Precarious Minds: Understanding Suicidal Thoughts Through Vulnerability Studies

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Abstract

This paper employs the lens of Vulnerability Studies to examine the representation of suicide ideation in *If Tomorrow Doesn't Come* by Jen St. Jude and *Me (Moth)* by Amber McBride. Both novels portray protagonists grappling with profound psychological distress, exploring how vulnerability manifests through personal loss, mental illness, social isolation, and the navigation of identity. Drawing on Judith Butler's conceptualization of precarity and the relational ontology of vulnerability (Butler, 2009), the analysis foregrounds how the protagonists' suicidal thoughts are not merely individual pathologies but are entangled within broader social, cultural, and familial structures. The paper argues that these narratives reframe vulnerability not as a static weakness but as a dynamic, affective condition that offers the potential for resistance, relationality, and ethical engagement (Gilson, 2014). It also draws on Martha Fineman's concept of vulnerability being an inherently embodied concept that is universal, and responsive to external stimuli that arise due to human dependency on various factors. By doing so, the texts challenge stigmatizing discourses surrounding mental health and suicide in young adult literature, presenting vulnerability as a shared human condition that demands collective responsibility and care. The study concludes that both novels offer a powerful critique of the individualistic framing of mental health, urging a reconceptualization of suicide ideation through a lens that acknowledges systemic and affective interdependencies.

Keywords:

vulnerability, suicide ideation, young adult fiction, relational vulnerability, relational ethics

Introduction

The current discourse on young adult fiction that deals with suicide ideation navigates four interesting concepts namely vulnerability, normativity, performativity and precarity. The work done by Judith Butler, Bryan Turner, Erinn Gilson, Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds in this regard is quite significant. Jen St. Jude's debut YA novel *If Tomorrow Doesn't Come* (2023) is a sensitive, poignant exploration of mental health, queerness, and the enduring struggle with suicidal ideation in the face of personal and global catastrophe. Through its central character Avery Byrne, the novel does not sensationalize suicide but rather foregrounds the deeply personal and systemic dimensions of vulnerability. Amber McBride's debut novel that was a finalist for the National Book Award 2021 in the young people's literature category, *Me (Moth)*, very subtly depicts the theme of suicide by portraying the grief and loss experienced by the protagonist, Moth, who battles Survivor's Guilt after losing her entire family in a car accident. Employing the lens of vulnerability studies—particularly the works of Judith Butler (2004), Martha Fineman (2008), Bryan Turner (2006) and Erinn Gilson (2014) - this paper explores how St. Jude's and McBride's novels confronts suicide not as a singular event but as a complex manifestation of embodied precarity, self-deprecation, social marginalization, and existential despair.

Situating Suicide in Vulnerability Studies

Vulnerability studies, as articulated by Butler (2004), views vulnerability not merely as a deficit or weakness but as a constitutive part of human life. Butler writes that "vulnerability is not a subjective disposition but a relation to a field of objects, forces, and passions that impinge upon the living body" (Butler, 29). This relational understanding reframes suicide from an individual pathology to an expression of being overwhelmed by one's entanglement in unjust social, familial, and emotional conditions. Similarly, Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds (2014) argue that vulnerability is both universal and particular: while all humans are vulnerable, some are more exposed due to political, social, and economic conditions (Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, 5). Martha Fineman, in her work, *The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition* (2008), has explored several key concepts pertaining to the Theory of Vulnerability where

she as critiqued the traditional notions of equality and justice that often ignore the inherent and universal nature of vulnerability to human condition. She has emphasised that Vulnerability is fundamental and shared aspect of human condition; all humans are inherently vulnerable, and it is an integral part of what it means to be human. She has defined Vulnerability as a dynamic and relational condition that is responsive to various factors and stimuli; that is, it is relational to and is influenced by social, political, and economic contexts. Thus external stimuli play a huge role in exacerbating or mitigating one's Vulnerability, which is essentially relational to it (Fineman, 9).

Discussion and Analysis: Avery's Suicidal Ideation and Vulnerability

Precarity has also been linked to queerness by St. Jude thus compounding Avery Byrne's vulnerability. In *If Tomorrow Doesn't Come*, Avery's queer identity, depression, and sense of alienation form an intersectional triumvirate of vulnerability, which the novel carefully excavates. Her struggles are not only personal but also shaped by larger socio-cultural forces that dictate the terms of belonging and exclusion.

