



# Feminists Reshaping Gender

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## Abstract

The gender order is incredibly durable, and persists relatively unchanged despite major cultural and structural changes. Feminists, however, have collectively mobilized to change some aspects of the gender structure. Over hundreds of years, participants in the U.S. feminist movement have advanced women's position in the workplace, home, and economy. Feminists have challenged social institutions such as the nuclear family, interpersonal relationships privileging men, and the gender binary. Over the years, feminists helped win woman suffrage, they shaped social policy during the New Deal, they helped win the right to birth control and safe and accessible abortion, they raised awareness about the harms of sexual harassment and gendered violence, and helped draft and pass laws around equal pay and access to work, among other wins. Using a range of tactics, from community-based groups, to protest and Internet organizing, feminists have unquestionably improved women's position in soci-

ety. Scholarship about feminist movements has also pushed social movement scholarship in new directions, emphasizing a diversity of targets and tactics, focusing on movement continuity over time, and foregrounding the importance of community-building and other extra-political activities in the maintenance and growth of social movements. Areas for additional research include a deeper empirical and theoretical analysis of the intersectional nature of feminism and more attention to the heterogeneity of women's experiences. Greater methodological diversity in the study of feminist movements would offer a more robust understanding of the movement, including a better grasp of the cultural and discursive outcomes of feminist movements and those like them.

There are few structures more durable than gender. Gendered stereotypes, expectations, and social practices shape nearly every facet of our individual and collective lives. Although gender norms are not identical across cultures, the rigidity of the gender structure is near universal. Social movement participants, particularly those in feminist movements, have confronted and changed the gender structure in an array of social contexts. As one of the longest lasting social movements in modern history, the many successes and challenges of the feminist movement

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tell us not only about social movement continuity, but also about the relative malleability and durability of the gender order.

Feminists have successfully reshaped gender in a number of spheres of American life, including in cultural, political, and institutional contexts. They have mobilized to change existing structures, such as increasing gender and racial diversity in the education, employment, and legal sectors. Feminists have successfully reshaped institutions such as healthcare (Sulik, 2010), military (Katzenstein, 1998), unions (Fonow, 2003), motherhood and family (Taylor, 1996), and education (Stomblor & Padavic, 1997). Feminists also create their own institutions and practices. This includes establishing alternative organizations and communities, and offline (Taylor, 1996) and online (Crossley, 2015; McCaughey & Ayers, 2003) support systems. Despite many successes, feminists continue to confront a plethora of barriers. After a period of increasing gender equality in a number of measures, including political representation and the wage gap, advances in gender equality have all but stalled since the mid 1990s resulting in what scholars call the “stalled gender revolution” (England, 2010). Remaining inequalities are too numerous to list here, but feminists continue to target women’s representation in government and policy arenas, gender segregation in educational and occupational spheres, interpersonal and gender-based violence, and the persistent wage gap between men and women. Campaigns that have recently drawn national attention include campus anti-sexual assault activism and the interconnectedness of race and gender in the police brutality epidemic.

The study of how feminists have reshaped gender has pushed the field of social movements in new directions. Because feminists are the least likely of all social movement participants to target the state or use street protest tactics (Van Dyke, Soule, & Taylor, 2004), the breadth of their mobilization requires traditional studies of social movements to deepen. This has included examinations of collective identity, emotions, movement continuity, and extra-institutional organizing (Crossley and Taylor 2015; Reger,

2012; Taylor, 1989; Taylor & Whittier, 1992). By exploring feminist movements, scholars have demonstrated the importance of non-state centered mobilization and of cultural change and tactics more broadly. This includes feminists who target change in family, education, and religion; through interaction, language, and the redefinition of social practices. These analyses indicate that social change happens in everyday interactions, online and off, in community, and through reshaping identity.

In this paper, we summarize the state of theory and research on feminist movements, include a discussion and critique of relevant approaches, and conclude with comments about needed directions for future theoretical and empirical work.

