

## **Revisiting *This Girl is on Fire: Seeking a Home for the Narrative* during darkness of lock down to uncover the burning embers**

This paper relates the author's insights about writing as inquiry that emerged whilst reading *This Girl is on Fire: Seeking a Home for the Narrative* during lock down. It describes how the contemplative and expansive space of this narrative resonates with the in-between feeling of being locked down during a pandemic. Writing to inquire within in-between spaces is vital for exploring the rich and vibrant possibilities of the unknown.

### **The possibility of in-between spaces**

Pent-up energy bubbles under the surface, demanding to be released. It spills over into my day, waking me up with the setting sun and leaving me feeling slightly off-kilter. I fidget till late evening, restless and unsure of whether to turn off the lights or to continue working. *How much is enough and when is it okay to stop?* This uncertainty about where to draw the line has escalated in the post-pandemic world. Job insecurity has intensified despite almost two years having passed, with full-time and tenured staff now being heavily targeted (Littleton & Stanford, 2021). With a greatly reduced staff, our faculty has become a house of cards and the smallest breeze could topple us over. This recent upheaval has uprooted notions of security and certainty, leading me to question the work I had once whole-heartedly pursued.

The restlessness can be traced back to the monotony of lock down life. Any joy of anticipation is lost as our scope of physical movement narrows. Each day mirrors the one before and after in an endless stream repetitive activity. Although this lock down will have lasted for more than a hundred days, it appears to have gone on for an eternity. Respite looms in the near distance with only a week remaining, but the anxiety of simultaneously working full-time and home-schooling two little children seems to have permanently short-circuited my brain. Distracted by the constant interruptions, greater effort is needed to focus. Not surprisingly, my listless eyes linger over the headline '*Life a waking coma: overcoming languishing in the age of COVID*', and I note how widely spread this feeling of disparateness has become (Elliot, 2014). The tag line 'Few plans, little pleasure: the era's sense of ennui' exposes the shared sentiments of our locked down condition (Elliot, 2014). The absence of anticipatory pleasure creates a gaping abyss that leaves us in a limbo, and buried within its deafening silence, vitality is lost.

Vibrant and nourishing connections can feel rare in lock down since much of our interactions take place online. Poor internet connections have created lags in the conversation, and people continue haplessly cutting each other off as words and facial expressions are delayed. Senses become dull with the ongoing lack of physical interaction and inertia settles. It is easier to close off our microphone and camera to shut ourselves away from the gaze of others. Knowing that I can hide myself away reassures because life has become chaotic. I find myself frequently needing to mute my children's rambunctious voices that echo down the corridor, as well as the noise of balls hitting hard wooden floors. The desire not to give myself away exacerbates the loneliness, but by sitting slightly apart from the others and kept separate from the action, I also become free to observe what unfolds. The distance that forms as I step back from the conversation allows me to notice the connects and synchronicity, as well as the disconnects and the lack of fluidity. My current state of alienation draws my gaze towards dissonance, driving me to search the faces on the screen to make sense of the friction that pervades our *locked down* lives.

Inner turmoil heightens this awareness of discord. Each new day brings about the buildup of noise signaling that my children have become off task, which creates a tension that I cannot resolve. *Someone* needs to redirect their attention back onto their schooling, but that same *someone* is sitting inside another room with her door closed, trying to shut out their loud voices. I briefly unmute myself to move the conversation forward, silently urging, *just say what you need to and move on*. Remorse

immediately follows as I fear causing offense. It is difficult to relay my intent. *It is not you, but me. The world is caving in.* The vacuous online space has unmasked my vulnerability, as well as my lack of patience. I question what I am doing ‘in here’ when my primary responsibilities lie ‘out there’ supervising my children. This stream of busy activity distresses, leaving me curious about how others may be faring. It is a desolate time with staff targeted for redundancy and others barely clinging onto their jobs as they struggle with home-schooling. Despite the variations in our experience, our isolation remains the same. We sit alone in our make-shift home offices, trying to carry on despite everything. I peer into the faces on my screen, observing the mixed expressions, the changing light within eyes that absorb or register meaning, the parting of lips that signal the desire to contribute something, the shoulders that curl as an indication of growing fatigue, and the eyes that dart across the screen revealing distractedness. I sit, taking in these small bodily expressions, thinking about the words spoken and the messages felt by the body, noting how we are alone despite our shared experiences. Together, but set apart, we float within in-between spaces.