Avery's suicidal ideation is introduced early in the novel as a burden she carries silently. This articulation exemplifies what Gilson (2014) calls responsive vulnerability, the idea that vulnerability can become a site for ethical relations, transformation, and care (Gilson, 37). Rather than framing Avery as a tragic figure, St. Jude renders her vulnerable interiority with compassion, allowing readers to witness the oscillation between her desire for escape and her tentative will to live.

Avery's queerness is another axis of vulnerability. Her Catholic upbringing and the silence around her sexuality generate a sense of being out of place, especially within her family. Vulnerability here is not only emotional but also epistemological—a lack of validation and space for her identity to be known. Turner (2006) highlights that vulnerability can stem from one's position within normative social orders; Avery's queerness becomes a source of fragility because it collides with familial expectations and cultural norms (Turner, 51). St. Jude's narrative discusses precarity and queerness, emphasizing that queer individuals

often navigate systemic instability, social exclusion, and existential insecurity. Avery's internal struggle mirrors this broader condition of queer precarity, as she wrestles with the burden of invisibility and the fear of rejection.

A Literalization of the Suicidal Psyche

The apocalyptic backdrop of the novel—a comet hurtling toward Earth—functions as a literalization of the suicidal psyche. For Avery, the world's impending end externalizes the hopelessness she feels within. Yet, paradoxically, the shared vulnerability it induces creates possibilities for connection, care, and renewal. Avery's choice to finally share her secret with her loved ones, including Cass, is a moment of what Butler (2016) describes as grievability—the recognition of one's life as valuable and mournable (Butler, 14).

This gesture of sitting with someone in their vulnerability, of witnessing rather than fixing, aligns with the ethics proposed in vulnerability studies. Gilson (2014) warns against "resilience discourse," which tends to individualize and depoliticize suffering (Gilson, 94). Instead, *If Tomorrow Doesn't Come* centres care as a collective, relational act. The novel refuses quick resolutions or recovery narratives; Avery is not "cured," but she chooses to live in and through her vulnerability.

Responsible Representation of Suicide

One of the novel's most significant achievements is its responsible depiction of suicide. Rather than focusing on the act itself, St. Jude foregrounds the emotions, silences, and contexts surrounding it. Avery's eventual disclosure of her mental state becomes a moment of narrative rupture and ethical significance. As Whitehead (2004) suggests in trauma narratives, such moments open space for re-narration and transformation (Whitehead, 120). Avery begins to rewrite her story—not to erase her despair but to include her desire for life alongside it.

Furthermore, the novel models ethical storytelling by including resources for readers at risk and by avoiding graphic or romanticized depictions. It echoes the approach advocated by mental health scholars who emphasize the importance

of non-triggering yet honest narratives in YA fiction (Bridge, Goldstein, and Brent, 372).

> I wanted to hide my body somewhere no one would have to find it. Midway through my freshman year, I settled on the Saco River—a hungry stretch of icebergs and fog that slipped by the edge of campus. I liked the river because when I stood on its edge, it always felt like morning, even at sunset, even at midnight. I also liked it because it was practical and clean. It would take me away, wash every part of me. Bury me in its silt.

On a frigid February night, I cleaned my side of the room by moonlight as my roommate slept soundlessly. I deleted every photo of myself from social media and then sat on my bed writing goodbye notes on loose-leaf paper. I put the letters on my desk, tucked myself into my bed, and listened to an audiobook until our window glowed with the first sign of dawn (St. Jude, 13).

The above lines clearly illustrate how Jen St. Jude resists the resilience discourse—the cultural expectation that individuals must overcome suffering through sheer willpower—by using several symbols that complicate the idea of linear recovery. Instead of depicting resilience as a triumph over adversity, St. Jude illustrates how survival is a fragile, relational process rather than an individual achievement. The way she seeks refuge in the river also underscores the tactile relationality of the moment.

