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Writing a murderous mother: a case study on the critical applications of creative writing research to crime fiction

Abstract:

Creative writing research offers a unique opportunity to draw together threads of inquiry from the realms of the creative, the practical and the critical (Kroll and Harper 2013). This article explores a writer's interrogation of this process and how it was applied to creating representations of a murderous mother in a crime fiction narrative. Crime fiction provides a natural space for intersections of the creative, practical and critical due to the genre's tendency towards social critique (Moore 2006) and the opportunity it offers to question the representations and cultural assumptions that surround us. This article aims to unpack these intersections and ask how common representations of the murderous mother can be deconstructed, challenged and repositioned through first separating, and then realigning, critical and creative processes.

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Keywords:

Creative writing – Crime fiction – Creative writing research – Murderous mother – Representing deviance

Introduction

Creative writing research offers a unique opportunity to draw together threads of inquiry from the realms of the creative, the practical and the critical (Kroll and Harper 2013). While the researching writer may feel that their work-in-progress resembles a crudely stitched together patchwork doll, in reality the component parts of creative, practical and critical slowly merge over the duration of the research to become an increasingly seamless artefactual end product. As the research draws to a close, the artefact is newly clothed and ready to face the world. The various blocks or patches of research are hidden beneath the decorated surface of the artefact, each holding the other in place and making the final body of work cohere more strongly.

This drawing together of Jeri Kroll and Graeme Harper's three realms of research proved to be a highly effective method for resolving a central dilemma of creative practice that arose as I was writing my crime novel, *The Fingerprint Thief* ([2009]2013). The dilemma was how to convincingly represent a murderous mother who killed her adult children. The casting of the mother as the murderer was not an immediate intention during the plotting of the novel. Instead, my path towards choosing the identity of the perpetrator began with the image of my protagonist at a crime scene on a beach and broadened to include elements that I wanted to include in the plot. These included fingerprints; as well as environmental issues and the pressures of development on a city and the changes in citizens that these pressures induce. Each of these aspects required practical research, or what Kroll defines as 'grounded' or 'local' research that communicates the specific aspects of a field, era or *Zeitgeist* (2013: 112). From these grew *The Fingerprint Thief*, a police procedural with mystical undertones that follows a young Melbourne-based finger-printer named Sarah Arden as she collects and processes fingerprints during a murder investigation into the shooting of a young woman whose body is found on an urban beach.

Once I had established that silencing and greed would be the reasons the victims in the story were murdered, I began considering who in the victims' circle of acquaintances would benefit from that silencing and greed. This consideration forced me to shift away from practical research towards the poetics and creative aspects of the work. I asked myself what motivations were common for murder in the conventions of crime fiction, what type of murderer was needed to make this story work, and how each of the characters connected to the victim might function in the plot and arcs of the novel. Elizabeth Faber, the victims' mother, was an identity that constantly arose during this mapping. This form of research could be seen as specifically creative research as it required investigation into the narrative possibilities of the work. I also wanted to link the identity of the murderer with the novel's theme of disrupting nature, and the concept of a murderous mother served this notion well. The murder of a child by her mother is a crime that our culture has particular difficulty understanding, as it is seen as a direct violation of the 'natural' roles of caregiver and 'every culturally sanctioned code of femininity and womanhood' (Jewkes 2004: 122). It is not only a crime, but a crime against nature. By moving my investigation into this broader cultural context, I am engaging in critical, or as Kroll terms it, 'global' research (2013: 112–113).

I was conscious, however, that the casting of a murderous mother as the perpetrator introduced a number of difficulties into the novel, the first of which had to do with craft and market. When I sent the novel to a well-respected literary agent, she suggested that while a murderous mother was plausible, the motivation must be even more highly believable than with other stories and other perpetrators. This was particularly so if the mother was to kill her two adult children and if the novel was to be the author's first major entry into the world of published novels. She suggested I make the mother less rational and signal more clearly that she was mentally unstable. The agent advised that if I did not wish to take this approach, then I should change the identity of the perpetrator.

