

# Resurrection of the Hybrid<sup>i</sup> Witches: Textual Hybridity in *Sally Hemings* and *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* as Historical Novels

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## Abstract

This paper compares two historical novels, *Sally Hemings* by Barbara Chase-Riboud and *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* by Maryse Condé. I recognized a similarity between these two novels by female novelists, Chase-Riboud and Condé: they resurrected enslaved black women who had been expunged from American history. This similarity is worth exploring in the sense that both novelists took up two marginalized black women, who nonetheless have an important place in American history. *Sally Hemings* may have inspired Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States and one of its most revered national; the Salem Witch Trials started with the arrest of Tituba.

Key words: Sally Hemings, Tituba, hybridity, racial consciousness, the Salem Witch trials

## 1. Introduction: The Salem Witch Trials and *Sally Hemings*

This paper compares two historical novels<sup>ii</sup>, *Sally Hemings* by Barbara Chase-Riboud and *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* by Maryse Condé. I recognized a similarity between these two novels by female novelists, Chase-Riboud and Condé: they resurrected enslaved black women who had been expunged from American history. Although the two novelists emigrated from both their homelands by the haphazard of chance, and they are close in age,<sup>iii</sup> there is no connection between them and there is no proof that either of them was influenced by the other in her writing. Moreover, like many female African American and Caribbean writers, they engrave the voices and identities of black women into their work. However, this similarity is worth exploring in the sense that both novelists took up two marginalized black women, who nonetheless have an important place in American history. *Sally Hemings* may have inspired Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States and one of its most revered national; the Salem Witch Trials started with the arrest of Tituba.

As it is now commonly known, a shocking rumor in American history was confirmed a DNA test in 1998. The alleged affair between Thomas Jefferson and his slave, Sally Hemings, may have been a historical fact.<sup>iv</sup> Before and after the DNA results, the Jefferson-Hemings scandal was dismissed by traditional historians. The Jefferson historians were enraged by the rumor, claiming that it sullied the honor and achievements of a national figure,<sup>v</sup> so because of a mighty blending of white supremacy, racial prejudice, and hero worship no rigorous and fair examinations of the Jefferson-Hemings liaison had been conducted by scholars. Nineteen years before than the DNA tests, Barbara Chase-Riboud wrote about the Jefferson-Hemings affair, moving Sally Hemings from the shadows of history to center stage. She stated that “I wanted the American public and the men who write history to recognize an historical figure that had been denigrated, erased and denied. I wanted her to have a name – something she had never had – even if I had to do it through fiction” (Wells). She breathed life into Sally Hemings with the power of literary techniques, and by skillfully weaving truth into fiction.

Concurrently, Maryse Condé completed her historical novel, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*. Although there have been a great number of studies about the Salem Witch Trials, and are well known events in American history, there have been few studies of Tituba herself, despite the fact that the witchcraft hysteria began with her arrest. The witchcraft hysteria in Salem occurred in 1692, when more than 400 persons were accused of joining with the devil to destroy the Church of Christ in New England. The hysteria began in the home of the Reverend Samuel Parris, minister of the Salem Village (now Danvers) church. His nine-year-old daughter Elizabeth, and his eleven-year-old niece Abigail Williams had spent time listening to Tituba, the Parris' West Indian slave, who told them stories about her native Barbados. After a while, the girls began to act as if they were in a post-hypnotic state. Rev. Parris and Dr. Griggs blamed Tituba, whose previous owner in Barbados had been a witch. Soon she was arrested, along with Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne on charges of practicing witchcraft. In *Salem Story: Reading the Witch Trials of 1692*, Bernard Rosenthal stated that “the myth of dark Tituba recapitulates with an

America tint the myth of original sin, the archetypal tale of the woman as progenitor of evils to come” (13).<sup>vi</sup>

Sarah Good was sentenced to death on July 19, Sarah Osborne died in jail three months after her arrest, but Tituba was never heard of again after she was released from jail. She was sold for her jail fees, because Rev. Parris had denied payments for her.<sup>vii</sup> In Maryse Condé’s *I, Tituba*, Tituba was sold to Benjamin Cohen d’Azevedo, a Jew. After becoming his mistress, she was disengaged and returned to Barbados. Afterward, Tituba was intimate with Christopher, the maroon leader, and became pregnant by him, not knowing that there was “a tacit agreement between them and the planters,” whereby “they have to denounce every plot and every attempt at a slave revolt,” instead of enjoying their precarious freedom (163). At the close of the story, Iphigene was her lover, and they tried to raise a rebellion. Regrettably, they were captured and hanged on account of Christopher’s treachery.