The Comet: A Symbol of Impending Doom and Collective Vulnerability

In the author's note to the reader with which the novel begins, St. Jude writes:

> Avery Byrne, the narrator of my YA debut, *If Tomorrow Doesn't Come*, doesn't know how to keep living. Her depression is a state, a feeling, a place: where things will never get better, not ever. Where she doesn't deserve anything better, anyway. Where the world keeps spinning in technicolor around her, but she's trapped in her own little gray apocalypse, alone. Then she learns

> an asteroid is hurtling toward Earth, and she has nine days left to live. Suddenly, her own private apocalypse is not so private. It's everywhere. It's everyone's. And they must all learn how to survive it, together (St. Jude, 10).

The approaching comet functions as a metaphor for Avery's suicidal psyche, externalizing her inner turmoil. Unlike typical narratives of resilience where protagonists "fight back" against despair, the comet suggests an inevitability that Avery must confront rather than conquer. Her thoughts parallel the world's existential dread:

> "It's going to be okay. You're going to get to Boston, you'll get on that plane, and you'll get out of here. You're going to get home."
> I had started to doubt that, but it was the only thing I could think to say.
> "Why are you helping me?"

It was a question I couldn't answer honestly. Aisha, you're an anchor. Aisha, I don't know how to be alive right now, but I have to get to Kilkenny to see Cass one last time, to be with my family. Drag me with you (St. Jude, 22).

This statement defies the resilience discourse by rejecting the pressure to "push through" pain. Instead, it aligns with what Gilson (2014) calls responsive vulnerability, where survival emerges through connection rather than self-sufficiency. When Cass comforts Avery, she does not try to force a narrative of recovery but instead sits with her in her pain:

> "So. You were suicidal."
> I couldn't say it, so I nodded.
> "And you were going to jump in the river that morning."
> "Right." I braced myself for her anger, her hatred, her hurt.
> "Come here," she said softly, and pulled me by the hand. She leaned up against a bale of hay, and I lay with my back to her chest. She held me to her, and I felt her tears, inally falling, in my

> hair. “I don’t even know what to say, Avery. I’m probably not going to say the right things.”
> “There’s no right thing,” I said. We sat there for a minute breathing while
> she collected her thoughts.
> “I’m sorry you felt so alone. I’m really, really happy you’re still here. I’m thanking every single God I got to love you like this. I’m angry it seems like I’m the last to know (St. Jude, 226).”

This moment challenges the individualized notion of resilience, which demands that people "save themselves." Instead, it affirms Judith Butler’s (2016) concept of grievability, emphasizing that survival is rooted in being seen and valued rather than merely enduring alone.

The River: An Alternative to the "Survivor" Narrative

The river is an important symbol in the narrative that connects Aunt Devin to Avery:

> And yet, when Peter and I discovered a tattered shoebox under my parents’ bed when he was eight and I was five, we pulled it out even though we both knew we shouldn’t. We found photographs, envelopes, ticket stubs, and clippings inside. In every photo, the same woman: red hair, blue eyes. Just like me.
> “That’s Aunt Devin,” Peter whispered, and my blood chilled. I knew she was Mom’s sister, and that she had passed away, but my parents only talked about “what Devin did” in hushed tones with each other, never us. Peter picked up a newspaper article and started reading it.
> “February second—Avery, that’s your birthday!—Police believe Devin Walsh entered the sea between Seapoint and the West Pier in south Dublin.”
> “What’s entered?” I asked, as quietly as possible.
> “I guess, like, walked into?” (St. Jude, 24).

In a key moment, Avery describes herself as a river, a striking contrast to the "warrior" or "fighter" imagery often associated with resilience. She reflects:

> "The river had seen the worst and the best of me, and all the while, I was enough (St. Jude, 260)."

Here, St. Jude subverts the resilience-as-strength framework by offering an alternative metaphor of survival. Instead of "overcoming" pain, the river suggests continuance without force or resistance. This aligns with what Turner (2006) calls ontological vulnerability, where fragility is not a weakness to be conquered but a fundamental condition of life.

Through symbols such as the comet and the river—St. Jude refuses to romanticize resilience as a solitary victory. Instead, she envisions survival as relational, collective, and non-linear. Rather than depicting Avery as someone who "overcomes" suicidality, St. Jude allows her to exist in her vulnerability, affirming that survival is not about heroic endurance but about finding spaces of care, connection, and acceptance.

Suicide: A Killing of One's Self or a Tragic Succumbence to Unfortunate External Stimuli?

