

Representations are Misrepresentations: The Case of Cover Designs of Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen*

Les représentations sont des déclarations : Le cas des conceptions de couverture de *Kitchen* de Banana Yoshimoto

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Article abstract

Megan Backus's English translation of *Kitchen* is notable for being both a critical and commercial success. Critics have praised its readability but noted that its translation strategy is foreignizing. Although its cover designs have not been discussed in relation to domestication and foreignization, the strategies are worthy of mention, because they have huge implications for the symbolic representation of marginalized cultures and dominant counterparts.

The American publisher Grove Press uses a foreignizing strategy which succeeds in producing an intelligible image of the Oriental novel which at the same time appeals to readers, and the design accelerated the popularity of this novella in the US. In contrast, the first UK edition uses a photograph of a weeping geisha, even though the main character is a young Americanized Japanese woman. Most importantly, there are no geishas anywhere in this story. The cover may seem foreignizing at first glance, but is in fact, obviously domesticating. This design fits the stereotyped mould of what Westerners regard as "a typical Japanese image," completely unrelated to the content. This paper investigates how *Kitchen* has been represented in Western countries, with a focus on the cover designs of the translations.

Representations are Misrepresentations: The Case of Cover Designs of Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen*

Hiroko Furukawa

Introduction

Megan Backus's English translation of the Japanese novel *Kitchen* is remarkable for the attention it has received, both academic and popular. Critics such as Venuti (2008 [1995], p. 121) have praised its readability and noted that its translation strategy is foreignizing. Harker describes the translation as "accessible yet still 'oriental'" (1999, p. 27). Although neither discusses cover designs in relation to domestication and foreignization, the strategies are worth considering in terms of translations of *Kitchen*, because they have huge implications for the symbolic representation of a marginalized culture in the interaction of the Japanese novel and the Western audience.

Paratexts¹ such as a book cover tend to be separated from the text itself when translation is discussed. However, a paratext functions as a "*threshold*" (italics in the original, Genette, 1997 [1987], p. 2) to give information about the text to the audience and

1 Genette uses the term "paratext" to define "a zone between text and off-text" (1997 [1987], p. 2), such as a title, a preface and a cover. These accompanying productions of the text play an important role because they convey some commentary on the text to the audience.

affects how the text is received. In this sense, a cover may itself be a text: “if it is still not *the* text, it is already *some* text” (italics in the original, *ibid.*, p. 7). If the commentary on the text that a cover conveys is significantly different from the text itself, it may impact upon the novel’s reception. In the case of translation, the original text is translated into another language by a translator, and the translated text is packaged at the discretion of a publisher in the target society. If the information on the original text that the translator or the publisher conveys is misrepresented, or if the information is distorted through this process, the content of the text cannot be adequately received by the target audience.

Kitchen is an interesting case in terms not only of how it is translated, but also how it is packaged in the target society and subsequently received by the audience. It shows how “Western cultures ‘translated’ (and ‘translate’) non-Western cultures into Western categories” (Lefevere, 1999, p. 77) in order to understand non-Western cultures and appreciate them. According to Lambert, translation is a cultural import/export activity or movement between two literary systems (1995, pp. 97-98). Through the process by which *Kitchen* is conveyed from the source literary system to fit the target literary system, the novel was adapted to the dominant norms of the target literary system. The transformation symbolizes an intervention of ideology and shows that literary systems are related to social, religious or other systems in target cultures (Lambert, 1985, pp. 38-39). Therefore, this paper builds its argument by investigating the cover designs of *Kitchen*, focusing on domestication/foreignization strategies mainly in the American, UK, and Dutch versions. I will also explore the problems of using stereotypes in the cover designs.

This novel is the first work of the Japanese best-selling writer, Banana Yoshimoto. Published in 1988, when Yoshimoto was only 24 years old, *Kitchen* has so far been translated into more than 25 languages all around the world. It has sold over two million copies, with more than 60 printings in Japan alone, and garnered prizes in Italy and Japan (Gaouette, 1998 [1987], p. 13). The main character Mikage is a Japanese university student in her twenties, and she has recently lost her only relation, her grandmother. She has started living with a young man and his

male-to-female transsexual mother. This story is narrated in colloquial style with “a young person’s dialect, a bit reminiscent of J. D. Salinger” (Harker, 1999, pp. 36-37) and the style is described by some Japanese reviewers as “bubble-gum” Japanese (*ibid.*).