In addition to Maryse Condé, Tituba has appeared in two other twentieth-century works: Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* and Ann Petry’s *Tituba of Salem Village*. The former emphasizes the hysteria in which Tituba played a supporting role. In the latter, Tituba is a leading character, in much the same way as she is in Condé’s novel. However, she is characterized as a hard-working and patient victim of slavery. Put another way, Condé’s Tituba is the first character to appear as a “fighter,” who asserts her identity and significance, and who speaks in her own voice.

In both Chase-Riboud’s *Sally Hemings* and Condé’s *I, Tituba*, the protagonists are real persons, interacting with fictional characters. In these fictional narratives, how could they describe the identity of their protagonists? Just as Tituba was condemned by whites as “witch” for her exoticism and strange superstitions, Sally Hemings could also be reckoned as a “witch,” who put a curse on the white racial purity through miscegenation. How did Barbara Chase-Riboud and Maryse Condé resurrect their respective witches? This paper, in light of the fact that these novels are historical narratives mixing “reality” with “fiction,” discusses the resurrection of the two witches who were ostracized from official history because of their color and status by examining how “hybridity” was achieved in these novels.

## 2. Resurrection of Black Witches: Hybridity in the Two Texts

Scientific progress proved that the Jefferson-Hemings liaison may have been a historical fact and that Thomas Jefferson had fathered his slave’s children. We are safe in assuming that scientific techniques contributed enormously to resurrection of the slave woman. However, in Barbara Chase-Riboud’s novel *Sally Hemings* was resurrected and taken to center stage by literary techniques. Tituba, like Sally, was erased from official history, despite her early central role in the events. Although no scientific research to give credence to her actuality could be carried out, her voice was resurrected through literary techniques in the twentieth-century, as shown in Maryse Condé’s novel. First let me discuss the hybridity in Condé’s text.

As is recognized in the actual world, the fact that there are no written documents of her existence is stressed in Condé’s novel. Indeed, Tituba, the protagonist, experiences this omission and silence with “a violent feeling of pain and terror” (110), which means that, brought to the New World not of her own free will but as a slave, she lived at the margins.

"Tituba, a slave originating from the West Indies and probably practicing 'hoodoo.'" A few lines in the many volumes written on the Salem witch trials. Why was I going to be ignored? This question too had crossed my mind. Is it because nobody cares about a Negress and her trials and tribulations? Is that why? (149)

Tituba’s questions take the form of an inquiry about her existence and identity. Condé resurrected Tituba, a Barbadian slave in a few lines, protesting her invisibility as a black woman. The novel reconstructs the life of Tituba by letting her speak and tell her story in her own words. In the opening of the epilogue, Tituba says, “That is the story of my life” (175). That is, *I, Tituba* is a re-telling of history with Tituba as the first-person narrator and Condé as the scribe. The novel contains the two parts: the first part covers Tituba’s birth to her arrival in Salem, and the second part begins with the witchcraft trial to Tituba’s hanging in Barbados. Condé tells readers in a preface that “Tituba and I lived for a year on the closest of terms. During our endless conversations she told me things she had confided to nobody else.” This indicates that Condé prepares a domain for Tituba in the text, in recompense for her absence from history. Tituba mentions the lack of documentary information about her life. While commenting on her exclusion from historical record, Condé incorporates Tituba’s actual statement at the trial into Chapter 3 with the footnote: “These extracts are taken from the deposition of Tituba Indian. The original documents of the trial are kept in the Essex County Archives. A copy can be found at the Essex County Courthouse, Salem, Massachusetts” (104). Tituba’s depositions are extracted from the original trial

record. The incorporation of her official depositions into the text accentuates her silence in history, because this implies that she could speak only in response to questions. The incorporation of the historical document into the text can be a denunciation of “racism of the historians” (183).

