

# Having It All: *Sex and the City* and Feminist Post-structural Discourse Analysis

Justin Charlebois\*<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis (FPDA) (Baxter, 2003) was used to analyze episodes from the series *Sex and the City*. A denotative analysis of one episode ('All or Nothing', 3:10) will show how a 'have it all' discourse is realized differently for characters in the series. Moreover, it will be argued that a 'have it all' discourse is in fact a gendered discourse (Sunderland, 2004) which is intertextually (Fairclough, 1992) linked to other gendered discourses including a 'gender differentiation' discourse (Baxter, 2003) and a 'biggest day of a woman's life' discourse (Sunderland, 2004).

While media discourse has traditionally been seen as a subfield of sociology or cultural studies, it is also a field of inquiry within discourse analysis. For example, it has been studied in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995), multimodal discourse analysis (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001) and mediated discourse analysis (Scollon, 1998). Because the media is a central part of our everyday lives, not only is there value in studying it, but it is also an important part of contemporary culture. Media forms the cultural and social dimensions of the modern world (Silverstone, 1999).

While discourse analysis traditionally focuses on non-fiction, fiction has also been researched. Sunderland (2004) analyzed gendered discourses in children's literature, Levorato (2003) studied fairy tales, Talbot (1995) analyzed gender representation in romance stories, Shibamoto-Smith (2004) analyzed Japanese romance novels and Nakamura (2004) focused on Japanese fashion magazines. While not using linguistic analysis, recent attention has focused on the analysis of popular series (Lavery, 2006; McCabe & Akass, 2006).

This paper recognizes that although fiction does not constitute reality, the discourses circulating in it do represent aspects of contemporary society. Television is such an ever present force in most people's lives that one cannot ignore the fact that contemporary thinking is displayed in it as well. It is part of how we make sense of the world (Silverstone, 1999).

## Feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis (FPDA)

Baxter (2002; 2003) applied the approach she developed, FPDA, to the analysis of classroom discourse and the discourse of a management team of a company. FPDA is a feminist methodology that analyzes how speakers negotiate their various identities and positions in competing yet interrelated discourses. This paper will next discuss some of the

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main tenets of the approach which draws on both feminism and post-structuralism.

FPDA sees 'discourses' as 'practices that systematically form the object of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972). Therefore, discourses are powerful sets of assumptions that determine orthodox social and cultural practices (Baxter, 2003). Discourses are closely linked to the concept of 'discursive practices' which are social practices that are created by or through discourse. FPDA sees discourse as inextricably linked with notions of power. Power is seen as an energizing force in discursive and social relations. These discourses do not exist in isolation but are intertextually (Fairclough, 1992) linked to others.

It is important to point out that unlike CDA, FPDA sees social 'realities' as discursively produced. Thus, identities and subject positions as speakers are constantly being reconstructed through discourse, not outside it (Baxter, 2002). CDA, on the other hand, assumes a dialectical relationship between discourse and other social practices whereas they simultaneously shape and constrain each other (Fairclough, 1992). Put another way, CDA sees a dialectical relationship between the discursive and material while FPDA takes an anti-materialistic stance. This is a crucial difference between the two approaches.

It should be clarified that FPDA conceptualizes power as constantly shifting. For this reason, women are not automatically assumed to be the victims of male oppression but continually shift positions across discourses. Thus one may be positioned powerfully within one discourse and relatively powerless in another.

One of the key components of FPDA is self-reflexivity. There are several subcomponents of this concept. First, scholars should aim to make their theoretical positions clear. Similarly, researchers need to be reflective about how their own research agendas and interpretations of data affect their conclusions. No matter how objectively a researcher approaches his/her research topic, he/she has an agenda at some level, even an unconscious one. FPDA recognizes the unrealistic ideal of truly "objective" research and consequently advocates continual self-reflexivity throughout the whole process. Any analysis of data is context-specific, provisional, and reflects the interpretation of the author. While researchers assume a feminist perspective, it is necessary to be self-reflective as the monologic voice of the author ultimately prevails. Thus, whenever possible additional voices should be allowed to emerge. Second, researchers must be self-reflective about the usage of specialist vocabulary. The vocabulary chosen cannot describe reality objectively and can potentially turn into scholastic discrimination, excluding and marginalizing certain readers. Third, practitioners need to be aware that the act or research itself is fictional and involves a series of choices the author makes. Researchers should then be prepared to justify any choices they made in the process of text analysis.