Suicide, historically, has been conceptualized as the act of intentionally ending one's life, often seen as a personal and voluntary decision carried out by the individual who is typically burdened with the weight of this action. This traditional view, however, has been increasingly contested in recent decades as the mental health field has evolved toward a more nuanced and empathetic perspective. Modern psychological and sociological discourse advocates for a shift in the language used to describe such tragic occurrences. For instance, instead of the phrase "committed suicide," which carries heavy connotations of criminality or sin, scholars suggest the more compassionate "died by suicide." This re-framing diminishes the stigma associated with suicide, repositioning it as a consequence of psychological distress rather than a deliberate, conscious choice (Gould et al. 2003). Central to this transformation is the framework of Vulnerability Studies, which asserts that all human beings possess inherent vulnerabilities that are

often exacerbated by external factors. These studies emphasize that vulnerability is a dynamic, relational condition influenced by one's social environment, underscoring that the struggle to survive adverse life circumstances is often less about an individual's strength or will and more about the external forces at play (Butler 2004).

Amber McBride's *Me (Moth)* offers a poignant exploration of how grief and trauma influence an individual's susceptibility to suicidal ideation. While the novel does not directly address suicide, it implicitly touches upon the emotional and psychological processes that can lead to such thoughts. Through the character of Moth, McBride illustrates the devastating impact of losing a loved one, and how grief, isolation, and a loss of hope can alter one's perception of life. The novel begins with the tragic death of Moth's parents and brother in a car accident, leaving her with a profound Survivor's Guilt. This loss becomes an insurmountable barrier, preventing Moth from experiencing joy or optimism in life. As McBride poignantly writes:

> "I only ever felt at home when moving
> under the stage lights.
> When moving I could fly, but after the accident that split our car
> like a
> candy bar,
> I gave up movement,
> so sometimes I feel less alive" (McBride 15).

Moth's grief is compounded by her relocation to Virginia to live with her Aunt Jack, where she feels further isolated due to the lack of emotional support from her aunt and the apathy she encounters at school.

Intersectionality plays a significant role in amplifying Moth's vulnerability. Living in a predominantly White community, Moth is marginalized by her peers, who largely ignore her, and she attributes this exclusion to both her racial identity and the physical scar on her face from the accident. The alienation she experiences at both the personal and social levels exacerbates her sense of isolation, further deepening her grief. This marginalization contributes to a loss of hope, with Moth

purposefully distancing herself from things that once brought her joy—such as dance, her lifelong passion. Dance reminds her of the happy memories she shared with her family as well as a zealous drive towards life where she has always aimed to be the best

> "Instead of playing outside after school, Mom & I travelled to the best dance studios so I could flutter my wings & sprinkle dust on everything, so I could dance strong, like Misty Copeland—" (McBride 14).

The act of refraining from dance symbolizes her internalized belief that she is undeserving of happiness due to her survivor's guilt. As McBride writes, Moth creates a list of rules for herself:

> "1. Don't live too hard.
> 2. Fetal: huddle, knees tucked to chin
> 3. Be as silent as a seahorse.....
> ...13. Don't dance like Misty Copeland" (McBride 17).

These self-imposed limitations reflect Moth's emotional withdrawal from life, which, though not explicitly suicidal, mirrors the psychological toll that trauma can have on an individual's desire to engage with life.

Moth's vulnerability, deeply rooted in her grief, trauma, and the isolation she faces, reflects the broader conceptualization of vulnerability as an embodied condition that is shaped by both internal emotional states and external social factors. Her emotional turmoil underscores the theoretical arguments in Vulnerability Studies, which suggest that individuals who experience significant loss and trauma often become emotionally exposed, making them susceptible to feelings of despair and hopelessness. The lack of adequate emotional support compounds her vulnerability, illustrating the structural dimensions of grief. Butler's work on ethics of Vulnerability opines that vulnerability creates an ethical responsibility for others to care for those who are suffering (Butler 2012). Thus, there is a moral obligation or an ethical responsibility to Moth's aunt and her peers to help her navigate her vulnerable situation. However, she does not receive any recourse from them to

process her feelings and the rejection makes her feel more isolated. The novel thus subtly critiques the social systems that fail to provide necessary care and empathy for individuals experiencing trauma, leaving them more susceptible to further emotional damage. In this way, McBride's depiction of Moth's emotional and psychological state can be read through the lens of structural vulnerability, where her suffering is not solely a product of her internal weaknesses, but rather the compounded result of systemic neglect, societal isolation, and the profound emotional scars left by her traumatic experiences.