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## 1 Movement Continuity

Modern feminist movements have enjoyed a continuous existence since the early 1800s. The most enduring framework proposed to understand these long-standing movements is the wave framework, first proposed by women involved in the women’s liberation and women’s rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. These feminists believed they were part of a second “wave” of feminist activism, building on the work done by women in the first wave (DuBois, 1971; Evans, 1980; Firestone, 1968). This early articulation of feminist waves has shaped subsequent analyses, and has persisted in the collective feminist lexicon.

The three central waves of feminism include the first wave woman suffrage movement, the second wave women’s liberation and women’s rights movement, and the third wave intersectional and micro-political movements. The first wave began in the mid-1800s and culminated in the passage of the 19th woman suffrage amendment in 1920. In addition to helping win the right to vote, first wave feminists helped win access to higher education institutions, they formed the first birth control clinics in the United States,

they won property and employment rights for married women, and started a conversation about social and cultural equality for women.

The second wave women's rights and women's liberation movements began in the early 1960s and culminated in a failed attempt to pass the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). While this movement did not win its main demand—the ERA—they did successfully win the right to legal abortion, they pushed the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to take seriously sex-based discrimination, they generated the phrase *sexual harassment* and brought this concept into the mainstream, they challenged the cultural idea of women as sex objects, and they established women's shelters and women's centers in cities across the U.S. (Rosen, 2000).

The third wave began in the 1990s and incorporated a more intersectional and micro-political approach to feminism (Reger, 2005; Walker, 1995). This wave emphasized the heterogeneity of women's experiences, including lesbian and gender-queer women, and they celebrated individual expression as a form of politics (Reger, 2012). Some believe we are currently witnessing a fourth wave, beginning in the late 2000s and persisting today (Baumgardner, 2011). This movement has utilized online spaces to create global conversations about gender discrimination, and is challenging gender-based violence and its intersection with the state and the police.

While these periods were particularly dramatic, with surges of public protests and actions in the name of women's rights, feminist political action existed before and after each of these periods of heightened action. During the supposed "doldrums" in the 1920s–1950s, feminists played an active role in shaping the new deal and other social legislation of this period, organizations like the League of Women Voters kept women and women's issues in the public eye, and organizations like the National Woman's Party worked behind the scenes to keep a feminist identity and community alive (Lemons, 1973; Rupp & Taylor, 1987; Ware, 1987). Working-class feminism and union feminism also peaked during the 1940s, the supposed

between-wave period (Cobble, 2005). After the second wave supposedly subsided, Black feminism surged, peaking in the late 1980s (Roth, 2004). In the post-1990s era, when the feminist movement was declared officially dead, feminist communities and feminist identities remained strong through offline and online communities, music and arts spaces, and institutions such as university women's centers, feminist businesses, and domestic violence shelters (Reger, 2012; Staggenborg, 1996).

As scholars uncover the myriad ways in which feminist movements exist and persist they have concluded, in the words of Jo Reger, that feminism is, and has always been, everywhere (2012). Or, feminism may be best understood as "waveless" (Crossley, 2017). The ubiquity of feminist movements across time, space, and institutions has prompted scholars to shift their attention from the differences between waves to understanding movement continuity and community.

Research on feminist movement continuity has contributed a number of concepts to understand the persistence of social movements in general over time. Rupp and Taylor coined the phrase *abeyance structures* to explain how movements persist through inhospitable political and economic environments (Rupp & Taylor, 1987). These abeyance structures can be organizations, such as the National Woman's Party, formal institutions such as university women's centers, cultural institutions such as feminist bookstores and music festivals, and informal movement discourses kept alive through on and offline activist communities and networks (Staggenborg, 1996; Crossley, 2017). These abeyance structures and those who build them work behind the scenes during politically hostile periods, providing activist networks, goals and tactical choices, and a collective identity to movements as they re-engage the public as the political environment become more open (Taylor, 1989).

Jo Reger uses the phrase *overlapping generations* to summarize both continuity and change within feminist movements over time. At any one moment, multiple generations of feminist activists co-exist and overlap. Early generations

shape and influence later generations, but this co-existence also produces generational conflict that has pushed feminism in new directions (Reger, 2012).

