

Chris Anyanwu's *The Days of Terror*: A Female Political Prisoner as a Witness

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Abstract

This paper examines Chris Anyanwu's *The Days of Terror* as an aspect of the literature of witness (temoignage) of the experience of human captivity. Non-fiction memoirs of the experience of incarceration especially by female writers still appear a largely under-researched component of African Literature. Thus, by situating *The Days of Terror* within the category of Witness Literature, African Prison writing and particularly the literary tradition of women's prison writing, the research brings to the fore existential motifs of memory, pain and trauma, survival and truth-telling. The research is interdisciplinary as the dominant motifs span across disciplines such as history, psychology, philosophy, penology and human rights. Hence, the approach is literary – critical through content based and flexible. This critique of the African literature of incarceration is important as it inevitably discovers the incursion of literature into critical issues related to human rights and governance in Nigeria. As a female political witness, Chris Anyanwu reveals in *The Days of Terror* a woman's condition as a form of double incarceration in a nation's correctional facilities.

Keywords – human captivity, incarceration, witness, existential, human rights

Introduction

In sharing their experience of incarceration with the larger community of the outside world, African writers have engaged other outlets of life writings such as diaries, journals, blogs, testimonial pamphlets and private letters. In this regard, this paper attends to Chris Anyanwu's *The Days of Terror*. By adopting a content analysis approach, I attempt to highlight some aspects of how an incarcerated self-recreate a new sense of self and the society of which one is a product and part of.

It is noteworthy to reiterate that African literary texts, especially prose writings are bound up with particular social and political exigencies in the society. In stressing the value of literature as a social institution and a reflection or refraction of the society, David Cook confirms that "writers who are genuinely

socially conscious set their works within the framework of their society. This underscores the point that literature and society are interdependent" (3). It cannot be over emphasized that African writers have a deepening propensity for social and political commitment as their texts depict socio-political events in the society.

Moreover, my analysis also aligns with the notion that the this has emerged as another sociological document from particular Africa penitentiaries. Margareta Jolly's *Encyclopedia of Life Writings: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms* says:

The 'story' of how life writing has developed in sociology can be summarized as follows. First the life stories were taken as facts (to be checked), then they were given a narrative dimension and ultimately they were approached as contextually

bound constructions, in distinguishable from fiction. (2001:818-820)

Another peculiar attribute of the African prison memoir is what I have identified as the "oppositional power of writing", which in Paul Gready's words is a "contested arena". The critic affirms:

There is no monopoly over the political function of writing. While the written word retains both a dominant intention and a dominant operational truth. It is simultaneously ambiguous, an approximation, open to interpretation, manipulation and appropriation. In the context of imprisonment these are the contours of the contested arena of "power of writing". (489)

Witness literature

It is a kind of writing by victims of terror or human atrocity. The word terror here suggests experiences which bear the trace of what Carolyn Forché describes as "extremity within them and are such evidence of what occurred" (8). In "The Days of Terror", the writer subtitles her memoir as "A journalist eye witness account of Nigeria in the hands of her worst tyrant".

It is a kind of writing characterized by veracity of what happened to the witness. Literariness of that account is of secondary importance to the witness. According to Frederick Detue and Charlotte Lacoste:

Witnessing, however literary it may be, is founded on a part of veracity, in which witnesses are bound to relate no more than their own experiences and to do so with precision (22).

The memoir has an evidentiary value of truthfulness on the part of the personally involved in the experience "I was there," "I saw it," "I lived it". In her preface note

to the *The Days*, Anyanwu witnesses "I wrote about everything I saw, everything that happened to me, to others and to the larger society." (IX) This statement serves as an attestation of the witness's presence. Thus, in a testimonial literature, the literary witness does not acquire this attribute as a mere observer (eyewitness) or as a participant to a certain event, the witness is defined as the one who speaks up and does so in testimony. "I was there, I saw it, I can tell people" in her essay entitled "Witness Literature – A Conceptual Framework", Laura Sasu posits:

In this threefold definition of the witness, simultaneously complying with all three mandatory provisions – that of presence, that of perception and that of transmission - testimony emerges as an act speech having the capacity of reproducing the experiential circumstances of the real event.(8)