In-between spaces can feel unsettling since they appear neither here nor there. There is a sense of separation from the unfolding action and of being kept in a holding space until the clock starts again. Lock down has become such a space as our sense of normality has been disrupted. A similar feeling of displacement can be felt in the vacuous spaces of an online meeting because it becomes so easy to disengage. Often in larger meetings, we can conveniently turn off our camera and microphone and let our minds wander. Our focus gravitates towards the multiple tabs left open on our screen, and away from the stilted conversations that jar our consciousness. There is still so much to do. *Where do you start? What is important?* Working from home during lock down forms one such in-between space of uncertainty. Not only are we distracted by numerous tasks, but we also seem to be constantly waiting for something. We wait for lock down measures to lift so that we can travel out of our local area to visit family and friends, to attend school and go to work to sit down at a park and to enjoy a meal away from home. We wait to regain some semblance of our former lives and for lock down to become a story of the past. These moments do not contain any memorable encounters that locate us in time; instead, they form the vacant spaces of a life placed on pause. We dismiss such moments because they seem to contain little joy and purpose. We do not wish to remain unmoored in these in-between spaces because we fear floating too far away.

Despite wishing to skip and fast-forward these unsettling in-between moments, I write about them to explore their hidden possibilities. In-between spaces are fluid and dynamic, and because they lack rigid boundaries and nothing is set, anything becomes possible. Such unfocused vision emancipates us from predetermined views or notions, “open[ing] up new realms of vision and thought” (Pallasmaa, 2012, p. 40). Lugli (1986) accordingly relates how this fluid space in-between can be “an intermediate, highly particular state akin to a sort of suspension between ignorance and enlightenment, which marks the end of unknowing and the beginning of knowing” (p.123). He depicts these *in-between* spaces as the beginning of new consciousness. Within the shadows and dim light of in-between spaces, it is possible to daydream and to imagine (Pallasmaa, 2012). The new consciousness that emerges during the darkness of lock down accordingly embodies equally creative, vibrant and dynamic possibilities.

### **Writing the in-between spaces to uncover mystery**

Writing to inquire within in-between or disrupted spaces is to find new possibility. Disruptions can derail an automatic and mindless existence, allowing us to break the chain of monotony to uncover an alternate melody. Consciousness can expand when unconscious rhythms are broken to enable more spontaneous and dynamic variations. This desire to find colour and vibrance can increase during lock down because life becomes functional rather than pleasurable. We can only leave the house for *essential* activities, which means everything *non-essential* is stripped away. Writing to inquire within this context is to find a way to break away from the ennui of a functional existence and to uncover

vitality within our everyday experiences. Narratives of lived encounters are particularly revitalizing as they evoke our sense of wonder and alert us to the mysteries within seemingly ordinary encounters.

Narratives are restorative; they can connect us to deeper forms of meaning when we feel adrift. Narratives provide us with the lay of the land, allowing us to chart our progress through life and to imagine possible future paths. A narrative can flow smoothly since the critical mind is not awakened. It aligns with our natural sense making patterns, so that we can draw together random and inchoate experiences into larger and more meaningful units (Bruner, 1990). To listen to a story is to become a part of a telling or to enter an alternate universe. Tell me a story and I become a child, unencumbered by what is and cannot be. The spaces of a story bring me back to a state of childlike wonder, reminding me of life's fantastical possibilities. A story is an expansive space that paradoxically draws me closer to myself, whilst simultaneously connecting me to something much larger. These are the sensations evoked by Gorman's (2019) *This Girl is on Fire: Seeking a Home for the Narrative*. When revisiting her story through the dim light of lock down, it is possible to enter a contemplative place. Awareness expands to generate new insights about what it means to be *locked down* both in body and mind. Gorman (2019) reflects on how our canonical memories and stories can take on new meaning when revisited through an expansive lens. Her story unmask the rigid borders that limit and imprison, such as the superficial perspectives that discount the intangible and mysterious.