Continuities need not arise from direct connections between waves or overlapping generations of feminists. Social movements draw on implicit, or latent, political models and knowledge as they form new organizations (Armstrong, 2002). Early iterations of movements institutionalize particular ways of understanding the world and ways of intervening and changing social structures. This institutionalized knowledge then shapes subsequent iterations of movements as new actors build their own organizations based on these latent understandings, even in the absence of direct transferal of knowledge (Nelson, 2018).

As political opportunities change over time and create climates that are more or less open to social movements, feminist movements ebb and flow and move in and out of the public eye. Abeyance structures, overlapping generations, and the institutionalization of political knowledge ensure that movements never disappear, but shift and change while also building on the successes of the past, producing overall movement continuity and growth.

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## 2 Organizational Repertoires

The different forms of feminism over the many decades of its existence is much broader than the traditional “organizational repertoire” adopted by social movement organizations in other fields. Because women were historically blocked from formal political institutions feminists have had to be politically innovative, adapting nonpolitical institutions for political purposes, including voluntary organizations such as women’s clubs and the Parent Teacher Association, labor unions, corporations, and institution auxiliaries. Each of these forms interact with existing political institutions in different ways, producing an array of “alternative institutions” that have provided politically-excluded women a way to influence the political process. These alternative

institutions are often consciously structured differently than formal political institutions – for example structures that are explicitly non-hierarchical and more inclusive of those without social and economic power—and have thus provided new models of political organizations, expanding the organizational repertoire available to social movements (Clemens, 1993).

This focus on nonpolitical organizational repertoires extends to a focus on extra-political change. From its first iteration in the 1910s, feminists have used nonpolitical organizational repertoires to focus on challenging gendered discourse, gendered inter-personal relationships, and individual psychologies. Women’s isolation from one another in nuclear families has prevented the types of solidarities, and organizational opportunities, present in other marginalized communities by virtue of living and working together. Feminists have challenged this isolation by forming women-only groups that provide spaces for women to give a political voice to their personal, isolated lives. These spaces allow women to make visible common experiences they face by virtue of their social positions, raising awareness around the issues women collectively face as a social class.

The earliest form of this political tactic was via “background talks” used by the feminist organization Heterodoxy, active in New York City from the 1910s to the early 1940s. During these background talks women would discuss their childhood, early careers, and any challenges they faced growing up. The women as a group would then discuss the common experiences among different women, linking these experiences to larger social structures (Nelson, 2018). Women’s liberationists active in small groups in the 1960s gave this tactic a name: consciousness-raising. Fusing the personal and political is the nucleus of these groups (Cassell, 1977), and they ideally involve four steps: self-revelation, active listening, discussion and linking between individual problems and larger social forces, and connecting their discussions to other theories of oppression (Ferree & Hess, 1995, 71). Personal issues such as intimate relationships, family, work, sexuality, and housework were shared among participants, and the realization of gender oppression in these

groups drove much of the growth of the women's movement. This form of social movement organizing "offers participants the opportunity to reframe their individual biographies in socially and politically meaningful terms" (Taylor, 1996, 104). The goal is to change individual psychologies and in doing so, provide fodder to change institutions. While many consciousness-raising groups had no organizational affiliations, the process of politicization that occurred in these groups often led to organizational affiliations, additional feminist activism, or the maintenance of feminist networks (Cassell, 1977, 55). In the contemporary period, this conversation happens online in a global community, with Twitter hashtags and Facebook groups that transcend geographical boundaries (Crossley 2015).

Formal feminist organizations are also essential to the continuity of the feminist movement and are also a barometer of the vitality of the movement (Ferree & Martin, 1995). Feminism, like most social movements, does not have a central organizational structure or homogenous ideology. Instead, feminism is composed of organizations and communities that are independent and heterogeneous in their structures, tactics, and ideological frameworks. Feminist organizations vary dramatically in their structure and approaches, consistent with the broad range of experiences that women have and bring to feminist movements. Historically, feminist organizations take on two forms: collective and bureaucratic. In the 1960 and 1970s, with a resurgence of the feminist movement more broadly, bureaucratic and hierarchical feminist organizations were a popular form of feminism—with organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) becoming for many, the face of the feminist movement (Reger, 2002). Collective organizations such as SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective and Older Lesbians Organizing for Change (OLOC) strove to reflect the ideologies of the feminist movement,

