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Gossip, rumor, hearsay, tattle-tattle, scuttlebutt, scandal, dirt. Whatever the term, gossip is one of the most common—and most condemned—forms of discourse in which we engage. Around two-thirds of our daily conversation focuses on personal and interpersonal matters. If we were to keep a record of our activities during our waking hours, according to anthropologist Max Gluckman, only our time spent in work would exceed our time spent in gossiping.¹ Gossip is a consummate human activity and occurs across time and space. Scholars have discovered gossip’s prevalence in a range of cultures, and Robin Dunbar has suggested “that language evolved to allow us to gossip.”² Yet, even as gossip is intensely involving and interesting, it is also widely denigrated. At best, gossip is trivial and idle; at worst, it is invasive and destructive. Religious injunctions against both relaying and receiving gossip appear in Christian, Jewish, and Islamic texts, and concerns about the moral ramifications of gossip continue.³ The long association of gossip and women has strengthened these negative evaluations. Cultural aphorisms—such as the Danish “The North Sea will sooner be found wanting in water than a woman at a loss for a word” and the Chinese “The tongue is the sword of a woman, and she never lets it become rusty”—confirm this view.⁴

Gossip’s contradictory status as frivolous and formidable has drawn the attention of many commentators and researchers. Philosophers Søren Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century and Martin Heidegger in the twentieth century took issue with gossip, while poet and writer W. H. Auden published an article “In Defense of Gossip” in 1937.⁵ Essayist Joseph Epstein’s recent book Gossip offers a collection of popular opinions of gossip, from the historical (Benjamin Franklin’s “most people delight in censure, when they are not objects of it”)}
the contemporary (celebrity journalist Bonnie Fuller’s “I really believe we all have a gossip gene”). The scholarly literature on gossip is also substantive and interdisciplinary, with extensive studies in anthropology, psychology, sociology, linguistics, and philosophy, and important works in cultural, literary, visual and media, and women’s studies as well as history. Philosophers, as with Kierkegaard and Heidegger, explore the moral dimensions of gossip, while anthropologists and social psychologists were among the first scholars in the mid- to late twentieth century to take gossip and its social functions seriously. Linguists focus on gossip’s structure, and literary scholars point out the fundamental connections in both form and content between gossip and the novel. Feminists in a range of disciplines analyze the meaning and significance of gossip’s characterization as “women’s talk.” Although the definitions, questions, methods, and sources for investigating gossip vary across the disciplines, researchers share a common interest in redeeming and revaluing gossip.

This volume contributes to this ongoing endeavor for scholars of American history and culture and provides a much-needed historical overview. We identify significant continuities as well as changes in the definition, form, and function of gossip in US political, legal, religious, print and media, and diplomatic cultures over the last four centuries. In bringing these scholarly conversations together, a broad, inclusive definition of gossip emerges: information—generally about other people—that might be positive or negative, accurate or not, distributed via face-to-face talk in neighborhoods, churchyards, courtrooms, and embassies, or via print and a range of mass-media and social-media platforms. The in-person exchanges that predominated in the colonial period persist even as mass-media and social-media gossip has proliferated across the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. New forms of dissemination have expanded a central function of gossip as a promotional tool in market exchanges. In the twenty-first century, gossip can sell a media product (including newspapers, films, and Internet vlogs), secure a job, and define a brand. As a result, media gossip purveyors—whether individual or institutional—have been greatly empowered and enriched. But gossip today also functions in many ways as it did in the past. It can provide personal enlightenment, pleasure, and pain. It can serve as a tool of the powerful, the disenfranchised, and everyone in between. Gossip can both celebrate and condemn, include and exclude, build and undermine community, as it has colonial Virginia to contemporary online networks.