Whilst this was sensible advice that would make the novel more saleable, and no doubt also more believable as a piece of fiction, it seemed to me to uphold a stereotype about mothering and to reflect the difficulties our culture has in understanding why women kill. To make the mother mentally unstable was to suggest that only an ill woman would kill her children. As I discuss in greater detail below, it seems we need to believe that a murderous mother must be mad to commit such a terrifying act (Bergler 1949; Scher 2005; Jewkes 2004).

Yet during my years of teaching in a maximum security prison, I had worked with apparently psychologically stable women who had killed their children. These women's crimes had shocked their family members and friends because of their unexpectedness. Clearly, in their cases, any indication of mental instability was either hidden or overlooked. Could it be that some had simply committed their crime for the same reasons that thousands of criminals commit a crime – complex combinations of impulse, revenge, selfishness and anger? There have been noted examples of mothers murdering their children for these reasons – the most infamous amongst them being Susan Smith in the United States, who drove her children into a lake to save her relationship with a man who did not want her children. And then there were Sally Clark and Kathleen Folbigg. These two women claimed their children died of SIDS but were portrayed in the media and by prosecutors as 'career-obsessed women' who 'liked pretty clothes' and murdered their children because they ruined their mothers' slender bodies and 'stood in the way of a lucrative future' (Scher 2005: 10). To kill out of selfishness is clearly an act of double deviance. As my thinking unfolded, I would often return to these examples of women who were seen, in a sense, to have joined the world of men by killing for selfish gain. Australian crime writer Claire McNab expressed it best when she wrote: 'Men command their own destinies, women are expected to take into account the destinies of those around them – not to be selfish. Surely then, the ultimate in selfishness is the woman who kills for herself … she dared to join the boy's club' (1993: 70).

My nagging fear, however, was whether my potential readers would accept an exaggerated sense of selfishness as a motive for a mother's murder of her two adult children? The literary agent's reaction suggested they might not. I decided that the only way to calm this fear was to examine in more detail why our culture feels so threatened by the existence of murderous mothers, and why we are more comfortable with the idea that they must be 'mad' rather than 'bad'. A number of academics suggest the need to pathologise the killing of children by their mothers arises from

Freudian notions of unconscious fear, the movement of a child from the pre-Oedipal stage of object cathexis to the post-Oedipal stage of identification and fantasies of maternal destructiveness (Bergler 1949; Jewkes 2004; Scher 2005). Edmund Bergler suggests that a child, in pre-Oedipal moments, intensely fears his reliance on a mother capable of 'starving, devouring, poisoning, choking, chopping to pieces, draining and castrating him' (1949: 46). The subconscious memory of this former dependence may make us particularly vulnerable as adults to the 'fear that an evil mother in human form can elicit' (Morrissey 2003: 23). A more literal reading of Freud's appropriation of the Oedipal narrative suggests anxiety over the mother takes place as the child attempts to move beyond the incestuous desire for his/her mother that Freud labelled 'object cathexis', or the desire to have or possess (Freud 1991: 95). To progress past this stage, the child must sever (or castrate) its desire for the mother and identify the father as both the object of authority and the object of imitation (Freud 1991: 95). It is during this transition that the child feels the parents' (particularly the mother's) 'strictness and severity, their prohibiting and punitive function' (Freud 1991: 94). In his/her attempt to repel desire for the mother, the child 'expels or externalises that part of himself that he finds intolerable – in other words, the painful 'victim' feelings of humiliation and vulnerability – and projects them onto his newly discovered 'other', his mother (Jewkes 2004: 110).

Julia Kristeva further illuminates the relationship between this process of separation and unconscious anger by arguing that the process of separation from the mother is a constant series of struggles towards objectifying the maternal and the feminine. Kristeva's theory of the abject explains that there is a kind of horror attached to our psychologically violent efforts 'to release the hold of the maternal entity even before existing outside of her' (1982: 13) and that the breaking away from the maternal is so terrifying because there is 'the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling' (1982: 13). The mother in Kristeva's work is the focus of phobia because she disturbs a child's identity and is the authority that maps the clean and proper body from the improper, offering 'differentiation of a proper-clean and improper-dirty, possible and impossible' (1982: 72). In 'Speculum of the other woman', Luce Irigaray also establishes the presence of the mother as negative and threatening. The mother deliberately dominates the process of absorption, differentiation and identity; she is phallic because she controls the mysterious unfolding of life, death and meaning (Gallop 1982: 115).

