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THE CONTRADICTORY PRIVACY OF DENISE RILEY'S WORKS: ALONE TIME AND LISTENING TO ONE'S OWN VOICE

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Abstract

Denise Riley's poetry and prose explore the concept of inner speech, a "voice without a mouth" that plays a significant role in personal and social relationships. Inner speech, a touchstone of privacy, has its history dating back to Socrates and has been influenced by philosophers like Epictetus and Hanna Arendt. Riley's theory suggests that inner speech originates from the external unconscious of unglamorous language, making us "spoken" subjects. Her work exposes the "gripping power" of abusive language, as self-criticism is a common form of internal monologue. Her influential book, Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History, explored the discursive interpellation of biologically female persons into subaltern 'women' in male-dominated cultures. Riley's autobiography describes her upbringing in postwar Gloucester, a harsh environment marked by verbal and physical violence. Her writings also explore the concept of solitude, addressing the writer's internalized injuries from her past and the desire to draw others into her inner air. Her internal monologue, which is frequently littered with the remnants of what she hears, might convey anything from love to hatred to kindness to aggressiveness.

Keywords: Riley, Loneliness, Inner Voice, Feminism, Thoughts.

INTRODUCTION

> Speaking apart, I hear my voice run on
> in the red heart of an ear, an ear coils round me
> disturb the text; you don't disturb the world (Riley, 2019: 35, 'Ah, so').

> My inward ears will jam wide open to internal words that overlying verbiage can't smother (Riley, 2019: 120, 'Affections of the Ear').

Denise Riley provides her audience with a glimpse into an internal dialogue in her poetry and prose, evoking a "voice without a mouth" (as taken from the work of Samuel Beckett's "Texts for Nothing"), as described in the initial essay of her 2004 anthology, The Force of Language.

> 'Whose voice, no one's, there is no one, there's a voice without a mouth, and somewhere a kind of hearing, something compelled to hear . . . ' (Lecercle and Riley, 2004: 7).

Riley characterizes the internal dialogue experienced in moments of solitude as a "distinct aspect of self-reflection in isolation" (Lecercle and Riley, 2004: 16), referring to it as "solitude's discourse" in her writing. She notes its historical lineage, tracing back to Socrates or even earlier, emphasizing its enduring significance. While Riley isn't particularly focused on history, she adeptly incorporates historical insights into her poetry and essays, which resonate with echoes of centuries of silence.

> Inner speech is the touchstone of a privacy which needn't depend on the isolation of its silent speaker, for it may mutter forcefully in our ear even when we are

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> among some animated social gathering. The very topic of inner speech conjures an aura of loneliness, whether hapless or wilful...It is reassuringly or irritatingly there on tap...offer[ing] us the unfailing if ambiguous company of a guest who does not plan to leave (Lecercle and Riley, 2004: 8).

The essay explores Riley's reflections on internal monologue and the "sense of solitude" it evokes, achieving this by examining her works through the lens of ancient practices that involve listening to one's inner voice. Various traditions, including religious, philosophical, and literary, emphasize the significance of inner speech. For instance, Socrates famously considered human thought to be characterized by internal dialogue. In Theaetetus, he described thinking as "the conversation the soul has with itself," where the soul engages in questioning, affirming, denying, and reaching conclusions silently. In Hippias Major, Socrates humorously referred to an inner self as a close relative with whom he engaged in continuous dialogue, often challenging him for answers. This internal discourse was integral to Socrates' philosophical method, even though it occasionally caused him friction with others. The enduring value Socrates found in this process justified its challenges and conflicts.

Epictetus, echoing Socrates, portrayed the individual engaged in self-dialogue as not lonely but rather in his own thoughtful company. According to him, these inner conversations, essential for nurturing reason and judgment, were a hallmark of philosophical practice. Stoic philosophy, exemplified by Marcus Aurelius in his Meditations, emphasized not physical isolation but the mental seclusion necessary for such dialogues within oneself. Pierre Hadot recorded this method in his work "Philosophy as a Way of Life." It belonged to a larger Stoic tradition of reflective practices. Hadot explained that these exercises aimed to free individuals from the alienation caused by worries, passions, and desires, leading them towards a liberated moral personhood rooted in internal dialogue. Epictetus further advised, "If you are truly a man, walk alone, converse with yourself, and do not seek refuge in the crowd" (Epictetus, [108 CE?] 1890: 3:14).

