

Mad World, Mad Hope: Carballido's *El día que se soltaron los leones*

Diana Taylor

Although *El día que se soltaron los leones* is one of Emilio Carballido's major plays, it has received surprisingly little critical attention. One reason for the oversight might lie in Carballido's use of the farcical genre. Farce, traditionally a "filler" genre (deriving etymologically from *farcir*, to stuff) tends to be considered a frivolous form incapable of expressing serious or important content. On close examination of *Día*, however, we find that the social, political, and philosophical questions posed by the play prove as penetrating and important as those in more obviously "serious" Latin American drama. The confrontation between individuals and society proves as life-threatening in *Día* as in, for example, Triana's *La noche de los asesinos* and Wolff's *Flores de papel*. And although Carballido depicts the confrontation in a playful fashion, he uses genre-as-discourse in as calculated and significant a manner as Triana and Wolff—not as a means of conveying a message but as part of the message itself.¹ In this study I will analyze the social, political, and philosophical concerns expressed in *El día que se soltaron los leones* and relate the "serious" content of the play to its seemingly frivolous form.

The play's grotesquely farcical nature appears at once, especially in the context of Carballido's stage design calling for "biombos con los árboles pintados" and people dressed in lions' costumes. The play opens with a dialogue between La Tía and La Vecina—the bedridden aunt suffers from "un dolor muy raro" that has plagued her since puberty, "me corre por la espalda, me sacude los hombros, se me clava en las conyunturas y luego desaparece, para volver después en el corazón," (232)—La Vecina has left her child tied up, attacked by rats and screaming for liberation in order to tend to her ailing neighbour. La Tía yells for her 67 year old niece, Ana, whose position in the household resembles that of a maid rather than a relative. Ana prepares her aunt's tea, talking to and caressing the cat she keeps without her aunt's knowledge or consent. La Tía, fed up with waiting for her tea, enters the kitchen, finds Ana with the cat, and throws the cat out of the house. Ana,

after a second's hesitation, leaves the house looking for the cat. Ana's search takes her to the lake in Chapultepec Park where she meets El Hombre, a hungry outcast. Together they capture a swan from the lake and roast it over a fire for breakfast. In another part of Chapultepec Park, El Profesor leads his military cadets through the zoo. While the professor pauses briefly to chat with his fiancée, La Joven, the students engage the animals in a rock fight. A mischievous student, López Vélez, hits La Joven, and afraid of the Professor's punishment, opens the lions' cage and runs away. The lions escape to where Ana and El Hombre prepare their meal, frightening the latter into taking refuge in the trees. La Señora, a housewife who inadvertently stumbles on the scene, faints when she sees the lions. Ana comes out of hiding and chides the lions for threatening to eat first the swan and then La Señora. The first jornada ends as Ana and El Hombre share a meal accompanied by La Señora and the peaceful lions.

In the second jornada the police and the professor begin their pursuit of the lions and, by extension, of Ana and El Hombre and La Señora as accomplices, but the fugitives escape to the island in the middle of the lake. In the confusion, El Profesor dies, wounded by police bullets intended for the lions. In the third jornada Carballido juxtaposes the confusion of the police activity, (eg., sirens, megaphones, search lights) with the intimate conversations between Ana, El Hombre, and La Señora in which they question the pressures, fears and attitudes that have shaped their lives. La Señora decides to return to shore in the rowboat, tips into the water and is rescued by López Vélez, whose bravery is rewarded with a medal. The police begin their attack on the island and in order to escape Ana and El Hombre ride back to the mainland on the lions. Hemmed in by police, Ana, El Hombre and the lions run towards the lions' cage. Ana and the lions enter the cage, and the police catch El Hombre at the door. He claims to have captured the lions and returned them to their cage. He is rewarded by a job as zoo keeper. Ana opts to live in the cage with the lions although she learns from La Vecina that her aunt has died and bequeathed her the house. As the play closes, Ana knits a sweater for a baby bear, converses with her friend El Hombre and screams at the military cadets the new professor leads through the zoo.