and in theory did not reproduce the hierarchical structures that historically silence and marginalize women and people of color. These organizations typically emphasized the importance of sharing personal knowledge and experiences, emotions, and cultivating a distinctive women's culture (Crossley, Taylor, Whittier, & Pelak, 2011; Rupp & Taylor, 1993; Taylor, 1996). Feminists also create groups within larger social movements whose participants' express sexism or racism, such as Occupy Wall Street, maintaining some ideologies of the larger movement while carving out a specific space for feminist and anti-racist principles (Hurwitz and Taylor, 2018).

While collective and bureaucratic feminist principles are important strands of feminist organizations, these organizational structures overlap and are intertwined, as decision making in collective organizations can pose challenges, and feminists even in hierarchical groups bring their feminist principles and beliefs (Crossley et al., 2011; Staggenborg, 1998; Whittier, 1995). These feminist organizations are also central to the creation and nurturing of feminist and women's culture more broadly—and operate within the constellation of feminist community, culture, and organization—furthering feminist collective identities and the movement as a whole (Crossley et al., 2011; Rupp & Taylor, 1993; Staggenborg & Lecomte, 2009; Taylor & Whittier, 1992).

The perspective of feminism as existing and persisting in many different forms, through different organizational models, and via a range of abeyance structures, institutions, and communities, provides an expansive view of feminism and feminist fields. Feminism is not restricted to lobbying governments or marching in the streets. Feminism also, if not predominantly, exists across nonpolitical organizations and institutions throughout society, and it is an ongoing presence, continually challenging gendered social structures through individual change and interpersonal interaction.

### 3 Feminist Community

Feminists employ cultural tactics and target cultural change, such as emphasizing movement solidarity and community-building, more than participants in other movements (Van Dyke et al., 2004). In her examination of a local women's movement, Staggenborg (1998) develops the theory of "social movement communities," and finds that community is central to propelling a movement over time and through cycles of protest. This perspective adds nuance and a feminist perspective to the traditional political opportunity theory, which focuses on external forces in shaping a social movement. Instead, gender and social movement scholars acknowledge the dynamic relationship between community networks and other forms of mobilization. Communities create deep feminist ties that not only nourish the participants, but then also establish critical networks so participants are ready for mobilization when a spurious event or grievance occurs. Write Staggenborg and Taylor (2005, 44): "When political campaigns mobilize, they draw on the emotional bases and the cultural and institutional mobilizing structures of the movement community." An example of this is the feminist mobilization after the murders in Isla Vista, CA, during which a young man killed a number of young people stating that women were never attracted to him. Immediately following this event, participants in on- and offline feminist networks mobilized in Isla Vista and around the world to demand attention to the persistence of sexism and violence against women. Pre-existing feminist communities allowed for a rapid organized response.

Staggenborg and other scholars highlight how the cultural elements of movements and interpersonal dynamics of their participants can reveal previously overlooked elements of the life of a social movement (Ray, 1999; Reger, 2012; Staggenborg, 1998). Feminist communities are a tactic to further feminist goals, insofar as they provide a space for the planning of feminist mobilization and an opportunity to build networks. Feminist communities are also a movement outcome in and of themselves, insofar as

they advance feminist solidarity in creating spaces for women outside mainstream social structures.

Recent research has built upon the frameworks of offline community and analyzed online feminist communities, such as on those facilitated on social media and feminist blogs (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Nip, 2004). Similar to offline feminist activism, a study of an Australian feminist blog network (Shaw, 2012) found that the blog network "functions to critique the ideology of mainstream discourses at least partly in order to change them, and participation in this community can be understood as discursive activism" (42). Scholarship has also found that online activism is capable of fostering the types of interpersonal networks and communities that are central to mobilization and movement continuity (Crossley, 2015), providing fora for dissemination for feminist ideologies and connections to other feminists regardless of geographical distance. Duncan (2005) found an online discussion board fostered strong community ties: "Online networking ... provides feminists with a home place, a protected space to return to and build a community after working toward activist goals" (162).