Furthermore, Literature of witness is subjective. It is an expression of the self from personal experience. Thus, theories of the I – pronoun as the agency of self – expression in life writings become imperative. In *The Days*, the auto – diegetic duality of the First – person pronoun (as Narrating I and Narrated I focalizes the social vision of the writer. She intentionally writes to communicate her "testimony" to the larger society. It is clear that *The Days* emerges as a written testimony related in the words of Sasu "both to historiography as historical documents and to literature as literary works".(12) The critic regards Witness Literature as a "hybrid concept bearing a new specific configuration of its constitutive elements: objectivity and factuality, credibility versus forgery, subjectivism versus subjectivity,

functionality and transitivity versus aesthetic value and literary affiliation(12).

Prison Writing As a Tradition

The literature of incarceration otherwise labeled interchangeably as dissident, rebel, detention, confinement, captivity or containment writing is a global phenomenon. It is a kind of writing motivated by the experience of being restricted to a place either in solitary isolation or within a group of other prisoners. In an attempt to situate the textuality of incarceration within the larger context of the experience of human captivity, Mark Larmount Hill (2013) contends, "confinement literature refers to any work of fiction or non-fiction that deals with the fundamental issue of human captivity. It also encompasses other sites of containment such as slave plantations and concentration camps"(19). Since this study is concerned with the writings of African writers who have experienced confinement as a real life experience, the subject of a prison environment, as a physical place of restriction of movement, association and expression comes to the fore. This explains why W.B. Carnochan (1995) in *Oxford History of the Prison-The Practice of Punishment in Western Society*, posits that "confinement writing is a kind of literature characterized by restricting the free movement of body and mind" (39).

Within the context of the experience of incarceration by some African writers, this study aligns with Jack Mapanje's (1995) explication of what constitutes confinement literature. The writer affirms:

Prison literature springs from types of confinement under which one lives in isolation, where sometimes no visitors and no reading materials are allowed. There is confinement where one has access to books because the prison has a library, however inadequate, there is imprisonment with hard labour, imprisonment where no work is allowed; and there is confinement or

exclusion ; from society where the writer has limited access to the wider world ... What is important is that each confinement generated writings with texture which reflects its own kind of environment and context. (5)

However, this kind of contextual backdrop problematizes ways of identifying the distinctive generic features of writings that should be classified as prison literature. It is noteworthy, that, while notable scholarly works such as Loan Davies' *Writers in Prison* (1990), Bruce Franklin's *The Prison Literature in American: The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (1989) and W.B. Carnochan, N. Morris and David Rothman's *Oxford History of the Prison – The Practice of Punishment in Western Society* (1995) have in various ways clearly identified and established the poetics of the Western literature of incarceration, that of the African tradition within the corpus of African literature appears to be under-researched and inadequate.

Against this backdrop, it is imperative to state the theoretical issues which surround the aspect of generic taxonomy of African prison writings. For instance, in his study of "Prison Literature in East Africa", Kimani Wawanjiru (2010) observes that it would be "fallacious and inadequate to study the body that is African literature without mentioning prison writings and the writers who have been so prolific in prison and captured insightful thematic concerns in Kenya and the continent at large" (1).

In her study of South African prison literature, Elizabeth Oswald (2007) attempts to provide a suitable definition for prison literature in relation to their cross-generic mode of classification. She maintains that "prison writing takes many forms: novels, memoirs/autobiography, poetry, biological/sociological studies, and so on. In other words it cuts across well-established, widely recognized genres" (32). In pointing out the problematic

nature of generic classification in terms of their particular poetics, Oswald submits that "prison literature cannot be defined in terms of genres because of the vast differences both between and within the genres mentioned above" (34). This study aligns with Oswald's method of identifying the common characteristics of prison writing which within our purview entails written literary expressions from personal experience. Thus, what some literary scholars would aptly categorize as the "writers' prison diaries" are subsumed in this study as the broad cross-generic self-life modes of poetry and prose narratives. To the extent that these autobiographical modes are traceable to the triadic component of "autos-self, bios-life, and graphe- act of writing, fictional works about prison experience are excluded from consideration in this study. However, it should still be mentioned that this mode of categorization comes with its theoretical controversy over the blurring of what constitutes non-fiction and fiction materials in prison memoirs. Andrew Sobanet (2002) in discussing the nuances of the prison novel as an interdisciplinary sub-genre observes that:

The texts which fall into the sub-genre of the prison novel represent artful intersections of autobiography and fiction, and their narrators often attempt to be sociological in their precision when observing and depicting the nature of conditions and relations behind bars. (1)

The foregoing overview of the multi-generic mode of prison literature points to an examination of the expressive motifs of African prison writings.