Domestication and Foreignization in the English Translation

Venuti (2008 [1995], pp. 13-20) discusses two approaches to literary translation: domestication and foreignization. Domestication strategies tend to strive for readability whereby linguistic and stylistic characteristics, metaphors and images are changed to adjust to the system of the target language, or cultural values are deleted or altered to be seen as natural in the target culture. Foreignizing strategies make the target text “strange and estranging in the receiving culture” by emphasizing linguistic, stylistic and cultural difference in the source text (Venuti, 2008 [1995], p. 263).

In the English translation of *Kitchen*, some foreignizing strategies can be seen such as mixed usage of current English and archaic English, juxtaposition of Japanese words and American proper nouns, and deviations from linguistic forms of Standard English. These factors foreground Yoshimoto’s characteristic style and Japanese culture, and make the translation exotic. On the other hand, the number of paragraphs has been reduced by 17% in the target text to adjust to the writing style in English.² This mixture of foreignization and domestication makes this English translation readable but foreignizing. In fact, the success of *Kitchen* is due to its “middlebrow translation strategy” (Harker, 1999, p. 36). Harker regards the strategy as “a middle ground between domestication and foreignization” (1999, pp. 37-38) describing it as “carefully constructed, reminiscent of Japanese rhythms and language and yet fluently readable” (*ibid.*). This English translation overcomes the dilemma “adequate” (source-oriented translations) vs. “acceptable” (target-oriented translations) (Lambert, 1985,

² The number of paragraphs has been reduced from 516 in the original to 430 in the English translation.

p. 40) and has found an “acceptable but adequate” ground on a micro-structural level (*ibid.*).³

Although Megan Backus’s strategy succeeds to a considerable extent, in terms of how the text is conveyed to the target audience, two aspects are worth considering. Firstly, the gay character’s use of feminine language is omitted. There is a wider variety of pronouns in Japanese, which indicate the speaker’s femininity or masculinity. Take the most common pronouns for example, *watashi* [“I”] is usually used by girls, and *boku* [“I”] is mostly for boys. The gay characters: the male-to-female transsexual mother and her friend use a girly and informal pronominal form *atashi* [“I”] to address themselves (Yoshimoto, 2006 [1988], pp. 25 and 114; Yoshimoto, 1993, pp. 17 and 83). However, the English pronoun “I” completely elides their use of women’s language (*ibid.*). Also, feminine sentence-final forms, which are a characteristic of Japanese women’s language, highlight their feminine speech style in the original, but the effect is lost in the English translation. Secondly, there is a censored description of gay people. As Aoyama points out (1996, p. 24), the description underlined below is clearly deleted in the English translation:

よくTVで観るNYのゲイたちの、あの気弱な笑顔に似てはいた。しかし、そう言うてしまうには彼女は強すぎた。あまりにも深い魅力が輝いて、彼女をここまで運んでしまった。(my italics, Yoshimoto, 2006 [1988], p. 28)

[*She looked like gay people in NY with a weak smile that I often saw on the TV. But her attractions were much stronger than this. The brilliance of her extraordinary charm had brought her to where she was.*]

[*Her power was the brilliance of her charm and it had brought her to where she was now.*] (Yoshimoto, 1993, p. 19)

3 Lambert (1985, p. 46) defines “micro-structural level” as selection of words; dominant grammatical patterns and formal literary structures; form of speech reproduction; narrative, perspective and point of view; modality; language levels, and “macro-structural level” as division of the text; titles of chapters, presentation of acts and scenes; relation between types of narrative, dialogue, description; relation between dialogue and monologue, solo voice and chorus; internal narrative structure; dramatic intrigue; poetic structure; authorial comments; stage directions.

The gay characters' feminine use is omitted because of linguistic difference, and censorship of gay description is determined by a political and ideological value in the target culture. Lefevere considers translation as rewriting (1992, p. 9). In this case, the publishing industry may have dictated the deletion from a political motivation as Venuti argues (2008 [1995], p. 1). As a consequence some aspects of the novel have been lost. These reductions can also be considered as domestication.

