



Literary Quilt:

A Covering for George Floyd



In the following pages, 15 of the nation's top Black writers give voice to the unrest and current movement for Black lives. These cultural artists collaborated on a literary quilt honoring the elders who made this movement possible, and the young people remixing the tradition.

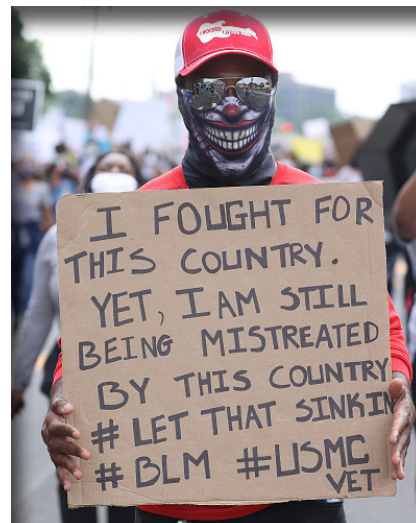
Quilts are often made from the fabric of clothes we no longer wear - old t-shirts, tattered pants, ill-fitted dresses, vintage skirts, classy jackets. Our grandmothers weaved together these different patterns to create something new and beautiful.

Quilts are a comfort. This material of memories - from our ancestors and generations past - keep us warm in the winter, a blanket for our soul when the world is cold and uncaring.

It's winter.

This is a literary quilt for George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and all those who died too soon.

Literary
Quilt



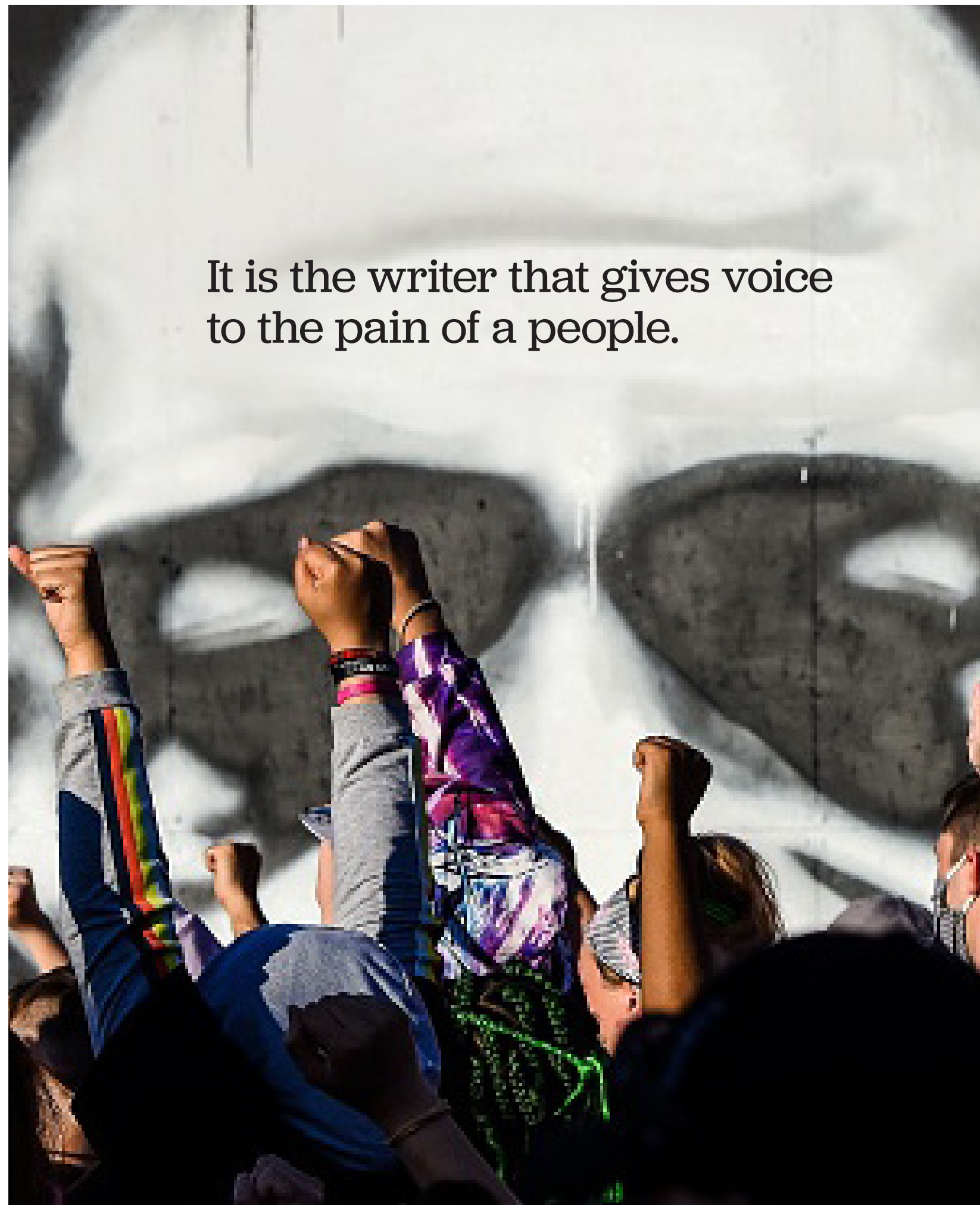
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Opposite Page: CHANDAN KHANNA / Contributor