FPDA also advocates taking a deconstructionist approach to the analysis of discourse. This involves deconstructing or questioning what is assumed to be the status quo in order to release the possibility that new 'realities' and interpretations exist. One modernist assumption is that language is organized in terms of binary distinctions (e.g. male/female; public private; subjective/objective). Post-structuralism encourages seeking the interconnectivity of terms. This tendency to view various aspects of life in terms of binary distinctions has been supported by other research. Tannen (1998) highlights the tendency

in American culture to organize many aspects of contemporary social life in terms of a debate or as an 'argument culture.' Therefore, speakers assume relatively fixed subject positions in terms of the issue at hand. FPDA discourages these types of fixed dichotomies.

Baxter (2003) highlights several ways in which researchers can develop a deconstructionist approach. First, she discourages assuming an overriding authorial argument at the expense of alternative points of view. Other points of view include those of other scholars and the participants in one's study. This prevents the author from privileging his/her voice at the expense of those who have contributed to or constitute the data. In other words, Baxter encourages researchers to supplement their own accounts with those of others.

Second, in lieu of closing a study in the form of a narrative, analysts should opt for an open-ended verdict. By doing so, researchers adhere to the principles of FPDA that encourage multiple voices and interpretations, not one authoritative interpretation of the data.

Third, analysts should be self-reflexive to the irony of the whole research process. This means that while an analyst makes every attempt to be self-reflexive, the results of a study fix meaning in some way, no matter how hard one attempts to do otherwise. Baxter encourages analysts to remain self-reflexive regarding their positions.

An additional principle of FPDA is that of finding a feminist focus. Though this may initially appear to contradict FPDA's privileging of multiple voices and accounts, Baxter (2003) asserts there is room for a partnership between post-structuralism's advocacy of textual interplay and feminism's privileging of the female voice. They both share the common goal of releasing the voices of those who have been silenced or oppressed. Baxter (2003) favors adopting FPDA to the speech patterns of particular social groups and moving away from antiquated issues such as the oppression and subordination of women. As the previous discussion has suggested, because speakers are subjectively positioned in multiple ways, it is naive to automatically assume women are the victims of male domination. In other words, gender is constructed by assuming a number of different subject positions that are realized in language (Simpson, 1997).

Another component of FPDA is the concept of 'voice' which Baxter (2003) links to Bakhtin's (1981) views of polyphony where in any discursive context there is a plurality of voices that do not necessarily combine into a single authorial account. Bakhtin (1981) is proposing that discursive diversity is an intrinsic part of every utterance, even those that do not initially appear to be related.

This is inextricably linked with the notion of heteroglossia which attempts to foreground the non-official viewpoint, and the voices of the silenced, marginalized, or otherwise oppressed. Bakhtin (1981) suggests that every linguistic community is characterized by heteroglossia and language is the means by which different voices confront one another. FPDA incorporates this concept as it seeks to give spotlight the female voices that may be oppressed by their comparatively outspoken male or female counterparts. While FPDA attempts to give a voice to the silenced and oppressed, subject positions within discourse are seen as constantly shifting. Thus, one can be relatively powerless in one context yet powerful in another.

Baxter cites the close analysis of text as a crucial part of performing FPDA. This is done

through a combination of denotative and connotative analysis.

Analysis at the denotative level results in the production of a concrete description of what is going on in a specific text such as an abstract of spoken data. Researchers are encouraged to adopt a self-reflexive approach here as well. This is because the opinions and biases of the scholar can influence the account that results. However, the value in denotative analysis is that the given transcript which results can serve as the starting point for further heteroglossic analysis.

Analysis at the connotative level draws from both the synchronic, denotative evidence mentioned above and ethnographic or diachronic sources of data. The goal of analysis at this level is that analysts identify institutional or social discourses that appear to be operating in the research setting. As these discourses rarely emerge in one particular speech event, ethnography is often selected as a tool for uncovering them. Connotative analysis seeks to show how speakers are continuously shifting between multiple subject positions.