Notwithstanding the colorful and lively exaggeration evident in the plotline, a closer look reveals a carefully juxtaposed series of events rich in socio-political and philosophical significance. The episodes and elements in the play demonstrate a parallel structure—one side focusing on specific domestic situations while the other presents similar images on a larger scale: house/park; water tank/Chapultepec lake; cat/lions. The opposition superficially suggests a straightforward inside/outside dichotomy in which the inside represents confinement and alienation while the outside speaks of freedom and nature. The play clearly insists on the serious (indeed life-threatening) conflict between oppressive social systems and individual freedom, but it does not limit itself to this deceptive binary classification. As we shall see, the work underlines the insufficiency of simplistic classification by showing that on one level, specifically on the socio-political level, the inside/outside tension is a false dichotomy. Ultimately, there is little difference between inside and outside in this work since the characters cannot escape from social constraints.

Rather, the parallel construction indicates Carballido's inductive form of logic, progressing from the particular to the universal. So while the parallel images point to differences, in the majority of the cases they are quantitative rather than qualitative (eg. the bound child/the military cadets), suggesting widening spheres of significance.

The conflict on the most superficial level indicates an obvious social and political crisis (auto-determination versus social authority), but on a deeper level there is an existential one as well, different ways of "Being-in-the-world." The images describing the existential confrontation, though also juxtaposed in a parallel fashion, demonstrate true qualitative differences. Ana's importance as a character in the play extends beyond her defiance of social norms. Her interactions with others (eg. the cat, the man), her use of language, her speculation concerning epochs and comets, signal the central confrontation in the play between "interiority" and "exteriority," not merely in spatial but—more significantly—in philosophical terms. The scene in which Ana prepares tea for her aunt provides a counterpoint for the third scene of the third act in which she obliges the man to assume equal responsibility in making the tea. Beneath or behind every social clash, the play tells us, exists an individual whose sense (or non-sense) of personal autonomy and responsibility produces a given vision of the world and explains the nature of his/her participation in the system. El Hombre observes that one's individual philosophical outlook makes subsequent socio-political structures either possible or impossible: "Contra la creencia común, cada quien es responsable de los padres, parientes y jefes que le hayan tocado" (265).

The terminology employed by the French phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas proves the most useful in analyzing the conflict between interiority and exteriority. Levinas uses "interiority" to denote systems (political, religious, historical, linguistic, and so forth) that attempt to bind individual existence within their own framework. Systems try to explain, measure, and simplify the innumerable complexities of life by placing them within their own continuity, their own all-engulfing "totality." People tend to participate in systems, as the play aptly points out in the figure of El Profesor, according to their function, rather than their individuality. Ana's stifling situation as a dutiful niece makes clear that personal needs succumb to social obligations for those trapped in roles. Yet the freedom from interiority, according to Levinas, cannot lie in unbound, irresponsible subjectivity. Exteriority places individuals within their personal context, but always in relation to a world of people and things truly "other than," though not denying, themselves. The play's concern with the possibility of neutral, non-binding, yet at the same time *responsible* interaction between individuals challenges the interiority of a social structure based on personal anonymity, sustained by the sacrifice of the individual moment redeemable only by the concept of social time—history.

Interiority, as Carballido portrays it in the opening scene, implies confinement, infirmity, and alienation from nature. La Tía, as owner of the house represents a "dis-eased" social authority divorced from the natural order. She lies "detrás de un balcón" as the sun rises "atrás de ese tinaco" viewing the natural elements filtered through man-made barriers. She asks La Vecina to shut the blinds. Carballido's playful tone, however, does not

diminish the violence associated with interiority. La Tía dominates Ana, subjugating and abusing her in a fashion less physical, but just as real, as La Vecina who ties up her child. The aunt, by using her "illness" as an instrument of manipulation, tries to absorb Ana into her own personal cycle. The aunt makes her niece further her (rather than Ana's own) physical and spiritual needs by preparing meals and attending church in her place. By denying Ana the possibility of action and responsibility in the present, offering her instead the distant hope of inheriting the house, the aunt commits what Levinas describes as the treason against individuality: "violence does not consist so much in injuring and annihilating persons as in interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray . . . their own substance, making them carry out actions that will destroy every possibility for action" (Levinas 21). Carballido underlines through *El Hombre* the violence implicit in society's attempt to make individuals and groups conform to accepted norms and ethics: "¿Se imagina si a una tribu de gitanos le regalaran una parcela? O algo peor, ¿si la obligaran a labrarla?" (256). The play repeatedly demonstrates that figures of authority, La Tía, La Vecina, El Profesor, abuse their position, violating the nature of those around them, keeping them inactive, ignorant and submissive. The assault on individuality creates the circular violence of the onstage society that traps its members, prompting incidents of vandalism and desertion to justify the need for further violence. El Profesor reminds his militarized students that "un homo sapiens . . . se encuentra en el periodo de domesticación, y sería colocado en una jaula al menor síntoma de ferocidad" (240).