Several of our contributors have written influential studies of gossip and continue that work in this collection. Contributor Mary
Beth Norton’s studies of gender in early Anglo-American society and of the Salem witchcraft crisis, which she returns to in this volume, show gossip’s significance in the colonial period and dovetail with works by John Demos on witchcraft and Jane Kamensky and Terri L. Snyder on disorderly speech.¹⁷ Important work by Patricia Bonomi, Joanne Freeman, and Cynthia Kierner reveals the impact of gossip and scandal on Anglo-American political, print, and popular culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. ¹⁸ Our contributor Nancy Isenberg further illuminates this impact in her biographies of Aaron Burr, James Madison, and Thomas Jefferson, as well as in her chapter in this volume. ¹⁹ Histories of journalism, popular culture, and scandal in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—such as those by Richard Wightman Fox, Neal Gabler, and Charles Ponce de Leon—also give fruitful attention to gossip’s content and context. ²⁰ Samantha Barbas’s essay here on gossip law takes in new directions her earlier research on movie fan culture and her biography of Hollywood gossip columnist Louella Parsons. ²¹ Similarly, Mary Desjardins extends her previous analyses of movie star gossip and scandal in her chapter on a Hollywood agent and publicist who sought to manage both the positive and negative effects of gossip on a star’s career. ²²

Despite these exemplary examples, few scholars of American media, culture, law, gender, and history have made gossip their major subject of inquiry as we do in this collection. These 12 essays explore the role of gossip in American society, culture, and politics from the colonial period to today. To this history of gossip, our contributors bring insights and methods not only from the historical discipline but also from American studies, cultural studies, visual and media studies, mass communications, women’s, gender, and sexuality studies, and law. They examine gossip in a variety of forms and settings, use a range of sources, and assess the function and impact of gossip at different moments and locations in US history. With this chronological span and topical diversity, When Private Talk Goes Public demonstrates gossip’s importance, change, and continuity over time—from the back fence to the blogosphere.

Defining Gossip

The definition of gossip has changed over time and continues to be debated among scholars. Literary scholar Patricia Meyer Spacks and historian Melanie Tebbutt offer useful surveys of gossip’s changing definition in English. The word originated as a noun, “godbib,”
meaning a relative in God, and connoted a godparent or a person in attendance at a christening. As the word evolved, it took on a more secular meaning and could apply to a close friend or neighbor for men or women. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, a new, gender-specific definition of gossip became common: a woman attending a mother at childbirth. This transformation in meaning was driven by the rise of separate spheres and the identification of the public sphere with men and the private sphere with women in Anglo-American society as ably demonstrated by Mary Beth Norton. Increasingly denied access to public roles and political power, women would use gossip in the domestic realm to wield power and influence. At this time, gossip also became a verb and underwent a “process of degradation” and a “deterioration in meaning.” An outcome of this development, according to Spacks and Tebbutt, was Dr. Johnson’s 1755 dictionary definition of gossip: “One who runs about tattling like women at a lying-in.” Popular understandings of gossip continue its negative association with women’s talk, but scholars have long since rejected this pejorative and sexist association, and the essays in this volume show both women and men engaging in the practice of gossip in equal measure.

Instead of these older definitions of gossip, scholars propose different meanings. These proposals range from what Spacks calls “a minimal definition of gossip” as “idle talk about other persons not present” to philosopher Maryann Ayim’s more expansive definition with over a dozen features and qualifications. Our contributors recognize that gossip has more than one meaning and emphasize different aspects of gossip in their chapters. In her examination of Anne Royall—one of America’s first gossip columnists—during the Jacksonian era, Nancy Isenberg draws upon an early-nineteenth-century definition of gossip as “easy and unrestrained talk.” For Molly M. Wood, gossip in the US foreign service in the early 1900s is best understood as “informal information.” And according to Tim Seiber, contemporary digital gossip is both a category of speech and a “structure of networking relations.” The diversity of scholarly definitions within this anthology is matched beyond it, leading cultural anthropologist Niko Besnier to conclude, “In short, an airtight and cross-culturally valid definition of what constitutes gossip is probably not possible.”

What all scholarly attempts to define gossip share, including those of our contributors, is a focus upon the personal and often the private, and, thus, this volume identifies gossip as “private talk.” Spacks
uses this phrase to highlight one of gossip’s defining characteristics: an “intense interest in the personal.” Ayim similarly argues that the subject matter of gossip “is highly personal, focused on knowledge of other people.” Writer Gail Collins adds that the “classic form of gossip” is “unverified information about a person’s private life that he or she might prefer to keep hidden.” Gossip makes private matters public, and, for many, gossip’s most transgressive quality is precisely how it blurs the imaginary yet influential boundary between public and private. Indeed, what Kierkegaard found so objectionable about gossip’s revelation of private matters was a lack of respect for the “vital distinction between what is private and what is public.”

