Totalitarian systems and their peaceful alternatives in Karin Boye's *Kallocain* and Olga Ravn's *The Employees*

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Dystopia. Fragility. Vulnerability. Peace. Posthumanism.

Drawing on recent discussions on fragility and vulnerability, this article delves into the questions of why and how the totalitarian systems collapse. Applied to Karin Boye's *Kallocain* (1940) and Olga Ravn's *The Employees* (2018), the concept of acknowledged fragility helps societies to locate an alternative to oppressive systems. In Boye's authoritarian world state, the eponymous substance is instrumentalized to eliminate dissidence, yet ultimately causes a rupture within the body politic. Likewise, Ravn's anonymous corporation's exclusionary tactics result in unexpected results among its humanoid crew. Both text's alternative visions of vulnerability can be characterized as peaceful and accepting of the interconnectedness of human and non-human life.

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The authors of *The Global Peace Index 2024* found that global peacefulness has deteriorated once again, marking the fifth consecutive year (Institute for Economics & Peace 2024). This disintegration is primarily due to a series of ongoing conflicts and a worsening security situation. The Stockholm Peace Research Institute (SPRI) arrives at an equally concerning conclusion in its 2022 report, *Environment of Peace* (Black et al. 2022). Increasing military spending and the failure of the international community to address the climate crisis are mentioned as the main reasons for the current state of the security situation. Given these alarming statistics, it comes as no surprise that academia has taken a keen interest in the subject of peace.[1] In the field of literary studies, this interest is often reflected in research focused on the portrayal of wars in literature, whether it pertains to the two World Wars or more recent conflicts.[2]

After the shocking brutality of World War I, the positive take on the necessity of war, advocated by many thinkers of the previous centuries, such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Jacob Burckhardt, was deeply compromised (Schölderle 2021, 97).[3] At the same time, there was little hope for perpetual peace throughout the 20th century. Wilhelm Janssen, writing in the middle of the Cold War in the 1970s, mentions the use of nuclear weapons as a breaking point, which shaped the thinking on peace after World War II. Following the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, peace indicated not solely a question of an ideal way of living together but also one of the survival of humanity as such ([1975] 2004, 590). In the 21st century, a global perspective on peace has become inevitable, mostly because of the rising interconnectedness of the whole world. This perspective shift can be partially explained by the crucial role that climate change has played in the understanding of peace in recent decades. When talking about a peaceful coexistence in the 21st century, "poverty, dysfunctional governance and conflict history" (Black et al. 2022, 2) are mentioned as driving forces behind the recent deterioration in peacefulness.

In this article, I will examine two dystopian novels from Sweden and Denmark respectively: Karin Boye's *Kallocain* (1940; Eng. trans. *Kallocain*, 1966) and Olga Ravn's *De ansatte* (2018; Eng. trans. *The Employees*, 2020).[4] *Kallocain* and *The Employees* tell of secular political systems that are presented to their members as the only way to organize society. I will argue that both Boye's state and Ravn's corporation represent totalitarian political systems, and they fail because of a fundamental disregard for their members' emotional and intellectual interconnectedness. In both texts, the vulnerability of bodies takes center stage, allowing the emergence of alternatives beyond the systems through positive sociopolitical cooperation. This contribution offers a new perspective on vulnerability and fragility understood as analytical tools for literary analysis.

VULNERABILITY AND FRAGILITY AS PRODUCTIVE FORCES

Vulnerability and fragility evince overlapping characteristics. Vulnerability, derived from the Latin word *vulnus* ("wound"), denotes "the capacity to suffer that is inherent in human embodiment", which arises from "our corporeality, our neediness, our dependence on others and our affective and social natures" (Mackenzie,

Rogers, and Dodds 2013, 4). Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers and Susan Dodds also introduce a second dimension, which addresses the relational character of vulnerability, emphasizing "the contingent susceptibility of particular persons or groups to specific kinds of harm or threat by others". This second approach to vulnerability underscores "the ways that inequalities of power, dependency, capacity, or need render some agents vulnerable to harm or exploitation by others" (6). Such agents can either be individuals oppressed by others or entire groups facing discrimination from the state or corporations.