Geisha as a Representation of a Modern Japanese Woman

The American and UK editions of *Kitchen* use the same text translated by Megan Backus. However, each cover is clearly different. In Venuti's terms, the American edition uses a foreignizing strategy, while the UK edition employs a domesticating one. The UK design indicates central-peripheral relationships, namely how a marginal culture is represented in the Western book market.

The original Japanese version has a cover jacket with black tulips on a white background (see Figure 1). On the frontispiece, there are white tulips contrasted against a black background. Although rather ambiguous in its design, a reviewer on the Amazon.co.jp website considered the cover to be a powerful representation of life and death (Bohemiya, 2004, n.p.).



Figure 1 Original (1988)
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The American and UK versions, however, markedly digress from the simple design. The American publisher Grove Press succeeds in producing an intelligible image of the Oriental novel, which at the same time appeals to readers (see Figure 2). In the cover design, a young Japanese woman and an upside-down Japanese bowl are foregrounded, implying that this story is about a young Oriental woman and is related to food or cooking. As Venuti indicates, foreignization foregrounds the translated text in the receiving culture by emphasizing linguistic, stylistic and cultural differences between the original and translated texts (2008 [1995], pp. 263-264). In light of this definition, the American version is apparently foreignizing by using the photograph of the Japanese woman and the bowl.

The publisher, Grove Press, effectively attracts even the most casual book-browser with a packaging which Harker praises as exhibiting “the most sophisticated techniques” (1999, p. 36) as compared to other designs for translation. Gladstone acclaims this design as one of the best covers of the year because readers can easily identify with “a bright, healthy-looking young Asian woman” (cited in Harker, 1999, p. 37). The critic Deborah Garrison writes in *The New Yorker*:

There’s a photograph on the mint-and-dark-peach jacket of a bright-eyed Japanese girl in a white eyelet dress, her hair stylishly longer on one side than the other—someone it might be fun to know. She’s not Banana, but the packaging doesn’t entirely lie. The author was only twenty-four when “Kitchen” was first published... you’re meeting a real young woman, who is, among other things, cute. (Garrison, 1993, p. 109)

Looking at the photograph of the American version carefully, we will notice that the image is very similar to the poster for the film *Kitchen* (Yoshimitsu Morita, 1989), which was adapted from the novel. This photograph of the Japanese girl resembles the leading actress Ayako Kawahara; the pose, white dress, and black socks—everything is very alike. The cover seems exotic, but not entirely exotic because the Asian-looking woman’s clothing is as likely to be found on a Western woman. In this sense, it can be said that this cover design succeeds in creating “an accessible yet still ‘oriental’” image as Harker indicates in relation to the English

translation (1999, p. 27) and can be regarded as a middle strategy between domestication and foreignization (*ibid.*, pp. 37-38).

The publisher uses the same image as the film version for the paperback design in 2006 and the consistency of the visual image indicates that this strategy contributed to the strong sales in the US. In fact, the editor of this translation, Jim Moser of Grove Press, was very pleased with the sales (Harker, 1999, p. 42 n. 3).



Figure 2: American Edition (Grove Press, 1993)
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In contrast, the UK edition uses a photograph of a weeping geisha (see Figure 3). The main character Mikage is an Americanized young Japanese woman, and as soon as readers start reading this book, they recognize that American popular culture is deeply rooted into her ordinary life. Indeed, it is possible that readers in English might mistake it for a US novel because the references are “decidedly American” (Kakutani, 1993, p. 15). Most importantly, no geisha appears in this story. At first glance, the design would seem to be foreignizing Japanese culture. However, on reflection we can see that the cover design domesticates: this design is adjusted to a Western stereotyped mould; an image with

exotic sensuality and unrestrained sexual pleasure, irrespective of whether or not it relates in any way to the content of the novel.

