
Introduction

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Introduction

Patricia Clough and Jasbir Puar

Wall Street; Madison, Wisconsin; Spain; Egypt; Greece; and London—the sites continue to proliferate—offer examples of what has been tagged a viral politics protesting a viral capitalism. Although this is a recent and spectacular instance of the viral, there are the repeating and more ordinary ones. Fear-raising reports of the threat of biological terrorism that at any moment might go viral are released with some regularity; in Fall 2011, the *New York Times Magazine* led with a story about the 2001 anthrax attacks that announced, “We are still not ready.” Nor does a week go by without some study claiming to document the loss of our ability to think logically because of our susceptibility, if not addiction, to digital media, the form of which is more affective than its content. One only has to turn to books like David Weinberger’s *Too Big To Know* (2012) to read how the web’s structure is destroying the institutions of knowledge production as we have known them. If social protests, the structure of digital media, and threats of terrorist attacks on the health and welfare of nations can all be described in viral terms, this special issue of *WSQ* would propose that the viral has itself *gone viral*. The “viral” has come to describe a form of communication and transmission in and across various and varying domains: the biological, the cultural, the financial, the political, the linguistic, the technical, and the computational.

But what is contagious about the social protests of today, or infectious about threats of biological terrorism, or addictive about the form of digital media is not so much about the transfer of messages or ideologies, or the production of a singular solidarity or a clearly defined collectivity, but

rather the process of transformation. The viral is transformative; it has an open-ended relation to form itself. In this sense, the viral takes on characteristics, albeit selectively, which usually are attributed to the virus. At play is the virus's ability to change itself as it replicates and disseminates, or what Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker refer to as the virus's capacity for "replication and cryptography" (2007). In its replications, the virus does not remain the same, nor does that which it confronts and transits through. Viral replication swerves from the performative "repetition with a difference"; it is replication without reproduction, without fidelity, without durability. It is this generative differentiation that is repeated. It is the repetition that *is* the difference, the difference that *counts* and that is expressed numerically in code as "a continual replication of numerical difference." The virus, it might be said, seeks out code as its medium. It is through code that the virus performs its mutation in and across species, as well as all technical platforms or domains.

While the viral may differ from the virus in that the former seems only to signal exuberant capacities of rapid replication and distribution without the capacity for mutation accorded the latter, nonetheless, the difference between the viral and the virus is not one of opposition, a point explored by Zack Blas in this issue. Rather, the characteristics of the virus, we would argue, serve as a threshold, an horizon against and alongside which virality takes its action. There is the becoming of the virus in the viral. Or to put it another way, the viral seeks to be an infecting form, to have the virus's capacity for mutation, its sensitivity to the timing of repetition, the rhythm of the speeds of repetition, and the resonances of its numerical vibrations. As such, the viral has invited economic, political, social, and cultural investment in new processes of quantification that would allow code to be applied to what Luciana Parisi has described as "the full densely packed zones of information that are the intensive surrounds of zero and one," or the seemingly infinite series of numbers between zero and one. These processes of quantification enable a "numerical variability, which remains computationally open." (2009, 363).

Providing code with a computational openness may only further erase differences between the viral and the virus; quantification that is computationally open allows "active and passive parasitic forces" to inform measure, so that measure can measure where "stability is mobile, directed by vectors of attraction and repulsion" (2009, 364). Here, however, measure only modulates or affects what already is mobile; it affects a self-affecting

or self-infecting numerical variability. With the viral, measure and all its relata—values, norms, if not reality, truth, and objectivity—become a matter of modulation, not relative but affected and affecting. In relationship to the viral, measure becomes speculative in its aim; it activates, if it does not preempt, futurity and potentiality in probing for the not-yet-calculated, the excess incalculability in calculation. Measure is no longer representational or if representational, representation functions as modulation.