Vulnerabilities can vanish and new ones can emerge (Dederich and Zirfas 2022, 2). They are continually evolving and are only observable "in an indissoluble relationship to specific social, cultural, historical and societal contexts and individual experiences" (4).[5] Sturla J. Stålsett echoes a similar sentiment: "However, seeing life as always dependent on a prior interweaving with other lives, and experienced reality as necessarily relational", he raises the question, "what it might mean politically to say that human beings, as communal beings, are constitutively vulnerable" (2023, 1). Acknowledging one's own vulnerability entails acknowledging a relationality with others. This implies positively charged aspects of vulnerability:

> [V]ulnerability as "ability" also necessarily implies openness, relatedness, mutability, and communicability, which could be seen as positively charged dimensions. They may represent an invitation to and a call for responsible relationships with other vulnerable beings; an expectation, or a demand that the vulnerable – human or nonhuman – is recognized, considered, cared for, respected, and protected. (2)

Rather than a weakness, vulnerability can be understood as a productive force, which foregrounds the emotional and intellectual interconnectedness of human and non-human life. The importance of this acknowledged interconnectedness for the continuation of life on Earth is highlighted in Judith Butler's recent work, *What World Is This?* Here, vulnerability is equated with interdependency, exposure and porosity (2022, 87), offering new insights into the frailty of our imperfect bodies.

While vulnerability addresses the potential for harm to be inflicted, fragility characterizes the constitution, be it a (non-)human body, object, political entity, or a planetary system. In the state of fragility, the integrity of an object or organism is still intact, yet its endangerment becomes apparent (Dederich 2022, 193–195) and can become manifest in form of a rupture (Arend, Sander, and Wetenkamp 2023, 8). If fragility is identified, measures can be taken to prevent the decay of the entity, but if ignored or not taken seriously, the rupture can lead to fragmentation (Dederich 2022, 196). After a phase of uncertainty, however, fragmentation can also have liberating effects, for example when a totalitarian state or an extractive economic system collapses and gives way to new ways of thinking and conviviality.

The unwillingness of individual actors to accept fragility as their own condition also stands at the center of Yener Bayramoğlu's and María do Mar Castro Varela's book *Post/pandemisches Leben. Eine neue Theorie der Fragilität* (Post/pandemic life: A new theory of fragility, 2021). They argue that during the pandemic, the fragility of life, relations, and communities became apparent (9). Part of Bayramoğlu's and Castro Varela's theory involves expanding the field of the applicability of fragility from

single objects to more diffuse entities such as political infrastructures (29–30). They attribute the failure to acknowledge the frailty of socio-political systems to the "politics of the strong", resulting in institutions being overwhelmed during the pandemic. This politics is marked by the unwillingness to confront the balance of the planet and the fragility of our bodies. Instead of seeing it as a shortcoming, Bayramoğlu and Castro Varela's theory advocates for living in and with the fragile (43).

THE TOTALITARIAN STATE IN *KALLOCAIN*

Karin Boye's final novel was published only one year before her suicide in 1941. Although the novel and Boye's overall body of work received significant attention in Scandinavia, it remains relatively unknown on the international stage.[6] *Kallocain* deals with technological progress and economization of human life in a totalitarian "World State".[7] The novel is written as a confession of the chemist Leo Kall. In service to the World State, Leo develops the substance *kallocain* that, when injected, compels people to reveal their innermost secrets. During his experiments, Leo learns of a potentially dangerous secret group of people opposed to the World State, known as the "desert society". Convinced that his boss and antagonist Rissen sympathizes with the group, Leo reports him to the authorities. Acting on his own suspicion that his wife Linda is in love with Rissen, Leo injects her with *kallocain* to find out. As Leo's actions result in Rissen's death penalty and Linda's disappearance, the end of the novel sees the World State overtaken by the Universal State after a brief war. Increasingly weary of the totalitarian systems, Leo wishes he could search out members of the obscure desert community and take part "in the creation of a new world" (Boye 2019, 169).