Thematics of African Prison Writing

A prison writing is an act of self-expression; a re-writing of self to counter and resist, as it were, the official code of imprisonment.

Therefore, prisoners, especially prisoners of conscience, engage in narrating their experience for several reasons. First, they engage in the act of writing for the purpose of self restoration. They write to restore the sense of self-identity and intellectual freedom taken away by the punitive regime of incarceration. Michel Foucault (1977) considers imprisonment as an instrument of the state power to maintain total control over its subjects. In describing this official code of imprisonment as a "network of writing", Foucault claims that "the prison writer is a heavily mapped writer. He is situated in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix him" (194). What this implies is that once an individual becomes a prisoner, the state authority gives him an identification number which signals the end of the personal identity of that person as a free member of the human community. In reaction to this, prisoners according to Paul Gready (1993), "write to restore a sense of self and world, to seek empowerment in an oppositional power of writing by writing against the official text of imprisonment" (493).

Moreover, the act of writing for an incarcerated individual, is a kind of mental therapy and emotional catharsis. For John Lwanda (2004), "writing for oneself within prison can be a tool of mental survival" (60). Frantz Fanon (1963) in *The Wretched of the Earth* also conceives political prison writing as part of the "discourse of national or communal aspiration. It can never be analyzed outside the context of the socio political and economic circumstances placing the writer in prison" (181). This concept of prison writing as a tool of empowerment for incarcerated writers brings to the fore some expressive motifs which bind prison texts together as narratives of self witnessing of the experience of human captivity. Doran Larson (2010) succinctly asserts that "all prison writings bear not only a common subject, but re-current, internal formal traits. It is a genre bound not only by its subject and authors, but in its expressive tropes" (2).

Thus, we have an expressive motif of torture and trauma. The motif of torture is a recurring decimal in the discourse of the narratives of human captivity. Incarcerated writers usually express the traumatic effect of confinement on their mind and physical body. The power to arrest, detain and interrogate people manifests as a form of torture and inflicting pain on people. Elaine Scarry (1985) addresses the subject of torture in her book, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. She contends that "the essence of interrogation and torturing is to uncreate and unmake a prisoner's world and sense of self" (13).

There is also the motif of self-witnessing and truth-telling of things that happen and experience lived in a prison facility. Prisoners write to testify of the horrors of incarceration. The things that often characterize the physical space of a prison environment include hostility, sexual harassment violence and death. Thus, prisoners write as witnesses of those things that either happens to them or to others around them. Kate Millet (1994) in her book, *The Politics of Cruelty: An Essay on the Literature of Political Imprisonment*, discusses how political prisoners in South Africa represent their experience of violence and other forms of human rights abuse in their narratives. The critic uses the term "témoinage": the literature of the witness, the one who has been there, sees it, knows" (15) to situate literature of incarceration in the category of autobiographies of the victims of the acts of state terrorism. To this end, prisoners' writings emerge as narratives of truth-telling of their feelings about their particular countries' system of justice and mechanism of penology.

It should be underscored that prison writing is not only characterized by the writers' concern with the nature and meaning of human existence, there is also the motif of survival. Prisoners express their determination to survive the horrors of incarceration in their writings. In her study of the prison memoirs of Wole Soyinka and Breyten Breytenbach, Ilena Sora Diminitriu (2000) confirms that "survival is a

major theme of prison writing" and that prison writing is a back translation of daily suffering into one's own higher vision of the self (94). This position, as the study discovers, reinforces the widely held notion that imprisonment hardly succeeds in its intent of silencing or more or less rehabilitate prisoners of conscience, instead it often serves to radicalize and harden their ideological and oppositional stances. This explains why prison-authors often foreground the imagery of birds, sun, moon and the stars in their expressions. They also attempt to endure the harsh realities of prison life which they consider as a process of physical and spiritual form of self-renewal.