The purpose of this paper precludes a comprehensive documentation of the entire philosophical tradition surrounding individual inner dialogue. Riley draws attention to Hannah Arendt's contemporary reading, in which the philosopher characterises thought as a "two-in-one" conversation that gives the individual company while they're alone (Riley, n.d.: 34). According to Arendt's writings in "The Life of the Mind," she argues in which nothing emphasizes more strongly the essential plurality of human existence than the fact that solitude enhances our self-consciousness, suggesting a dual aspect of thought that we likely share with higher animals (Arendt, [1971] 1978: 185).

> ‘Thinking, existentially speaking, is a solitary but not a lonely business; solitude is that human situation in which I keep myself company. Loneliness comes about when I am alone without being able to split up into the two-in-one, without being able to keep myself company . . . ’ (Arendt, [1971] 1978: 185).

Arendt suggests that when the self "loses the saving grace of companionship" ([1966] 1976: 476), solitude shifts into loneliness. What causes some individuals to find it challenging to connect with themselves when they are alone?

> What kind of dialogue can you conduct with yourself when your soul is not in harmony but at war with itself? (Arendt, [1971] 1978: 189).

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> I am prey to whatever noisy inscriptions have run in advance of me (Riley, 2000b: 99).

Where does one's internal dialogue originate? Previously, Riley aligned herself with language philosophers such as Volosinov and Bakhtin, who emphasize the external expression of internal discourse. She describes how our inner monologue is received "from the outside" as "the common and thoroughly external unconscious of unglamorous language" (Lecercle and Riley, 2004: 55). As beings who communicate through language, we are shaped by it, "indifferent to us yet constituting the very fabric of the personal" (Riley, 2005: 1). While this reasoning appears straightforward, Riley's distinctive ambiguities, inquiries, and both direct and subtle challenges permeate her exploration. Her writing often mirrors an internal dialogue, with her persona acting as her own provocateur, engaging in quasi-Socratic exchanges ("There's a hum of language at my ear, I swat it away, it rises to resettle in thick clouds."). She disclaims ownership of it, viewing it as external and not entirely defining her. These complexities are revisited in her subsequent works, which approach the argument from a different angle. Later, I will revisit this topic, but first, I will explore how Riley's exploration of the darker aspects of inner voices—such as guilt, humiliation, abjection—and the solitude they entail, intersect with the externalist perspective.

> There was such a brilliance lifting off the sea, its aquamarine strip Blocked in behind white-dashed mimosas, that it stung my eyes all morning as I stood in the old playground, pushing the swing steadily, looking out across the water and longing to do without these radio voices, and without my post as zealous secretary, as
> transmitters of messages from the dead, who'd issue disclaimers that they'd ever sent them – all the while a slow hot cut spreads to baste me now with questions of my own complicity in harm muttering thoughtfully about patterns until I'm stamped out as
> an old paisley shawl or worn kelim, do I look good in this one or should I be less loud or less repetitive? and on the top of my wardrobe, familiar spirits cluster and hang on to chatter, lean over to peer down interestedly at me, vivaciously complaining about
> the large amounts of fluff I've left up there, 'that's just as we'd expect'; meanwhile the out-to-kill person is not, or so she or he shrugs, pulled at by voices, but dead at heart stands amnesiac plumped out with the effective innocence of the untroubled –
> This gloss is taking me on unconvincing dashes down blind alleys I mistrust, since desperate to see things straight I can't fit apt blame in to self-damnation . . . (Riley, 2019: 104–105, 'Seven Strangely Exciting Lies').

In another essay from 2004, Riley explores the concept of auditory compulsion and the Beckettian notion of a "voice without a mouth," her article on internal monologue gets its title from this experience. In "Bad Words," Riley deeply investigates malediction, defining it as "the act of directing insults, curse words, or accusations at another person in such a way that the target internalizes the hate speech and starts to identify with it" (Lecercle and Riley, 2004: 55). Riley reflects on how inner speech can be both lyrical and relentlessly self-critical, emphasizing the "powerful grip" of accusatory language. This theme recurs throughout Riley's writings, where she explores how individuals may internalize derogatory labels and question their own identities in moments of interpellation, asking themselves, "Am I truly defined by these

labels?" This process can evoke feelings of apprehension (Reilley and Lecercle, 2004: 50).