The concepts mentioned by Stålsett – openness, relatedness, mutability and communicability – illustrate the vision of vulnerability that the World State tries to uphold. It considers itself the headstone of human progress, dismissing earlier epochs as backwards and inferior. History is not understood as open and subject to change but as engineered by the World State and, therefore, obsolete. Instead of embracing the public sphere as an open space for diverse opinions (Kant 1991a, 55), and recognizing fragility as integral to every political entity, it suppresses emotional and intellectual bindings among individuals, making the relatedness among individuals impossible. Love is seen as a sentimental residue of a bygone era, as all positive feelings must be directed at the World State. Through establishing a closed, easily controllable society, the World State deems its social order to be enshrined "securely for all time" (Boye 2019, 8). Its vision of vulnerability suppresses every form of mutability, as every significant change or deviation from the "norm" is forbidden. This manifests in the strict hierarchy and uniformity of a society, in which everyone is addressed as "fellow-soldier" and lives in the same, standardized apartment. The possibility of a vulnerable position of the rigid, heavily rationalized system is never acknowledged.

Both mutability and communicability are best exemplified by the World State's use of *kallocain*. Leo's development of the truth serum is instrumentalized by the World State to eliminate dissidence and every form of political other-mindedness. The com-

munication between the state and its citizens happens one-way most of the time, from the center to the periphery, with citizens being solely on the receiving end. It is only during the *kallocain*-experiments and the subsequent court trials that the citizens are asked to deliver information serving the center's political ends. Overall, the World State's vision of vulnerability is based on a heavily controlled society of suppressed emotions and the persecution of political dissidence.

The state's effort to eliminate internal enemies reaches a climax in Rissen's trial,[8] an event that is meant to set an example of strength. Yet confronted with the state's own fragility in the shape of a single character, rupture in the political power is observable. Under the influence of *kallocain*, Rissen's speech makes a case for the emotional and intellectual interconnectedness of human beings, an aspect that the state refuses to acknowledge: "[Truth] could be a bridge between one person and another – as long as it is voluntary, yes – as long as it [is] given like a gift and received like a gift" (Boye 2019, 155). Strikingly, Rissen's speech addresses both the state as an unpersonal center of power and its subjects. This enables him to prompt people to confront their own defenselessness. When he asks everyone in the courtroom whether they understand that truth loses its value when not shared voluntarily and free of coercion, he answers the question himself: "No, you haven't noticed it, of course, because then you would see that you have been scraped bare, exposed right down to your naked skeleton – and who has the strength to see that?" (155–156). The state representatives' refusal to acknowledge their own "nakedness" is underscored by the futility of their effort to identify and punish every alleged enemy. This task is near impossible given the predominance of one-way communication between the state and its subjects.

Leo's wife Linda becomes aware of an alternative to the World State society that offers a more wholesome vision of vulnerability (Meurer-Bongardt 2022; Wennerscheid 2023). While the state perceives her solely as a "production machine" of future soldiers, she opposes the notion that a state or parents can own a child. She contrasts the economic notion of "producing" children merely for the State's military purposes with the feminist idea of a society comprised by mothers and individuals, who comprehend the true meaning of childbirth. As argued above, signs of fragility of an entity can lead to fragmentation if not identified and confronted properly (Dederich 2022, 196). After making her fading loyalty visible (Hammarström 1997, 229), Linda articulates a new vision of motherhood as "a productive, life-giving force", which is not reserved for women only (Wennerscheid 2023, 211). This new way of living together peacefully encompasses "unconditional love, empathy, caring, nursing, growing, educating and leading with response directed at both human individuals and other beings" (Meurer-Bongardt 2022, 239), presenting a wholly new understanding of relatedness. Linda's programmatic vision clearly echoes Stålsett's call to view vulnerability as a prerequisite for responsible relationships "with other vulnerable beings" (2023, 2).

The values implied by the alternative society contrast strongly with the bureaucratic and hierarchical structure of the World State. The guarantee for a peaceful coexistence lies in the voluntary nature of the social contract that its members uphold. Linda underscores this when she repeatedly stresses the urge to leave everything be-

hind to search for a community of like-minded people. Shortly before the outbreak of the war between the World State and the so-called Universal State, Leo experiences an analogous desire to be on the way to somewhere (Boye 2019, 164). Under influence of *kallocain* during the trial, Rissen echoes the same sentiment: "At least I'm alive – in spite of all they have taken from me – and right now I know that *what I am is on the way somewhere*" (157; emphasis in the original). This "somewhere" might be located among unknown ruins in the desert, a contaminated environment where the members of a secret society congregate. Strikingly, Linda, Leo and Rissen express the wish to seek out the place despite its apparent uninhabitability. This not only highlights the strength of their will but also the resilience of individuals in search of meaningful interpersonal connections.