Another critical area of self-expression in African prison narratives is history. African political inmates write with a new keen sense of history of the social and political exigencies of their particular milieu. In a political prison text, there are usually two versions of what happened. We have the dominant official version of historical events, which is circulated as the master narrative of national histories. Then, we have the narrative of self of a political inmate, which is regarded as marginal unofficial or alternative version of the master narrative that comes in form of state laws and penal codes, which a prisoner of conscience might have disregarded or flouted as a result of his political conviction and social vision. To this end, political prison writings are regarded as 'counter-discourses of official version of national narratives. Davies (1990) makes the notion of 'counter-discourses' and 'unofficial marginal narrative' more clearer, in the way he describes the historical context which conditions the artistic texture of a prison narrative. In describing the dehumanizing condition of a prison facility as marginal, he contends that "it is necessary to understand those ideas which had been nurtured by prison and to understand prison as a school for writers. We need to understand the imprisoned intellectual as writing not only in a margin of the society that imprisons, but also in the margin of

the prison itself" (4). Oliver Lovesey (1995) also considers the usefulness of the African prison diary in re-shaping the official version of national histories. In his examination of Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died*, Ngugi's *Detained* and Breytenbach's *The True Confessions of Albino Terrorist*, Lovesey regards the African prison diary as an allegory of "the structuring of national histories" and affirms that "the African prison diary brushes against the grain of official histories of the prisoner's activities, it re-writes official master narratives of national history" (38). It is in this light that we note the relevance of Mapanje's introductory notes to *Gathering Seaweed – African Prison Writing* (2002). The writer underscores the historical value of African prison narratives. He contends that:

The fragments of prison experiences gathered here have historical relevance, they constitute a defiant recasting of Africa's history through the eyes of some of its finest hostages, it is also an indelible record of the original growth and maturity of the struggle for the restitution of human dignity and integrity, justice and peace on the African continent. (XIV)

Therefore, history in African prison writing is not just seen as a mere record of historical events in a linear sequence, but it manifests as a text of other discourses and social practices. An overview of the foregoing expressive motifs leads to the aspect of artistic tools of expression in a place of confinement.

Socio – Political Background

One of the distinguishing traits of women's autobiographies is a detailed presentation of their personal life experience not only as it affects their physical shape and outlook, but also as it affects their inner mind as relational social beings in the society. According to Patricia Meyer Spacks (1980) "women narrate their inner life in autobiography. They define for

themselves and their readers woman as she is and as she dreams" (17).

In line with this tradition, Anyanwu subtitles her prison memoir "A journalist eye witness account of Nigeria in the hands of its worst tyrant". She also employs Albert Camus' anecdote that "It is immoral not to tell" by directly disclosing in her prefatory note that "I wrote about everything I saw, everything that happened to me, to others, and to the larger society"(ix).

This section of the study, therefore, focuses on the peculiar characteristic concerns of a female political detainee whose commitment to the ideals of a free press made her to face the sentence of life imprisonment under the rulership of the late General Sanni Abacha in 1995.

Chris Anyanwu was one of the many Nigerians which included military officers, politicians, journalists and other civilians jailed in the 90's under the military dictatorship of General Abacha. In particular, Anyanwu, erstwhile publisher of *TSM Weekly* news magazine, with three other journalists (Ben Charles Obi, Kunle Ajibade, and George Mba) were jailed in 1995 for committing an offence the then Military Tribunal termed "as accessories after the fact" for reporting an alleged military coup d'état to overthrow the regime of General Abacha. Anyanwu was released along with other political detainees upon the sudden death of Abacha in 1998. Notable prison memoirs that emerged out of that experience include Kunle Ajibade's *Jailed For Life* and Olusegun Obasanjo's *This Animal Called Man*.

Literary Tradition of Women's Prison Writing

This study further situates *The Days of Terror* within the tradition of women's prison writing which Judith Scheffler

(1984) asserts has emerged as "a body of literature with a tradition of its own" (57).