Kiese Laymon

"They always want something for nothing," Grandmama says as Donald Trump sics his military on all that fleshy courage standing between him, a church, a Bible and a camera.

"That's the same thing they say about us," I tell her.

"They lied then," she says, "and they steady lying now. I can't tell if it's the end of times or beginning of that mo(u)rning we been praying for. What you think?"



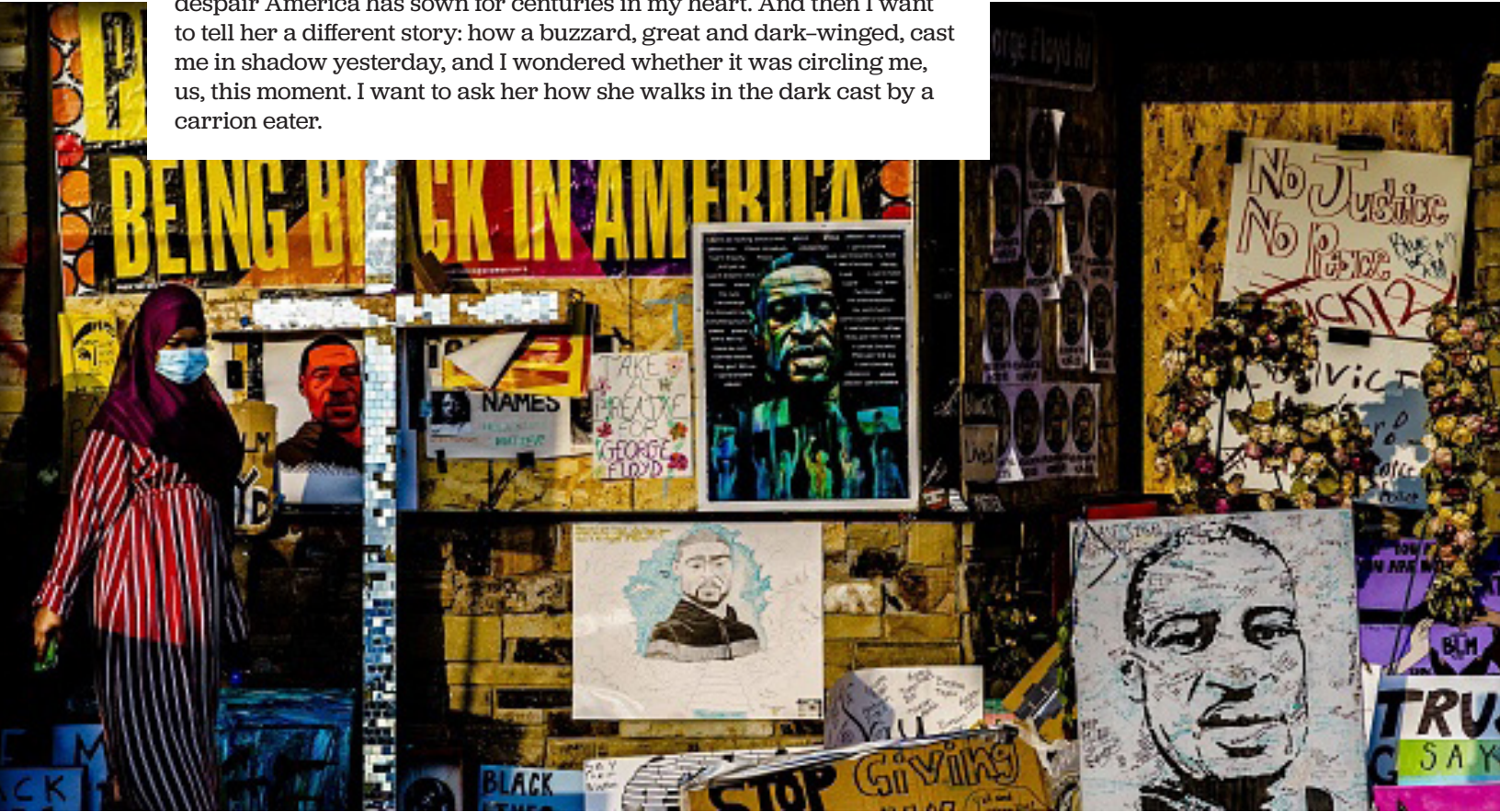
Camonghne Felix

“I think the game is the game and the lie is a win. And I think a win is just a turn of phrase while a loss is an indictment. And out of context, we’re all accidents and idiots busy deferring to our basic narcissisms and the ideals of what we think our children deserve. Everything is possible but unlikely. Nothing is likely, But even less is possible. And still, y’all all got the nerve to be out here, alive.”



Jesmyn Ward

I want to tell her that every time I see Maori tribespeople pounding haka dances for Black life or hoodie-wearing kids rallying in parks in London, it breaks something in me, some assumption of loneliness in this struggle. How it jars the despair America has sown for centuries in my heart. And then I want to tell her a different story: how a buzzard, great and dark-winged, cast me in shadow yesterday, and I wondered whether it was circling me, us, this moment. I want to ask her how she walks in the dark cast by a carrion eater.



Dee Rees

I want to ask her how she walks in the dark cast by a carrion eater.
Is it cool there in the circling shadow?
Is it so high up that she does not feel the drift of death above her
Her path dappled by the careless swoon of constant surveillance



Imani Perry

T says they look at everything, talk under folks clothes, listen to your business, but don’t see anything, nothing at all. But we can just look outside and see their whole con. I want to hold my breath because the long con might be over and it’s almost too good to hope for. I hope we breathe long enough to see it.



Darnell Moore

My mama saw it. She saw fire and Black people fatigued and Black people fighting and pieces of red, black and green cloth pinned to the outside of Black folks' doors in Camden in 1971. "I'm sitting here at work having flashbacks of what happened." Some memories are revelatory. In seeing what was I believe that she had a glimpse of what will be. I believe.



