

# DIGESTING FEMININITIES

THE FEMINIST POLITICS OF CONTEMPORARY FOOD CULTURE



NATALIE JOVANOVSKI



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The Feminist Politics of Contemporary  
Food Culture

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Natalie Jovanovski  
Swinburne University of Technology  
Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

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*I dedicate this book to my grandfather, Radivoj Todoskov, who passed away before I had the chance to finish it. Nobody believed in me more than you did. My heart always sinks when I remember that you're gone.*

*You are irreplaceable, unforgettable and forever in my heart.*

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## Digesting Femininities: Gendered Food Discourses and Body-Policing Narratives

The relationship women have with food, eating and their bodies is a topic of intense public interest, filling psychology journals and wallpapering magazine stands. Curiously, what is less often discussed by mainstream and academic sources are the cultural messages about food and eating that surround women, promoting confusing, and often conflicting, narratives that promise answers, but leave women with further questions. From the meteoric rise of celebrity cooks and their reclamation of all things domestic, to the stream of ever-changing diets reinforced by reality TV health experts, the gendered marketing of food is an undeniably powerful discourse that reflects tensions about how women relate to food in their everyday lives and, indeed, how they fall short of reaching certain ideals. But what happens when these rich narratives about food and eating, which dominate bookshelves and the world of television, emphatically promote messages about a woman's right to hedonism and indulgence with just a pinch of self-consciousness thrown in? Indeed, what does it mean when this form of oppressive gendered socialisation around food and eating is rebranded as a feminist pursuit? And what is the function of presenting femininity, and the sexist expectations that women face around food, eating and their bodies, as a veritable smorgasbord of marketable identities ready to be freely chosen? In this book, I address these questions by examining the way that gendered discourses on food and eating reinforce body-policing cultural narratives aimed at women. Specifically, I focus on how the advice given to women about food and eating in influential food discourses, such as diet books, cookbooks and iconic feminist texts, is founded upon

gender stereotypes that instantiate and normalise how women police their own bodies and the pleasure they receive from food.

The way that women police their bodies and, indeed, objectify themselves, is intimately tied to notions of gender. Over the last four decades, feminist writers and scholars have problematised the practice of self-objectification, or the process of judging one's body as an object to be evaluated, and acknowledged the importance of locating and theorising the cultural origins of women's obsession with body-policing practices (Bartky 1990; Fredrickson et al. 1998; McKinley and Hyde 1996). This body of research has implicated the harmful role that fashion and beauty discourses play in the practice of self-objectification, and linked these practices to the development of 'disordered' eating (Ahern et al. 2011; Grogan 2008). Yet these approaches, while generating a significant and influential body of literature explaining, at least partially, where women's conflicted relationships with their bodies originate, have been largely body-centric, focusing on how the size and shape of the female body is depicted in the media and overlooking the power of other significant discourses in perpetuating harmful self-objectifying messages (Malson 2009, p. 135; Probyn 2008). Despite the strong association between women policing their bodies and simultaneously displaying 'disordered' eating behaviour (Tiggemann 2013), very few studies have addressed the role that gendered discourses on food and eating and previous feminist analyses of women's relationships to food, play in the reinforcement of women's body-policing narratives. In this book, I take up the task of examining these gendered discourses on food and eating, for the myriad of ways harmful body-conscious narratives are constructed and reproduced. Indeed, I argue that this culture is even permeated in popular texts informed by feminist understandings, where body-policing is reinforced as an individual responsibility rather than challenged at a broad cultural level. In essence, women are given seemingly different versions of femininity to digest in food discourses that may not always be as palatable as they seem.

Being critical of one's body, and imposing a rigid level of surveillance over it, is considered to be both normative and problematic behaviour for women in contemporary Western culture (Bartky 1990; Rodin et al. 1984; Wolf 1990). Despite an increase in public awareness over the dangers of extreme weight loss and yo-yo dieting, women are encouraged more than ever to strive for an ideal feminine aesthetic, a look often defined by a slim and sometimes athletic-looking body (Bordo 2004; Grogan 2008). While fashion, beauty

and fitness discourses encourage women to adopt a leaner and supposedly healthier body weight through various dietary and surgical methods (Murray 2008), a growing medical and psychological consensus problematises women's perceived choices to engage in these behaviours (Orbach 2010). This conflicting mixture of views has, unsurprisingly, generated confusion among women regarding how to perceive their bodies, underlying the importance of understanding how body-policing narratives are culturally determined rather than simply individually mediated (Popa 2012).