In its effect on subjectivity, memory, desire, and history, virality suggests a move away from identity; it is a move away from those sorts of representational forms or strategies that privilege interiority, depth, and integrity. Virality proposes its own strategy of creativity in its being attracted to or aligned with what Gilles Deleuze called the “virtual.” As Heather Lukes suggests in this issue, the viral binds representation to virtuality. As such, the viral returns measure to the aesthetic in that aesthetic measure is a singular, or what we have called a “subjective,” measure, one, that like the virus, changes its metric or perspective with each measure or modulation, allowing measure to probe again and again for the incalculable excess of calculation. Thus the subjective perspective of aesthetic measure does not refer specifically to the human subject. With the viral, aesthetic measure goes beyond human perception, consciousness, and cognition, drawn to a futurity or potentiality that today is an object of political, cultural, economic, and technical contention.¹ If the virus can invoke anxieties about trespassing borders, the containment of contagion, or failure thereof, the viral can instigate a panic around measure or measuring that takes us beyond human perception, consciousness, and cognition to the incalculable or the yet-to-be-calculated. Yet both the virus and the viral also signal a positivity in the conviviality of the numerical and the virtual, the calculable and the aesthetic, the bodily and the technological, the inorganic and organic, the living and the nonliving. The viral brings a porosity of boundaries, with the ease of crossing them, or the requisite to cross them with the expectation of transformation. Indeed it is not surprising that in biotechnological circles, for one, it is suggested that metaphors for describing our relationship with infectious agents be more ecologically informed, taking into account the microbes on our skin, in our guts, and in our mucous membranes, how these are more often protective rather than destructive. They are part of us as well as of the biosphere. Recent reports indicate that very old viruses, some called Mimi, once reproduced without

a host and were even the condition of possibility for the development of the genome.

This shift in seeing the virus and the viral as life giving as well as central to communication and transmission might suggest that the viral is becoming what Deleuze (1988) referred to as “diagrammatic,” thus, informing strategies of practice across governing, economic, and social formations. Writing about the viral as diagrammatic, Jussi Parikka has proposed that virality is a specific mode of action that is crossing institutions, contexts, and scales and is “inherently connected to the complex, non-linear order of a network society” (2007). This network is not a stable structure, but can be seen as an active principle for assembling actors: not only the action of human actors but the action of various and varying entities. As such, the viral presents itself as “a key tactic in commercial, security and technological contexts” and is therefore useful for questioning “the complex ontology of contemporary capitalist culture” (2007). In this formulation, the viral easily is connected to what has been called “the affective turn,” “the new materialisms,” “posthuman and interspecies studies,” “speculative realism,” and “object-oriented ontologies.”²

Each of these strands of thought has a purchase on imagination in the present moment, when the human is being displaced as the central concern in critical theoretical engagements with perception, cognition, bodily feeling, or affect. In each of these strands of thought, there is a rebooting of ontology in order to give weight to the *ahuman*, the *anorganic*, and the *asubjective* as ground of being and knowing. That is to say, there is a move beyond deconstruction to what necessarily is a speculative philosophy, a philosophical speculation on what is beyond human perception, cognition, and consciousness.³ There is also the return to aesthetics. There is an elevation of aesthetics to first philosophy such that aesthetics comes to inform measure when measure has become speculative, or a mode of modulating futurity or potentiality. All this is giving shape to the viral as diagram, as the viral invites a rethinking of measure and method in the arts, the humanities, the sciences, and the social sciences, as well as practices of governance and economy.

The essays to follow not only arise out of the abstract contexts, offered above, of the becoming virus of the viral and the becoming viral of transmission and communication; they also offer specific meditations on virality. They bring us news of the viral from the various domains already infected and infecting cultures, local and global, while providing spaces

in which to judge the present-day effects of virality—multiple, complex, if not contradictory—and to strategize about political, economic, and aesthetic responses. As already indicated, Zach Blas, in his essay, goes beyond any opposition of the virus and the viral, allowing him to consider what positive strategies for progressive, even revolutionary, politics virality might model, complicating the reduction of the viral to a mere effect of globalization, digital control, or vectors of illness. Instead he points especially to those ways of understanding the viral that allow for speculation on the virus's affective states or its perceptions. What does it feel like to become viral? What kinds of “abilities, capacities, and debilities” are involved (Puar 2009)? Is the virus dead, alive, undead? Does the virus emote? Here, Blas, taking a lead from Ian Bogost's “alien phenomenology,” (forthcoming 2012) promotes the viral as an opportunity for an *ahuman* poetics in the context of a nonhuman unknown becoming human speculation on what Eugene Thacker calls a “world-without-us” (2010). Blas suggests that the viral's political potential is best estimated in these terms.