Carballido most concretely explores the tension between interiority and exteriority in spatial terms, using Mexico City as the arena of confrontation. In opposition to the closed interior set of Act I, Scene I, where people lie behind balconies and water is contained in storage tanks, Carballido presents the outdoor "freedom" of Chapultepec Park. By shifting location he apparently allows us to judge interiority not only from the inside but also from the outside. He seemingly privileges exteriority not only structurally, by placing the bulk of the action outside, but by allowing us to see the constraining nature of interiority from the point of view of marginal characters who feel pulled, yet resist total absorption into the system. In the quasi-magical intimacy of the park, populated with exotic and poetical creatures, Ana hears music and sees brightly colored lights. The barrier between spiritual and physical elements falls away. Ana's "hambre vieja" (264) for experience and El Hombre's physical "hambre en las tripas" (265) magically merge, both suddenly and simultaneously fulfilled. The swan's exaggerated beauty and delicacy satisfies not only the characters' poetic sensibilities. The playful allusion to González Martínez' "Tuércele el cuello al cisne" justifies killing the self-absorbed bird in the interests of satisfying their hunger as well. And by stuffing the swan with "laurel," El Hombre points out, they combine the poetic honor associated with laurel and the flavor of bay. The open space of the park, "sin hojas de ventana, ni quicio de puerta" (264) suggests a newly found perspective and clarity of vision as the characters acknowledge the frustration of their thwarted lives. The misty landscape represents, for one day only, the possible co-existence of beauty, physical satisfaction, humor and companionship.

The false inner/outer dichotomy of the setting explains the short-term exteriority—the play presents no “outer” space. Chapultepec Park, with its famous gates, lies locked in the middle of Mexico City. The artificial lake and the man-made island which provide temporary refuge for Ana, El Hombre and the lions, speak not of freedom but of another form of entrapment. Even the swans and the lions are government property. In this regimented world nature lies behind bars. Closed in on all sides by the police, Ana, El Hombre, and the lions must choose, not between interiority and exteriority, but between death and imprisonment. Ana’s desire to protect their lives prompts her decision: “Entonces, ¡a las jaulas!” (269).

If we follow Carballido’s inductive form of logic, his use of Chapultepec Park as a setting offers another level for interpretation, demonstrating that Ana’s “no exit” situation proves more generally valid than we originally supposed. The area of Chapultepec has historically been the scene of confrontation, suggesting not only the sacrifice of the individual in modern Mexico, but sacrifice as a persistent theme in Mexican history. Ana and El Hombre realize that the ground they sit on is “levemente podrida” (263). The absurd attack by the police on the island that harbors the fugitives, though staged in a highly theatrical, fantastic manner, remains firmly grounded in the tragic vein of Mexican history. It points to centuries of destructive displays of power—the Spaniards’ siege of the island of Tenochtitlán, the castle symbolizing the Spanish and French domination of Mexico, the school age children (military cadets like the children in Carballido’s play) dying to defend Chapultepec hill from the invading United States army.² The domination of Ana by her aunt, the dehumanizing violence suffered by La Vecina’s child, do not constitute isolated acts of personal nullification. Rather, they indicated the perennial sacrifice of individuals trapped in a violent history.

The play’s emphasis on images of physical confinement, the gates and cages, underlines the thematic preoccupation with the diminishment of human existence within a rigid structure. Just as society controls nature by constructing gates, it attempts to define and limit human nature as well. The question of self-definition and personal identity become central in a society that binds its members to a purely objective classification. The professor boasts: “En la escuela, en los laboratorios o en las oficinas sabemos todo cuanto puede saberse de usted, de sus semejantes o de los otros seres en la escala zoológica” (240). People become objects-on-paper to be analyzed and filed away by others as anonymous as themselves in a collective system that can differentiate, but cannot name or individualize its members. In this context, the fact that Ana has a name in a sense becomes her destiny, defining her from the basis of her personal context and rendering her a misfit in terms of her social function. López Vélez and Godínez, the only two other characters with proper names, distinguish themselves by not participating appropriately in the system, talking back to their professor and proving inept at zoological classification. Other members of the collectivity are interchangeable, as La Joven “insignificante” notes upon the death of her fiancé: “En tu escuela, mañana va a haber otro en tu lugar, y enseñará a los niños igual que tú lo hacías; le pagarán tu sueldo, le entregarán tus listas de asistencia” (261).