As women and feminists have less access than men to formal political change and opportunities, community has been critical to the movement. An emphasis on community and cultural change has made feminist mobilizations less visible than movements engaging in street protest (Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005), resulting in the sometimes overlooking or underestimating of the movement and its continued vibrancy (Crossley, 2017; Reger, 2012).

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### 4 Institutions and Feminism

Because power is reproduced in multiple institutional arenas (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008), social movement actors target a variety of institutions and non-state entities (Crossley, 2015). Although it is true that social movements generally target states and governments (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001), scholars have recently

begun to analyze the dynamics of social movements inside institutions (Banaszak-Holl, Levitsky, & Zald, 2010; Katzenstein, 1998; Raeburn, 2004; Rojas, 2007). Particularly during periods when the state is non-responsive to social movement mobilization, participants may direct their claims-making to other institutional contexts or “habitats” (Katzenstein, 1998). Feminists have had a number of successes in mobilizing to change religious denominations, universities and their administrations, and health care institutions, to name a few (Van Dyke et al., 2004). The opportunities afforded by these contexts vary over time and place, however (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008).

Feminism within institutions of higher education has been critical to the continuity of the movement, and educational institutions have created numerous opportunities for feminist contention and mobilization. This takes the form of women’s studies departments, women’s centers, women-friendly policies, and feminist student organizations. It is indicative of movement success, because access to education was a major goal of the women’s movement (Gelb & Palley, 1996). Institutional embeddedness has important consequences for the transmission of feminist knowledge and ideas, particularly evident with student activism. Student identities and networks foster camaraderie, energetic mobilization, and tactical innovation unique to the student experience, as separate from established political institutions. In large part, scholars attribute the persistence of student mobilization to their biographical availability, or free time and flexible schedules (McAdam, 1988; Snow et al., 1980). However, as students face rising tuition and fees, many of them are also employed, complicating the biographical availability approach (Crossley, 2017). Student activism has typically been synonymous with mobilization by men, and recent attention to feminist student organizations has shed light on them as important sites of leadership skills and the teaching and learning of feminist ideologies (Crossley, 2017), as well as the connection between academic curricula and activist networks (Taylor & de Laat, 2013). Just as feminism varies by context, so does campus

feminist activism (Reger, 2012), for example some educational institutions and their administrators nourish a feminist culture while others attempt to stymie mobilization and community.

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## 5 Diversity with Feminist Activism and Research

Feminism means many things to many people. While feminist movements have always been diverse, inequalities between women and the strength of social structures that prop up those inequalities has meant that a certain type of feminism dominates public coverage of the movement, and subsequently much research. This well-covered feminism is one that is composed predominantly of white and middle-to-upper class women, and one that assumes gender universalism and the idea that all women experience gendered oppression the same way. To counter this hegemony, and to protest the inequalities among women this form of feminism reinforces, some activists actively avoid the feminist label or modify their feminism with additional terms such as “woman of color feminist” or “intersectional feminist” (Crossley, 2017). Women of color, for example, proposed the term “womanist” in the 1980s as an alternative to the term feminist, to emphasize the alienation they felt from mainstream, white feminism (Walker, 2003). “White feminism” has also not fully recognized the complexity of feminism in developing countries (Mohanty, 1984), or within gender queer and transgender communities (Stryker, 2007). Unfortunately, feminisms within these different communities, and across geographic and social boundaries, often develop in isolation from one another.

Research on feminist movements needs to better recognize the complexity of the feminism label, how mainstream, often white-dominated, feminism interacts with marginalized communities, as well as how feminism coming out of these marginalized communities challenges and complicates accepted feminist discourses (Mohanty, Russo, & Torres, 1991; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1984). Recognizing the complexity of

feminism and its meaning in different communities will require scholars to re-think the definition of feminism and what a feminist movement entails. Moreover, research on feminism could do a better job of incorporating intersectional concerns and taking into consideration the heterogeneity of women's experiences. Theoretically, social movement scholars can benefit from a deeper engagement with critical gender, critical race, postcolonial, and queer theory, as well as a more global approach to feminist movements. Steps toward this is research that brings a global and neoliberal lens to feminist movements (e.g., Armstrong, 2013), and research that employs a trans-rights lens (e.g., Stryker, 2007).