It has been suggested that these feelings of conflict and fear play a direct role in how we represent mothers, women who harm and women overall. These fears become ingrained in our lives through cultural prejudices and mediated responses (Jewkes 2004: 109–111). The mother who betrays her maternal responsibilities by harming her child is represented as a shadowy 'other' who has breached the trust we offered our own mothers as dependent children. Not only has she, in a defiant act of castration, severed her allegiance to 'every culturally sanctioned code of femininity and womanhood' (Jewkes 2004: 122) and breached the 'ideals of maternal care perpetuated by a patriarchal media' (Jewkes 2004: 123), but she has also descended from the Freudian state of difference into deviance (Minsky 1998: 84).

There are other, perhaps more sociological, explanations of why the murderous mother evokes in our culture a higher level of discomfort than other (male) perpetrators. Feminist historians such as Diane Eyer and Kristin Luker suggest that the 1970s heralded a growing concern that middle-class mothers were challenging the culturally ingrained constraints on women in terms of family, the role of mothering and reproductive rights, the dominance of the nuclear family, the need for day care and the preconceptions about women entering the workforce (Genter 2006). This signalled that mothers were an increasingly disruptive social group and the subject of greater social anxiety (Genter 2006). Co-existing with this is the notion that mothers are the continuers of community. Culture and community cannot survive if its heirs are murdered (Caminero-Santangelo 1998: 164). This introduces a wider social, anthropological and political frame to the problem of anxiety towards the murderous mother.

After this journey through the ideas of Freud, the Lacanian-influenced Kristeva and Irigaray, I concluded that the image of the 'bad' mother terrifies us so because it invokes feelings of vulnerability. We have all been children at the mercy of the omnipotent mother, or an equivalent mother-figure, and carry that sense of powerlessness with us. We can only understand misuse of this power and can only feel safe with it if we label it 'mad'. Perhaps we see mad as somehow detectable and curable. Evil and 'badness', however, have no cure. I decided that if I was to establish my murderous mother as 'bad', I needed to establish a set of signals to the reader that she was unconventional. If I chose to make her mad, I would also have to set up a set of signals, albeit completely different ones, of her instability. A third alternative was to give her a coldness that stemmed from a type of sterile madness, the coldness of action that a sociopath who does not feel 'normal' emotions might enact. This seemed the safest option as it added complexity to her motives. It was also alluring because I felt our dark fear of the 'badness' of female nature would be a fascinating concept to explore. It would simply be too easy to make the murderous mother mad and far more engaging to mix madness with badness. I considered what possible 'signals' to the reader might be available to me.

Signalling deviance and a 'little bit' mad

Of potential signals, unfeminine and non-nurturing behaviour seemed effective. Female identities outside the Victorian ideal of 'passive, maternal, married and monogamous' are regarded as a suspicious 'difference' that must be subject to censure (Jewkes 2004: 109). Link these 'others' to female offending and criminality, and these women are represented as being 'all the more fascinating and diabolical' (Jewkes 2004: 109). They are doubly deviant and doubly damned because they have broken both a criminal law and the law of nature (Lloyd 1995). As England's *Daily Express* remarked in 1993 of the Myra Hindley case: 'When women do things like this it seems unnatural, evil, a perversion of their own biology' (cited in Jewkes 2004: 123). I realised that by locating my murderous character outside the traditional boundaries of feminine behaviour, I could signal to the reader that she was residing in

the space of a psychological 'other' and may act in a manner that is contrary to our cultural mores.

I, therefore, set about establishing the signal that Elizabeth Faber resided outside conventional female behaviour by having her be dominant in the world of male commerce. However, for the reader to remain unsuspicious of her until very late in the story, she must still seem to be comfortable and credible in her position as mother. Creating this dichotomy of character proved challenging as it required her to appear a grief-stricken and sensitive mother who could also steer coldly through the world of men.

I resolved the question of how she would move through the men's world by giving her not only the traditionally masculine occupation of lawyer, but also making her the primary breadwinner in the family. Further emasculating her husband, she occupies the role of financial guardian for her family and rescues her spouse when he is in legal trouble. I hoped this would symbolise that she had reneged on her position of 'subordinate female' and had stepped up to perform as a male on the stage of patriarchy.