Although *I, Tituba* describes an episode in American history, Condé’s narrative claims neither to be “history” nor to construct “historical truth.” She expounds upon her ideological principles on creating this novel in the Afterword:

For me Tituba is not a historical novel. Tituba is just the opposite of a historical novel. I was not interested at all in what her real life could have been. I had few precise documents: her deposition testimony. It forms the only historical part of the novel, and I was not interested in getting anything more than that. I really invented Tituba.....Being a black person, having a certain past, having a certain history behind me, I want to explore that realm and of course I do it with my imagination and with my intuition. But I am not involved in any kind of scholarly research. (200-201)

The first part of *I, Tituba* is based upon the Salem Witch Trials, but the second part is complete fiction. Just as Condé has said, filling in the blank spaces of lost history is not her primary focus, and we would rather notice the importance of the novel in the second part. This signifies that, although Tituba had become involved in a maelstrom, and was compulsorily brought to a page of history, as soon as the hysteria calmed down, the majority had no disregard for her. In other words, the author gives Tituba a literary presence by exposing her historical marginalization. “The hybridity” is clarified in *I, Tituba* by being partitioned into a historical record and a fictional account. The hybridity was able to be expressed because no news of her whereabouts was heard, and thereby her elimination was effectively eliminated from history. This literary technique clearly gives Tituba a new visibility, through which we cannot but see how the past has been monolithically constructed.

Meanwhile, Barbara Chase-Riboud’s *Sally Hemings* also gave a voice to a slave woman who had been expunged from history, thereby restoring her history and identity. As the slave mistress of Thomas Jefferson, Sally Hemings was placed in an extremely contradictory position and excluded from the dominant discourse of American politics. The novel captures Sally’s public presence at the heart of American discourse. The central theme of the novel is miscegenation, for which the author, through flashbacks and investigations of historical documents, has historical figures appear in the novel to examine the love affair between slave master and slave mistress from. In this sense, *Sally Hemings*, though a historical novel, is a contrast to *I, Tituba* as sharp distinction between history and fiction. Chase-Riboud meant to give a realistic significance to Sally Hemings by telling her story in a manner that is faithful to the historical evidence.

The novel start with Nathan Langdon, a white census taker in Albemarle County, Virginia, twenty-six years after the death of Thomas Jefferson. Langdon is a fictional figure, but the content he delivers seems to be entirely realistic. Chase-Riboud, as southern white male was resentful of northerner’s misconceptions about slavery, explores the attitude of a white public figure in the dominant society. Langdon, who represents the propertied class, believes in the inherent superiority of whites over blacks. However, he is astounded by Sally who was “the negation of everything he had been taught to believe” (8). His shock is echoed in the nation at large, through which we can see that the belief in white superiority, “the one favor of God” (49), endangers racism. As soon as her graceful ways disproves his beliefs about the so-called inferior race, she is no longer the invisible woman. Sally objects to the irrational racial stereotypes that have marginalized her. Langdon analyzes the implications of the rumored affair between Jefferson and Sally, concluding that the late president may have “broken the law of Virginia” (15). He, however, writes in their race as white as well as their age, family status, and occupation for the purpose of protecting Thomas Jefferson from charges of miscegenation. Most importantly, having Langdon classify Sally Hemings as white elucidates the falsification of official documents and shows how easy it is for history to be rewritten.

The novel consists of 45 chapters and seven parts. By moving backward and forward in time, rather than a chronologically, she describes the complex relationships that among the characters. For example, Nathan Langdon tries to obtain supporting evidence of the affair from Aaron Burr, John Adams, and John Trumbull, which lends some credibility to Sally’s words. Readers, therefore, are led to assume that the stories are factual. Besides, some real persons appear in the novel, among whom Nat Turner is the most important. In 1831, Sally Hemings attends his trial in Jerusalem, where she is confronted with “the truth of her life: she had loved the enemy” (55). Her presence at Turner’s execution signifies her pursuit of self-assertion by affirming the racial struggle against slavery. The scene is described in Chapter 8, 1 Part. Although the author writes the novel as a love-story, the appearance of Nat Turner, a

leader of a slave uprising, makes the novel more than a mere love-story. The miscegenation behind the love affair is highlighted as a fact.

