

079. A political reading of *The Piano Lesson*: Survival strategies of black people in white culture

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to make a political reading of the American playwright August Wilson's play, *The Piano Lesson*. Since the play discusses the redefinition of black people's identity and the significance of the collective black memory in a white society, besides the politics of race, a post-colonial approach is used as well. The main theme of the play discusses the different attitudes of the Charles siblings towards the sale of a piano which stands for their family roots and history. The siblings' divergence about the sale also defines their standpoints in American society. While Boy Willie perceives the piano solely as a source of money to gain power and authority, Berniece appreciates the spiritual values attributed to it. As a matter of fact, throughout the play the piano as an African-American heritage becomes a bridge between the two races, two cultures, two families and two periods of time in American history. It also stands for the long-lasting suffering of black people under the hegemony of the white master. Therefore, as symbolically signified in the title, for the liberation of black people, the lesson that the piano teaches to black characters is the inevitable necessity of embracing the African-American heritages that are the oral tradition and the ancestor worship. Besides the necessity of preserving the values of African-American heritage, for black characters ownership of land and having a religious identity are accepted as methods of gaining power, authority and status and thus, being accepted within the white culture.

Keywords: African-American heritage, silence, voice, oral tradition, ancestor worship

Piano Lesson'ın politik okuması: Siyahların beyaz kültürde hayatta kalma stratejileri

Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Amerikan oyun yazarı August Wilson'ın *The Piano Lesson* adlı oyununun politik okumasını yapmaktır. Oyun incelemesi boyunca, beyaz toplumda siyah kimliğin yeniden tanımlanması ve kolektif siyah hafızanın önemi tartışıldığı için ırk politikasının yanısıra sömürgecilik sonrası bakış açısından da faydalanılmıştır. Oyunun ana teması Charles kardeşlerin aile köklerini ve tarihlerini ifade eden bir piyanonun satışı hakkındaki farklı tavırlarının tartışılması üzerine kuruludur. Kardeşlerin bu satış hakkındaki birbiriyle çelişen tutumları, onların Amerikan toplumundaki farklı konumlanmalarını da ifade eder. Kardeşlerden Boy Willie, piyanonun satışını kendisine sadece güç ve otorite kazandıracak bir para kaynağı olarak görürken, diğer kardeş Berniece piyanoya atfedilen manevi değerleri takdir etmektedir. Aslında oyun boyunca Afro-Amerikan mirasını simgeleyen piyano, Amerikan tarihinde iki farklı ırk, iki farklı kültür, iki farklı aile ve iki farklı dönem arasında köprü vazifesi görür. Bu piyano, aynı zamanda beyaz toplumun

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hegemonyasında ezilen siyah ırkı da temsil eder. Sembolik olarak oyunun isminde de belirtildiđi gibi piyanonun siyah kültüre verdiđi ders ise, siyah ırkın bağımsızlığında Afro-Amerikalıların mirası olan sözlü gelenek ve ataları anmanın kaçınılmaz gerekliliđi olmuştur. Oyun boyunca, Afro-Amerikan deđerlerini ve mirasını koruma gerekliliđinin yanısıra, dini kimlik ve toprak sahibi olmak da siyah karakterler için güç, otorite ve statü kazanma ve böylelikle beyaz toplum tarafından kabul görme metotları olarak kabul edilir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Afro-Amerikan mirası, sessizlik, ses, sözlü gelenek, ataları anma

Introduction

August Wilson's play *The Piano Lesson* discusses the long suffering of African-American people in their endeavors of self-definition while trying to cope with their history marked with the heritage of slavery and racism. The play takes place in The Great Depression of 1930s in Pittsburgh and it depicts the life styles and problems of Southern black people who migrated from South to the northern cities in order to find jobs and better living conditions. However, the play can also be accepted as a journey in time since it takes the reader to the Ante-bellum period through the memories and stories of the characters in the play.