In his essay, Seb Franklin also raises questions about the political, but unlike Blas he is more skeptical of those practices linked to the viral that have been touted as progressive. Interrogating the practices of hacking and networking, Franklin is disappointed in their potential for progressive politics because politics has depended on the novel types of social interaction these practices afford; therefore these practices cannot make claim to being able to transform the technical structure of computation. Rather, they depend on who is hacking or networking. Franklin is no more impressed with the contagious aspects of the virus, as if anything viral is automatically resistant to or deconstructive of given power relations. Instead Franklin finds potential for progressive politics in the excess of the virus, in the in-between-ness or the yet-to-be-calculated of viral excess. Thus behind Franklin's evaluations is his concern about the reduction that calculation is judged to affect or the appropriation of the excess of the viral as a matter of biopolitical control. Franklin also argues that since it is this drive for appropriation that motivates the development of mathematical technologies of measure, it is these technologies that become objects of political, cultural, and economic contention, for which aesthetic measure must give expression and be a critical intervention.

Kenneth Rogers's essay also draws a connection between the viral and a mathematical technology that makes “crowdsourcing” possible. Rogers gives a genealogy of the crowd, beginning in the nineteenth century, when

fear of the crowd's expression of a need for equality led to a view of it as irrational, a threat to civic life, while in the economic sphere of the market the crowd was considered rational or an expression of individuals together pursuing individual gain through rational choice. Taking this genealogy as a backdrop, Rogers goes on to address the 2008 death of a Wal-Mart temp worker who was asphyxiated in the crush of bodies entering the store on Black Friday. Tracing the indirect racism of the descriptions of the crowd of mostly African American shoppers as barbaric, uncivil, and irrational, Rogers notes that at the time of this event, the crowd already was being rethought as an economic resource as well; in a transformation of crowd psychology, a market logic increasingly was being ascribed to various non-market behaviors. Through making use of a mathematical technology that would be the basis for modern derivatives and hedge funds, it became possible to collapse the difference between the irrationality of the crowd and the rationality of individual self-interest through bundling risks for investment. Crowdsourcing, then, is a matter of drawing users' participation into some scheme about services or social networking that appeals to both self-interest and communal belonging. Once there is a critical mass of users, Rogers explains, the value of the online crowd can be monetized. Here too the mathematical technology also serves politics offering an image of possibility. In contrast to the top-down design of crowdsourcing, Rogers suggests the "open source crowd" as an image of the crowd's removing itself from exploitation.

In her essay, Melissa Autumn White turns our attention to biology, one of the preeminent discourses of the viral. White also returns us to racialized populations that play a part in Rogers's discussion of Black Friday as well. However, White focuses primarily on populations of migrants or guest workers. Taking Canada as her example and starting with the recent H1N1 flu scare; its failure to become an epidemic; and the subsequent excuse offered by the World Health Organization that epidemics, like viruses, are unpredictable, White shows how the uneven distribution of capacities for health across populations has become a way the state shores up its increasingly porous borders. While capital and commodities move swiftly, if not easily, across national boundaries and financial markets, labor moves differently. In controlling immigration even while inviting guest workers, states reproduce a geopolitical stratification of vulnerabilities as they ensnare vitality in relations of power. For example, in linking immigration to the fear of the H1N1 epidemic, the Mexican

migrant worker became what White describes as “a vector of disease,” an “informational node,” or a “potential transmitter of viral code.” Mexican guest workers invited to do agricultural work in Canada became a resource of another kind, a population that could be declared a health threat to the nation and thus denied rights of residency, even the right to have rights. They became a political resource for strengthening national boundaries. So the vulnerable populations described as irrational consumers in Rogers’s essay are vulnerable as workers in White’s essay, while vulnerability in both cases racializes the population.