Even the disquieting intuition that something basic is lacking from personal experience does not, in itself, rescue individuals from enslaving social roles. La Señora who wanders into the park feels shocked to realize that she has never been to the park alone. She suddenly feels cheated, "como si en toda mi vida nunca hubiera hecho nada," because she has sacrificed her life to domestic duties. And although she asks, not only Ana and El Hombre, but principally herself "ustedes, de repente, no sienten que algo les falta?" she clings to the only role she knows. At the end of the play, caring for her grandchildren, she finds herself unindividuated but happily reassimilated in the natural order, another link in the great chain of being.

Beneath all the layers of socialization, however, the play points to the problematic presence of unadulterated human nature at the center of a system founded specifically to defend itself from that nature. The image of the lions eloquently reflects the situation—as long as they are caged they pose no danger, but no one is safe from them if they are free and hungry. Ana, like the authority figures she despises, finds that she, too, resorts to violence to control the hungry lions. Yet, unlike the authorities, she strives to satisfy, rather than control, their needs. Ana, starved for liberty and experience, identifies with the trapped animals and clings to the hope that humans, like lions, will be sufficiently true to their nature to rebel when faced with an unbearable situation. Personal authenticity, she discovers, comes through the acceptance of personal responsibility and the rejection of social bonds that threaten to absorb and nullify individuality. In the park, talking to El Hombre, she finally accepts that her aunt "nunca quiso lo mejor para mí . . . sólo quiso sujetarme, utilizarme" (264). "Tías, gobiernos, jefes, teorías . . ." her friend agrees, "son cirujanos, carniceros, siempre amputando miembros, planos mentales, gestos . . ." (265-66) butchering experience, simplifying pluralistic thought. The dialogues between Ana and El Hombre introduce the externalizing dimension of speech in the play, a language that allows the speaker to approach and understand people and elements from the starting point of their own particular specificity rather than seeking to control and incorporate "otherness" into the self. Their conversations challenge the enslaving discourse of "tías" and "gobiernos" that proves incapable of differentiating, that simplifies the complexities of experience into controllable categories. Ana and El Hombre communicate freely, giving to each other without compromising or diminishing themselves. Ana, as we see from her attitude towards the cat at the beginning of the play, never felt the need to control her pet ("yo no quiero quitarte nada . . ." (234) but her newly found ability to affirm her autonomy surprises her: "Pero vio usted qué fácil? Nunca le dije así a ella" (265). It signals two major developments in Ana's maturity, her capacity to accept herself as an adult, and to accept the responsibility of adulthood. In contrast to her wilted childlikeness in the opening scene, Ana now acknowledges her body and rejoices in her age, longing to "ponerme vestidos indecentes, y pintarme la arrugas . . ." (265). And having rejected her aunt, and her claims to her aunt's house, she owns up to her responsibility for having participated as victim in the annihilating process: "Ahora, creo que soy responsable de todo."