Although that “vital distinction” changes over time and place, the practice of gossip breaches it. Sociologist Jörg R. Bergmann contends that breaching the boundary between public and private is both “a constitutive element” of and “an essential stimulus to gossip.”

For historians, gossip’s boundary crossing provides us with direct evidence of its existence in the past and the sources necessary to make it a subject of historical inquiry. In this volume, our contributors utilize evidence from private and published letters, diaries and memoirs, courtroom testimony, law and legal writings, government records, newspapers and celebrity magazines, press releases, and Internet video blogs. This range of sources indicates the varied form and function of gossip from the colonial era to the early-twenty-first century. Gossip has not only taken the form of interpersonal oral communication—literally, “talk”—as gossip is traditionally defined, but in these essays gossip also has been handwritten, typewritten, printed, published, videoed, and blogged. Neither has gossip only been expressed in private settings. Instead, our contributors find gossip recorded in courtrooms, shared from letters, discussed in meetings, read in publications, and viewed on computers and mobile devices. These forms, settings, and sources show how gossip is an evolving practice as the modes of communication change over time with the advent of new technologies and mass media. Even so, this variety does not preclude important similarities and continuity in the historical practice of gossip in America for nearly four centuries.

Why Gossip Matters

The dual processes of change and continuity similarly characterize the functions of gossip in US society and culture. Emerging in a
significant way in the work of social scientists in the mid-twentieth century, the functional view of gossip complicated the traditional moral view. Instead of assuming gossip was idle or trivial talk, these scholars ascertained and analyzed the purpose and meaning of gossip in different contexts. As a result, a body of literature asserts the positive values of “good gossip” rather than just gossip’s negative ramifications. Some scholars contend the personal, social, cultural, and political functions of gossip only occur in face-to-face, reciprocal exchanges and not through the mass media. Philosopher John Morreall, for example, considers mass-media gossip about celebrities to be “noninteractive, impersonal forms of communication” and, thus, not truly gossip. Yet, other scholars, including our contributors, find gossip delivered through the mass media also fulfilling these various functions. In this volume, Kimberly Wilmot Voss’s history of the women’s pages in newspapers in the 1950s and 1960s, Anne Helen Peterson’s study of *People* magazine and the *National Enquirer* in the 1970s, and Seiber’s analysis of digital celebrity gossip show how new modes of communication alter but do not negate the process and purpose of gossiping.

The primary function of gossip is as a means of circulating information about other people’s lives. “I put gossip in the same category as news,” Hollywood gossip columnist Hedda Hopper asserted in the 1950s. And over the last century, the role, profession, and reach of the mass-market gossip purveyor—as personified by Hopper and others—have emerged as a lucrative persona and profession. Gossip as news or as a form of knowledge is an “educative discourse,” according to Spacks. Isenberg also sees gossip as a commodity that is valued and exchanged among participants, such as Anne Royall and her many readers in Jacksonian America. In these ways, gossip can overlap with rumor, slander, libel, and scandal, all of which appear in this volume. For our purposes, however, rumor is a discrete piece of information or report, while gossip is more holistic, encompassing a range of conversational topics. Moreover, once a rumor is proven true, it is no longer a rumor; the same cannot be said for gossip. Slander and libel also differ from gossip. Slander is oral and libel is written, but both are assumed to be false and damaging, whereas gossip can be true as well as positive. Finally, although one definition of scandal is synonymous with malicious gossip, more commonly scandal refers to a publicized, disgraceful event rather than information or “talk.” Thus, gossip functions more comprehensively than any of these other words, transmitting
data about other people, whether true or false, positive or negative, specific or general.

All of the essays in this volume illustrate this function of gossip. To take just one example, Wood’s essay proves the utility, even necessity, of gossip for both the internal functioning and diplomatic efforts of the US foreign service in the years between 1900 and 1940. The exchange of informal information within the US diplomatic community fostered and fractured relationships and played a key role in advancing or ending the careers of individuals, including that of pioneering female diplomat Lucile Atcherson in the 1920s. At the same time, face-to-face communication between foreign-service officers and members of the local population augmented formal, diplomatic negotiations. This interaction became particularly important in moments of crisis, such as the outbreaks of World Wars I and II. Wood highlights the contribution made by the wives of diplomats to the circulation of information inside and outside embassy walls, but she leaves no doubt that men in the foreign service recognized the value of, and very much relied on, gossip themselves.