So, in order to validate the tradition of women's prison memoirs as a distinct literary genre, Scheffler edited a volume of women's prison literature entitled *Wall Tappings: An International Anthology Of Writings By Women's Prisoners* (1988). In her introduction to the volume, she highlighted the peculiar attributes of women's confinement literature. She opines that women prison writers are motivated by personal, social and political compulsion to write for the following reasons: their belief in the merit of their experience as worth expressing; the desire to vindicate themselves; commitment to a political, social or religious cause; and the sudden realization that they have untapped writing talents (xxxi). In addition, Scheffler contends that, in contrast to the tradition of male prison writers who mirror their experience of incarceration with a sense of heroism and rebellion, the female prison writer is pre-occupied with the concrete reality of the prison environment and especially in relationship with those who are close to her, namely family members (xxxi).

Remarkably, within the terrain of contemporary African Literature, "Women prison writing is still crying out for critical engagement" (Waliaula 2014). Mapanje (2002) has earlier placed the tradition of women's prison writing under the shadows of males' prison writers. In the prefatory notes to *Gathering Seaweed – Africa Prison Writing*, the critic argues "The ratio of male to female writers is disproportionately high" (xiii). In the anthology, only six female political prisoners were selected from different regions of Africa. These include Fatimer Meer, Winne Madikizela Mandela, and Caesarina Kona Makhoere (South Africa), Leila Djabali and Nawal El Saadawi

(North Africa) and Chris Anyanwu (West Africa). In 2020 a female Uganda Queer, Human Rights Activist – Stella Nyanzi published a collection of poems entitled *No Roses from my Mouth from jail*.

In line with Scheffler's recommendation of a sustained critical engagement with the works of female prison writers, Waliaula (2014) contends "prison narratives by men may outnumber those by women, but there is enough women's prison writing to merit attention" (72). Consequently, in the context of African women's prison literature, the critic listed Francis Baard's *My Soul Is Not Banned* (1986), Emma Mashinini's *Strike Have Followd Me All My Life* (South Africa) and Faridah Al – Naqqash' *Prison: Two Tears And A Rose* (1988) Egypt; and from Eritrea, Abebe Tesfagiorgi's *A Painful Season and Stubborn Hope* (1992) and then from Kenya, Wambui Otieno's *Mau- Mau's Daughter* (1998) (Waliaula 2014:2).

Content Analysis of *The Days*

It is against this background that Anyanwu draws our attention in several ways to the predicament of "a woman as she is and as she dreams" as a victim of a particular government regime of terror:

General Sanni Abacha and his terror gang desecrated Nigerian womanhood. They spilled the blood of women in orgy of violence, on the streets, in living rooms, in cars, anywhere they smeared the face of the land and soaked it and Maryam was there, silent. (*The Days Of Terror* xxi)

In *The Days*, Anyanwu's awareness and sensitivity to the environment of confinement as a place of violating the 'Self' of womanhood comes to the fore:

It was not just the fact of confinement within those high – fenced walls that

encage .It was the terms of stay within those confines... The conditions foisted on those women were hellish...It amounted to stripping people psychologically .I saw the situation in this light ; they seize your self- image ; the things that make you who you are. They sever you from yourself and 'you' become alien to the 'self'. ... 'You' cannot find the 'self' because there is nothing to remind you of self...You stand alone traumatized .The emotional ties also have been severed. (88)

At Gombe prison, the writer also remarks:

The women's wing was in a horrible condition. It took more than six months of my stay before the management allowed me to step into it... keeping people there was an abuse of their humanity. The facility belonged to a different time .In every way it reflected the general attitude to women in our society, that women were lower beings. Even in a place of punishment that inferiority was stamped on everything; facilities, attention and the quality of the staff. (172)

The narrative style of the text also portrays the **womanist** inclination of the writer .The plot of the story begins with " The denouement" where in a binary reversal of fortunes, the narrator testifies of the violators of human rights of yesteryears being prosecuted in a court of law under a newly inaugurated democratic dispensation. Anyanwu draws attention to the irony of the catharsis:

Maryam cried today in Lagos .In her hysteria , she did and said the unthinkable ; she crawled .She begged .she evoked ideals she understood and

respected not ; human rights, social justice, public sympathy and forgiveness. These were notions alien to this woman ... she was asking for justice for Mohammed , her son, a young man alleged to have tortured innocent human beings wickedly... Maryam was demanding that his human rights be respected, something she and her husband denied others. (xix)