Addressing these issues will also require methodological pluralism. Research on feminist movements typically consists of ethnographies of one or two movements or communities (e.g., Reger, 2012; Staggenborg, 1996), qualitatively following a few organizations over time (e.g., Rupp & Taylor, 1987), and quantitatively tracking single issues, such as suffrage or the jury movement (e.g., McCammon, 2012). This research has provided empirical knowledge and theoretical concepts to better understand feminism as a social movement and has contributed valuable concepts and theories to social movement scholarship. These methodological approaches have limited the ability to understand the full diversity of feminisms and feminist activism, the relationship between feminism and other social movements, outcomes of feminist movements, and the relationship between feminism and the gender order as a whole. Feminist scholars should also embrace new methodological advances in Bayesian statistics, computational and big data methods (Bail, 2014; Nelson, 2017), lab experiments, simulations and agent-based modeling, and large-N qualitative studies (e.g. McAdam & Boudet, 2012). Embracing methodological pluralism will provide a more complete picture of feminism and feminist activism.

## 6 Future Research

Substantively, outcomes of feminist movements, the diffusion of feminism and feminist fields, and the influence of feminism on other social movements, are all areas needing future attention. Because feminism focuses on social, cultural, and individual change, future research should focus on ways to operationalize and measure these types of outcomes, and the direct or indirect influence the feminist movement has on effecting this change. This could be done through large-scale, longitudinal discourse analysis and longitudinal analyses of images, relating changes in the wider, societal discourse to claims made by feminists. The methods and computing power needed to analyze discourse on a large scale exist. The challenge is collecting longitudinal data that can track wide-spread changes. Scholars should focus on creating open-source, expansive, digital repositories containing feminist literature and movement documents, as well as more general cultural artifacts that span histories, countries, and communities, to begin to document these changes.

Feminists also attempt to change individual psychologies and the way men and women view themselves and their relationships to one another. Lab experiments can identify how feminist tactics may change individual psychologies and individuals' understandings of gender and inter-personal relationships, as well as inter-personal practices. Larger-scale experiments done through platforms such as Volunteer Science and Mechanical Turk could supplement smaller, more focused, lab experiments. Large-scale experimental framing studies could further identify how different types of movement claims illicit different responses (e.g. Bloemraad, Silva, & Voss, 2016). This type of methodological pluralism will better capture discursively-based movement outcomes.

Another outcome of feminism is its effects on other social movements. Social movement spillover has captured one aspect of this (Meyer &



Whittier, 1994), but future research could expand on this concept. Organized feminism today is perhaps most evident within other social movements. The Black Lives Matter movement was started, and is led by women, and Black Lives Matter maintains a strong program of gender equality. Feminism has also flourished within the Occupy Wall Street movement (Hurwitz and Taylor, 2018). This suggests that we may even need to abandon the idea of feminism as a movement that can be analytically, conceptually, and empirically separated from other issues and movements. Social movement scholars in general who study indigenous movements, labor movements, racial and ethnic movements, and others, should incorporate a feminist lens into their analyses, to better understand how feminism directly and indirectly shapes these movements, while scholars of feminist movements should recognize that new forms of feminism come directly from these other social movements. This research should intentionally blur the boundaries between known social movement communities to recognize the inter-penetration within. Doing so will incorporate a much more diverse set of actors into research on feminist movements.

The research on feminism as a social movement has shown that feminism is everywhere (Reger, 2012). This ubiquity is a sign of its impact, but also makes it difficult to measure and empirically study. Increased conversation between scholars of feminist movements, social movement scholars, race scholars and post-colonial theorists, and gender scholars will enable us to better address issues of outcomes, including individual, cultural, and inter-personal change, as well as cross-movement influence. How do we understand the role of feminist women in contemporary Black movements? Indigenous movements? Post-colonial movements? What does this mean for our understanding of feminism? How does the ubiquity of feminist identities challenge our understanding of gendered socialization? Unconscious bias? Gendered social structures? These questions require a holistic conversation among multiple strands of sociological theory and methods.

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