Disruptions can free us from the known so that we can experience the unknown. The unknown precedes knowing; it cannot be skipped over and we need to pass through it to reach new understanding. Writing to inquire is to embrace these undefined in-between spaces of unknowing and to shape meaning in an infinite number of ways. This intuitive sense-making path reflects the inherently mysterious passage of our lives, as Goodall (2001) reflects:

For this reason, I see communication as the method people use to work out the mysteries and problems in their lives. But I also understand those mysteries and problems as part and parcel of a larger dramatic action, a bigger mystery, a movement from something toward something else (p.5).

Narratives can capture unfolding mystery. Gorman's (2019) account of caring for a terminally ill ballerina as an early career nurse, depicts how mystery can be revealed through the wisdom of passing years. She senses the stirrings of universal wisdom within this memory, writing, "This is a story of interwoven commonality among women, of inquiry and rediscovery" (p. 164). She weaves a narrative that features the characters of Gorman in her early nursing years and as an experienced academic and nurse practitioner, Mary, a 94-year-old former ballerina, and Kathleen, a senior hospice nurse. Through reflecting on the care Kathleen gives to Mary on her deathbed, she can develop a deeper affinity with our shared humanity. Gorman (2019) marvels at the care and devotion evoked by vulnerability and contemplates the wisdom acquired through the "expanse of years" (pp. 163-164). She expresses insights that take a lifetime to come into being, which are made even more beautiful and timeless for their transience. Her story reveals how such paradoxical *truths* can only be encompassed through the rich medium of stories. Gorman's (2019) account demonstrates how stories allow us to walk in the shoes of others to teach us about ourselves and who we ultimately desire to become.

To read Gorman's (2019) words is to walk in her shoes. This experience comforts because it sheds light on my yearning to know, feel, and understand. Like Gorman (2019), I write to make sense of my encounters and to escape the ennui of being *locked down*. The beauty of her poetic prose awakens my dormant senses and stirs my imagination; it is the sunlight that breaks through the clouds after endless days of rain. When describing the former ballerina's proud beauty, she relates how her "Clear blue eyes [that] belied her age and remained her only form of expressive connection. In the final throes of dementia, she remained almost haughty, aloof—a finely sculpted artist with patrician nose and proud cheekbones" (Gorman, 2019, p. 163). From her description, I can perceive the beauty in the former

dancer's fragile body to understand how time lays waste to the bloom of youth. As I imagine Mary's body, I see faint traces of my various selves that encompass ". . . something of the woman I used to be" and the one that I am becoming (p.163). To imagine myself in the body of a much older woman is to dwell upon the aging process that unifies us all. Gorman (2019)'s narrative conveys how such deep understandings about the human condition are embodied since the "full metabolism" of understanding, which is felt so intensely that it becomes visceral (p.164).

A vibrant narrative can resonate on many levels. Now that I am locked down in my house, I crave rich stories of lived encounters like air and water. It is the sustenance that keeps my inspiration and vitality alive. Gorman's (2019) paper sheds light on an equanimity that softens the hard edges of lock down. Lock down has deepened the hair-line cracks around my struggle with work life balance and my confusion about my academic identity. The gendered task of caregiving rests primarily on my shoulders and the tensions of being the main caregiver and homemaker, full time worker, and now teacher, threatens to overwhelm. I subsequently feel relief when reading about Gorman's (2019) initial reluctance at being associated to nursing due to her gender, as she relates, "Still defined by second-wave feminist certainty, I backed away when they told me I would 'make a wonderful nurse.'" The societal conformity of my new marriage, with all its gender laden implications, already chafed" (p. 163). The gender laden implications of being a mother and an academic during lock down equally chafes, and my skin feels raw, worn down by the endless demands and distraction of small children whose attention spans flutter about like little butterflies. Trying to fulfill the care-giving role of motherhood, as well as my professional workload, has exacerbated my fears of not being able to measure up. It has evoked endless guilt. Gorman (2019) brings my attention to the forces that *chafe*, shedding insight into the ways we can remain *locked down* due to our limiting thoughts.

Disruptions, such as the pandemic, reveal the inner walls that lock us in. Narrow preconceptions and a mindlessly automatic life form the walls that imprison, but when disrupted, their presence becomes visible. The loss of the old creates a vacuum in space, leaving us in a limbo until we can find alternative frameworks to guide us. The post-pandemic higher education landscape appears as such a transient space that needs to be endured until life returns to normal. We dismiss this period, thinking that there is nothing to gain from it because we are locked down, incapacitated and unable to act or respond freely. Viewing in-between spaces in this way, however, causes us to miss out on the opportunities buried within them. Writing to inquire within undefined spaces, such as the pandemic, involves looking beyond the devastation and disruption to see hidden opportunities. It is to explore such moments for their rich possibilities.