In her influential book "Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History" (1988), Riley titled her work after the question Desdemona unjustly asks Iago in Shakespeare's Othello: "Am I that name?" Riley studied how women are systematically oppressed in patriarchal cultures in this work. The book, written in the latter years of the Women's Liberation Movement, tentatively argued that gendered language may be challenged by opposing the politics of subjectivity—a hope that appears more nuanced in hindsight (Riley, 1988: 99). Riley acknowledges that resisting the "violence of interpellation" is quite individual, emotionally demanding, on top of that, isolating, a theme she continues to explore in her reflections on inner speech (Lecercle and Riley, 2004: 71).

> I can't believe in a selfhood which is other than generated by language over time . . . What purports to be 'I' speaks back to me, and I can't quite believe what I hear it say (Riley, 2000b: 61).

> My autobiography always arrives from somewhere outside me . . . (Riley, 2000b: 58).

Riley, one who grew up as an only kid in post-war Gloucester after being adopted, penned an autobiographical essay in 1985 reflecting on her early life. The essay chronicles her experiences up to the age of eleven, vividly recalling a childhood overshadowed by persistent verbal and physical abuse from her adoptive mother. Amid pervasive cruelty, love was conspicuously absent. Solaced in the garden, the child—who was frequently referred to in the second person—wished he or she might be as carefree as the family dog. Engaging in word games, she imagined herself confined to a cell, seeking refuge from the tumultuous external world. "You sit in silence amid crashing noises like a snail in its shell," she describes, retreating inward, speechless under the onslaught. Curled in her own flesh and clothing, she burrowed deeper into herself, intensifying her internal exploration. To truly perceive others outwardly, she found she needed to look inward as well (Riley, 1985b: 238).

As the child lies feverish in bed, she observes her adoptive mother—a figure resembling a wolf-headed person—in the doorway of her sickroom. Is there an escape? "Keeping secrets. Guarding personal information... My dear, what are you hiding? So, what's the catch?" (Riley, 1985b: 245) when viewed in the light of day. Yet, surely, there was something within that intensely sought-after inner world, as it was from that depth that the writer eventually emerged. Riley consistently asserts throughout her poignant essay that the horrors she recounts are everyday occurrences, a "monstrous ordinariness," and indeed, such inhumane brutality is unfortunately commonplace. However, its impact has rarely been so vividly and profoundly portrayed.

> . . . fixed at the sites of institutionalised pain of which yes, you can have as much as you like you can remember everything that is said that killed you, you are word-perfect 28 years of rehearsing got it off by heart for you you examine it each night lovingly where it is all yours for always (Riley, 2019:32.'Our youth and mine')

> My body's frame arched to a drum houses a needle. A splinter of this world has stuck in me, snapped-off, floated down syrupy blood. It points me on.

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> This thick body can't dim its brilliance though it vexes the car of my flesh. Sliver of outside that I cradle inside and which guarantees me my life also. (Riley, 2019:81. 'True North')

> Injurious speech echoes relentlessly, years after the occasion of its utterance, in the mind of one at whom it was aimed . . . Where amnesia would help us, we cannot forget (Riley, 2005: 9).

The familiar inner dialogues experienced by figures such as the ancient Greeks (Socrates) and Romans (Stoics) (and later thinkers like Montaigne and Rousseau) originated from within, intrinsic to the process of thought itself. However, external voices, often intrusive, have likely played a more significant role in shaping perceptions of internal monologue. Some of these voices have been benevolent, like guardian angels, departed loved ones, supernatural oracles (such as Socrates' daimon), and even deities. However, "harmful speech," described by Riley as voices that invade and dominate the self, also has a long history. Religious believers, for example, have frequently experienced subjectification through curses rooted in spiritual traditions. Riley touches upon this in a compelling section of her work on inner voices. The theological concept of Althusserian subjectification, wherein guilt acts as a psychic driving force, was rigorously critiqued by Judith Butler in her 1997 book "Psychic Life of Power." Riley expands on Butler's analysis in "Words of Selves," illustrating Adam and Eve's punishment as a divine intervention through God's Word. The unfortunate couple is marked, shamed, and expelled as they "hand in hand, with wand'ring steps and slow,/Through Eden took their solitary way" (2000b: 86; Milton, 1667: Book X, 1539-1540).