### 3. Sexuality of the two Witches: Hybridity in the Representation of Feminist Thinking

Leota S. Lawrence writes in her 1983 essay that “among West Indian writers, very few women are represented. Interestingly, when women do write, they tend to be poets rather than novelists” (225). Lawrence argues that “with the exception of Jean Ryhs, those who do write novels rarely create more than one work” (225). Only after Merle Hodge published *Crick, Crack, Monkey*, did that female writers became actively involved in writing. As evidence of her claim, Mara Dukats, in “The Hybrid Terrain of Literary Imagination,” discusses women’s “voicelessness,” citing the Cameroon proverb, “Women have no mouth” (61). She points out that “against this of women’s essential silence, feminist writing has historicized and contextualized women’s absence and her enforced voicelessness” (61). Here “voicelessness” signifies “not only the historical absence of the woman writers’ text, but also the inability to express and the silence of articulation that goes unheard” (61). In other words, “voicelessness” means women’s subordination and the absence of their texts in Caribbean literature.

It is quite natural that Dukats’s statement applies to women’s voicelessness in Caribbean literature, but her suggestion, is also applicable to Chase-Riboud’s *Sally Hemings* in African American literature, not to mention of *I, Tituba*, because it retells a slave woman’s life which was deleted from history, like Tituba. These texts contextualized in the protagonists’ voicelessness. Consequently, feminist thinking is strong in these texts. This section points out that feminist thinking in the two texts is also in conformity with the hybridity of these texts, a mixture of reality and fiction.

Although some critics state that what authorizes the typical feminist literature in *I, Tituba* is Hester Prynne’s appearance, the protagonist of *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne,<sup>viii</sup> I suggest it is Tituba’s response to prynne’s ideology. Hester, jailed for adultery, educates the black woman and makes her own discourse: “I’d like to write a book, but alas, women don’t write books! Only men bore us with their prose.....Yes, I’d like to write a book where I’d describe a model society governed and run by women! We would give our names to our children, we would raise them alone...” (101). Tituba, however, makes an irrelevant comment, “We couldn’t make them alone...” (101). While Hester, a white feminist, turns her gaze upon only “gender,” not “race”; Tituba cannot understand fellow feeling between women without distinction of race (Furomoto 28). Elizabeth Parris, the wife of Rev. Parris, had been sympathetic to her because of Tituba’s sincere care for her illness, but amid the hysteria she denounced Tituba for witchcraft in company with her husband. For this reason, Tituba cannot feel a sense of union with white women. Moreover, for Tituba, who has had many relationships with men her feminine identity is based upon enjoyment of her sexuality. Tituba admits that all men have privileges, and concedes that “the color of John Indian’s skin had not caused him half the trouble mine had caused me” (101). Nevertheless, she cannot become a feminist like Hester, because she enjoys her physical relationship with Iphigene and pursues her sexual pleasure with him. Angela Davis states: “Tituba is a powerfully sexual being. She accepts and embraces her sexuality and does not allow the strong sexual attraction she feels for men to dilute her active solidarity with women, black as well as white. Yet, because of her defense of her sexuality, she is reluctant to call herself a feminist” (x).

The white women, Hester Prynne and Elizabeth Parris, are struck by misfortunes that are caused by their unhappy lives with their husbands, and cannot accept the pleasures of heterosexuality. Above all, sexuality is a source of conflict for these white women: Hester experienced sexual enjoyment but had to pay for, and Elizabeth lives in religious terror. These circumstances led them to hate and distrust men. However, as Davis stated, sexuality is a source of delight for Tituba. Her misfortune is caused by racism, not just by sexism. Although Hester expresses her hatred of men to Tituba, Prynne’s words do not resonate with her. In this sense, as Davis notes, Tituba is a “powerfully sexual being,” and “the voice of a suppressed black feminist tradition” (x).