Influential feminist writers, including Sandra Lee Bartky (1990), Susan Bordo (2004) and Susie Orbach (2010), have played a seminal role in understanding the cultural origins of why women police their bodies. They conceptualise women's dissatisfaction with, and surveillance over, their bodies as a sign of patriarchal oppression, an exaggerated expression of femininity, and as an inevitable result of the cultural objectification of the female body. Bartky (1990), for example, describes the objectification of the female body as a process where a woman's "sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from the rest of her personality and reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her" (p. 26). One of the harmful features of the cultural objectification of women's bodies is the tendency to see one's body through a critical, outsider's perspective (Jack 1993). In psychological literature, this phenomenon is referred to as both self-objectification (Fredrickson et al. 1998) and objectified body-consciousness (McKinley and Hyde 1996). While self-objectifying attitudes and behaviours play a central role in the representation of women in popular culture (Bordo 2004; Jeffreys 2005; Piran and Cormier 2005), they have also been associated with a host of detrimental physical and psychological outcomes. One of these outcomes is a conflicted and sometimes disordered relationship with food (see Tiggemann 2013). In this book, the self-objectification, objectified body-consciousness or body-policing that women experience as part of their normative and yet problematic socialisation into femininity will be described through the interrelated use of the terms 'self-objectification,' 'body-consciousness,' 'self-policing' and 'body-policing.'

The self-policing quest for an ideal body is one that often compromises women's relationships with food and eating (Bordo 2004; Grogan 2008). Throughout the last two decades, both correlational and causative links have been found between self-objectifying attitudes and disordered eating behaviours in women (see Tiggemann 2013). Psychological researchers have identified these links in non-clinical samples of women (Vinkers et al. 2012),

affecting women of all ages (Augustus-Horvath and Tylka 2009; Grippo and Hill 2008), ethnicities (Fitzsimmons-Craft and Bardone-Cone 2012; Hebl et al. 2004) and sexual orientations (Hill and Fischer 2008). One factor that occurs resoundingly across these studies is that self-objectifying behaviours are a part of mainstream Western culture, and not just confined to clinical samples of women (Tiggemann 2013). Generated by a host of socialisation practices and proscriptions to feminine beauty ideals, women are said to be taught that their self-surveillance practices are merely a normative part of being female (Bartky 1990). There has been a growing interest in feminist and psychological theory in the power of cultural discourses that promote a thin bodily aesthetic and disordered relationship with food (Bordo 2004; Grogan 2008; Harper and Tiggemann 2008). Psychological and feminist studies implicate fashion and beauty discourses for their construction of a poor body image in women (Prichard and Tiggemann 2012; Tiggemann et al. 2009; Wilson 2005; Young 2005). Some of these studies call for the diversification of representations of the female body in the media and address just one aspect of the body-policing society women live in, failing to identify the power of other and, perhaps, less obvious discourses in instantiating this harmful message (Malson 2009, p. 135; see Probyn 2008). In *Digesting Femininities*, I take up the task of filling the gap in the current literature by examining alternative cultural discourses for different ways that body-surveillance messages are normalised and perpetuated.

The choice to centre this project on food and eating-related discourses comes from the growing popularity of guidance-based, or ‘self-help’ content directed towards women in relation to food and the construction of gender more generally (Winch 2011). Currently, a thriving and profitable culture of food and eating has occupied Western media, branching off into multiple and seemingly disparate genres with neoliberal underpinnings (Miller 2007). This culture of food and eating has offered women new ways to connect to food in times where confusing messages about women’s entitlement to consume has been paramount, be it through cooking (Greer 1999; Neuhaus 1999), nourishing the body via diet and exercise (Heyes 2006; Coleman 2010) or through understanding the political origins behind why women binge or restrict their food intake. The success of these discourses stems in part from the contradictions and complexities that surround women’s relationships with food, contributing to a range of food femininities, or gendered ways of relating to food, for women to ‘choose’ from. While gendered narratives on food and eating remain

popular among women, however, their failure to provide any coherent advice on how women should relate to food and eating has exacerbated the confusion that already defines women's relationships with food. Rather, these seemingly conflicting texts have both marketed and offered women a smorgasbord of food femininities to choose from, and left them with the paralysing task of being a responsible, knowledgeable and empowered consumer in a cultural landscape that produces often harmful and conflicting messages (Popa 2012).