In addition to the dissonance between Mikage in the story and the geisha girl in the UK design, the tone of this story has been changed. Despite the tragedy of the protagonist losing her only relation, the tone is not completely downbeat. On the contrary, it lifts readers' spirits because of the main character Mikage's innately cheerful character. As the Japanese translator Minami Aoyama indicates, although Mikage often uses words such as *kodoku* ["loneliness"] or *samishii* ["lonely"], these feelings have not been conveyed to the readers (1996, p. 16). Conversely, they experience the heroine's happy-go-lucky attitude. Hence, not only the content of this novel, but also the impressions of it given to the audience are misrepresented in this cover design (Figure 3). If a reader buys this book only because of the cover expecting an emotional and melancholic geisha story, s/he would be disappointed when reading the novel.

This "geisha" design was changed when the book was published in a paperback version (see Figure 4). Yet, the second design still insinuates eroticism although there is neither a kiss nor sex in the story. A naked Asian woman is lying on a bed in a dim room, wrapped in a blanket. She seems to be seducing men to bed with her suggestive look. This is a representative image in a world where "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 442). The Japanese woman is represented as a passive and sexually available figure.

In the pocket-sized version, the publisher Faber and Faber decided to use a Japanese word 台所 [*daidokoro*] which means "kitchen" (see Figure 5). The use of the Japanese language makes the book be visibly recognized as a translation. Hence, it could be argued that the design strategy has gradually changed from domestication to foreignization.



Figure 3:
UK Edition (1)
Hardcover / Paperback
(Faber and Faber, 1993)



Figure 4:
UK Edition (2)
Paperback
(Faber and Faber, 1999)

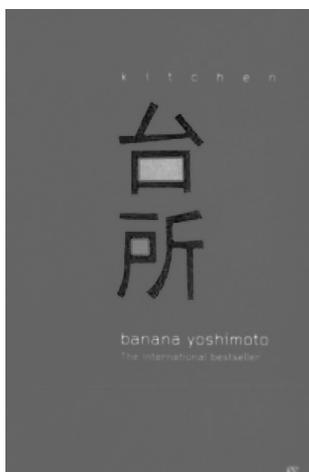


Figure 5:
UK Edition (3)
Pocket-sized book
(Faber and Faber, 2001)

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Western Men's Illusions about Japanese Women

These misrepresentations in the two UK versions can be regarded as resulting from Western people's image of Japanese women. Western males in particular have long held illusions about Japanese women's exotic sensuality and unrestrained sexual pleasure. They have been viewed, as "improper women" (Harker, 1999, p. 29) ever since Commander Perry forced Japan to open trade with the West in 1853. According to Harker, Japanese women were European men's "most valuable item of commerce" because they "constructed the passive, always sexually available Oriental woman into a masturbatory fantasy as an oppositional image which challenged the dominant values of Victorian morality" (1999, p. 29). Miner also identifies the Victorian image of Japan as "an Eastern country which was curiously civilized but hardly European, a nation of beautiful and refined but also enticing and 'improper' women" (1966, p. 66).

This misrepresentation of Japanese women was in part created through the introduction of geishas to the West. In the 19th century, a Japanese pioneer in the development of photography and photomechanical printing, Ogawa Kazumasa (1860-1929), photographed geishas and published several picture books between the late 19th and early 20th century. The book is titled *Types of Japan, Celebrated Geysa of Tokyo*, published in 1892, and is one of Ogawa's most famous works. A famous geisha in Tokyo posed for each picture and each has an explanation with their names and places where they work. The image of geisha was exported through these books to European countries and established as "the passive, always sexually available oriental woman" (Harker, 1999, p. 29). There was another book also called *Types of Japan, Celebrated Geysa of Tokyo*, published in 1895. This book contains 105 portraits, an amount that demonstrates the Western fascination with geishas. If they simply wanted a generalized image of geishas, perhaps several pictures would have been enough, but this book introduces 105 geishas with their names and places where Western men could actually meet them. Western men appreciated concrete information about geishas, and they might have turned the pages just as we read a guide book before we go travelling.

Anyone who has seen the film *Memoirs of a Geisha* (Rob Marshall, 2005)⁴ will understand the eroticism with which geishas are depicted from a Westerner's perspective. They are fantastically titillating in the film. Geishas take a bath with their customers and the leading actress sleeps with an American businessman to help her customer's business negotiation.