The Role of Relatability and Companionship in Healing

Relatability and companionship are often central to the healing process following trauma. A shared feeling to pain or emotional relatability can aid in healing from trauma that an individual faces. In *Me (Moth)*, this dynamic is beautifully explored through the relationship between Moth and Sani, a half-white, half-Navajo boy she meets at her new school in Virginia. Sani, who is grappling with his own mental health struggles stemming from a dysfunctional home life and an abusive stepfather, is the only person who truly sees Moth and acknowledges her pain. For Moth, Sani's attention becomes a vital lifeline that encourages her to open up about her tragic loss and re-engage with her passions, such as dancing—something she had abandoned after her family's death.

Sani, too, understands the weight of emotional distress, and this shared experience of trauma fosters a deep, empathetic bond between them. He takes medication to manage his mental health, and his openness about his own struggles helps Moth feel less alone. This mutual recognition of each other's vulnerability creates a foundation for their healing. Sani's companionship is instrumental in Moth's journey, offering her solace and a sense of comfort that she has not found elsewhere. Relatability and companionship can catalyst in a person's healing process, in this sense, Sani's support helps Moth regain a sense of purpose and direction as she starts to confront her grief.

Their shared connection extends to a literal and metaphorical journey of healing—a road trip to Sani's ancestral home in Navajo Nation, New Mexico. This trip serves as both a physical escape and a space for emotional exploration,

where the two of them talk openly about their dreams, trauma, and the future. Through this shared experience, they begin to heal together. Sani encourages Moth to return to dancing, reminding her that the death of her family was not her fault, and she in turn motivates him to pursue his passion for singing by applying to the Julliard Conservatory. Their connection helps restore a sense of optimism in Moth's life, allowing her to rediscover her dreams and aspirations.

A pivotal twist in the narrative, however, reveals that Moth has been a ghost all along, having died in the car accident with her parents. Sani, with the unique ability to see ghosts, is revealed to have been assigned to help her navigate her journey to the afterlife. This supernatural twist, while central to the novel's plot, can be interpreted as a metaphor for how companionship, empathy, and relational support can guide individuals through even the darkest moments. Moth's feelings of alienation are explained by her ghostly status—she is invisible to everyone except Sani. Yet, even without this supernatural element, the novel emphasizes how timely companionship can restore hope, even in the most dire circumstances. Sani's help allows Moth to process her trauma and guilt, and ultimately find peace in the afterlife, which can be seen as a metaphor for the emotional resolution that companionship provides in times of deep grief and loss.

Thus, while the novel's supernatural elements may frame Moth's journey in the afterlife, its core message about healing through connection and relational support is profoundly grounded in psychological and emotional realities. Moth's journey, both literal and figurative, highlights the transformative power of companionship—illustrating how being seen and heard by another person can catalyse healing and recovery, even when that healing is not from physical wounds but from deep emotional and existential suffering. The novel underscores a crucial insight from trauma theory: that connection with others, especially those who understand our pain, is essential for moving beyond trauma and finding hope (Brown 2010).

Me (Moth)

Poetic Language and use of metaphors in portraying vulnerability in *Me (Moth)*

In *Me (Moth)*, McBride blends prose with poetic elements, using vivid metaphors and figurative language to deepen the emotional resonance of Moth's experience with grief and trauma. The novel's structure, enriched with poetic devices, allows McBride to communicate Moth's internal struggles in a way that transcends the literal and brings readers into the realm of the emotional and the symbolic. One of the most striking examples of this is McBride's use of the simile comparing the car accident that claimed Moth's family to a candy bar:

"Two summers ago our car broke in half like a candy bar on the freeway & we all spilled onto the pavement as crumbled as sticky caramel-peanut filling." (McBride 11).