I also had to establish clear evidence that she does not fit into the Victorian model of the 'passive, maternal, married and monogamous' female as suggested by Jewkes (2004: 109). In her first scene, she thus makes it clear she will not be passive by offering up the story's initial murder suspect in a deliberate act of deceit, and we soon learn she has not had contact with her son for many months. Any claim to maternal feeling is proven to be false when it is revealed she killed both her children. Whilst she is married, she is certainly not monogamous. For example, she is caught basking in the afterglow of a sexual encounter with an extramarital partner.

The character of Beryl, the mother of central protagonist Sarah Arden, also functions as a device for emphasising the un-motherliness of Elizabeth Faber, making Beryl and Elizabeth effectively foils for one another. Beryl Arden is quite a caring and protective figure, going out of her way to create potions for Sarah, trying to help Sarah resolve the identity of her father, and feeling great guilt over Sarah's birth deformity of pebbled fingerprints. She is the antithesis of Elizabeth Faber, yet they are both outcasts in worlds ruled by men. Beryl feels the only way she can navigate this world is by setting up a rival system of power that centres on superstition, whereas Elizabeth dons the robe of masculine behaviour.

This seemingly instinctive need to masculinise a character in order for her to kill was probably not instinctive at all, but rather an ingrained cultural sense that murder is a masculine trait (Worrall 1990: 31). Helene Cixous raised this notion when she remarked 'does it mean that a woman who kills a man is a man? That only a man kills a man' (1993: 51). Cixous' comment made me ponder whether I was doing the right thing by so completely masculinising Elizabeth Faber. Perhaps I was missing an opportunity to confront, through storytelling, preconceived images of masculine criminality and feminine passivity by underplaying Elizabeth's caregiving qualities?

Yet, to clothe Elizabeth in the cloak of maternal concern and to remove her from the testosterone-heavy world of corporate law would erase her motivation for the crime. I feared increasing the traditional feminine elements in her personality would make

readers feel the sole motivation for her crimes, and a possible defence for them, would be unstable mental health. Whilst I wanted the reader to feel that she must be mad in order to have committed her crime, I did not want them to be completely convinced of that madness. Elizabeth Faber needed to be seen to make a conscious choice to take the lives of her children. If Elizabeth is not perceived by the readers as having made a deliberate intellectual choice to break both the laws of man and the laws of nature, then Sarah's quest for a logical solution to the horror of the crime would be undermined. It did not feel possible to me that madness could be met by reason. Madness would have to be discovered before the last page or Sarah would not look like a competent investigator. To put it another way, complete madness left unrevealed until the last would be a trick ending.

The notion of the murderous mother being doubly damned because she has broken both the laws of man and the laws of maternal nature also held great allure to me because it allowed me to play very literally with the idea of disrupting nature's laws. Once the crime has been committed, Sarah learns part of the Yarra River is flowing backwards. This back-flow ceases when the mother meets her death by being washed out to sea. This motif appears in Sarah's dreams and travels through the story – she dreams of the river overflowing with garbage because pollutants cannot be washed away and spends a lot of her out-of-office time navigating around, on and over the Yarra River. In these scenes nature's violation creates a mood of threat and ominousness.

Having the character break the laws of nature is also an opportunity to use the figure of the mother to personalise the dichotomies of creation and destruction that run through the story. During the space of the book, the mother and the other symbol of creation and destruction, the Yarra River, are always linked: she lives by the river; she works overlooking the river; she is seen being unfaithful by the river; she kills her daughter at the mouth of the river; and, she is finally consumed whole by the river. Traditionally, the image of the river has been a symbol of both life and death, of change and continuity, a site of crossing from life to death (Scoggin 2002). The mother has significant money invested in apartments by the river, yet her daughter opposes these. Hence, the daughter she has created stands in the way of her other act of creation – the creation of wealth. A choice must be made: follow the rules of nature and be returned to a passive condition of female dependence, or break nature and enter the world of masculine violence.