It is this notion that popular food discourses are sites of gendered meaning and, potentially, the site of harmful gender norms that underpins this book. The concept of 'food femininities,' that is, the multiple versions of gender offered to women throughout cultural discourses about food and eating, will be used to describe the many different ways in which the authors of cookbooks, diet books and iconic feminist texts instantiate and reproduce harmful gender stereotypes by using food as a mouthpiece. Specifically, this book focuses on how these different food femininities, which frame discourses on food and eating, promote harmful self-objectifying attitudes in women, and how they are marketed to women in a variety of forms to make otherwise harmful gender norms seem more culturally palatable. While the term food femininities was originally used by Cairns et al. (2010) in their study on the gendering of foodie culture, where they identified the various ways in which people 'do' gender through their relationships with food, in this book, the term food femininities is used to focus on the oppressive or harmful gender stereotypes that define women's conflicted relationships with food and their bodies.

A feminist understanding of discourse, one that acknowledges the social construction of gender and the ways in which power and hegemony operate throughout language, is of central concern in this book (Haslanger 2002; Lazar 2004; Malson 2009; Weedon 1997). The analysis of food and eating-related discourses in this book is therefore informed by feminist understandings of discourse as a patriarchal tool. According to Lazar (2004), the term discourse can be understood as the "complex workings of power and ideology... [that] sustain[s] gendered social order" (p. 1). Writers devoted to using feminist ideas in their research associate the notion of gender as being reconstructed and perpetuated in language, and as something that takes shape through language in a multitude of ways. This is especially so for feminist writers who deal with women's conflicted relationships with food and their bodies (e.g., Burns and Gavey 2004; Malson 2009). The way gender is used in food and eating-related discourses aimed at women is, thus, important to understand.

One feature that distinguishes feminist understandings of discourse from other, non-feminist epistemological positions is the emphasis on patriarchy as a powerful driving force behind language (Bartky 1990). According to Speer (2005), language is “one of the primary means through which patriarchy and oppressive norms... instantiate and reproduce” (p. 7) gender inequalities, and this is often reflected in everyday talk or text. While a great deal of attention has been paid to cultural discourses that display and promote an emaciated body shape in women, such as fashion and beauty discourses (e.g., Prichard and Tiggemann 2012; Tiggemann et al. 2009; Wilson 2005; Young 2005), relatively little has been said about the way that food discourses operate through a gendered narrative to achieve a similar outcome. In this book, a feminist understanding of discourse, as a place where gender is positioned in a multitude of ways, is used to uncover how discussions of food ultimately centre women’s anxieties about their bodies.

Understanding the power of language in perpetuating the social construction of gender and, indeed, the expectation that food discourses are a celebratory feature in women’s lives is an important component of understanding how gender is constructed and reproduced in discussions of food and eating. Gender, in this book, is both a site in which patriarchal social structures demarcate the sexes and position women as a subordinate social class, and a way to market pseudo-feminist messages of empowerment (Baxter 2007; Lazar 2004; Speer 2005; Weedon 1997). Indeed, gender is a political phenomenon that operates discursively and often expresses itself through a multitude of seemingly distinct guises. These versions of gender can be malleable and, thus, subject to change through acts of resistance (Lazar 2004; Weedon 1997, p. 121). In this project, the discursive construction and perpetuation of gender is addressed through the various food femininities identified in the texts, that is, through the gendered ways that authors position women’s relationships with food and their bodies. The multiple food femininities that I identify in this book indicate the multiple ways that gendered subordination is marketed to women in food discourses, offering what initially seems like a veritable smorgasbord of food femininities for women to ‘choose’ from. These stereotypes of women form the basis of the feminist critical discourse analysis that will be conducted on the data (see Chap. 2), where it is posited that multiple food femininities in gendered discourses on food and eating in diet books, cookbooks and iconic feminist texts result in the continued perpetuation and normalisation of body-policing practices in women.