While Kant argued that peace can only be achieved through the rationality of reasonable citizens in a republican contract (Behnke 2012, 254), *Kallocain* scrutinizes this notion by pointing toward a life outside the state. Indoctrinated to seek science-based explanation for every observable phenomenon, Leo realizes the insufficiency of this approach when confronted with a starry night at the end of the novel. Mesmerized, he reflects on the origins of the stars, yet he cannot grasp his amazement while looking at the sky and forgetting everything else. After waking up from this trance, he is aware that something has changed: "I felt that I had touched the living depths that Rissen had cried out for and Linda had known and seen. 'Don't you know that this is where life springs up?' the woman had said in my dream. I believed her and was certain that *anything at all could happen*" (Boye 2019, 164; emphasis in the original). Although the "living depths" are part of every single individual, Leo's experience has significance for society as a whole: "There was no hesitation in me anymore. I was taking part in the creation of a new world" (164).

The secret society that Leo intends to join is defined by traits that not only stand in opposition to the World State's politics, but also to Kantian peace theory. Firstly, the peacefulness of the alternative society is not ensured by the "spirit of commerce" or by the congregations of republics adhering to the international right (Kant 1991b, 113–114). The sole foundation of peace is that citizens join the community voluntarily. The absence of a centralized, coercive state power stands at the heart of the desert society. Secondly, this community acknowledges the fragility of human bodies. Members shake hands, a ritual deemed unhygienic by the World State. In the desert society's meetings, there is a sense that "people are looking through you. As though you were naked or worse than naked. Spiritually naked" (Boye 2019, 78). The ritualization of the fragility and vulnerability is described by a citizen who attends their meetings: one person hands a knife to someone else, then lies down on the bed and pretends to be asleep, hereby creating a situation in which the person's fragility and vulnerability is greatly accentuated. In this ritual, the faux-sleepers acknowledge the exposure of their bodies to injury as a fundamental characteristic of human life.

This portrait of the alternative society stands in crass opposition to the World State's desire to screen its citizens for its own political ends. Its failure to secure a peaceful future for its citizens is not only rooted in its unwillingness to acknowledge any fragility, but also fails because its quest to eradicate fragility proves futile.

It is impossible to uphold a closed, heavily monitored society, where mutability and emotional bonds are prohibited. Instead of recognizing citizens as complex beings whose private and public roles are incongruent, the state aims for their synchronization to facilitate complete transparency. The irreconcilable rupture between the private and public realms becomes apparent during the trial nevertheless, as the powerful drug *kallocain* exposes the limits of coercive power to uphold a stable social order.

THE TOTALITARIAN CORPORATION IN *THE EMPLOYEES*

The Employees by Danish author Olga Ravn consists of statements ranging from a few words to five pages. The story is set on board a spaceship involving a crew comprised by both humans and humanoids, all employed by an unnamed corporation. A brief introduction states that the latter commissioned these interviews to better understand why the productivity of the employees has decreased. Apart from the crew and interviewers, mysterious objects appear which are believed to influence the employees' working capacity. These objects were found on a planet called New Discovery and fluctuate between inorganic, stone-like entities and pulsating living organisms. In *The Employees*, the lines between human and non-human are constantly blurred. The reader cannot tell apart human and non-human respondents, as the humanoids are able to imitate and appropriate almost every human reaction and emotion. At the end of the novel, the humanoids start to isolate themselves from the humans and become increasingly menacing. This leads to the eruption of violence against the interviewers, which ultimately serves as a pretext for the termination of all life onboard. The longest surviving humanoids descend to New Discovery to complete their mission – before succumbing to their inevitable death hours later.