Now I will examine feminist thinking in *Sally Hemings*. Chase-Riboud pays attention to miscegenation, and at the same time keeps her eyes upon the gender issue. In the antebellum south, patriarchy was a hotbed for miscegenation, which is described by Sally Hemings, Elizabeth Hemings, and Martha Jefferson Randolph. In Chapter 4, during Elizabeth’s last moments, the author displays the implications of aberrant blood relations: “She and Martha had sat in a strange and southern circle of complicity: the concubine, daughter, the mistress and the slave, the aunt and the niece. All three women were reflecting, each in her separate way, on the intricacies of their blood ties and relationships” (25). Though “they had all lived their lives according to the rules” (30), the ringleader, who forced *the rules* on them, never appears in this scene for a riding. In this scene, Chase-Riboud emphasizes that women, black or white, unavoidably have to accept the unnatural circumstances and consequences of miscegenation. That is, all women, both white and black, are subordinated.

The appearance of the feminist and abolitionist figure Frances Wright shows that the author is conscious of both sexism and racism. In Chapter 42, Wright denounces slavery. Wright insists that both of women and slaves have been deprived of their rights and freedoms.

Then, how does Sally, construct her female identity? With the enlightened feminist thinking from Frances Wright, she shows her approval of it to a great extent in comparison with Tituba's reaction to Hester. She, however, cannot be a complete feminist like Wright, which is obvious from her words, "You don't count the bonds of love and passion as one more bondage?" (324). While, with advancing age, she comes to understand the difference between the sexes with distinctness, it is true that she remains in Charlottesville until the end of her life on account of her devoted love for Thomas Jefferson. To put it another way, we can come up with the same theory as in *I, Tituba*. Tituba developed her femininity by loving men, not by hating them. Likewise, Sally ripened into womanhood by engaging with her lover, not by rejecting him.

At the beginning, in *I, Tituba*, the protagonist is reduced to being a slave by her own choice because of gratifying her desire to live together with John Indian; in *Sally Hemings*, the protagonist preferred returning to Virginia to staying in Paris as a free woman because of her love for Thomas Jefferson. Tituba ended her life in a happy physical relationship with Iphigene, and Sally died in Charlottesville because of her irresistible attachment to her dead lover. The two women developed their respective identities and enjoyed their lives as women. In this sense, Tituba and Sally are "powerfully sexual being[s]."

Moreover, what is the most important here are the literary techniques which Condé and Chase-Riboud employ. Hester Prynne, Hawthorne's fictional protagonist, appears on the basis of "feminist-nationalism thinking which is modernized too much so as to bewilder serious reader of historical novel" (Tatsumi 35), through which the mixture of reality and fiction becomes quite apparent. Although Hester's appearance is seemingly an exhibition of feminist thinking, what we should notice is Tituba's reaction to prynne's teaching. In other words, her prynne's brings out Tituba's feminine identity. Through the use of Hawthorne's fictional character, the feminine identity of Tituba, a real person, is highlighted, enabling us to read an excellent mixture of reality and fiction.

In contrast, in *Sally Hemings*, the historical figure of Frances Wright, appears to enlightens Sally. General Lafayette and Frances Wright visit Monticello, and she explains her ideology to Sally. There is no evidence the two women ever met, but General Lafayette's visit to Monticello in 1824 has been documented.<sup>ix</sup> Wright was also known to have discussed the issue of slavery with Thomas Jefferson.<sup>x</sup> If Sally Hemings was at Monticello at that time, it is quite possible that the two women encountered each other. The scene expressed feminist thinking shows us the peculiar feature of the novel while taking a serious view of the historical background.

#### 4. Conclusion

While it is indisputable that both Barbara Chase-Riboud and Maryse Condé have restored the marginalized black slave women to official history, they did so in different ways.

Chase-Riboud puts special emphasis on the historical relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. Chase-Riboud resurrects her protagonist by providing evidence that Thomas Jefferson was in love with Sally Hemings, and was the father of several of her children. Because racism, the theme of the novel, survives in the United States, it is necessary for Chase-Riboud to tell a story that has the ring of truth. The plausibility of the novel enraged some Jeffersonians, who then threatened the author.