In her essay, Caitlin Berrigan continues to engage the viral in the context of biological discourse, the biology of plants, blood, and disease. Focusing on hepatitis C, a disease that had not yet invited a legible interest group, Berrigan raises interest through performance art. She does so by rendering palpable or cultivating more intensively a sense of reciprocity between plant and human. The performance described by Berrigan makes use of hepatitis C–carrying blood, thought harmful to humans, in order to nourish dandelion plants, a weed thought of as “bad” for lawns, but having curative potential for hepatitis C. Berrigan’s interspecies performance shows complicated antagonisms, codependencies, and evolution in our relationship to pathogens. Here is a commingling and becoming that is at ease with the virus and suggests a ceasefire in fighting disease with Big Pharma drugs. By investigating evolution as a matter of alliances rather than evolution as a matter of filiation, Berrigan demonstrates that viruses show the way to lateral genetic transfers among unrelated organisms that may be health giving. They even suggest an image of life that does not privilege the bounded organism. Unfortunately, as Berrigan reports, the installation of her “weed” performance was deemed a threat to health and was not allowed to stand, a reminder of the way the potential of the virus circulates in a global capitalist economy where health is all but inseparable from a financialized, militarized security.

It is in the context of a financialized, militarized security that, in her/his essay, Mel Chen takes up the mask against the current fixation on the veil. For Chen, masking functions to evoke projections of otherness, especially terrorist otherness, and at the same time to manage environmental insecurity through biological protection. Thus Chen’s treatment of the viral works in that space of crossing between the virus as biological and the viral as political or communicative. As such, the mask, for Chen, is to be understood as a prosthetic, as a biopolitical strategy that modulates debil-

ity and capacity. As bodily prosthesis, the mask speaks through the individual to the debility of a nation, to protect it from its vulnerabilities while simultaneously disavowing them. The mask points to the nation's displacement of its vulnerabilities, projecting them elsewhere, rather than owning them. Further, the mask as prosthesis moves racialized populations beyond the visual registering of otherness in the nation's self-representation; in reconfiguring bodily matter as prosthetic, the mask also points to the "new" materialisms of *ahuman* assemblages and their potentiality for reconfiguring boundaries and security.

The chances for such a reconfiguration as a function of the fast circulation of calls for freedom and the establishment of sexual rights as human rights is, however, doubtful, as Tavia Nyong'o sees it. Offering a reading of a gone-viral tweet appeal to support defeating the Ugandan antigay measure becoming law, Nyong'o, in his essay, points to the difficulty of getting beyond the short-circuiting of such appeals into giving new life "to old clichés about African alterity, violence, and dependency." Drawing on Jodi Dean's work on rapid connectivity through virtual proximity, Nyong'o shows how "Africa" easily fits the process of short-circuiting. Not only has the African, nearly-starved-to-death child become iconic of global poverty and illegitimate governance, but more recently the engagement with Africa by queers in nations such as the United States, decrying those who would punish those practicing "African homophobia," has shown the difficulty of disconnecting human rights and humanitarian appeals from the effects of their circulating in capital-invested information technology. It is not so much that the form of circulation simply is overcoming the content of the messages circulated; rather, Nyong'o argues that the content is short-circuited, not only foreclosing a deeper critique of the "fantasy of participation," but also often reducing politics to single issues. The short-circuiting of content also makes it easy for messages to be taken over by what Nyong'o sees as a perverse discourse. Focusing on how the fast circulation of messages, like those of Twitter and Facebook, are dissolving symbolic identities into imaginary ones, Nyong'o suggests that the "neoliberal pervert" has displaced the postcolonial subject. That is to say, both those messages critiquing so-called African homophobia and those resistant to those critiques are not guided by a prohibitive law or authority; the perversion is not that of homosexuality. It is that the messages and their various viral permutations all wind up soliciting enjoyment and disavowal.

While Christine Balance also is critical of social media, especially for

the way it makes use of uncompensated affective labor, she nonetheless registers some of the positive uses of DIY online production. In her essay, Balance takes up the surveys and reports that indicate that Asian Americans are dominating DIY online production. Focusing on the inclination of Asian Americans to use new media to create, notably, vlogs, webisodes, musical covers, and parodies, Balance suggests that Asian Americans, while doing affective labor for free, are also performing their identities in novel ways they have not been able to perform otherwise. The online productions, with predecessors in forms thought to be narcissistic and self-indulgent, allow, in Balance's view, Asian Americans to sift out their identities both from the catchall term "Asian American" and from other stereotypes, including that of the model minority. It is an affective labor that transforms alienation into expression of various emotions: anger, rage, heartache.