This simile serves a euphemistic function, softening the raw, violent reality of the crash while simultaneously allowing the reader to grasp the emotional devastation of the event through a familiar, almost mundane object. The candy bar's seemingly harmless exterior contrasts sharply with the horrific incident, echoing how trauma can initially seem alien and surreal to the person experiencing it. This choice reflects the function of metaphor in literature as a tool to render the invisible and intangible—like trauma—into something more perceptible and accessible (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). Through this juxtaposition, McBride masterfully transforms the abstract concept of vulnerability into something visceral, tangible, and profoundly felt.

McBride's language does more than just describe Moth's grief; it serves to externalize and personalize her trauma, enabling the reader to viscerally feel what Moth is experiencing. The use of metaphors in *Me (Moth)*, particularly in reference to the stages of the protagonist's emotional journey, draws on Judith Butler's (2004) concept of the vulnerable body. Butler contends that vulnerability is not merely a passive state but an active, relational condition of being "exposed" or "at risk." In the context of McBride's novel, the metaphor of the Moth—an insect that undergoes a transformative journey—echoes this vulnerability. Moth, the character, undergoes her own metamorphosis, not unlike the creature after which she is named. The stages of her life—from Larva to Butterfly—serve as metaphors

for her emotional and psychological progression as she navigates the trauma of loss and grief. McBride uses this symbolism to frame vulnerability as a fluid, evolving state, emphasizing that recovery is not a linear path, but one filled with setbacks, growth, and the continual reshaping of the self.

Furthermore, the novel's climactic revelation—that Moth is a ghost, and Sani is helping her navigate to the afterlife—serves as a poignant metaphor for relational support in the healing process. While the supernatural elements of this revelation may appear fantastical, they underscore a central theme of the narrative: that companionship, shared trauma, and mutual healing are fundamental to overcoming emotional despair. Sani's presence in Moth's life, despite her literal and figurative isolation, reflects the healing power of human connection and mutual understanding in the process of emotional recovery. McBride's use of these metaphors emphasizes vulnerability as not only an individual experience but also one that requires relational engagement to move forward. The novel culminates in a powerful metaphor about resilience and emotional survival, as expressed in Moth's final reflections:

> "It turns out
> when you step out of a cocoon,
> you can step out
> less alive
> but light enough to fly.
> It turns out
> there is enough
> magic & love
> in the universe
> to mold
> your own death mask
> but not fully die" (McBride 220).

These lines encapsulate the idea of metamorphosis, not as a return to the former self, but as an acceptance of the new, transformed self—one that, though marked by loss, remains capable of hope and flight. McBride's lyrical expression of this process offers readers a poignant commentary on the complexities of

trauma recovery, where healing involves not the eradication of pain but the transformation of that pain into something that can support new growth.

In conclusion, McBride's deft use of poetic language and metaphor allows her to vividly portray the vulnerability of her characters, drawing readers into the emotional intricacies of grief and healing. Her use of the Moth metaphor, in particular, illustrates the delicate balance between pain and transformation, a theme that resonates deeply with contemporary understandings of trauma and recovery. Through her lyricism, McBride not only conveys the struggle of the protagonist but invites readers to empathize with the universal human condition of vulnerability, in all its fragility and resilience.

Conclusion

In *If Tomorrow Doesn't Come*, Jen St. Jude offers a luminous narrative of vulnerability that does not flinch from pain but instead asks how we might live with, through, and alongside it. Suicide, in this novel, is neither condemned nor glorified; it is understood as part of a complex matrix of suffering, silence, and the desire for relief. Through Avery Byrne's journey, St. Jude enacts a politics of care, one that aligns with the core tenets of vulnerability studies: that our exposure to harm is also what makes us capable of relation, recognition, and love. The novel ultimately affirms that survival is not merely enduring but choosing, again and again, to be in the world—even when it hurts. McBride's novel *Me (Moth)*, although refraining from any explicit mention of suicide, depicts the loss of optimism and hope that can result from a traumatic incident or tragic personal loss. It highlights how external stimuli, such as the loss of a loved one, can amplify an individual's vulnerability, shifting the focus from personal fault to external stimuli causing trauma. The novel also aligns with Butler's ethics of vulnerability, which suggests that vulnerability is relational and shaped by external factors, rather than solely

an internal condition. It also reiterates that the role of those around the vulnerable person is crucial in navigating these challenges. McBride's portrayal of Moth's struggle thus removes the stigma and guilt from the ideation of suicide.

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