The final component that is central to FPDA is intertextuality (Barthes, 1977; Fairclough, 1992). This refers to how texts constitute other texts; in other words, traces of one text reappear in another. Concerning *Sex and the City*, Carrie Bradshaw, the protagonist, shares many things in common with Sister Carrie (Dreiser, 1900). Both characters are single women living in a city who are not following the social conventions of their times. This concept is not limited to texts such as *Sister Carrie* which blatantly reference other texts. Texts, even seemingly unrelated ones, do not exist in isolation from one another. In addition to this concept, Fairclough (1992) has identified 'manifest intertextuality' where specific traces of other texts are overtly drawn upon in another text. Whether traces of a text overtly (i.e. manifest intertextuality) or more covertly (i.e. intertextuality) emerge in another text, it remains that texts do not exist in a 'pure' form. For example, Baxter (2000; 2002; 2003) separately identified the discourses of 'gender differentiation', 'peer and teacher approval', and 'collaborative talk' in her classroom study. These discourses, however, do not exist in isolation, but produce a range of subject positions for the students in the class.

In sum, one of the strengths of FPDA and ways that it can be differentiated from other research methods is its constant focus on self-reflexivity and multiple subject positioning of social actors. FPDA sees concepts such as 'powerfulness' and 'powerlessness' not as fixed, binary categories that confine social actors, but as positions that are constantly being negotiated and thus constantly shifting within discourse. While no research can be purely objective, FPDA's emphasis on self-reflexivity results in an account that has considered multiple voices and is all and all more objective in nature.

### ***Sex and the City***

The hugely popular series *Sex and the City* was broadcasted on HBO from 1998 through 2005. The series focuses on four successful thirtysomething women who are searching for romance in New York City. In addition to providing entertainment, the huge popularity of the series has resulted in its leaving an impact on contemporary culture, more so than previous series (Akass & McCabe, 2004). For example, it was on the cover of *Time* magazine in 2000.

While this series does progressively portray women, linguistic traces of what are referred

to as gendered discourses (Sunderland, 2004) can be found. Through the denotative analysis of “All or Nothing”, I have identified lexical traces of what I am referring to as a ‘have it all’ discourse which I suggest is a ‘gendered discourse’ (Sunderland, 2004). My analysis will demonstrate that different versions of this discourse do exist. Nevertheless, the prototypical meaning is associated with women who want both a career and family. This discourse is intertextually linked to a ‘gender differentiation’ discourse (Baxter, 2003) and a ‘biggest day of a woman’s life’ discourse (Sunderland, 2004). Akin with one of the central elements of FPDA, I am not suggesting this series only portrays women in traditional roles, but shows them as shifting between various positions of powerfulness and powerlessness. It has been suggested that while the women in *Sex and the City* are attracted to patriarchal stories of fairy-tale romance, women talking about sex, creating humor and sharing laughter is changing the script (Akass & McCabe, 2004). While FPDA cannot have an emancipatory agenda per se, the discourses Akass and McCabe refer to suggest the emergence of ‘emancipatory discourse’ (Fairclough, 1989) in the sense that women are openly talking about topics that were previously considered taboo. When previously silenced or marginalized voices are heard this is a step toward promoting discursive change. FPDA is interested in the voices of the silenced being heard (Baxter, 2002). The next section will analyze excerpts from an episode where a ‘have it all’ discourse emerges.

### **‘Have it all’ discourse**

While women have made substantial progress toward attaining equality with men, antiquated assumptions about women retaining domestic roles still exist. Thus, when women desire a role besides a domestic one, they often subjected to scrutiny which can linguistically materialize. Lakoff (2004) identifies lexical items such as ‘supermom’, and ‘soccer mom’. These terms are linguistically marked (Lakoff, 2000) as they suggest women with these goals do not reflect the norm and are overextending themselves. Lakoff (2000) cites New York State Senator Hillary Clinton as a prime example of a woman who has been the subject of much media abuse due to her career aspirations and success. Further evidence of this is illustrated by the definition of ‘career woman’; “is a woman with a career who is interested in working and progressing in her job, rather than staying at home looking after the house and children” (Collins, 2004).

Equivalent terms such as ‘career dad’, ‘soccer dad’, or ‘ballet dad’ do not exist to characterize men who desire both a career and family. An automatic assumption exists that they can have both a family and career and their wives remain at home to support them. Women who desire a family and career do not have the same luxury.