Along with the circulation of information, gossip has a personal function. At a most basic level, gossiping is a pleasure, even if a guilty one. Human beings enjoy learning about one another and expressing their own thoughts and feelings. Pleasure emerges from both the activity itself and the information gained. “Such knowledge satisfies our curiosity and may be valuable in understanding our own lives,” notes philosopher Aaron Ben-Ze’ev. As a form of knowledge and a means of self-expression, gossip can allow participants to explore and potentially resolve personal issues and conflicts and, in the process, create self-knowledge and construct identities. In addition to providing personal pleasure and understanding, gossiping can yield power for individuals. It can advance the interests and enhance the status of participants, an argument most famously made by anthropologist Robert Paine. Integrating these personal functions, feminist sociolinguist Justine Coupland identifies gossip as “a source of female identity and power, and certainly enjoyment.” Yet, gossiping also poses a risk. Given the traditional moral condemnation of gossip, “it can destroy the reputation of its transmitter, in fact, harm its possessor permanently,” just as it can the subject of gossip.

Thus, the practice of gossip can be double-edged, functioning both to the benefit and detriment of its purveyors and recipients. Christine Eisel’s essay about women’s gossip and church politics in colonial Virginia relates this process and outcome. In 1658, Elizabeth Woods
circulated a libelous note accusing two parish vestrymen of inappropriate sexual associations. In her analysis of the libel case that followed, Eisel uncovers a women’s gossip network through which its members exchanged information—including criticisms of church leaders—and exercised power in the community. But the attempt by Woods and her fellow gossips to challenge their church leadership ended in failure and fines for libel. Gossip posed real risks in early America, especially when translated into the written word. Early in her gossip career, Anne Royall also endured prosecution, when she was arrested and put on trial as a “common scold” in 1829; she, too, escaped with a fine, as Isenberg recounts. Royall, however, was not only controversial but also celebrated for her gossip. She certainly profited from her commentaries about both elite and everyday Americans, which she published in books and newspapers for an eager readership into the 1850s.

Enhancing such personal benefits and allaying the potential risks of gossip are its social functions. Gossip occurs within distinct social groups, such as families, networks of friends and colleagues, and communities. These social groups are characterized by close relationships, and gossip builds on and furthers interpersonal intimacy and trust. “We feel close to those with whom we converse,” observes John Morreall. The process of gossiping cultivates social relationships and a sense of solidarity. For many participants, this outcome or “we-ness” is often more important than the information shared. Gossip, whether delivered interpersonally or through print and mass media, leads to exchanges among participants, creates social ties and connections, and builds a sense of community. While gossip contributes to camaraderie within groups, it simultaneously establishes or reinforces who remains outside. Anthropologist Max Gluckman made this pioneering argument when he connected gossip “with the maintenance of the unity of groups” and noted that “the outsider cannot join in gossip.” By defining who is “in” and who is “out,” gossip fosters both social inclusion and exclusion.

The way in which gossip is constitutive of both our immediate and our imagined communities is evident in the essays by Erica Ball and Tim Seiber, respectively. As Ball points out, African-American newspaper writers and editors used gossip to build and solidify the free black community in the North in the decades before the Civil War. While the antebellum black press denigrated malicious gossip as destructive of community relationships, they deployed “good gossip” to publicize and promote pride in the activities and achievements of
African Americans across the North and as part of the larger African diaspora. Such intra-racial inclusion coexisted with examples of inter-racial exclusion, as when the black press dealt with gossip by and about white Americans. In Tim Seiber’s work, online celebrity gossip both creates and is a creation of a twenty-first-century form of community: social networks. Seiber focuses on musician and media personality Charles Trippy, his fans, and the production and consumption of his celebrity through gossip on the Internet and social media. Digital gossip not only transforms old modes of interaction and community into new ones. What makes this entire process possible is the way networked computers are programmed to communicate—a “gossip protocol”—inspired, appropriately, by gossip’s social functions.