Maurice Carlos Ruffin

My great-great-great-grandmother saw it too. When, in 1811, the men took off for the German Coast outside of New Orleans. They had burlap pants and cotton shirts. They had wooden clubs and iron hatchets. Wanted to cut freedom from the American cloth. Those white men had long guns, but our brothers weren’t made to fear. You can’t turn back when you have nothing to lose. You can’t retreat when you need to send a message to your descendants’ in the 21st century. The white man put their heads on pikes, but that only made it easier for us to hear our blood cry freedom.



Namwali Serpell

We watch the first undoing on the television, the white lady newscaster droning on about protesters and police, while on the screen, spotlighted by a chopper, there’s a crowd milling around a giant white statue. A young brother half its height stands casually on the pedestal, wearing black basketball shorts and black socks and black sneakers, something red and white hanging from his waistband, something white wrapped around his neck like a scarf. His chest is bare and he’s reaching up to hold the statue, for balance it seems, with one of his hands, then both, and with utmost grace, he tugs its big white hand, pulls it right off, and swings down to the ground with the others. They say the statues are for history, that without a statue like this, how will we know that there was once a king in France named Louis, and that this city in Kentucky was named for him, and that a revolution over two centuries ago cut off his head? But what I know and what Grandmama knows is that we do know. We’ve been knowing. Just look at that man, leaping free with that hollow cut-off hand. Just look at how much he knows.



Opposite Page Clockwise: KEREM YUCEL / Contributor (2), Stephen Maturin / Stringer, Johnny Louis / Contributor
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Charlene Carruthers

Learn to be big and sit at your grandmama's swollen feet. Let her massage your scalp with the same hands that till soil and bang cops in the streets. She feels it all. In her back, right below the bellybutton and up through the stars. Stir it up.

“It’s your turn now.”