Differences in the referring terms (Schiffrin, 2002) applied to single men and women also exist. While men are ‘eligible bachelors’ and ‘playboys’ women are ‘spinsters’ and ‘old maids’. Lakoff (2004) suggests that ‘bachelor’ is a neutral term, even a compliment, which suggests he has been pursued and successfully eluded his pursuers. ‘Spinster’, on the other hand, does not carry analogous positive connotations. When these terms are used metaphorically ‘bachelor’ suggests sexual freedom and ‘spinster’ puritanism or celibacy (Lakoff, 2004).

Similar to the referring terms listed above, women who desire both a family and career can

be described as 'wanting it all'. In *Sex and the City* this is realized linguistically with what I am naming a 'have it all' discourse. It will be shown through denotative analysis how this discourse is realized differently in the narratives of various characters in the series.

### Denotative Analysis

The 'have it all' discourse is a 'gender differentiation' discourse (Baxter, 2003) as it applies to women but not men and thus is also a gendered discourse (Sunderland, 2004). Men do not make reference to "having it all" nor are they described as "wanting it all". The next section will focus on the denotative analysis of the episode where this discourse first appears.

Samantha Jones invites her friends over to celebrate the purchase of her new apartment. Samantha runs her own public relations company and does not desire either marriage or family. In fact, she frequently affirms her desire to have "sex like a man" which means sex without commitment and is not a "relationship kind of girl". Samantha challenges the gender differentiation discourse where women are said to be more emotional and focused on relationships than men (Tannen, 1990). This urban myth fuels other unsubstantiated notions like women are unable to divorce physical from emotional attachment and men are. This first excerpt suggests that women today can have whatever they want, which is interpreted in different ways depending on the social actor.

### Excerpt One

37 Samantha: Oh ladies let's just say it – we have it all – great apartments, great jobs,  
38 great friends, and great sex.

39 Miranda: We can have our baby quiche delivered and eat it too.

40 Samantha: Exactly. At my age my mother was saddled with three kids and a drunk  
41 husband.

42 Carrie: You just have three drunk friends.

43 Samantha: By choice.

Samantha's definition of 'have it all' does not mean balancing a family with career. For her it entails a career, friends, apartment, and sex. Samantha's articulation of 'having it all' actually positions her quite powerfully in the sense that she does not need a man to complete her life. Samantha's interpretation of "having it all" challenges the social expectation that women should marry and raise a family. Consistent with FPDA, these social actors assume various subject positions in discourse. We cannot automatically assume that a 'have it all' discourse places women in a powerless position.

Using two discursive strategies, Samantha positions herself in solidarity with both her friends and women collectively. This is accomplished through the use of referring terms (Schiffrin, 2002) and metaphor. She begins this with her usage of the personal pronoun 'we'. Miranda continues the alignment begun by Samantha by adopting 'we'. She also introduces a metaphor *have our baby quiche delivered and eat it too* (line 39) which is intertextually linked to the "have your cake and eat it too" metaphor. Samantha further builds solidarity with Miranda by introducing another metaphor (line 40) to draw a sharp contrast between the lifestyle of women in her mother's generation with that of her own. The usage of 'we' creates

a clear in-group/out-group distinction. Carrie's turn (line 42) also has a solidarity building function. Samantha concludes by drawing a clear distinction between women of her mother's generation and modern women, which is intratextually linked to her original articulation of "having it all".

For Samantha, 'having it all' is neither a gender differentiation discourse nor a gendered discourse. It could be equally taken up by either men or women and might describe many thirty year olds in the 1990's and 2000's who are redefining traditional lifestyles. In this sense, it is a very progressive discourse.

'Having it all' is realized quite differently for another character, Charlotte York, who still holds to traditional values concerning marriage, family, and motherhood.

### **Excerpt Two**

43 Charlotte: Well I think having it all really means having someone special to share it  
44 with.

45 Samantha: Oh please that's so Barney.

46 Charlotte: Well I'm sorry. My life wasn't really complete until I met Trey. And  
47 Trey's mom is so great. Wait until you all meet her at this engagement party she's  
48 throwing for us.