From desert-dwelling parents besieged by demonic voices to John Bunyan tormented by Satan's demands to "sell Christ" (Bunyan, [1666] 1998: 39), and poet William Cowper driven to despair by inner voices prophesying his damnation (Cowper, [1772] 1979: 25-37), the lives of religious and biblical figures abound with stories of divine and demonic curses. John Stachniewski's insightful examination of seventeenth-century English Puritanism illuminates the profound "self-despair" stemming from the movement's oppressive language culture. This despair often intensified within families, as seen in diarist Richard Norwood's account, who felt his parents' stern demeanor reinforced his self-image as a irredeemable reprobate (1991: 109). Norwood, like many Puritans, experienced a form of isolation that was more relational than literal loneliness, as Stachniewski notes. Negation and feelings of estrangement were intertwined, where parental disapproval underscored fears of divine abandonment, the epitome of utter isolation. Even the Elect were warned against solitary living, as it was seen as Satan's domain where sinners suffered under gloating curses.

Riley attended a convent for her education, even though her adopted parents were Lutherans and Church of England members for nominal purposes. Her first gold star came when she was just five years old, for an essay she wrote about the Mortification of the Flesh for Lent. She was quite good at that subject. However, her accomplishment was met with disapproval at home, and the narrative of achieving grace through self-imposed hardship did little to alleviate previous humiliations. Riley emphasizes that no amount of academic success could overcome the perception of inherent wrongdoing within her household (Riley, 1985b: 239). Riley doesn't delve deeply into this aspect, but in Words of Selves, she explores "word-wounding" through the story of a child regularly labeled as "evil," steeped in Christian language that

exercises interpellative authority beyond just parental influence, exemplifying domestic dynamics (2000b: 142). Divine judgment reinforces this partial condemnation, where authoritarian religious figures at home wield significant subjectifying power over a solitary child.

> [A] moment of damnation can resemble an unholy baptism (Riley, 2000b: 141).

> Imagine someone who habitually ends up in a position of pleading with those deaf to all her appeals to act humanely, when it was long clear that they would not do so...She compulsively redesigns a scenario in which her question 'Am I a bad person?' can be asked and answered in its own unhappy terms; for she cannot get her ancient interrogation taken seriously by someone who's not already her opponent...She is reluctant to be emancipated from her distressing situation, only because that rescue would make retrospective nonsense out of a wrong that she was forced to live out as if it had a rationale...she must know it was deserved (Riley, 2005: 14–15).

> Perhaps she would rather take the blame on herself for the harm of the past . . . than to admit it had happened arbitrarily, in that she was then (as a child) truly helpless (Riley, 2005: 15).

Every child, regardless of innocence, would rather face punishment than feel completely powerless. When a child internalizes parental criticism out of guilt, "harmful speech... transforms into... deeply internal speech" (Lecercle and Riley, 2004: 55). Riley refers to this as "a (fatally exhilarating) vein of psychologizing speculation" (Lecercle and Riley, 2004: 14) in her poignant exploration of childhood vulnerability in the article "Malediction," published in 2004. Riley has consistently approached psychological analysis cautiously, yet the starkness of these passages urges further exploration into this speculation.

In 1939, psychiatrist Otto Isakower observed that children "must construct their speech using linguistic material that is presented to them pre-formed." Darian Leader, a Lacanian analyst, recently explored Isakower's theory further in an essay titled "Psychoanalysis and the Voice," focusing on the interactions between infants and their mothers. Leader suggests that baby-talk emerges when an infant "feels addressed" by its mother, an experience it "cannot immediately defend" against. It is the "intervention of another speaker" that molds communication "into a dialogue, whether consciously acknowledged or not," a dialogue Leader characterizes as "a source of anxiety" for some children (2017: 3-9).