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROJECT

*Digesting Femininities* was originally conceived from my interest in the body-surveillance practices of women and the way in which this phenomenon has been reinforced and even normalised throughout popular cultural discourses as an unspoken feature of being female. Influenced by both feminist (Bartky 1990; Bordo 2004; Dworkin 1974) and psychological writers (e.g., Fredrickson et al. 1998; McKinley and Hyde 1996; Tiggemann 2013) who position self-objectification as a harmful gendered practice, I became increasingly interested in the way women are oppressed through everyday cultural messages found in the media, and the way in which the cultural perception of the ‘oppressor’ has shifted from being part of a male-supremacist culture (Dworkin 1974; MacKinnon 1989) to the internal state of women themselves in contemporary Western society (Bartky 1990; Rodin et al. 1984). As a young woman who is part of a contemporary Western society, I was particularly interested in the way mainstream cultural discourses promote the idea that femininity is an identity to be worked on rather than an oppressive feature of being female, and how they use certain gendered objects to convey this message (see Watkins 2006).

While studying the harmful influence of the media on women’s normative fixation with policing their bodies, I noticed that an overwhelming number of feminist studies were focused on the notion that women’s problems stemmed from the influence of emaciated supermodels and celebrities, and the lack of plus-sized examples of female beauty (Prichard and Tiggemann 2012; Tiggemann et al. 2009; Wilson 2005; Young 2005). These studies, while raising some important questions on the current status of women’s relationships with their bodies, tended to position the female body as a fixed rather than a fluid cultural object, as being powerful enough to perpetuate harmful attitudes towards the body (Probyn 2008). While I noted the importance of these discussions, this literature left me wondering if other cultural discourses were also implicated in the Western woman’s obsession with body surveillance. I aligned my argument with Elspeth Probyn’s (2008) assertion on the current state of feminist research, where she states that, “it’s hard to believe that 30 years of quite sophisticated theoretical and methodological debates within feminism are now reduced to complaints about the lack of images of ‘plus-sized’ women or to the outcry at the emaciated state of catwalk models” (p. 403). Indeed, looking beyond the superficial contours of the body in popular culture, and delving into



the language that reinforces messages of body-anxiety in women, eventually became the primary focus of the book.

The direction that I decided to take was based, in part, on Helen Malson's (2009) assertion that a "bizarre" (p. 135) lack of academic research currently implicates discourses other than those of fashion and beauty to women's dissatisfaction with, and surveillance over, their bodies. Taking into account the significant body of psychological research making strong links between self-objectification practices and disordered eating behaviours among women (see Tiggemann 2013), I wanted to understand if popular discourses on food and eating played a role in perpetuating self-objectifying attitudes among women. Drawing on the feminist literature addressing women's relationships with food (Probyn 2000), feeding (Cairns et al. 2010) and eating (Orbach 2010), it became clear that women's relationships with food were just as significant as indicators of their gendered socialisation as were the messages about their bodies. I was curious to find out if the gendered way that food and eating were discussed in certain parts of mainstream Western culture played a part in furthering the gendered obsession with body-policing practices. The importance of food as both a symbol of women's subordination *and* resistance to gender stereotyping was impossible to ignore. As a result, the central question underpinning this book is as follows: How do discourses on food and eating employ gender stereotypes to construct and perpetuate a culture of body-policing attitudes among women?

To answer this question, the book became a feminist critique of gendered discourses on food and eating and, specifically, on the role of cookbooks, diet books and influential feminist texts in perpetuating a culture of body surveillance among women. Lazar's (2004) Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis was used as a way to analyse the primary source material, where food femininities were identified and scrutinised on the basis of what they really offered their female readers. Extending on radical feminist understandings of femininity, which positions women as a subordinate social class, this book used evidence of the gendered construction of food and eating and, specifically, on how different types of femininity (or food femininities) are offered to women that serve to instantiate and reproduce harmful body-policing narratives.