Not all uses of the epistolary and diaristic forms have gone online, nor, as Balance suggests, are they all deserving of the labels "narcissistic" and "self-indulgent." After all, there has been a wealth of critical revisioning of these forms in much scholarship of identity politics, especially feminist scholarship. In her essay, Anna Fisher draws on artists Chris Kraus and Sophie Calle to demonstrate how the work of younger feminist artists remake the feminist project enabling it to assimilate "irony and equivocality for its tactical gain." Fisher shows how both artists use epistolary and diaristic practices to challenge heterosexual romance's complicity in women's abjection: Kraus by chronicling her romantic obsession with a famous author, Dick Hebdige, and Calle by providing analysis of breakup emails. Fisher argues that the artists' works are parasiting in that they do not flee from charges hurled at women, such as "hyperfemininity and overdependence." Rather, they hold on to them more tightly. Here parasiting is a matter of overidentification, where one pretends to take the system at its word and play it so closely that ultimately it cannot bear the intensity. As Fisher concludes, Kraus and Calle swell in critical import as each feeds on her male host, "who is suddenly dwarfed by its parasite."

Heather Lukes also turns to aesthetic production, to examine anxieties about speed, consumption, contagion, mass culture, and artistic politics during the 1930s—the time period during which she claims the virus moves from scientific visual capture to "metaphorical menace." Tracing the tropes of infection and virality in Nathanael West's last novel, *The Day of the Locust* (1939), Lukes dissects the social malaise haunting Southern

California's landscape, typically analyzed in this novel through an over-determined binary of the intentionality of the author and the (Frankfurt School-inflected) complicity of that author/artist as a mere puppet within the culture industry. An infectious mass culture threatens to mechanize all aesthetic performance. Like Rodgers, Lukes is interested in theories of crowd contagion, what she calls "the virus of mob affect," as a trans-human feeling. Reading against the grain of typical interpretations of West, she articulates a relation between viral affect and the psychoanalytic "symptom," rethought here as viral effect.

As a cultural artifact that delves with enthusiasm into themes of virality and also has had an interesting path of viral replication, *The Thing* is explored by Elena Glasberg as a fictional production that is continually revived from the edge of extinction. Glasberg's timely "re-review" of John Carpenter's 1981 sci-fi classic *The Thing* follows on the heels of a 2011 (largely failed) "prequel" and also is situated amid memes of a pulp fiction short story, an early film called *The Thing from Another World*, fanzines, video games, and documentaries. In all these versions the pivotal narrative moment is when the Thing and the human become indistinguishable. Noting that Carpenter relocates the story of the Thing to Antarctica to use the ice as an "environmental hard limit" that contains the Thing, Glasberg argues that virality actually thrives through and because of the hard limits, redefining the notion of a limit itself as that which allows for replication. The ice is thus the ideal setting for thinking about the posthuman, where the human seems not to be natural, or native. In reexamining the Thing and its prolific recounting across multiple media, Glasberg demonstrates the imbrication of the story and the means of its telling as a form of viral imitation. The Thing lives on.

Focusing on Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*, Una Chung, like Glasberg, looks at the perceived horror of the viral and suggests that the viral diagram offers the possibility of practices that would allow us to "cross over horror." Taking up the rhythm of attack and rest of the birds, the massed onslaught of speed and force and unabated intensity, Chung links crossing over horror with practices in the art of power befitting an aesthetic measure that is computationally open. With these practices, Chung proposes that we not be drawn back into, or become overwhelmed by, depressing descriptions of these times. Or that we not follow critics of *The Birds* like Žižek, who proposes, on the one hand, that horror must be accepted as central to human existence and, on the other, that horror is the psychotic

core of the machine, its becoming speed unattached to representation, memory, or history. For Chung, crossing over horror is the displacement of the opposition of human and machine in a practiced or practical recognition that “human impotence no longer [need make] us mad.” Chung ends by pointing to the practice of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, maker of films and multimedia installations, which as Chung sees it, refuses to put a “chalk line around a human form” and instead engages the quality of light that encourages time travel, reincarnation, through flashes of dreams that one can shift through at one’s own pace and thereby remember, forget, desire, and make history anew.