The dialogues between Ana and El Hombre explore questions exceeding

the strictly socio-political tension of unbound personal freedom within social constraints. They pose epistemological questions that go beyond the scope of the knowing "en conjunto" of the holistic tradition, to the knowing "en detalle" (257) of pluralistic thought. In the world of the play, the educational system mechanically divorces information from context, thereby proving antithetical to knowledge. It serves a pragmatic function, molding members of the society, reducing rather than expanding their frame of reference. As El Profesor says: "entre más cosas sabe la gente, más difícil resulta disciplinarla. . . . El sistema ideal sería: nadie aprenda cosas que no le corresponda saber" (241). Clearly, Ana's ignorance strengthened her aunt's tyranny over her: "Yo nunca he sabido nada de todas esas cosas. No he leído mucho. Mi tía vigila todos los libros que llegan a casa. Los lee, y decide cuáles son buenos y cuáles son malos" (256). But free from the house, Ana begins to understand the validity of her way of knowing "en detalle," which she had previously felt to be abnormal in that it approximates more the natural perception of the lions that the education of humans. She has trouble accepting the universality of pluralistic thought: "Pero no todo el mundo es como yo. ¿O sí?" The central epistemological opposition clarifies the difference between interiority, based on "the traditional assumption that reason has no plural" and exteriority, that asks us "to recognize what our lived experience shows us, that reason has many centers . . ." (Wild 16). *El día que se soltaron los leones*, like *Yo también hablo de la rosa*, points to an infinitely more complex concept of existence than any theory or perspective can comprehend, dimensions of reality, as La Intermediaria warns us in *Rosa*, "que no sospechamos siquiera" (*Rosa* 145). A totalizing approach to thought, like the discourse that maintains it, tries to absorb and classify knowledge to sustain itself. The attempt to reduce the infinite to the finite explains not only the intellectual subjugation we see throughout the play, but also the distortion of reality required to support the fictitious framework. The official version of El Profesor's death demonstrates the web of social mythification. Although the bullet wounds suggest otherwise, El Comandante, El Policía, and El Fotógrafo concur, "Lo mataron los leones" (261). Both in *Día* and *Rosa*, Carballido humorously underlines the arrogance, and ultimately the danger, of those who pretend to understand existence "en conjunto," and maintain that "todo lo que pasa en el mundo es claro e inteligible" (240).

Freed from the language of interiority and the philosophical outlook it formulates, Ana and El Hombre reclaim the importance of the moment, their "día" salvaged from the engulfing notion of history that absorbs human existence within its own continuity: "Éste ha sido un día, un día entre los demás. Me gustaría que no fuera el único . . ." (259). Ana's references to "siglos" and "épocas" accentuates the impersonal, artificially designated terms in which history conceives of temporality. She speaks for all individuals when she says "no sé muy bien de cuándo a cuándo va una época" (255). El Hombre replies: "Nunca se sabe. Se averigua después, mucho después. Y entonces la época se cuenta desde la muerte de alguien, desde que algo se dijo, desde que apareció algún libro." The difference between measuring and marking time in terms of comets rather than epochs, as juxtaposed by the work, underlines the gulf between personal and impersonal time. The

unforgettable experience of actually seeing a comet emphasizes the abstract, and basically arbitrary, man-made concept of centuries and epochs.

By breaking out of the engulfing notion of history, Ana and the man can judge history from the perspective of the moment rather than looking towards future Utopias that will deem past sacrifice all worthwhile. Their inquiry, informal and fanciful as it is, confronts the two major visions of Latin American history—the linear, triumphalist version in which heroic action leads to some glorious future versus the cyclical nature of Sisyphean toil expressed by Bolívar's "I've ploughed the sea." The misty vapors rising from the park, "tristes, tristes como si estuviera lleno de ahogados," reflect the enduring reality of sacrifice from the beginnings of culture in Mesoamerica to modern days. In pre-Hispanic times, the shedding of human blood was considered necessary to keep the cosmos functioning, insuring that Huitzilopochtli would have the strength to conquer the stars and introduce the day. And present socio-economic theories, El Hombre points out, continue to sacrifice individuals to keep the social order running: "Hay millones de hombres y mujeres construyendo disciplinadamente la humanidad futura, que será la que goce dentro de cien o doscientos años" (264). The violence against individuality in the name of future compensation is the common thread linking Ana's life of servitude as she waits to inherit the house, totalitarian social systems and pre-Columbian cosmography. The present moment mocks the myth of future well-being.

While *El día que se soltaron los leones* denounces the individual diminishment resulting from social interiority, it signals the non-viability of exteriority within this madhouse world. Having rejected internalizing thought, Ana realized she cannot return to her old way of life: "¿Qué voy a hacer ahora en la casa?" (259). But El Hombre's reply: "¿Qué va a hacer aquí afuera?" poses the central problem, the non-existence of neutral ground in a society that either locks in or locks away its members. Ana's "freedom," at the end of the play, derives from her choice to separate herself permanently from the norms of a demented society. Her non-violent resistance is a positive stance in that she remains a disturbing presence and disquieting voice challenging the silence of interiority. Conversely, El Hombre, is unable to sustain his borderline status and his individual authenticity. "Hay plumajes que cruzan el pantano y no se manchan . . ." he tells us, but he is mistaken when he boasts "mi plumaje es de esos!" (237). He locks himself out of the natural cycle, "ya no siento correr las estaciones por mis venas . . ." (272) by trying to cash in on the economically and spiritually bankrupt system. At the end, wearing a uniform, he waits for the authorities to honor their promise of a salary and prize money. Ana, through the bars of her cage, gently mocks him: "Cuidado con las máquinas de escribir" (272).