The main plot of the play develops from the different perspectives of the Charles siblings, Berniece and Boy Willie, about selling a family heritage; the piano. Before the Civil War, Charles family was among the slaves of the Sutters. As a present for their wedding anniversary, Robert Sutter buys a piano to his wife Ophelia. However, money of the piano is paid by selling the members of the Charles family; the great grandmother Old Mama Berniece and her son Boy Charles (the father of Berniece and Boy Willie). For a while Ophelia entertains herself with the piano but after a while she gets bored and misses her slave servants. Thus, Robert Sutter orders the faces of the sold slaves to be carved on the wooden parts of the piano. In this way, Ophelia could own both "her piano and her niggers." (Wilson, 1:44) However, what is carved on the piano is not only the faces of the sold slaves but the whole history of the Charles family. After the Emancipation, Papa Boy Charles steals the piano from the Sutters with the hope of owning his family's history. Yet, he is killed by the Sutters as an act of revenge. During the action of the play, Boy Willie comes from the South to the house of Uncle Doaker in order to sell the piano and then return to the South to buy the land which is now sold by the Sutter family. In this way, he hopes to redefine his family's existence in the past. However, he cannot take the piano out of the house due to the reactions of Berniece who does not want the piano to be sold and due to the unexpected appearance of Sutter's ghost.

Coping with history

In *The Piano Lesson*, one of August Wilson's most significant themes is the methods that the characters generate in order to cope with their past, that is history. From the very beginnings histories have been a battlefield of various cultures, races, voices and stories. In all societies, there is a hegemonic structure which can be mentioned "as a contested and shifting set of ideas by means of which dominant groups strive to secure the consent of subordinate groups to their leadership." (Strinati, 1995: 170) And this dominant hegemonic structure sets the rules, norms and defines the traditions of a society. It is this hegemonic structure which defines and legalizes even histories and stories within that culture. These legalized stories become the history of the dominant structure since it is his story or hi(story) and it is imposed on the whole society. The story/history created by the hegemonic structure can also be

mentioned as a “master narrative” of that society which “is the grand story told by dominant groups to legitimate and justify their actions and policies.” (Campbell& Kean, 1997: 15) Constructing master narratives, telling stories and creating histories have social and political implications. And they generate an ideology with an inclination of creating a controlling mechanism on the individuals of that society. This ideology has become the general attitude of white people towards the blacks especially before the Civil War in American society. Obeying the dictates of the master narrative with its ideology they have created, white master manipulated their slaves working in the plantations not only by creating a hi(story) for them but also by creating their position and even identity for their slaves. This situation can be mentioned as “the construction of blackness” which can be summarized as “the ways in which the dominant white culture and its literary products have over the ages constructed black males and females as different from their white counterparts.” (Bertens, 2001:111) Hence, during their slavery, illiterate black people become not only slaves physically working in the plantations but they have also become mental slaves whose way of thinking have been shaped by the teachings of their white masters. As a matter of fact, this situation is what DuBois defines as the “double-consciousness” of black people who are taught to “look at the world through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” (qtd. in Campbell& Kean, 1997: 80) The double-consciousness exemplifies what Althusser defines as ideology which “represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.” (Althusser, 1971:18) While creating an identity and story for African-American people, white people have imposed their ideology on their slaves and directed them to think and believe in the world they have created which moves the blacks away from their “real conditions” as Althusser mentions.

Significance of the Piano

In *The Piano Lesson*, the piano becomes an instrument for the Berniece and Boy Willie siblings to relate themselves to their history and the meaning of their existence. As Michael Morales mentions, the piano “provided a link to the past, to Africa, to who these people are.” (Morales, 1994:105) Since the history of the Charles family is carved on the piano, the images and symbols are accepted as their own historical documents by the black family. However, since the images and designs are carved by the permission and decision of Robert Sutter in order to please his wife, the historical documents of the Charles family reflect the perspective of the white master Robert Sutter, in other words, stories and histories of the black family become the product of the powerful hegemonic structure. Therefore, with its beautiful designs and carvings, the piano becomes the “silent testament of American racism.” (Bogumil, 1999:74) The Charles family look at and learn their history from the perspective of Robert Sutter. Hence, the piano can be accepted as “a kind of tabularasa upon which the white man could write what he chose.” (Levine, 1977:52) Believing and living in an illusory history written on a white empty sheet produces individuals who experience “a state of false consciousness” as mentioned in Marxist theory. (Bertens, 2001:85) In their false consciousness imposed on them by the white master, members of the Charles family read and transmit their history through the piano as follows:

See that right there? That’s my grandmother, Berniece. She looked just like that. And he put a picture of my daddy when he wasn’t nothing but a little boy... He put a Picture of... Mama Esther... and Boy Charles... Then he put on the side here all kinds of things. See that? That’s when him and Mama Berniece got married. They called it jumping the broom. That’s how you got married in them days. Then he got here when my daddy was born... and here he got Mama Esther’s funeral... and down here he got Mr Nolander taking Mama Berniece and my daddy away down to his place in Georgia. He got all kinds of things what happened with our family. (1:44)

Hence, with the various carvings on it, the piano becomes “a reminder of both the enslaving white culture that built it and the enslaved and suppressed black culture that silently suffered the oppression.” (Tekinay, 2001: 124) However, it is also significant that the piano represents the connection between two cultures, two races, two families and two phases of time; the past and the present. As a matter of fact, It is only the musician Wining Boy (also the uncle of Berniece and Boy Willie) who realizes the burden of the piano and thus separates himself from the piano and the stories that have shaped their lives for a very long time: “I give that piano up. That was the best thing that ever happened to me, getting rid of that piano. That piano got so big and I’m carrying it around on my back... And that piano get heavier and heavier.”(1:41)

As opposed to Wining Boy, Berniece and Boy Willie have a different relationship with the piano and their attitude towards the existence of the piano in the house determines not only their relationship with the past but also their positioning in and expectations from life in the present. Contrary to the ideas of Boy Willie, Berniece rejects to sell the piano which is the last token from her ancestors and their life of victimization in the plantations. She witnesses the suffering of her mother and the death of her father in the piano. The piano has to be kept in the house since it is a relic of the past and Berniece’s only link to the tragic plight of her parents and relatives. As she mentions: “Money can’t buy what that piano cost. You can’t sell your soul for money.” (1:50) However, Berniece’s situation and her attitudes are a little complicated since in her desire to preserve the piano and what it represents, she cannot separate herself from the influence of the white master since Robert Sutter’s ghost comes to visit the piano and becomes visible to Berniece from time to time. In other words, hegemony of the white people still controls both Berniece and the piano. On the one hand, Berniece appreciates the piano more than everything, but on the other she is victimized by the power relations assigned to it. This dilemmatic situation forces Berniece to experience the position of “self-fashioning” which puts her into a subject position. As Hans Bertens mentions, “self-fashioning” is the “notion that the self is always a construction, that our identity is never given, but always the product of an interaction between the way we want to represent ourselves – through the stories we tell or the incidents we suppress... and the power relations we are part of.” (Bertens, 2001: 179) Hence, not only the past of Berniece but also her identity has been shaped by the white power. Since she internalizes the roles imposed on her and since her identity is constructed by this internalization, the white hegemony with all its power and authority is re-produced. Throughout the play, the reader/audience witnesses how Berniece has been influenced by and has internalized the white power. She constantly buys hammocks and tries to tame her daughter Maretha’s hair with greases and hot dreggers which are her dilemmatic endeavors to separate her daughter from the black heritage in order to conform to the white way of life. As a matter of fact, this attitude can also be given as an example to Bhabba’s concept of “mimicry” in which the subordinate race imitates the fashions and way of behaviors of the dominant race. As Hans Bertens further explains, “the self-confidence of the colonizer is further undermined by what Bhabba calls mimicry – the always slightly alien and distorted way in which the colonized, either out of choice under duress, will repeat the colonizer’s ways and discourse.” (Bertens, 2001: 208) Berniece’s conformist attitudes in the imitation and the adaptation of the white culture can also be exemplified in relation with Fanon’s studies on the relationship between the powerless colonized ones and the powerful colonizers. As Fanon explains, in “the first phase” of this relationship, the colonized one “takes pride in demonstrating that he has assimilated – that is mastered – the culture of the occupying power.” (qtd. In Bertens, 2001: 106)

Voice and silence

Another significant characteristics of Berniece is that she has stopped singing and playing the piano after the death of her mother. She explains the reasons of her refusal to play it as follows:

When my Mama died I shut the top on that piano and I ain't never opened it since. I was only playing it for her. When my daddy died seem like all her life went into that piano... When I played it I could hear my daddy talking... I used to think them pictures came alive and walked through the house. Sometime late at night I could hear my mama talking to them... I don't play that piano cause I don't want to wake them spirits. They never be walking around in this house. (2:70)

As a matter of fact, her refusal to play the piano is Berniece's refusal to embrace her memories which have a very important place in the African-American culture. Besides remembering and keeping the values of the past alive, the concept of memory has different levels of meaning. It represents the rebellious voice of black people long silenced. In addition to the resistance of African Americans, memory stands for the self-expression, self-definition, communication as well as the education of the black community. As the voice of the black people, it is accepted as "a form of counter-history" which "resists the tendency to exclude", and which "articulates African-American identities to break the imposed silence inherited from slavery and perpetuated in the written history and social frameworks of the USA." (Campbell& Kean, 1997: 74) In this way, black people through their memory do not forget their past, but try to reconstruct it. In this attempt of reconstruction, oral history has become a significant aspect of the culmination of black memory since this tradition was the only method through which illiterate slaves were able to articulate their feelings and transmit their stories from one generation to the other. Therefore, the use of oral tradition and "memory... allows the inclusion of stories excluded or denigrated or erased from the versions of white history." (Campbell& Kean, 1997: 82) In this way, memory has become a method of resistance for the black people. In this resistance, the "repositories of individual memories, taken together, create a collective communal memory that represent a black counter-historical identity." (Campbell& Kean, 1997: 74) However, Berniece's rejection of singing and playing the piano is not only the denial of African-American heritage through the use of memory and counter-history but also the refusal of resistance strategies generated by the use of the collective communal memories of black people. By stopping to sing and play, she has silenced not only her own voice but also the voices of the black community. Taking Berniece's situation into consideration, the dichotomy between voice and silence becomes one of the central themes to discuss the power relations and the working mechanism of authority in the play. As a mode of expression and communication, "voice takes a variety of forms" as "slave songs, autobiography, fiction, political speech, rap music and film". (Campbell& Kean, 1997: 74) And all these voices as methods of expression "create an alternative mode of communication through which the African-Americans both state their own culture and assert their difference, whilst positioning themselves alongside the often more dominant voices of white mainstream culture." (Campbell& Kean, 1997: 74) Switching this voice off after the death of her parents by not singing and playing the piano any more transfer Berniece into the state of silence in *The Piano Lesson*. Silence is the state of not only passivity but also invisibility. "Without a voice, the African is absent, or defaced from history." (Baker, 1987:104) Her state of silence is the way she puts an end to her resistance and surrenders the white oppressor which appears in the form of Robert Sutter's ghost.

As opposed to her attitude, Berniece wants her daughter Maretha to learn and play the piano without carrying the burden of it:

I got Maretha playing on it. She don't know nothing about it. Let her go on and be a school teacher or something. She don't have to carry all of that with her. She got a chance I didn't have. I ain't gonna burden her with that piano. (2:70)

On the one hand, Berniece does not want her and her family's burden and suffering to be transmitted to Maretha and thus, she does not explain the story of the piano to her. But on the other hand, -though unconsciously- she feels herself responsible to provide the continuation of both the family heritage and also the collective memories of black people. However, towards the end of the play, Berniece experiences a transformation in her relation with the piano. During her deadly fight with Boy Willie in order to prevent the selling of the piano, Robert Sutter's ghost appears to remind the white supremacy and authority. Noone and nothing can stop the disturbances of the white ghost. All the members of the Charles family are powerless in the face of the harms of the ghost. It is at this moment that Berniece decides to visit and ask the help of her ancestors by playing the piano:

It is in this moment, from somewhere old, that Berniece realizes what she must do. She crosses to the piano. She begins to play. The song is found piece by piece. It is an old urge to song that is both a commandment and a plea. With each repetition it gains its strength. It is intended as an exorcism and a dressing for battle. A rustle of wind blowing across two continents. (2:106)

By embracing the collective memories and by practising the ancestor worship, Berniece begs the help and support of her ancestors:

Berniece. (Singing)
I want you to help me
Mama Berniece
I want you to help me
Mama Esther
I want you to help me
Papa Boy Charles
I want you to help me
Mama Ola (2: 107)