49 Samantha: (shouting out the window) You see Manhattan we have it all!

Charlotte utilizes the discourse marker (Schiffrin, 1987) 'well' as a turn-initiator. One function of this discourse marker is to reinstate a previously unexpanded topic (Schiffrin, 1987), in this case that related to having it all. In addition, the use of 'really' signals that what is to follow is the true definition of "having it all".

This is just one example where Charlotte articulates her desire for domestic life. In many ways she has idealized the notion of marriage so that it resembles a fairy tale with a storybook wedding and "happy ever after" ending. The tendency to hold a "prince" responsible for one's rescue and ultimate fulfillment has been referred to as a 'Cinderella complex' (Dowling, 1982). This is based on the fear of being independent. Unfortunately, research based in the gender differences school of thought (e.g. Tannen, 1990) fuels this myth with the notion that solidarity and personal relationships are of ultimate importance for women, while men place utmost importance on independence. Further, Charlotte's version of "having it all" is intertextually linked to Rich's (1980) 'compulsory heterosexuality' discourse by her reference to her male fiancé, Trey. This further suggests that her version of 'having it all' involves some mythological prince.

In contrast to the solidarity building exchange that previously occurred, Samantha immediately distances herself from Charlotte (line 45). This reference to Barney is intertextually linked to the popular American children's program, thus Samantha is connecting Charlotte's version of 'having it all' with that of a child's. In summary, Samantha and Charlotte discursively construct "having it all" differently, placing them in opposition with each other.

In this next scene Charlotte is selecting china for her wedding reception with her fiancé, Trey.

### Excerpt Three

96 Carrie: Later that day in the bridal registry department at Bergenstoft Goodman,

97 Charlotte discovered she wanted it all and more.

98 Trey: 1300 dollars?

99 Salesclerk: Yes, and we do very well with that.

100 Charlotte: It's *really* beautiful.

101 Trey: Yes, it'll look lovely under the ramen noodles we're forced to eat due to my

102 outstanding china loans. Oh, no, not that face. All right if it's what you really want.

103 I'm too crazy about you to say no. I've got to get back to the hospital.

Linguistic traces of what has been termed a 'biggest day of a woman's life' discourse (Sunderland, 2004) are found here. Notice how Charlotte's use of 'so' (line 47) is one of the features Lakoff (2004) identified as 'women's language' thus indexing her femininity. Conversely, this could be seen as Charlotte indexing a powerful subject position because Trey did buy the china. Lakoff (2004) identifies features of women's language which she claims denies them access to power in society. These features are also used by women to assume powerful subject positions (Evans Davies, 2004). More importantly, though, is that the propositions that are contained in this excerpt were identified elsewhere (Sunderland, 2004: 40) and will be discussed below.

First, marriage is more important for women than it is for men. This is suggested by the care Charlotte takes in choosing the perfect china and Trey's relative lack of interest in the whole process. It is something he squeezes in between performing operations (line 103).

Second, the proposition that marriage is more important for women than anything else is implicitly contained in this extract and is part of Charlotte's overall narrative. Charlotte continually talks about meeting the right person, a fairytale wedding, and happy family life following that. While linguistic traces of this discourse cannot be found in this particular excerpt, they exist elsewhere in the series. For example, when she and Trey decide they want a baby, she voluntarily quits her job at the art gallery, which she loves, so that she can concentrate on "more important things". These important things include motherhood and doing volunteer work at the hospital where her husband works.

Traces of a patriarchal discourse are also contained in this excerpt. Trey flouts Grice's conversational maxim of quality (Yule, 1996) by posing a rhetorical question (line 98). We can elicit the conversational implicature that this dish is too expensive. However, when Charlotte appears disappointed in response to Trey's comment about the price of the china, he immediately concedes (line 102). While it could be argued that Charlotte uses this as a strategy to get what she wants, Trey is positioned as a father figure who concedes to the wants of his daughter. He takes up a powerful subject position and she a relatively powerless one by having to obtain permission to buy something. This is also supported by the fact that Trey holds the financial power.

Charlotte's version of "having it all" is in the traditional sense, intertextually linked to such discourses as 'biggest day of a woman's life' discourse and 'motherhood as ultimate fulfillment' discourse (Sunderland, 2004) in her lexical reference to her fiancé being the one who completed her.