The play, again ironically, offers a glimmer of resolution to the interiority/exteriority impasse—ironic because it undercuts the explicit resolution offered by Ana. Ana's mad hope for a mad world lies in some nebulous future: "¡Ya llegará el día en que todos ustedes estén en jaulas mientras todos los leones andemos sueltos, rugiendo por las calles! ¡Ya llegará el día! ¡Ya llegará!" (270). At best, Ana's exclamation indicates the desire for the breakdown of the social system, the return to a wild state, the nostalgia for nature. But she falls

into the same temporal trap her aunt laid for her: “‘Una joven tiene el futuro cargado de promesas.’ Yo decía: ‘¿Y hoy, y hoy?’ Pero ella pensaba siempre en mi futuro” (257). By appealing to the future, Ana acts as accomplice to the sacrifice of the moment. The hope, then, lies not in “un día se soltarán los leones” but precisely in the title “el día que se soltaron los leones.” On that day Ana chose an authentic action over her previous acts of subjugation, thereby rupturing her restrictive world: Ana said “no” to her aunt, recognizing that “Yo he perdido tanto diciendo siempre que sí” (265). For Ana, that day becomes important, not in historic terms, but in terms of her personal context.

Carballido’s use of farce as genre reinforces some of the different philosophical and social concerns developed thematically throughout the work. The frenetic, non-reflective, unassuming nature of farce serves Carballido in the following ways: The characters representing social authority in *Día* precipitate the events and provoke confrontation. They resemble the stock characters associated with farce because their existence can be designated in terms of clearly recognizable roles. The breakneck pace of farce transmits the circular violence of interiority—many things “happen” but few “change.” In *Día* farce functions not only to formulate a problem (e.g. the absurdity of non-thinking, undifferentiated existence within an anonymous but self-perpetuating social structure), it also partially supplies an answer. Being an anarchistic genre, farce reflects the tension between exteriority and interiority, stubbornly resisting assimilation by the forces of decorum and order and undercuts the noble vision of personal authenticity and freedom offered by tragedy. Like the characters in the play, farce refuses to aspire to grandeur, asking only to “be” humbly and autonomously itself. Moreover, Carballido’s use of farce serves him as an unpretentious distancing device, encouraging our critical appraisal of a historically relevant situation while eliciting our laughter. He describes his play as “un tipo de farsa con una fuerte actitud de compromiso social, una especie de reflexión sobre el tercer mundo . . .” (Veléz 20). By combining the social, political and philosophical concerns analyzed throughout this study with the play’s humorous, exaggerated theatricality, Carballido satisfies the spectators’ intellectual and physical appetites. Farce, associated both with food and drama, explains the rich harmony of *El día que se soltaron los leones*—the play provides not only a feast for the eyes, but significant and substantial food for thought.

Dartmouth College

Notes

1. Triana uses truncated secular ritual in *Noche* to depict the failure to channel violence into what René Girard has called the beneficial violence of ritual. Wolff’s formal assault on the “well-made play” reflects the disintegration of the established “well-made” world. The idea of ritual as “the regular exercise of ‘good’ violence” (37) is central to Girard’s study. Girard argues “that the objective of ritual is the proper reenactment of the surrogate-victim mechanism; its function is to perpetuate or renew the effects of this mechanism; that is, to keep violence *outside* of the community” (92).

2. In 1880, Cunninghame Graham observed a phenomenon foreshadowing Carballido’s play: “The giant cypresses, tall even in the time of Moctezuma, the castle of Chapultepec upon its rock . . . did not interest me so much as a small courtyard, in which ironed and guarded, a band of Indians . . . were kept confined . . . their demeanour less reassuring than that of the tigers in the cage hard by” (116).

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