Responding to Riley's oppressive mother language was both illegal and irrational. Despite being too timid to speak out directly, the child displayed signs of defiance nonetheless. After repeatedly hearing the word "evil," she quietly muttered the name of an insect she had encountered in a story about a cotton field: "Boll-weevil, evil, evil boll-weevil" (Riley, 2000b: 142). With a touch of irony, she began referring to herself as "she," having grown accustomed to being addressed as such (Riley, 2000b: 143). Examining her conscience in search of evidence supporting her parents' accusations left her with a deep-seated feeling of injustice, yet she found none (Riley, 2000b: 144).

There was space for resistance against the harmful inner voice, evolving into a strategy for linguistic purification whenever there was a gap between how she was described and how she perceived herself. This allowed her to depersonalize "bad words" and expose them as clichéd insults from a "robust dictionary of unkindness" or

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"substitute rhetoric" that manipulates its speakers, who are merely "played like a pipe" by its "indifferent machinations" (Lecercle and Riley, 2004: 60). The emotional weight of hurtful remarks diminishes when divorced from their context. By disconnecting language from expression, it became a liberating force, enabling Riley to move beyond her victim identity of feeling "miserable and unproductive" to a life of stoic indifference toward her former tormentors (Lecercle and Riley, 2004: 59-60). To "separate the word from its speaker" and reclaim "its unique darkness undiminished," she had to endure considerable hardship before achieving this autonomy. "To achieve my liberation, I must first experience the initial infection by the bad word with intense fear and relentless self-doubt." This entails that only "absolute terror" can nullify it; anxieties alone are insufficient (Lecercle and Riley, 2004: 46). According to Lecercle and Riley (2004), it required a complete collapse of her sense of self to recover, if possible, by "acknowledging my own sheer contingency as a linguistic subject."

> I am a walker in language . . . I become myself only by way of fully accepting my own impersonality, too – as someone who is herself accidentally spoken, not only by violent language, but by any language whatsoever – and who by means of her own relieved recognition of this very contingency, is in significant part released from the powers of the secretive and unspeakable workings of linguistic harm (Lecercle and Riley, 2004: 62).

The anguish depicted here serves as a stark reminder of the gripping grasp of cruel interpellation, though it doesn't amount to a complete exorcism. Riley has always been against having her art analysed from a biographical perspective, asserting statements such as "who I am... means nothing to the work" (2000a: 74), and presenting herself as a passive recipient of her words rather than their creator: "it's the voice of language itself that seeks to speak" (2018a: 69). Given the veracity of this, then her poetry especially resonates with me as a reader, engaging me personally and deeply. "Are you okay?" the poet sings out, "straining into the twilight to hear," and "I think it's listening particles of air/at you like shot." Poetic expressions like this beg for reaction, sometimes directly, if inner speech is the language of isolation, [Riley, 2019: 56, 'A Shortened Set']—but more often by immersing the reader in the depths of Riley's own encounters: "Mad with loneliness I squeeze/the tissues of the air to compel/to the full words that would answer me" (1985a: 56, 'Two Ambitions to Remember').

Riley explores different facets of solitude in her writings, spanning from the confident assertion in an essay titled 'The Right to Be Lonely' (2005: 49–58), which staunchly defends unconventional lifestyles rooted in a proud feminist history, to the poignant and sometimes comical depictions of 'a perfectly democratic loneliness' (2000a: 37) experienced universally, except by those most socially privileged.

> ‘Walking by many on London streets in a despair which carries me
> I look from face to face like a dog going in the social democracy of loneliness.
> (Riley, 2019: 59, ‘A Shortened Set’).

In poems that recall past anguish, such as "So get up speed. / So you're sick with fear again so what so what," and others that speak directly to the reader in the solitary tone of the present, the writer's battle with internalized wounds from her history is poignantly portrayed. Shirley (2000a: 76, 'Seven Strangely Exciting Lies').