Employing similar tactics as the World State, the company strives for total transparency of the crew. Its vision of vulnerability involves a closed society under surveillance, there being no space on board that remains out of the company's reach. Apart from installing cameras and using crew members as spies, the company conducts and censors interviews, thereby strengthening its power and emphasizing its privileged position in knowledge production (Fricker 2007, 13). Emotional bonds among the crew members are forbidden. To keep the possibility of a revolt to a minimum, some human employees are provided with holograms of their children. The employees' names are rarely used; meanwhile, their rank and position in the spaceship-hierarchy are of paramount importance, echoing the societal organization in *Kallocain*. Every sign of individuality is considered a hindrance to the corporation's productivity. In terms of communicability, the employees, very much like the citizens of the World State, are passive subjects of communication. In contrast to the World State's use of an injected drug, however, the corporation relies on a more conventional capitalist practice, the compilation of a company report (Kraglund 2019, 89). Although the report-format implies a two-way conversation, this is not the case. The individuals who conduct the interviews remain opaque, as their questions are withheld from the readers and can only be reconstructed from the redacted answers. The interviewers exploit the answers of the employees with one goal in sight: productivity increase.

Similarly to the World State, the company treats vulnerability as an undesirable set of qualities, creating an environment of oppression, control and obedience.

Instead of questioning the imperatives of productivity and efficiency and thus acknowledging the fragility of its own economic system, the company resorts to denial. It paints an image of an indestructible entity that serves a higher ideal, extending humanity into a post-Earth future. However, this invincibility is gradually exposed as a mere facade throughout the narrative. One of the interviewers retorts: "You shouldn't take it for granted that people agree to be interviewed here. […] Your voices are friendly, your clothes are black, and from your sleeves your soft, writing hands protrude. The pores in the skin make them look so fragile, as if one could caress them and at the same time carefully peel the skin away, and it would hurt you" (Ravn 2020, St. 115). The fragility of the mortal body implies its possible fragmentation and destruction. This insight, made by a humanoid, culminates in the murder of one of the interviewers. The humanoid responsible for their death says: "I regret that one of you was killed in the process. It wasn't our intention that anyone should die" (St. 118). Shocked by their physical self-assertion, the corporation resorts to the "politics of the strong" (Bayramoğlu and Castro Varela 2021, 28) – by opting for a complete and deadly shutdown of the operation.

Faced with its exposed fragility, the corporation's exclusionary tactics play out in two phases. Firstly, the company orders the complete dismantling of the humanoid part of the crew. When this fails, the management calls for a final violent act, the termination of all life aboard the spaceship: human crew members are killed, the humanoids rebooted. The last words are articulated by an older model of humanoids, whose shutdown lasts several days. Their testimonies, placed at the end of the novel, lack enumeration and point at the organization's partial failure (or unwillingness) to impose its order. This narrative decision addresses the possibility of an existence outside of the totalizing, efficiency-driven corporation. The unnumbered statements are devoid of an interviewer's voice, as the recording machines were left on before their death. For once unsuppressed by the interviewers' questions, the humanoids decide themselves what they are going to say, experiencing an unprecedented level of self-determination: "And you're dead too. Your bodies are lying here" (Ravn 2020, Appendix 1). The dead bodies of the interviewers, the final manifestation of fragmented corporeality, point towards a failed experiment. They also mark a sudden lack of coercive power, leading to a rupture in the power structure.

A changing power structure shapes the last part of the novel. The conscious decision of the humanoids and their free self-articulation contrasts with the interviewees who, earlier in the narrative, lacked agency to do so. This becomes especially clear when read against the first page of the novel: "*The following statements were collected* […] *with a view to gaining insight into how they* [the employees] *related to the objects*" (I). The humanoid's statement contradicts the original goal of the company to strive for complete overview and transparency. It allows readers to glimpse an alternative in which the non-human longs for a peaceful relationship with the environment of New Discovery (Wennerscheid 2023, 221): "[W]e wish to spend our final time in the valley, where flowers and trees have begun to grow forth out of the soil and

the thrusting plants have pushed various objects to the surface, where they now lie scattered about in the moist earth" (Ravn 2020, Appendix 3). The visit to the valley only lasts several hours. Despite such brevity, this interval sees significant development playing out among the humanoid crew, and offers the glimpse of an alternative to the corporation's neoliberal and extractive system. Throughout the novel, there is a consensus that the humanoids are immortal and therefore do not comprehend the concept of death. This idea is articulated by one of the humanoids after the murder of the interviewer: "We don't really understand death, since we ourselves can't be destroyed and will go on regenerating" (St. 118). After achieving freedom to wander on New Discovery, a humanoid appropriates what was hitherto seen as a solely human feature: "We've talked about the risk that in committing ourselves to this decision we might not be re-uploaded, and this we accept" (Appendix 3). The acceptance of one's own finality can only emerge outside of the coercive power wielded by the totalitarian corporation, where the subject's "relation to death" (Hägglund 2019, 4) and to other beings becomes apparent.