Staying fixed in old ways is to remain locked down and closed off from the fresh breeze that rejuvenates. The belief that tenure equates to security has been one such false assumption that has locked me into a mindless path of chasing success. These beliefs have come from observing the prestigious careers of older colleagues who seemed to move effortlessly through their professional milestones. The post-pandemic landscape with its massive staffing cuts, however, has disrupted this smooth academic trajectory, revealing that there is no such thing as security and certainty. The academic terrain continues to be filled with uncertainty and increased pragmatism. Limited time is accounted for through instrumental outputs, and as time becomes quantified, life becomes equally functional. There is little space to engage in creative and intrinsically meaningful work because it requires slower and more contemplative time, and we subsequently forgo our desires for pleasure and purpose. Gorman (2019) relates how engaging in such a mechanistic approach forms a denial of one's own truth. She depicts a formative encounter in her early nursing career, in which fails to accept the precious gifts that Mary leaves her at her death bed; she expresses remorse for not "act[ing] in accordance with a higher truth which privileges relationship . . . [nor] . . . honor [her] intuition," sensing that she had "violated the best of what nursing should be—a natural and reciprocal relationship of care" (p. 165). She had failed to take Mary's gifts at the time because she believed this to be unethical. Decades later, she can revisit this memory through a more expansive lens to

understand how *true* meaning of ethical practice resides in relationships. Her story reminds us to honour our higher *truths* rather than to conform to the expectations of others.

After “decades of stumbling,” we may finally develop the eyes to see these higher *truths*. Gorman (2019) demonstrates this growing awareness as she relates her confusion after spending 16 years working in an institution that minimises the relational and care-giving work of teaching. After decades of nursing and teaching other aspiring nurses, she realises that her conceptions of value were too hastily drawn, stating, “I discovered that service based on tenderness and compassion does not denigrate feminism. Indeed it opens us to a fuller understanding of the commonality of women’s experience” (p. 164). She reveals how passing time can deepen one’s outlook to reveal what was previously hidden, as by reflecting on her inability to accept Mary’s gifts decades later, Gorman (2019) can understand how nursing’s true value resides in a “stripped-down, raw-to-the-bone relationship” that once emerged through the parting gifts of a dying woman (p.165). She alerts us to how understanding emerges within the “semidarkness when mortality looms large and passions rekindle briefly” (p. 165). Writing through this lens of mortality is to become unburdened by the practicalities of living; it is to write words that flow with *truth* (Cixous, 1993).

To read a narrative through the lens of lock down is to appreciate its nuanced meaning. Separated from the action, we are free to observe what unfolds from a more expansive space. We can no longer mindlessly move onto the next task as the known world disappears, and we become free to consider new possibilities. As our awareness of impermanence and transience grows, we can also become open to a fluidity that invites movement from all directions. Awareness seeps into Gorman’s (2019) consciousness, bringing my attention to the *hastily drawn* conclusions in my life. The pressure to publish academic papers, for instance, has often led me to minimise creative work because it does not conform to external measures of success. Gorman (2019) expresses similar concerns, relating how easy it is to “wonder about the intrinsic worth of one’s narrative” in environments that do not support (p.164). To redraw such *hastily drawn* or externally driven discourses is to rewrite them through one’s own understandings of value and worth. Gorman’s (2019) words resonate powerfully because it hints at the expansive possibilities forgotten during lock down. Such insights evolve about my own writing journey as I read her account during an in-between space.

“Writing closes circles” (p. 164).

To close a circle is “more than an act of atonement” (p.165).

It is to find beauty and *truth* in our everyday moments.

Such revelations may emerge in the stark light of mortality,

“only after decades of stumbling,”

They are made “more precious for their impermanence,”

and bound to time through the poetic (p.165).