And the ghost disappears. By singing and playing the piano Berniece experiences a transformation from silence into voice and from assimilation into liberation. Since "the process of liberation is intimately connected with the ability to express and define oneself in society" (Campbell& Kean, 1997:79) Berniece's songs become the declaration of her independence from the hegemony of the white power. Now she is ready to make peace with her long suffering and painful history by practising the strategies of her ancestors. In a sense, she is reborn in her new identity with the power of her voice. As Mariani suggests:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life, and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of 'talking back' that is no that is the liberated voice. (Mariani, 1991: 340)

The transformation of Berniece from the mental bondage into her liberation also exemplifies the second phase of Fanon's studies on the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer. In this phase, the assimilated or the colonized "is disturbed; he decides to remember what he is. He goes back to his own people, immerses himself in the native culture and the 'rhyming poetry' of the first phase gives way to

‘the poetic tom-tom’s rhythms.’ (qtd in Bertens, 2001: 106) Instead of being proud of her assimilation as seen in the first phase, Berniece now embraces and celebrates her liberation in her re-unification with the strength of her collective memory in the second phase. Transformation of Berniece can also be accepted as her education. She has learned a lesson from the piano as suggested in the title of the play; the only way to get rid of Sutter’s ghost that is the whites, is to listen to her own voice and make it heard.

The significance of land

As opposed to Berniece’s complicated bonds with the piano, her brother Boy Willie’s relationship with the piano is more pragmatic and future-oriented. He wants to sell the piano and with the money of it he wants to buy the land of the Sutter family which is now on sale in the South. First and foremost, the land is accepted “as a testing ground for masculine expression” and this expression gives voice to man’s “quest for power and control.” (Campbell& Kean, 1997: 132-133) Owning a land is the assertion of power and authority which has its roots in the beginnings of American Dream. It was the dream of many immigrants to own a piece of land in this land of opportunities after the discovery of the continent, during the westward expansion and after the Emancipation. By settling on that land, and working hard as farmers on it, they would be acquiring prosperity. This is the first step of leading a respectable and happy life. Boy Willie thinks that he can actualize this dream only by selling the piano: “If my daddy had seen where he could have traded that piano in for some land of his own, it wouldn’t be sitting up here now. He spent his whole life farming on somebody else’s land. I ain’t gonna do that.” (2:46) However, the land Boy Willie wants to buy after selling the piano is not any land, but it is the land of the Sutter family which is in close relationship with the history of the Charles family. On the Sutter land the whole history of the Charles family is declared: “Say it was the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it... he had us. Say we was still in slavery.” (2:45) This land in question is where the Charles family lived and worked both before the Civil War and in the aftermath of it. Before the Civil war, the land was a part of the plantation and they were working as slaves on that land. Hence, in that period that land was a witness to the suffering and victimization of the Charles family. However during the Emancipation period, many of the freed slaves migrated to the North in order to find a work and live in better conditions. The ones who stayed in the South continued to work on the same lands as sharecroppers. They hired the land from the owner of it and used it for farming. In that period, the land re-witnessed the suffering of the family – this time in their endeavors of survival in the face of poverty as illiterate freed slaves. Now Boy Willie has a chance to be the owner of and the sole authority of that land on which his family were servants for a very long time either as slaves or as sharecroppers. And in this way he has both a chance to own his family history and also achieve the traditional American Dream that has been the yearning of many people especially the males who migrated to America.

Religion as a power

Another significant character in *The Piano Lesson* who exemplifies the power relations in the interaction of two cultures is the boyfriend of Berniece, Avery who is also a preacher trying to organize a congregation and built his own church. As a matter of fact, religion is one of the traditional fields through which black people can acquire significance and respectability in their societies. However, religion has also been used as an ideology to assert the hegemony and domination of the white race over the blacks. “Slavery in particular had provided the opportunity for the colonization of the black mind, through the imposition of the white values and beliefs, especially Christianity.” (Campbell& Kean, 1997: 116) Therefore, religion and especially Christianity was used as a method to heal the spirituality of the suffering slaves and thus make them submissive and obedient servants. This controlling mechanism was

functional not only in converting the pagan blacks into Christianity but also in the continuation of the white status quo:

Under the restrictions of slave society, masters generally assumed control of their slaves' religious behaviour. Christianity was widespread on the plantation both because many masters encouraged missionary activity but also because slaves often converted voluntarily. Slaves generally were expected to worship under White supervision in services held by White ministers, and in the same churches as their masters, though seating arrangements were generally segregated. (Campbell& Kean, 1997: 116)

Therefore, Avery's desire to build his church "The Good Shepherd Church of God in Christ" (1:24) is a proof of the long-lasting hegemony of the white master over the black race. Avery is in search of assimilation into the American society through religion. However, his attitude reminds the reader/audience Berniece's attempts of "mimicry" that is, the imitation of the behaviors of the dominant race in order to experience a sense of belonging. And Avery practises mimicry through the belief system. His "proud eagerness" to establish his own Christian church also exemplifies the first phase of Fanon's studies in which the colonized is proud of his assimilation within the dominant society (a point also discussed while referring to the dilemma of Berniece). However, inspite of the strong religious controlling mechanism applied on the slaves in the plantations, black people generated some strategies "in developing their own distinctive religious beliefs and practises, in a manner which enabled them to withstand the travails of bondage." (Campbell& Kean, 1997: 116) In their new belief system "slaves meshed American inheritances with the evangelical practises they took from white society." (Campbell& Kean, 1997: 116) Hence, this new African-American belief system uses the collective black memory as a support and a guide. Consequently, churches have become one of the most significant institutions of the black community:

The new black churches assumed a central position in the lives of African-Americans; they quickly became the main social and cultural institutions which blacks made and operated for themselves. ... At the same time, they provided an opportunity for the expression of individual faith in a manner which encouraged a sense of identity and confirmed God's role in their lives. In deciding to make Jesus their choice, and to share with one another their common Christian sense of purpose and Christian understanding of their circumstances they created a situation in which their faith enabled them to hope for eventual triumph, however much they were seemingly forever on the cross, perennially crucified, continuously abused and incessantly devalued. (Campbell& Kean, 1997: 117)

Therefore, leading a congregation by becoming a preacher and building a church is the method Avery uses to rise in his African-American society. Just like Boy Willie tries to assert his power by owning a land, Avery's way of asserting his power and authority is through religion. It is also Avery's method of actualizing the American Dream. However, since this religious system addresses black people by relying on communal black memory and inheritances of the black community, the purpose of Avery can also be exemplified as the second phase of Fanon's studies on the power relations in which the oppressed and the colonized "immerses himself in the native culture." (qtd in Bertens, 2001:106)

Conclusion

August Wilson's play *The Piano Lesson* emphasizes the significance of the collective black memory in the liberation of black people and in the redefinition of their identity by the use of the piano metaphor. The play also discusses the prominence of this memory in harmonizing the power relations between the white and the black cultures. In *The Piano Lesson*, while the piano stands for the long-lasting suffering of the slaves in the plantations, it also becomes a bridge uniting the two races, two cultures, two families and two periods of time. The play focuses on the conflicts about the sale of the piano. While the different

attitudes of the Charles siblings towards the meaning of the piano change, their attitudes also define their positioning in the American society. While Boy Willie's pragmatism perceives the piano as an instrument that must be sold in order to provide him the money to buy a land and thus power and authority, Berniece attributes more spiritual meanings to the piano. It stands for her connection with her lost parents and victimized ancestors in a long past. However, she has stopped playing the piano after the death of her parents which emphasizes her state of silence. What she learns from the piano as a lesson is that she has to re-vitalize both her voice and the piano's voice in order to get rid of the hegemony of the white master identified with the ghost of the ancestor's master in the past. The remedy for the black people is to comprehend the importance of their collective memory, ancestor worship and voice which stand for the expression, communication, resistance, self-definition and liberation of black people in a hegemonic white society. The play also discusses the different strategies generated by black people in order to adapt themselves into the American society. Besides pointing out the significance of memory and voice, the play also emphasizes that owning a land and becoming a religious figure as a preacher are the adaptation methods generated by the black people to assert their authorities and declare their independency in the power relations.

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