Charlotte's articulation of a 'have it all' discourse is both a gender differentiation discourse and gendered discourse. It is gendered in the sense that Charlotte is portrayed as a woman conforming to traditional, almost Victorian, norms. In addition, it is a gender differentiation discourse. She portrays men and women as having different thoughts on the importance of marriage. While every detail of the wedding is important for Charlotte, Trey feigns interest at best. Next, Carrie Bradshaw's version of "having it all" will be discussed.

The series protagonist, Carrie Bradshaw, muses over what it means to "have it all". While initially appearing to be a very progressive discourse, there are traces of a gender differentiation discourse present.

#### **Excerpt Four**

165 I thought about choices. Since birth modern women have been told we can do and  
 166 be anything we want: be an astronaut, the head of an internet company, a stay-at-  
 167 home mom. There aren't any rules anymore and the choices are endless and  
 168 apparently it can all be delivered right to your door. But is it possible we've become  
 169 so spoiled by choices that we've become unable to make one? That a part of us  
 170 knows once you choose something—one man, one apartment, one amazing job,  
 171 another option goes away. Are we a generation of women that just can't choose one  
 172 from column A? Did we all have too much to handle or was Samantha right? Can  
 173 we have it all?

This initially appears as a very progressive discourse. Women today have a myriad of choices so the sky is the limit. The lexical presence of 'modern women' (line 165) suggests a gender differentiation discourse which is simultaneously gendered. The reason why 'modern men' do not need to be explicitly referenced is because these choices have always existed for them. Carrie incorporates Samantha's version of 'have it all' (line 168) in her consideration of what it means. Further, the use of the passive construction 'have been told' (line 165) requires that someone tell them; in other words, another social actor allows women these multiple choices. While we cannot automatically insert 'men' as the agent in this sentence, it remains that women are being allowed by someone to have these choices. In other words, this is not something they were able to do on their own.

Another traditional portrayal of women can be found in line 169. Carrie suggests the possibility that women have become spoiled because they are faced with an abundance of choices. They are portrayed as the ones with the problem, the ones who cannot choose. Although the choices are endless, women can't choose (line 171). While 'can' in the first sense (line 165) is the 'can of possibility' (Sunderland, 2004), can in the latter sense is that of ability. Women are represented as lacking the ability to choose. The lexical choice of spoiled indicates a patriarchal discourse as it conjures up images of "daddy's little girl" being spoiled. Further, lines 171 to 173 echo other traditional discourses about women such as their 'indecisiveness', 'wishy-washiness', and inability to handle serious life decisions. For these reasons, Carrie's portrayal of 'having it all' is a gendered discourse and discourse of gender differentiation.

Carrie's portrayal of "having it all", like Charlotte's, is built upon traditional assumptions

about gender. These assumptions index men as the ones who give women permission. The whole notion that some social actor (presumably men) is granting women permission is inherently gendered.

The excerpts discussed here today position women in traditional, gendered ways while at the same time suggest inherent differences in the way men and women regard the institutions of marriage and family, which is aligned with the popularized notion of “gender differences” (Tannen, 1990; Gray, 1992)

The difference framework for accounting for patterns of language use results in essentialist thinking of how men and women “should” speak. Therefore, it can be damaging to speakers whose linguistic behavior falls outside of the conventions associated with their sex.

## Conclusion

In sum, linguistic traces of a ‘have it all’ discourse are suggested in “All or Nothing” which is both a gendered discourse (Sunderland, 2004) and gender differentiation discourse (Baxter, 2003). Carrie, Samantha, and Charlotte articulate different versions of this discourse. Carrie and especially Charlotte articulate more traditional accounts of this discourse, while Samantha articulates a less traditional one.

In line with the principles of FPDA, this is not to suggest that any one version of “having it all” is superior to another. Again, FPDA upholds that social actors assume various subject positions that are constantly changing. Individuals possess agency so they can negotiate or resist dominant subject positions. However, in order to give space to female voices that are being silenced or marginalized which is also a key tenet of FPDA, I am suggesting that a “have it all” discourse can be both a gendered discourse and gender differentiation discourse. Hopefully, these different accounts of “having it all” will gradually be recognized by society, thus serving an emancipatory function for these previously marginalized social actors.

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