Once I was satisfied that I had created a system of signalled character traits that suggested both badness and madness, I turned to statistics on criminality to evaluate the likelihood that a person like my character could exist. 'Doubly deviant' women make up only a small percentage of the criminal world and an even smaller percentage of violent offenders. Jewkes estimates they constitute only 10 per cent of convicted violent perpetrators (2004: 109). Statistically, my readers would never meet a professionally employed woman who had killed her children in two separate incidents. Again, I asked myself if I was unnecessarily perpetuating the mythology that non-passive and patriarchy-rejecting women were deviant and somehow predatory. I have to admit that, inevitably, I was.

In an effort to mediate this, I tested my ideas for Elizabeth Faber's motivation for the murder against other illustrations of murderous mothers in crime fiction. Naomi King argues that crime fiction is replete with devouring mothers (King 2002, in Cole 2004: 155). However, I had significant trouble locating many who had murdered their children. In retrospect, I may have been reluctant to research too deeply the other fictions that touched on my story in case I was unduly influenced by them in my choice of plot events, or in case their representations were dramatically contrary to mine. This may be the reason I have not unearthed more murderous mothers in current crime fiction. The most prominent amongst those I did discover featured in Patricia Cornwell's *The Body Farm* (1994) and Jonathon Kellerman's *Devil's Waltz* (1993). Both works offer mothers who kill their children, but the children are pre-teenage and the mothers are diagnosed as suffering from Munchausen's by proxy. As a study, they offered little use to me. What was of interest, however, was how the protagonist of *The Body Farm* (1994), Kay Scarpetta seemed to disbelieve in the murderous mother's madness:

> Denesa was a little girl craving attention who had grown up knowing how to get it. She had destroyed every life she had ever touched, and each time wept on the warm bosom of a compassionate world. Poor, poor Denesa, everyone said of this murderous maternal creature with blood on her teeth (1994: 354).

Scarpetta does regard the mother as being afflicted with psychological conditions, yet her words quoted above suggest she does not regard the conditions as justification for the murder nor as valid psychological defences. To her, Denesa is 'a narcissistic, demented woman with an insatiable appetite for ego gratification' (1994: 354). I was relieved to find another murderous mother whose characterisation moved beyond merely 'mad' and into the realm of selfishness.

Outside crime fiction, it is not difficult to find texts that explore the murderous mother. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) features a mother who murders her child in an effort to protect her. There are also myths in most cultures about deadly mothers, including Medea in ancient Greece and la Llorona, or 'the wailing woman', in Mexican culture. La Llorona killed her children and threatened to steal the children of others (Caminero-Santangelo 1998: 164). These primarily focus on infanticide and, so, whilst they offer significant insights into the dilemmas, motivations and social responses to mothers who kill their infants, they do not specifically assist in the imagining the construction of a woman who kills her adult children.

Of all the narratives that feature murderous mothers, the one that fed most strongly into the creation of my perpetrator, Elizabeth Faber, was the character of Eva in Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973). Eva is a matriarchal figure who murders her adult son by setting fire to him in bed when he returns from war as a drug addict. Her motivations are complex – she loves him so intensely she cannot stand to see him decay, but she also resents the fact that his addiction will infantilise him (this is emphasised by her rocking of him to sleep before she ignites him). If he were to live, the Freudian evolution from cathexis to identification would be reversed and the boundary between the self and mother as 'other' would be eroded. The taboo of incest would also be

broken. Eva's act of murder could be seen as setting the final boundary in the relationship between her son and herself.

> He wanted to crawl back in my womb and well ... I ain't got the room no more even if he could do it … I'd be laying here at night and he be downstairs in that room, but when I closed my eyes I'd see him ... six feet tall smiling and ... he'd be creepin' to the bed trying to spread my legs trying to get back up in my womb ... One night it wouldn't be no dream. It'd be true and I would have done it, would have let him if I'd've had the room ... I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn't and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way (Morrison 1973: 62).

As I considered this excerpt, the idea that an adult child could return to demand the mother's attentions lingered in my mind. Such a return would not only require the mother to regress to the role of primary caregiver, but would also demand the mother interrupt her own return to an independent state. I thought here of murderous mothers Susan Smith, Sally Clark and Kathleen Folbigg. Each resented the interruption to their lives that motherhood had caused. The latter two were represented, as I have previously mentioned, as 'career obsessed' who saw their children as obstacles to their future (Scher 2005: 10). In creating Elizabeth's justification for the murders, I drew heavily on this idea of maternal resentment.