When floating within in-between spaces, we desire to find an anchor to ground us. The insights above provide such an anchor and remind me of the *whys* and *hows* of writing in academia. Narratives of lived experiences can form such a guiding compass by reminding us of what holds enduring value, and from Gorman’s (2019) account, we can see how value is held within moments of atonement, in which light shines brightly from the darkness. Gorman (2019) expresses the paradoxical beauty of a fragile ballerina whose mortality elicits a timeless care and devotion from others. Light can shine within darkness, as Peterson (2021) notes, “peering into the darkness as deeply as possible reveals a light that appears unquenchable” (p. 549). A physical death, for example, can reveal the unquenchable light of the spirit, which becomes increasingly visible as the body grows weaker. Our most redemptive and noble qualities can additionally emerge as we transcend the darkness of suffering. Gorman’s poetic descriptions relay how beauty may be forgotten when life becomes functional and the non-essential is trimmed away, revealing how what is deemed most *expendable* may be the compass that guides us, as Peterson (2021) declares, “Beauty beckons in a manner that straightens your aim” (p. 352). Rather than skipping over in-between or uncertain moments, or waiting for these

periods to be over, we need to honour them for their mystery (Gorman, 2019). Such *truths* are conceived to be beautiful, since *truth* resides in beauty (Gorman, 2019). To perceive the beauty of *truth* in lock down is to see the light that exists within its darkness, and to uncover the ways that writing can atone by enabling greater clarity.

### **Writing to bind in-between spaces to time**

We write about the mysteries that unfold within in-between spaces to bind them to time, but to craft our unfolding revelations, an equally expansive and versatile sight is required (Vannini & Vannini, 2020). Writing as inquiry forms one such subtle mode that encompasses the poetic and embodied. Indeed, our accounts of lived moments reflect this itinerant and wayfaring nature of understanding by allowing us to express knowing as it emerges, demonstrating how we “think through making” and become answerable to the “fluxes and flows of the materials” (Ingold, 2013, p. 6). Gorman’s (2019) intuitive craftsmanship is equally evident through the rhythmic flow or cadence of her words. Cadence shapes the flow of words. It carries the writer’s intent or voice and forms the “drumbeats that . . . [signal] [how] how the writing is to be read” (Jackson, 2003, p. 16). Cadence reveals the rise and fall of voice and its rhythmic and animated movement (SuperSummary, n.d., para 1). This flow of evolving meaning is captured through carefully placed commas that adds rhythm to her prose. Words fall into our consciousness like drops of water. . . *relationships*. . . *intellectually*. . . *on a more visceral level*. . . *digesting* . . . to form a bridge into her emotional world:

Relationship, I tell them, is the essence of practice. Intellectually, I have always believed this. On a more visceral level, full metabolism has been slower in coming. I am still digesting what these experiences teach. (Gorman, 2019, p. 164).

Shifting form allows us to disrupt everyday conceptions, and by altering lines of sight, we can reconfigure our sentences (Cixous, 1998/2005). Novel representations can heighten our awareness by making some details prominent, whilst causing us to skip over others, triggering “unforeseen ways of being, thinking, feeling, and knowing” (Bridges-Rhoads, Hughes, & Van Cleave, 2018, p. 817). Gorman (2019) equally shapes our thought patterns by using punctuation to convey the passage of leisurely meandering thought. As she reminisces about her early nursing years, she relates, “[I] walked the halls suffused in wonder. The longevity of the residents amazed me; the average age was 92. Still in my late twenties, my imagination strained to consider such an expanse of years” (p. 163). Understanding is relayed through short clauses that convey emerging wonder; like small waves, one thought after another ensues in rapid succession, mirroring the intuitive sense-making process. Alternatively, when Gorman (2019) recollects her observations of Mary’s painful final moments, her words become staccato, as she writes, “Pain relief remained a challenge almost to the end of Mary’s life” and “Pride was also a formidable obstacle” (p. 163). Under the stark lens of mortality, she is a matter of fact. She notes that pain relief is a challenge, and pride is a formidable obstacle. We cannot flee from pain. Pride is a vice. Her concise arrangement of words heightens our awareness of poignancy, demonstrating how unadorned words do not detract nor flood our senses. When Gorman (2019) chooses not to accept Mary’s gift of gold bracelets, she slips them into a plastic bag along with the “the toothbrush she no longer needed” (p. 164). She relays stark truths intuited in the darkness through simple but vivid descriptions. To no longer require a toothbrush suggests the lack of tomorrows. In the body’s absence, we can perceive what endures.