Westerners tend to assume that a geisha is a prostitute, but she is not. On the BBC website, a geisha explains the misconceptions of their customers and confesses that they are sometimes approached sexually by their customers. However, Geishas are not allowed to sleep with any client. If a customer touches a geisha, her agent will come in the room and remonstrate with the customer about his behavior (BBC, 2008, n.p.). In fact, the geisha consultant Liza Dalby, who was trained as a geisha for six months in Kyoto—and it was the first time a Western woman had done such a thing—says, “this is a stereotype in the West that a geisha plays things with men, but I found it as a community of women who are really dedicated to preserving traditional arts” (2005, n.p.).⁵ Nevertheless, Western men adhere to the illusion, and this kind of adherence to an incorrect image of Japanese women has always made the Japanese uncomfortable. Not only is the West's perception of the geisha wrong, but it also confuses ordinary Japanese women and geishas. Geisha is a female occupation in Japan, but needless to say, not all Japanese women are geishas. The UK designs for the cover of *Kitchen* indicate that the image is an enduring one.

Edible Japanese Women in the Dutch Version

Other European translations of *Kitchen* use a similar image to that on the covers of the 1989 film either by using the same

4 This is an adaptation of Arthur Golden's novel *Memoirs of a Geisha*, and it received Academy Awards in Cinematography, Costume Design and Art Direction, as well as some other prestigious prizes. It was released in December 2005 in the US and Japan, and in January 2006 in the UK. The final gross is \$ 57 million in the US and £ 6.5 million in the UK (The Internet Movie Database)

5 Interestingly, this interview happens to be recorded on a “Making of” supplement to *Memoirs of a Geisha*.

photograph or by using Kawahara's photograph/illustration. This picture was first used for the Italian version in 1991, before the US version and the following European versions also use a similar image in their translation: Greece in 1993, Sweden in 1994, France in 1994 and 1996, and Germany and Finland in 1995.

The Dutch version (Figure 6) is worth considering because it adopts a domesticating strategy by using Japanese traditional wood dolls called "*kokeshi*" in its picture. This design indicates how Japanese women are represented as commodities to the audience. The protagonist is an Americanized young Japanese woman and there is no connection with *kokeshi*, or even such traditional (or archaic) Japanese culture in this novel. The dolls may suggest something passive, the Western man's illusion of the sexually available Oriental women, as Harker suggests (1999, p. 29).

The dolls also indicate an assumption of the immaturity of Japanese women, which inevitably explains the superiority of the Western man. In addition, the *kokeshi* are represented as packages of Japanese sweets or rice crackers. The use of sweets emphasizes the availability of Oriental women: not only are Oriental women available, but they are also edible. This is exactly the metaphor which represents women as "a commodity" (Irigaray, 1997 [1977], p. 368) for men by likening women to Japanese sweets and dolls.

As discussed earlier the author's use of language shocked Japanese readers when *Kitchen* was published in 1988. Japanese is a gender-marked language and characters' language usage is likely to be different on the basis of the speaker's gender in Japanese fiction, but the gender differences in the conversation between the two main characters, Mikage (female protagonist) and Yuichi (her male friend), seem to be absent (Endo, 1997, p. 191). In terms of the impression of their speech, no male/superior and female/inferior relationships can be seen in this novel. Nevertheless, the Dutch design cynically demonstrates how women can connote "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 442) and can be "exploited as an object" (*ibid.*). In this cover,

Japanese women are depicted as passive and eatable (i.e., sexually available) commodities.



Photo 6 Holland (Uitgeverij Contact, 1993)

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Conclusion

I have investigated the cover designs of translations of *Kitchen*, mainly focusing on the US, UK and Dutch versions. The American publisher Grove Press uses a foreignizing strategy, which fulfils a recognizably Oriental but not entirely exotic image, and which at the same time appeals to readers, thus using a design which accelerated the rise in popularity of this novel in the US. In contrast, the UK edition first appeared with a geisha's picture, though there is no depiction of geisha in the novel itself. The second version of the UK design still alludes to Western men's stereotypical image of Japanese women. These covers demonstrate how Western culture sometimes forcefully adapts a non-Western culture to fit Western categories. In addition, the Dutch version uses *kokeshi* which is also unrelated to the content.