For *I, Tituba*, the Salem Witch Trials are the background to the story. The latter half, a pure fiction is more important; that is, the portion described Tituba's life after her release from jail, the part of her life that is unknown. Maryse Condé does not attach importance to historical credibility in her text. Her interest is in giving Tituba the words to tell her own story without the need of corroborating witnesses; Condé does not require "a convincing history," but "Tituba's own history." Though *I, Tituba* is a hybrid text that combines history and fiction as *Sally Hemings* does, it constitutes a characteristic feature of Caribbean literature from the viewpoint of having little regard for authentic history. For the people of the West Indies, their own words meant gave them back their own identity and history, and emerging from colonial rule and the imperialist exploitations of Europe (Mudimbe-Boyi 756). Condé's *I, Tituba* inherits this characteristic of Caribbean reconstruction because it allows a slave woman to speak out in her own voice.

<sup>i</sup> The word "hybrid" employed here does not only denote "mixed blood" but also "mixture of real

history and fiction.” Undoubtedly Sally Hemings was a quadroon in both real history and Chase-Riboud’s fiction. In Condé’s novel, Tituba was described as a mulatto born in Barbados. But some recent studies about her claim that she was an Indian woman from the northeast coast of South America, not a mulatto from Barbados (Breslaw 6).

<sup>ii</sup> I am using the term “historical novel” as defined in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*: “Traditionally the historical novel genre centers on the lives of famous historical figures and employs historical research. The historical novel in African American literature invokes and reworks this traditional model. . . . by focusing on the lives everyday, often enslaved people, whose lives had not been recorded because they had not deemed worthy by writers of history. These novels thereby challenge, either implicitly or explicitly, European American methods of record keeping, of evaluating who and what are important, and of making history” (358).

<sup>iii</sup> While Barbara Chase-Riboud emigrated from the USA to Europe and now lives in Paris and Rome, Maryse Condé, whose birthplace was the West Indies, is an immigrant to the USA. Chase-Riboud was born in Philadelphia on 26 June 1939, and Condé in Guadeloupe in 1937. By the bye, both of them have received honorable awards for the respective works; Chase-Riboud was a winner of the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize for best novel by an American woman, and Condé was given several awards, including Prix Littéraire de la Femme and Boucher on prize.

<sup>iv</sup> The DNA tests on male descendants in Thomas Jefferson’s family and that of Sally Hemings offer genetic evidence that Jefferson fathered the slave’s youngest son, Eston. The article, “Jefferson Fathered Slave’s Last Child” in the *Nature* is based on blood samples collected by Eugene A. Foster, who analyzed Y chromosomes and found a rare mutation in the Jefferson line. Samples are from descendants of Jefferson’s uncle Field Jefferson, Hemings’ sons Eston and Thomas Woodson and Jefferson’s sister’s sons, the Carr brothers, who were rumored to have fathered Hemings’ children. Carr chromosomes are different from those in the Jeffersonian line, but the Y chromosome of John Jefferson, believed to be an Eston descendant, has the rare Jefferson mutation. The Woodsons’ chromosomes are completely different, refuting his family’s oral history of Jefferson paternity.

<sup>v</sup> Madison Hemings claimed in “The Memoir of Madison Hemings” published in the *Pike County (Ohio) Republican* in 1873 that Sally Hemings became Jefferson’s concubine when Jefferson stayed in Paris as an American Ambassador to France in 1788. He stated in it that she gave birth to a child fathered by Thomas Jefferson immediately after she returned to Virginia, but the infant passed away. Also, he related that she gave birth to four others, and that Jefferson had fathered them all.

<sup>vi</sup> I consulted the following historical volumes on the Salem Witch Trials:

Elaine G. Breslaw, *Tituba, Reluctant Witch of Salem: Devilish Indians and Puritan Fantasies* (New York: New York University Press, 1996)

David C. Brown, *A Guide to the Salem Witchcraft Hysteria of 1692* (Boston: Image Press, 1984)

Bernard Rosenthal, *Salem Story: Reading the Witch Trials of 1692* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993)

<sup>vii</sup> Due to laws at that time, those who were under suspicion, even if released, had to pay for their jail fees – board, chains, and leg shackles.

<sup>viii</sup> See Arauko, especially p.218.

<sup>ix</sup> Lafayette was Jefferson’s closest French friend during his stay in Paris as American Ambassador to France (Ellis 125).

<sup>x</sup> See Langhorne, p.241: “Lafayette and his friend Fanny Wright pressed him far harder on the same subject. Rather surprisingly Jefferson admired this outspoken young woman.”

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