The choice of texts used in the book reflects the popularity of the authors and the influential status of their work (for a more nuanced discussion on the background of the texts studied, please refer to Chaps. 3, 4 and 5). Cookbooks and diet books were used, as data were based

on their current popularity in contemporary Western culture (Orbach 2010). Both culinary and dietary books have been used by women as helpful guides, promising to quell anxieties about their eating behaviours and, simultaneously, reinforcing certain gender identities (Winch 2011). Cookbooks, in particular, have been associated with socialising women into feminine practices, such as domesticity and nurturing (Neuhaus 1999). The cookbooks selected for this book were written by female celebrities currently occupying the mainstream culinary arena (Mitchell 2010; Scholes 2011). These authors were examined for the expression of their food femininities, which they reinforced through various versions of food femininity for the female reader to choose from. Two international authors, Nigella Lawson and Tana Ramsay, were selected on the basis of their mainstream media exposure, with Lawson known worldwide for her sultry, yet domesticated, public persona (Hollows 2003), and Ramsay known for her television cooking shows in the UK and her well-publicised marriage to celebrity chef, Gordon Ramsay (Lawson 2011). The two Australian authors, Julie Goodwin and Poh Ling-Yeow, were selected for similar reasons, that is, their participation on the first series of *MasterChef Australia*, which has cemented their place in both magazine columns and television cooking programmes.

The decision to analyse diet books was based on similar reasoning. While diet culture has been steadily criticised by both mainstream and feminist sources over the last three decades, it is still backed by a lucrative and financially successful industry (Drew 2009; Orbach 2010). The role that diet books play in the contemporary arena has changed to include more self-empowering perspectives, with women being offered supposedly agentic (rather than victimised) versions of femininity relating to food and their bodies (Coleman 2010; Heyes 2006; Winch 2011). This cultural shift in the construction of women from passive victims to active agents of their lives has led to changes in the way diet books have been marketed to women. The four diet books analysed in this book were, thus, selected due to their widespread popularity and also the ‘empowered’ ways in which they were marketed to appeal to female audiences. Rather than focusing on the diets themselves, I was more interested in selecting books on the basis of the authors and the celebrity status they hold. The two international diet books, *Skinny Bitch* and *Skinny Bitch in the Kitchen*, were chosen on the basis of their popularity amongst female celebrities, such as Victoria ‘Posh Spice’ Beckham (Moskin 2008; Rich 2007). The two Australian diet books, *Losing the Last Five Kilos* and *Crunch Time*

*Cookbook*, were chosen due to the popularity of their author, television fitness trainer Michelle Bridges, who has become a household name through her involvement in the Australian series of the weight-loss reality programme *The Biggest Loser*.

While diet books and cookbooks seemed like obvious discourses to study, as both sources—albeit distinctively—occupy an important place in women’s cultural relationships with food and eating, the choice to analyse influential feminist texts as data was motivated by different factors. One factor was that in both academic literature on contemporary cookbooks and diet books and in the books themselves, feminist terminology is used to express the message. This overlap has been met with scepticism among some writers, including myself (Winch 2011). Rather than assuming that these sources have always misused feminist understandings of women’s relationships with food and their bodies, I question whether influential feminist texts themselves contain elements of harmful gender practices that normalise body-policing practices in women. Two iconic feminists were used in the book, both known for their influential perspectives of women’s disordered relationships with food and their bodies (Bordo 2004). Firstly, feminist psychotherapist Susie Orbach and the 2006 edition of her groundbreaking analysis *Fat is a Feminist Issue* are examined in this book. The second iconic feminist text under investigation is Naomi Wolf’s seminal piece *The Beauty Myth*. Both of these texts are examined for the versions of food femininity they offer to women, and whether these gendered constructions reinforce a pervasive cultural attitude that positions women’s relationships with food and eating from a body-policing perspective.

## OVERVIEW

Chapter 2 looks at the way existing feminist literature has been dominated by research of the effects of the fashion and beauty industries on women’s obsessive surveillance over their bodies. Specifically, a review of this literature will draw attention to the body-centrism dominating understandings of self-objectification and disordered eating, and the need to study alternative discourses for their potentially harmful contributions. Once this literature is reviewed, a rationale for focusing on food and eating-related discourses is provided, where feminist analyses of cookbooks, diet books and iconic feminist texts are discussed. Chapter 3, then, provides a defence

for the study of food and eating-related discourses by describing the usefulness of Lazar's (2004) Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis as a methodological framework. In this chapter, definitions of discourse, femininity and the emancipatory potential for analysing gendered discourses on food and eating will be discussed from a radical feminist perspective.