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Hari Ziyad

She said it like she wasn’t afraid. Like she trusted what comes next; like she trusted me. She said it like she was okay, but I ain’t never loved someone who’s been okay before, so she couldn’t have been. Or maybe I didn’t really love her like I wanted to believe I did. Or maybe I didn’t trust myself as much as she trusted me, to rise and love when it’s my turn to love. I told you, grandma been knew, and I been knew too, but I don’t know enough. Maybe if I knew enough I would have burned this whole world down ages ago, and grandma could have sat with me between her boney legs, massaging my scalp with her gentle fingers, without hurting so damn much. She could have sat in a new world that didn’t encourage her to break her gentle fingers at every joint to keep a fist and hurt my mother so damn much with it. I want my mother and her mother to be okay, that’s all I know enough of. I want to love them enough for both of them to be okay, I want to make something I ain’t never did before happen, but the world hasn’t finished burning yet. My mother saw the fire coming a long, long time ago – in Camden and in Cleveland and in Chapel Hill, NC, and I been traveling a long time since I left Troy, but I haven’t finished trusting myself with the burning.



Morgan Willis

“Go,” she said.

And I left.

I left Troy, Alabama and Lily Island, Texas and Louisville, Kentucky and New Bern, North Carolina. I left Wilberforce, Ohio. I left New Orleans, Louisiana. I left Chocolate City with the wrapper still on. I left Harlem’s sacred concrete. I left Detroit’s fuchsia sunsets. I left and left and kept leaving and kept running and kept packing up less and less and finally, with sweat and dust making dirt in my pockets, I collapsed into memory and bones.

She was there. Whispered to the pile at her feet. Called me Lazarus. God’s greatest miracle.

“Rise,” she offered. I opened wide and became a river of light.



Jonah Mixon-Webster

Yet some night after my leaving, came a single dream. Fire and fire and no ash for the imperial bird to rise from again, to hover and shirk its wing in my eye, with its slack tempers and caw-calling crow shadows from its gut, shadows and a shade to blank me out. Fire and fire, a single vision. Fire and the space that it makes, and the space that must come next, which leads me to the next place to leave. As I said in the dream, “When I wake, I will leave again. I will leave Birmingham. I will leave Portland. I will leave St. Louis. I will leave Flint. I will leave PG County. I will leave both Atlanta and Atlantis. I will leave Camden and Trenton, again if that’s what it means. I will leave this whole damn world on fire if need be.”

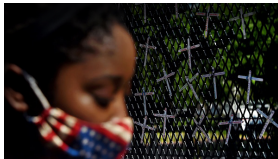
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dream hampton

kungani uhlala kule ndawo ekuzonda kangaka? le ndawo edla izingane zakho sengathi zingukudla okungabalulekile?

From Zulu: why do you stay in this place that hates you so? this place that devours your children as if they were an unimportant meal?



Nicole Dennis-Benn

Suddenly her daughter, a woman now, enters, and her voice is big. It rattles your insides and pulls you into the great depth of her soul—a marauding wave that recalls unclaimed bodies at the bottom of the ocean, and ancestors washed up on shores, their humanity crumpled. Her voice charges the air in almost visible white streaks and speaks of many lives bursting and full of “This too shall pass” and of dreams deferred and of generational traumas that pervade them, shape them, and open their mouths wide to belt out an endless echo of unspeakable stories, unsung. Her voice soars in the theater with its high gold ceiling, red velvet curtains, and grim, baroque facade that would’ve otherwise rejected the likes of her kind. She sings the blues in exquisite pain at the stoic white faces transfixed by the voice, but never moved by the story.

Jamey Hatley

But the story? It never belonged to those stoic white faces. The true story lived in the seeds hidden in her hair, in the sway of her hips, in the sound of the drums. The blues Daughter sings is two things at once: something those stoic faces can claim and own, but something more. Her voice – a tar baby, a trap to hold those stoic white faces bewitched in their false gold temple. As Daughter’s voice rises, the deep cries of the ancestors rise with hers. Her song is a song of her transformation and their coming destruction. As the temple falls, she is ready to join the ranks of ancestor. The lost legions rise, rise, rise and claim what they have always have been – a free people, a future people dancing on the ruins of what should have never have been and the new, true world becoming. Now.

Opposite Page Clockwise: Win McNamee / Staff; OLIVIER DOULERY / Contributor; TIMOTHY A. CLARY / Contributor; Spencer Platt / Staff
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