FRAGILITY AND VULNERABILITY AS A CONDITION OF THE PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

As I have argued, the totalitarian systems rendered in *Kallocain* and *The Employees* disintegrate due to their unwillingness to accept their own fragilities. The World State aims to eradicate its suspected enemies, while the company in *The Employees* attempts, through an interview report, to increase the productivity and efficiency of the spaceship's crew. Both endeavors originate in a desire to achieve complete emotional and intellectual transparency of the individual. In both novels, the plea for a new vision of vulnerability lies in the shadows of totalitarian control. In *Kallocain*, the unique aspect of the desert society is that its members join voluntarily. Within this community, the focus is on the ritualization of the fragile human body, whose mortality is highlighted by the contaminated surroundings of the desert ruins. In *The Employees*, which portrays the alternative vulnerability less explicitly, the reader gets a glimpse of a possible change in the attitude towards mortality. Provocatively, this change is articulated in a post-human framework, an aspect that sets the novel apart from *Kallocain*. Only after the humanoids have acknowledged their vulnerability, a radically different future can emerge.

The reason for the continuing interest in *Kallocain* lies in its focus on the fragile relationship between humans and their natural environment, affirming the novel's status as a predecessor to dystopian, utopian, and ecocritical literature of the 20th century. Most obviously, this is shown in George Orwell's *1984* (1949), but also in experimental science fiction texts, such as Harry Martinson's poem *Aniara* (1956), which relates the story of a spaceship that departs from the war-ravaged Earth and loses the course on its way to Mars. Regardless of its positive notion of humanity, the poem represents a bridge connecting Karin Boye's texts with Olga Ravn's *The Employees*, adding further evidence for the abundant tradition of Scandinavian dystopian and science fiction. In offering a glimpse of radically different futures, readers are asked to participate in imagining a world beyond totalitarianism. Such visions encompass

the start of a new society, throwing the stories' protagonists into unknown, possibly dangerous territories. They invite readers to "keep faith with what offers no guarantee" (Hägglund 2019, 377). After having explored the limitations of the systems that seemed indestructible at first, we can concentrate on building a periphery opposed to the centralizing, oppressive power, however futile it may turn out to be.

NOTES

[1] Among the numerous publications on peace, two notable handbooks can be named: Hampson, Özerdem, and Kent (2020) and Gießmann and Rinke (2011).

[2] Kaewert (2023) and Kempter and Engelbrecht (2021).

[3] Even the thinkers of the Enlightenment were torn on the topic of war. Andres Behnke points out that in Immanuel Kant's discussion of war, there is a clear ambiguity. While he mentioned its strengthening effect on populations, he simultaneously recognized the destruction it wrought on humanity (2012, 251).

[4] Both novels have been examined through an ecocritical lens, as researchers emphasized their shared concern on forging an innovative relationship between humans and non-human entities (Wennerscheid 2023).

[5] Original: "[…] im nicht auflösbaren Bezug zu spezifischen sozialen, kulturellen, historischen und gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhängen und individuellen Erfahrungen […]" (Dederich and Zirfas 2022, 4) Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German, Danish and Swedish are my own.

[6] Considering it laid the groundwork for the classical dystopian genre and the fact, that it was published nine years before George Orwell's *1984* (1949), the international obscurity of Boye's highly influential novel is astonishing (see also Gammelgaard 2023, 436–437).

[7] In the following, I consider the World State an obscure decision-maker that places citizens in a vulnerable position. In doing so, I aim to do justice to Karin Boye's depiction of a highly diffuse political entity that appears unapproachable, and whose structure remains in the dark for the main protagonist Leo Kall.

[8] The name Rissen implies the German word "*Riss*" ("Rupture"). Considering Boye's time spent in Berlin in the 1930s, this wording is hardly a coincidence.

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