Along with these various personal and social functions, gossip performs “cultural work,” to borrow literary scholar Jane Tompkins’s term. Gossip is storytelling, which makes it so personally compelling. It also shares among participants an interpretation of people and their actions, a point of view that develops and sustains social relationships. Finally, gossip carries moral evaluation, and it can stigmatize those who step outside the boundaries of what the community deems appropriate behavior. In this way, gossip provides opportunities to discuss, question, and reinforce cultural norms and values. Through gossip, participants may engage in “moral policing,” but they also use gossip to ascertain meaning in events and “make sense of their world.” This function of gossip has garnered the attention of scholars who show how gossip, as well as rumor, conveys and constructs the worldview and cultural understanding of participants. Gossip’s meanings are negotiated within, illuminate, and shape specific cultural and historical contexts.

Mary Beth Norton’s close analysis of gossip in the Salem or, more accurately, Essex County witchcraft trials of 1692 reveals these multiple and overlapping cultural functions. In a time and place where talking formed the predominant mode of communication, gossip about witches ran rampant across the region and played a role in the accusations, testimony, and convictions that followed. As a result, judicial proceedings document gossip’s role in the witchcraft crisis. These unique historical sources give us not only an “oral snapshot” of talk about witches but also an “entrée into the minds” of New England colonists and the life of their communities, as Norton argues. She focuses on four different cases to show how gossip worked in
different situations, although with similar tragic outcomes. What is clear in each case is that gossip about witches took the form identified by Spacks: gossipers presented narratives, offered interpretations of actions and events, and rendered judgments of guilt or innocence. In the process, they contributed to collective efforts to make sense of what they thought was happening in the world around them. Whether true or false, gossip’s meanings reveal and reinforce the cultural understandings of people in the past as well as in the present.

Often these meanings are political and relate to the power relations in a given family, community, or society. Drawing upon expanded definitions of “the political” from feminist scholars and more complex understandings of power from theorist Michel Foucault, Besnier concludes that “gossip is political action.” Gossip occurs across all the levels of politics, from the personal and domestic through the local and communal to the national and international. It is part of “political practice in the everyday,” as Besnier emphasizes, and a staple of public political life, according to Gail Collins. Whether participants deploy gossip in micropolitical or macropolitical settings and contexts, they recognize gossip’s power. By making private information public, gossipers aim to direct public opinion, shape alliances, and determine reputations. If the content is flattering, gossip can enhance reputations, but if it is not, gossip can destroy them. This outcome particularly results when gossip reveals a personal secret that contradicts a public persona. Of course, gossip does not “do things” on its own but is used by specific individuals in particular contexts. Gossip can be wielded as “a weapon of the weak” to assail the powerful in society, to borrow anthropologist James C. Scott’s phrase. For some scholars, this function makes gossip “indispensable to the democratic process.” Yet, gossip has also been used by social and political elites to expand or defend their power.

Because gossip’s political functions are multiple and wide ranging, a majority of our contributors examine some aspect of the politics of gossip. Christine Eisel’s study of Elizabeth Woods and her gossip network in seventeenth-century Virginia provides an example of women using gossip as a means to challenge the qualifications of powerful men in the church and community. Denied formal political participation, Woods and her friends utilized gossip to make their voices heard, as did Anne Royall. Nancy Isenberg relates Royall’s many criticisms of authority figures, such as President Martin Van Buren, and dominant institutions, including the church. Isenberg characterizes Royall as a “democratic gossip” who called the powerful to account.
Similarly, Erica Ball mines the political content of gossip in the black press before the Civil War, extracting how it advanced the abolitionist and civil rights agendas of African Americans. Proving gossip as a tool of elites, Virginia Price finds gossip central to the controversy over and eventual dismissal of Francis Nicholson, colonial Virginia’s governor from 1698 until 1705, and Andrea Friedman dissects the political meanings of gossip in the “sexual smearing” of Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s. As it turned out, Governor Nicholson and Senator McCarthy’s own relentless and remorseless exploitation of gossip backfired on them, contributing to the end of their political careers. In the political arena, historical actors clearly saw and understood the power of gossip.