Helene Cixous' writings about mother-daughter relationships provided illumination on this point and provided a frame I could apply to the help articulate the dynamic of Elizabeth and Emma as the novel's murderer and victim and as characters sharing a mother and daughter connection. Cixous argues that the mother-daughter relationship is the most intense possible because it is the closest that the human body will ever experience and that 'unheard of things occur that can never exist in everyday life, which are yet the very secret of our lives' (1993: 89). What, I wondered, if these 'unheard of things' included one mother's desire to prioritise her financial welfare above her adult children's lives and then feelings of harm towards those children? This did not seem as outrageous as I had first imagined. Cixous seemed to be introducing the idea of deliberate violence into her thinking about the mother-daughter relationship by defining the relationship as a series of 'invisible and endless assassinations' (Cixous 1993: 73). A mother risks death by giving birth to a being who has lived parasitically off, and within, her own body for nine months, and then in the months after birth. There is the expectation in our culture that the mother must continue to sacrifice herself for her child by allowing the death of her professional and personal life in order to become a full-time carer for the dependent child.

Gill Plain remarks that this sacrifice may be typical in a patriarchal society, yet suggests it might also be a site of intense conflict. 'The mother is expected, whether literally or metaphysically, to make a gift of her life to the child, but such a gift would inevitably be contaminated by regret or anger' (Plain 2001: 150). What if the mother refuses these demands and defends her right to a financially successful life by committing a final 'assassination'? In an effort to communicate this to the reader, I gave Elizabeth Faber dialogue in which she states that she resents this surrendering of her life and had her directly remark that she considers her children to be parasites:

> I loved my children. I just didn't expect to have to suspend my existence for theirs for the rest of my life. I willingly let them consume me when they were young. I asked nothing in return, just to have my own life back when they became adults. But what happened? One is so greedy that he sucks our finances, my money, dry and the other is so ungrateful that she would send us to ruin for a species of fish and a piece of land. They wouldn't have stopped until I ended up in the gutter. So I had to stop them first (Beasley [2009]2013: 273–274).

Cixous' ideas about the path from love to death also feed into the creation of Elizabeth Faber's rationale for killing her children. Cixous argues that the only person who can kill us is the one who loves us and whom we love. Loving and killing, she writes, 'cannot be disentangled' (1993: 52). While she is speaking metaphorically about writing and is calling on Barthesian ideas about writing as death, her words resounded as something Elizabeth Faber could use as a justification for her actions.

I realised that simply including Cixous' ideas as dialogue in the revelation scene where Elizabeth Faber is confronted by Sarah over the discovery of her crime and admits her guilt and her motivations to Sarah would not be enough to convince the reader that Elizabeth did, in fact, believe these things. What was needed was a gradual building up of behaviours and details throughout the plot that slowly drew a picture of Elizabeth's attitude. I wanted the reader to pause after the revelation scene and think 'ah, I remember that in Elizabeth. I can see how this murder is a product of her personality'. These beliefs and behaviours include background information that she created her own wealth but is not afraid to back risky financial schemes, that she worked her way up the corporate ladder to hold a high-ranking position in a commercial law firm but will change employer immediately if her workplace demands are not met, is highly controlling in her efforts to steer her children's careers and orchestrates a number of dramatic changes in her garden that signal her ability to uproot what she has nurtured. Hopefully, these are not incriminating in themselves, but that when recalled in the revelation scene, appear as signposts along a path to a destination.

Conclusion

In this article, I have interrogated the dilemmas I faced when trying to create a female perpetrator who kills her adult children. This interrogation yielded results not only for the novel itself, but also for my future creative practice. Just as my research has combined to create the decorated and clothed final version of a new work, it has also sharpened the tools needed to repeat this process for my next novel. Indeed, these threads of research and the investigative tools used to collect them could be seen as typical not just of creative research, but of research around the genre of crime fiction itself. Crime fiction is known for its exploration of social and cultural oppressions and taboos, its tendency towards both building upon and challenging the conventions of the works in the genre that have come before, and its ability to address the commercial needs of the publishing industry (Moore 2006; Priestman 1998). It is, in short, a natural knitting together of the critical, the creative, and the practical that offers models that writers of all genres can draw from.

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