Intuition makes it possible to discern deeper poetic understandings. Poetic words convey the ontological; they embody first principles about universal matters that reflect the rich and indeterminate nature of life (Dictionary. Com, n.d.). They can capture the nuanced emotions of an older woman such as Mary, who recollects the vibrance and passion of her youth, acknowledging, “When I was younger, I was on fire . . .” and her eyes looked past me (Gorman, 2019, p. 164). Such words are suggestive and can convey the anticipation of pleasure (Lea, 2012). They allow us to look past or beyond to uncover the presence of hidden beauty so that we can appreciate and behold, rather

than objectify or plunder. To look upon beauty is to perceive what endures; it is to become immeasurably enriched.

### **Moving on from in-between spaces**

In-between spaces are transitory. They form the moments before what is yet to come, acting as a bridge between the old and the new, but what are these places that we transition to and from? Peterson (2021) describes them as the ones we know, the ones we don't know and the ones that we find even difficult to conceive of. He describes the spaces *that we know* as the ones we inhabit "pragmatically and conceptually," which are different from those that lie beyond lie on or outside the borders of understanding (p. 331). Alternatively, the unknown paradoxically evokes the excitement of discovery and the pain of uncertainty. Both these states are present within the in-betweenness of post-pandemic academia because old ways are no longer possible, but as the everyday becomes disrupted, we can break free from the ties that bind us.

*So, how should we go about our day when lock down ends?* Our natural inclination may be to prepare for the next class, research project or publication and to mindlessly climb the pinnacle of success. To be a *successful* academic is to maintain a trajectory of achievements, but what lasting value does this have? There is tension when extrinsic notions of value do not correlate with internal ones. To write and inquire about our life experiences is to align oneself to the latter. It is to discern value through latter or the lens of one's own story, as Gorman (2019) asks herself, "Telling this now, years later, also raises the question: does any of this matter? And if it does, where is its proper place?" (2019, p. 164). She invites us to rewrite our stories of past encounters to uncover their inherent or enduring qualities. Our work subsequently continues to hold value by revitalising our lives and those of others; it is not the discarded toothbrush that holds no relevance to life beyond.

With only a week remaining of lock down remaining, I reflect on what it means to be locked down. Although our physical lock down may lift, I wonder about how we may remain *locked down* by practices or thoughts that robs us of our creativity and vitality. To revisit Gorman's narrative through the lens of a physical lock down is to grasp the emotional and intellectual ways that we may remain *locked down*. I question the rigidities that lock down my academic work, fearing that once the university opens its doors, natural forces of inertia may pull me back onto well-trodden paths. Re-entering the world also causes trepidation since I have remained at home for so long. I hesitate from undertaking new work, mindful that by choosing one direction, I may close off other opportunities. Peterson (2021) ponders this marvel of life, acknowledging how making a choice reduces a multitude to a "singular actuality of reality" and "bring[s] the world from becoming into Being" (p.393). By stepping out of in-between spaces and engaging with the world, we are in fact actualising our narrative. Our daily interactions subsequently become creative acts of self-affirmation that form the rich tapestries of our lives. So, how has this in-between space of being in lock down during a pandemic impacted us? Has it broken down fixed frames so that we can emerge lighter, freer and with a fire that burns brighter?

In my conversations with academic colleagues who have lost their tenured positions because of the pandemic, I have become surprised by the hope that stirs amongst their anger and sadness. After the initial burst of frustration subsides, they speak of creative projects in soft and breathy tones of excitement. New worlds have opened as carefully planned futures fall away, and in this shifting terrain, imagination allows them to uncover unforeseen paths. Alienation ensues from the loss of an envisioned future, but there is also a lightness of being emancipated from the known. Frank and honest conversations arise from this liminal in-between space, as unsure of how much longer they will remain in academia, my colleagues choose not to focus on pragmatic or superficial matters. Instead, we talk openly and honestly about the work that sparks our imagination and gives us pleasure and joy. Writing about our lived experiences of lock down and the pandemic is to continue engaging in such conversations. It is to explore disruptive moments for how they cultivate our capacity to *look beyond*

and enhance our scope of possibility. To write to inquire about moments of upheaval and turmoil is to write in ways that atone. It is to find the brightness of creative vision within the dim light of our daydreams; it is to break free from the ennui of a functional existence so that we can uncover the beauty that is *truth*.



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