Therefore, it can be concluded that considering the English translation of *Kitchen*, it succeeds in finding an “adequate

but acceptable” ground on a micro-structural level; however, representations of the novel in the UK and Dutch cover designs are “not-adequate and not-acceptable” on a macro-structural level. The novel as represented in the UK and Dutch versions is “deformed” to adapt to dominant norms, to quote Edward Said in another context (2003 [1978], p. 273). In this case, as Said indicates, representations are misrepresentations; they are “implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many things beside the ‘truth’” (2003 [1978], p. 272). Regarding the misrepresentation, we might recall the Indian writer and critic Amit Chaudhuri’s words, “the ‘exotic’ does not just mean ‘foreign,’ but a commodification of the foreign” (2006, n.p.).

Translation cover designs have not been discussed enough in Translation Studies. To borrow Roman Jakobson’s classification, the representations in cover designs can be regarded as a type of intersemiotic translation (Jakobson, 2004 [1959], p. 139). As shown in this paper, exploring translation’s cover designs is a rich repository, especially in relation to domestication/foreignization. Cover designs are symbols of how source texts are packaged and received in the target literary system, and they have huge implications for how source texts are represented in target cultures. We can observe a dominant/marginalized relationship here. A novel in a marginalized culture is transformed and appropriated by the dominant (Western) culture. In the case of *Kitchen*, this Japanese novel is made to conform to dominant cultural modes of the UK and Dutch market places. Despite the huge implications this has for the supposed “relevance” of translation, it is an aspect of translation which has not been systematically explored. Therefore, scholars may need to pay more attention to the semiotic image of translated texts.

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The American publisher Grove Press uses a foreignizing strategy which succeeds in producing an intelligible image of the Oriental novel which at the same time appeals to readers, and

the design accelerated the popularity of this novella in the US. In contrast, the first UK edition uses a photograph of a weeping geisha, even though the main character is a young Americanized Japanese woman. Most importantly, there are no geishas anywhere in this story. The cover may seem foreignizing at first glance, but is in fact, obviously domesticating. This design fits the stereotyped mould of what Westerners regard as “a typical Japanese image,” completely unrelated to the content. This paper investigates how *Kitchen* has been represented in Western countries, with a focus on the cover designs of the translations.

RÉSUMÉ : Les représentations sont des déclarations : Le cas des conceptions de couverture de *Kitchen* de Banana Yoshimoto — La traduction en anglais du roman *Kitchen* par Megan Backus est remarquable tant pour son succès critique que commercial. Les critiques ont fait l'éloge de sa lisibilité mais ils ont aussi remarqué qu'il s'agissait d'une traduction de nature sourcière. Bien que le design de la couverture n'ait pas été discuté par rapport à la cible et à la source les stratégies sont à noter, parce qu'elles ont des implications énormes pour la représentation symbolique des cultures marginalisées et leurs contre-parties dominantes.

L'éditeur américain Grove Press emploie une stratégie de nature sourcière qui réussit à reproduire une image intelligible du roman asiatique tout en plaisant aux lecteurs; le design a aussi contribué à la popularité de cette nouvelle aux États-Unis. Par contre, la première édition britannique emploie une photographie d'une geisha pleurant, malgré que la protagoniste du roman soit une jeune Japonaise américanisée. Qui plus est, aucune geisha ne fait même partie de cette histoire. Au premier regard, la couverture peut sembler relever d'une stratégie de nature sourcière au premier regard, mais, en fait, elle relève de toute évidence d'une stratégie cibliste, puisque ce design correspond à ce que les Occidentaux considèrent comme « une image typiquement japonaise », qui n'a rien à voir avec le contenu du roman. Cet article examine comment *Kitchen* a été représenté dans les pays occidentaux, tout en mettant l'accent sur les designs des couvertures des traductions.

Keywords: Japanese literature, Banana Yoshimoto, domestication, foreignization, cover design, stereotypes

Mots-clés : littérature japonaise, Banana Yoshimoto, traduction ciblisme, traduction sourcière, conceptions de couverture, stéréotypes

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