Another aspect of women's literature of witness, as earlier stated, is commitment to a political, social or religious cause. In the context of *The Days of Terror*, the writer's commitment is to the cause of the ideals of a free press in the arena of "public sphere". It is clear from Anyanwu's narrative, that Nigeria , during the era of autocratic regimes , lacked the "Public sphere which is supposed to provide a liminal space between the private realm of civil society and the family as well as the sphere of public authority" (Kehinde 2010:27),

In this sense, Anyanwu writes:

A free press is a threat to untrammelled dictatorship. As an open market place of ideas, it equips people to form reasoned opinion based on verifiable information, not dogma or propaganda. On the other hand, a dictatorship seeks to maintain control even by resort to force, over the way people think, act, or react to situations. (34)

In addition , there is commitment to the affirmation of a religious faith with special emphasis on prayer as a communal mechanism for building up strength and hope. This kind of sincere inclination towards seeking God often characterizes most women's literature of

incarceration and it appears regularly in *The Days of Terror*:

A whiff of air hit my face from the early morning draft...Someone was wailing out a prayer at the top of her voice. I stretched my ear. It came from an adjourning building for "Awaiting Trial" cases. She was praying, and chanting, quoting the Bible, speaking in tongues... She took considerable time to conclude her prayer like from 4.00am to 5.00am. Then another group from the extreme end of the compound went into songs and praises. Another group joined and yet another ... (85)

The writer also observes:

At the security group, I did not hear the male detainees shout at their draft game that evening. They sat in pairs, arm folded, silent. Col Craig paced the yard. Maigari led the moslems in repeated prayer. Becky went into violent praying in tongues... (129)

At the personal level, the writer even considered her predicament, especially when she was transferred to Gombe prison "As my journey through the furnace of fire which as the Bible says would purify me" (149).

It should be pointed out that the narrative also exemplifies other characteristic concerns and strategies of representation that the memoirs of human captivity often typify. Understandably, Dunton (2005) asserts:

Much of the substance of Anyanwu's account is echoed in the prison narratives of other writers ... as imprisonment is at once an extreme experience and one that by virtue of its restrictedness, finds its condition closely reproduced wherever and whenever it occurs... It is the hyper-

homogeneity of experiences of imprisonment that makes it difficult to comment on the record contained in prison writing without referring to apparent stereo typicality or archetypes. (117)

Thus, the text like any other narrative of witness, highlights the dehumanizing environment of Nigeria's prisons:

Prison is full of criminals, if not full-blown criminals in the making. It is also full of innocent victims. Innocence suffers on the altar of injustice to a degree that cries to heavens in Nigeria.

It is not only celebrated political cases. From 12 year old Hausa girl who is jailed for running away from her aged husband, to the 90 year old cattle man who gets nine year imprisonment for harboring thieves, to the young student who gets 5 years for looking at the wife of another man ... In Nigeria, prison is about people turning purgatory into hell through a maze of outdated brutal rules, through deliberate human cruelty. (89-90)

It is remarkable that Anyanwu plots her story in a "reverse chronological framework" as an artistic device to relay her ordeal of confinement in the light of the historical events that took place in 1999 following her release and Abacha's death, back to the moment of her arrest (1995) and then to the annulment of election result in 1993. In this sense, she offers a verifiable historical context for the text. The autobiographical base of the story is anchored on particular events in the history of Nigeria under the era of military regimes, particularly that of the military rulership of General Sanni Abacha. Consequently, the historical context

generates her own version of *temoignage* (witness):

I wrote about everything I saw, everything that happened to me, to others and the larger society. I was able to reflect upon this national predicament and to put the reality of what was happening to me on the inside against the backdrop of events outside. (ix)

Conclusion

From the foregoing, *The Days of Terror* is discussed within the modality of peculiar of women's tradition of prison writing. We have seen that the writer's narrative style is detailed and demonstrates a commitment to political and social causes from a woman's perspective of the experience of confinement. It is also clear that a study of the literature of incarceration as an integral aspect of the intersection between the literature of witness and the discourse of human rights. *The Days of Terror* evinces the possibility of personal written testimonies providing a basis for the campaign for the respect of human rights, especially right to life and freedom of expression. In a nutshell, *The Days of Terror* has not only revealed a woman's condition as a form of double incarceration in a nation's correctional facilities, but exposes the fall out of power intrigues within the rank and file of military hierarchy in the 1990's.

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