> . . . the social-worker poet in me would like her revenge for having been born and left. What forces the lyric person to put itself on trial though it must stay rigorously uninteresting? Does it count on its dullness to seem human and strongly

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> loveable; a veil for the monomania which likes to feel itself helpless and touching at times? Or else it backs off to get sassy since arch isn't far from desperate: So take me or leave me. No, wait, I didn't mean leave me, wait, just don't – or don't flick and skim to the foot of a page and then get up to go – (Riley, 2019: 96, 'Dark Looks').

A deeply human signal, as bright and unexpected as an announcement, is still awaited, and the poet implores the recipient to listen closely, stay committed, and alleviate the poet's loneliness, as described by Riley (2019: 97, 'Red Shout'). The writer's longing for an audience capable of understanding and appreciating the sincerity and beauty of the verses is evident in this plea. It appears a perfectly reasonable desire—to invite another person into our "inner air," in Riley's words—because it fulfills a fundamental human need (n.d.: 1). Establishing a psychological connection with those "represented in the self with whom I lead the dialogue of thought" ([1966] 1976: 476) is crucial for our ability to engage in solitary self-companionship, as argued by Hannah Arendt.

After her 2004 article, Riley began to write about the inner voice in a different manner, suggesting that the assumption of its externality or "imported otherness" has become thin (n.d.: 1). She returned to Arendt's concept of the social self, emphasizing the dual nature of inner dialogue that transforms loneliness into a more bearable solitude, advocating for placing the inner voice at the forefront of speech's boundaries, characterized by a "silent sounding" of "covert affect" that "lurks between individuals" (Riley, n.d.: 2, 3, 6). Referring back to Riley's term "solitude's talk" (Lecercle and Riley, 2004: 18), she suggests that inner speech is not solely accusatory; it can convey emotions like love, hate, kindness, or violence. Riley contends that it always retains echoes of past experiences, including "irrepressible puns, persistent echoes of ancient conversations, outdated directives from hymns, and fleeting fragments of old song lyrics" (Lecercle and Riley, 2004: 20). Furthermore, one's internal monologue serves as "the inner speech of the living," carrying the voices of the deceased (Lecercle and Riley, 2004: 18).

> The souls of the dead are the spirit of language: you hear them alight inside that spoken thought (Riley, 2019: 165, 'Listening for Lost People').

In 2008, Riley tragically lost her eldest child, an adult son. Almost four years later, in 2012, she wrote "A Part Song," a lament that later earned her the Forward Prize and was featured in her award-winning collection, Say Something Back (2016). Initially published in the London Review of Books (Riley, 2012), the poem reflects her ongoing struggle to hear her son's voice within herself as she crafted this poignant tribute.

> Outgoing soul, I try to catch
> You calling over the distances
> Though your voice is echoey,
>
> Maybe tuned out by the noise
> Rolling through me – or is it
> You orchestrating that now,
>
> Who'd laugh at the thought
> Of me being sung in by you
> And being kindly dictated to.

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It's not like hearing you live was.
It is what you're saying in me
Of what is left, gaily affirming.

(Riley, 2019: 143, 'A Part Song').

Riley stands out among contemporary poets for her adept exploration of the ego and poignant reflections on its complexities. Her contributions to literature delve deeply into the phenomenon of inner speech, which is both widespread and deeply puzzling, blurring distinctions between self and others, internal and external realities, and dreams and thoughts. While other critiques have covered Riley's nuanced approach more extensively, this one only scratches the surface. Critics like Brady (2011) note how she counters harmful interpellation through irony and repetition. Echo, a symbol of solitary internal dialogue, serves as a model for lyric poetry, which poets experiment with (Lehoŝczky and Skoulding, 2018). Philosophers debate her theories on linguistic interiority, while scholars studying voice hearing compare her descriptions of inner speech (Lecercle and Riley, 2004: 65-76; Hodgson, 2015; Fernyhough, 2016). There is much more to explore in this field, and Riley continues to contribute by delving into the cognitive aspects of interiority (2018a). Riley has always encouraged ongoing dynamic discourse, and paradoxically, the "voice without a mouth" now plays a role in enriching our understanding of solitude's expression through her innovative works. This unique voice engages in discussions that profoundly enhance our comprehension of solitude's discourse, reaching out to its audience with generous insight.

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