Chapter 4 offers an analysis of the body-policing culture constructed in best-selling diet books and diet cookbooks written by women. Two diet books and their corresponding diet cookbooks (e.g., Bridges 2010, 2011; Freedman and Barnouin 2005, 2007) are analysed, with a specific emphasis on the food femininities they promote. Drawing on analyses from Chap. 2, it is argued that body-policing narratives around food and eating will not only be dictated upon through culinary practices, but also perpetuated in the advice given to women about their health and eating behaviour. It is posited in this chapter that the versions of food femininity offered to women rely on an element of feminist terminology that positions women as active subjects rather than passive objects. Post-feminist and liberal-individualist constructions of femininity are examined, with an emphasis on how confusing roles around food and eating create a narrative of self-objectification for women. It is concluded in this chapter that the influence of diet books on women's body-policing attitudes is mediated by both post-feminist and liberal-individualist versions of food femininity, meaning that they perpetuate an individualistic narrative of personal choice and agency from a depoliticised and supposedly empowering perspective.

Chapter 5 builds upon the arguments put forth in the previous chapter, where popular cookbooks written by female food celebrities are examined for their gendered promotion of body-policing practices among women. Two Australian (e.g., Goodwin 2011; Ling-Yeow 2010) and three international cookbooks (e.g., Lawson 2006; Ramsay 2009, 2010) will be examined for the food femininities their authors promote. This chapter identifies two dominant versions of food femininity, one traditional (maternal food femininities) and one contemporary (hedonistic food femininities), and how the conflict between these two food narratives reveals an implicit message of self-objectification. It is posited in this chapter that in cookbooks, body-policing practices thrive in women's changing gender roles around food, which have clashed between the selfless, other-oriented stereotype of the traditional feeder (Greer 1999) and the promising, pleasure-oriented stereotype of the contemporary eater (Popa 2012). It is concluded that the

food femininities constructed and perpetuated in cookbooks reflect elements of body-policing narratives that may be explained by the changing gender roles ascribed to women about food and cooking.

Having established that both diet books and cookbooks are founded upon harmful gender stereotypes that instantiate self-objectifying attitudes among women, Chap. 6 looks at the influence of iconic feminist texts in doing the same. In this chapter, Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* and Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* are analysed for the food femininities they offer their female audience. Drawing on analyses from the previous two chapters, I argue in this chapter that even iconic feminist voices, which criticise gender and deconstruct women's conflicting relationships with food and their bodies, are also responsible for perpetuating body-policing narratives through their discussions of food and eating. It is concluded that iconic feminist voices present a politicisation of women's self-objectifying relationships with food, but rely on an individual woman to change her mindset. It is argued that this conflicting message has played a part in infiltrating current discourses on food and eating that use feminist terminology to create change.

Chapter 7 brings the three analyses together and acknowledges the similarities and differences between their messages. Drawing on analyses from the previous chapters, this chapter illustrates that all three genres, despite their seemingly disparate messages, reinforce a harmful narrative of body policing that can be viewed as a pathogenic or bulimic cultural consciousness of food and eating (Bordo 2004; Malson 2009; Popa 2012). I argue in this chapter that the patriarchal confines of gender reinforce women's relationships with food, which are reflected in their obsessive surveillance over their bodies, and that the fragmentation of food femininities further complicates the process as women are given the illusion of choice, despite their uniform reinforcement of body policing. This chapter also illustrates how women are offered supposedly resistant versions of food femininities and how these narratives mask the neoliberal intentions of these discourses, and how exposure to body-policing practices is framed as an inevitable part of being a female in contemporary Western culture. It is concluded that popular discourses on food and eating play a critical role in instantiating body-policing narratives among women, and that the investigation of how food and eating are constructed in popular culture indicates that radical social change belongs in challenging this culture, not the perceived choices individual women may make.

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