosexuality is not novel in gay fiction. For example, Leo Bersani contends in *Homos* that "Genet's cannibalistic appropriation of Jean after his death [in *Funeral Rites*] turns out to be a continuation of their lovemaking" (157).

7. Isaac's cunnilingus practiced on a dark menstruating woman is reminiscent of Catherine Breillat's *Anatomie de l'enfer (Anatomy of Hell)*, 2004, in which a gay protagonist, impersonated by straight porn star Rocco Siffredi, is made to gulp down menses. This French movie by feminist director Catherine Breillat was inspired by her controversial novel entitled *Pornocratie* (Denoël, 2001).

8. If blood is symbolic of masculine libido, therefore the craving for blood and the sucking of blood are the epitome of homoerotic desire. Matthew Gibson reminds readers at the end of his article on "Vampires and Vampire Fiction" that vampirism (that is, the sucking of blood) can be seen as symbolic of "repressed homosexuality (in particular in Polidori and Stoker)".

9. Gabriela Zabala-Notaras and Ismet Redzovic voice the same concerns, in their article "Writing off Europe", when they say "A particularly ghoulish and silly aspect of the novel has his mother rescue her son when he winds up in hospital with a mysterious illness, by cutting herself and at regular intervals feeding Isaac her blood. Isaac's illness could be a metaphor for AIDS, but this is as ambiguous and arbitrary as almost everything else in the novel." <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/nov2005/tsio-n16.shtml>, accessed 26 September 2006.

10. Melanie Klein, "A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States," in *The Selected Melanie Klein*, Ed. Juliet Mitchell, New York: Free Press, 1987, 116. Quoted in Caleb Crain, "Lovers of Human Flesh: Homosexuality and Cannibalism in Melville's Novels", *American Literature* 66: 1 (March 1994), 42.

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