In tune with Chung, Amit Rai in his essay takes up race and experiments with its affirmative possibilities. Rai suggests that in the viral diagram race would be better engaged in terms of ecologies of sensation or affect rather than seen as a matter of nominalization, a naming that works at the molar level to capture the molecular movement of race, or what Rai calls “race racing.” Instead of an antiracist politics driven by the reactive representational strategies of naming, race racing is the intensive processes of becoming that entail the multiplicity of race so that it is no longer familiar to itself. As such, “race racing” points to the embodied duration of race that makes possible its variation across populations. Rai argues further that this multiplication of race racing is coemergent with technoassemblages that make possible experimentation in new bodily habituations and the feedback loops from experimentation. Rai opens with a diagnosis that by the end of the essay becomes a provocation: “Antiracism must become something else, experimenting with duration, sensation, resonance, and affect.”

We close our introduction with a return to the feminist classic for this special issue, Donna Haraway’s 1985 “Manifesto for Cyborgs,” without which a feminist method for critically engaging technoscientific visions would have been greatly impoverished; nor would the many proposals for life-giving practices of epistemology or ontology have been envisioned. And in her response to the well-deserved praise and gratitude offered her in this issue by Jackie Orr, Joseph Schneider, and Rayvon Fouché, Haraway just starts up again, casting her wisdom, her humor, and her aesthetic over the future, once again hoping to orient potentiality by encouraging projects that are political, ethical, and daringly imaginative. If with her early scholarship, she already would teach us about “creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and

crafted,” (1991, 149) over the years, her work simply would make clearer how urgent is the task of refusing any forms of knowing and being that privilege human perception, consciousness, and cognition by a too easy dismissal of other lives, organic and nonorganic. From the start, Haraway has been calling for a criticism of technoscience that is subtle, a criticism that recognizes what we are faced with and takes account of it with what she described in the “Manifesto” as a double-vision or perspective. As she put it:

From one perspective, a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, about the final abstraction embodied in a Star Wars apocalypse waged in the name of defense, about the final appropriation of women’s bodies in a masculinist orgy of war. . . . From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. The political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point. Single vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many-headed monsters. Cyborg unities are monstrous and illegitimate; in our present political circumstances, we could hardly hope for more potent myths for resistance and recoupling (1991, 154).

While the viral may raise new challenges to double vision and require us to worry about those violated bodies, besides women’s, Haraway’s proposal for criticism still is a sound one. It is one that has been undertaken by all the authors writing for this special issue, those who authored the essays highlighted above and those who authored reviews, including Mara Mills, Max Hantel, and Greg Goldberg. And there is the mesmerizing art of Ranjit Kandalgaonker and Marina Zurkow, and the poems by Amy Evans, Deborah Fried-Rubin, Kate Greenstreet, Page Hill Starzinger, Anna Rabinowitz, Danielle Pafunda, Leah Umansky, and David Oscar Harvey. With all of them we say, “Here’s to the future.”

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co-editor, with Craig Willse, of *Beyond Biopolitics: Essays on the Governance of Life and Death* (Duke University Press, 2011). She is currently working on Ecstatic Corona: Philosophy and Family Violence, an ethnographic, historically researched, experimental writing project about where she grew up in Queens, New York.

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Notes

1. For a more developed discussion of aesthetics, measure, and new media, see Clough, forthcoming.
2. Important texts include Clough 2007; Livingston and Puar 2011; Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman 2011; Coole and Frost 2011.
3. It is not surprising that it is with considerable interest, if not concern, that the recent turn to speculative realism is being monitored. Not only does it question what has been labeled "correlationism," that is, the presumed impossibility of a world without human knowing or without a primordial rapport between human and world; it instead supports a speculative grasp of "a world-without-us," which Thacker describes as "a nebulous zone that is at once impersonal and horrific," that is beyond "the world-in-itself" that is finally always for us (2010, 5-6).

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