Gossip’s Histories

However used (or abused), gossip has consequences, and our contributors demonstrate its profound impact on people, events, and developments in the American past. Gossip’s importance for the law, media, and politics are three subjects of emphasis here. Several chapters portray gossip’s profound legal implications. In Norton and Eisel’s examinations of witchcraft and libel in colonial America, gossip was integral to legal and judicial processes that collapsed distinctions between religious or moral and criminal offenses. Samantha Barbas focuses on developments in US privacy and First Amendment law and the vital role played by mass-media gossip. In addition to Barbas, Erica Ball on the antebellum black press, and Tim Seiber on the Internet, other chapters discuss gossip and the media. Mary Desjardins and Kimberly Wilmot Voss further our understanding of women, journalism, publicity, and celebrity in the twentieth century. For Anne Helen Peterson, the advent and impact of “personality journalism” in the 1970s transformed the media landscape. Finally, the political consequences of gossip appear in chapters throughout this volume. In particular, Virginia Price and Andrea Friedman find gossip utilized at the highest levels of government to challenge and change the political order from the colonial period to the Cold War.

The broader, public significance of gossip emerges clearly in the pages to follow, but so does its everyday, interpersonal effects. Individual American women and men in their specific time and place felt gossip’s impact for good or ill. This intertwining of intimacy and influence means gossip’s histories illuminate both private and public life in the past. Even more, the history of gossip reveals what is understood to be
“private” and “public” at different historical moments in the United States. Historians now see public and private less as spatial terms—designating actual places, domains, or spheres—than as discursive and ideological constructs and concepts. Although conceived as a mutually exclusive, binary opposition, public and private are actually mutually constituted and better understood as a continuum. Even in the present, it is difficult to determine where the private ends and the public begins. As a result, the occurrences and consequences of gossip in the American past can clarify where the “shifting and uncertain” boundary between public and private lay at different historical moments. Moreover, gossip’s histories inform us about who at the time had the power to draw and defend that boundary and to what ends they deployed this power.

Taken together, these histories of gossip in America contribute to contemporary discussions about the practice of history. They build on a generation of interdisciplinary scholarship on women, gender, sexuality, and the family that redefined history to include these ostensibly “private” matters alongside traditional “public” ones. Similarly, gossip emerges here as an important subject of scholarly inquiry, an intimate practice connected to the larger world, and as a legitimate category of historical evidence. Gossip is usually viewed as “suspect evidence” because it cannot be verified as true or false. Yet, our contributors tease out the historical information and knowledge conveyed through gossip. In the same way, Claire Bond Potter has argued for valuing gossip as a source that can lead to new interpretations. African historian Luise White argues that gossip is not only a useful and often the only available historical source for some topics, but actually “the best and most reliable historical source.” Art historian Gavin Butt agrees, especially for exploring “questions of sexuality, and particularly, of homosexuality” in history. Gossip’s unsubstantiated truth claims still act as a “trace of some historical real.” Butt further asserts gossip’s “value and significance as a discourse of history.” Indeed, whether we understand gossip as “counter history” or history as an “elevated form” of gossip, gossip and history are integrally related. They both offer narratives of the past, and where and why these narratives differ and agree needs further investigation.

The essays collected here demonstrate the value of gossip as evidence and as a methodological and epistemological tool. Ideally, this volume will encourage further interdisciplinary research and writing about gossip in the United States over time, in all its forms—written,
posted, spoken, whispered, printed, broadcast, and vlogged—and functions. Paying attention to *When Private Talk Goes Public* allows us to reassess the known and recover what has been lost or overlooked.

**Notes**


15. Spacks, Gossip, 26; Maryann Ayim, “Knowledge Through the Grapevine: Gossip as Inquiry,” in Good Gossip, 86.


17. Spacks, Gossip, 34; Ayim, “Knowledge through the Grapevine,” 86.


Celebrity Culture and Journalism,” History Compass 10.6 (June 2012): 467–482.
27. Bergmann, Discreet Indiscretions, 58.
29. Coupland, Small Talk, 11; Spacks, Gossip, 5–6.
32. Spacks, Gossip, 13.
34. Coupland, Small Talk, 14, 211.
37. Besnier, Gossip and the Everyday Production of Politics, 190.
38. Ibid., 1; Collins, Scorpion Tongues.
42. Alan Wolfe, “Public and Private in Theory and Practice: Some Implications of an Uncertain Boundary,” in Public and Private in Thought and Practice,
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