Fighting Words: an Overview of the History of Politicization of American Folk Music

David Livingstone
Palacký University Olomouc, Faculty of Arts, Olomuc, Czechia
david.livingstone@upol.cz

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American folk music is currently associated with the singer-songwriter, on stage with a guitar, articulating his or her views on topical issues of the day. This has not always been so. Throughout the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, folk songs were largely apolitical and anonymous, although often referring to topical developments such as disasters, battles, and murders. The approach changed, however, with the arrival of seminal folk musicians like Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie in the 1930s and 1940s. This chapter will explore the evolution of political folk music from the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783) up to the early 1960s. The focus will be on songs that refer to key political events and take a clear stand on the issue at hand, including the American Civil War, Slavery, the Great Depression, and the Civil Rights Movement.

Keywords:
American politics, civil rights movement, Civil War, murder ballads, disaster songs

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This chapter explores how folk/popular music has turned political at times in an attempt to address key historical and societal developments in American history. The analysis will examine songs from the late eighteenth century to the early 1960s.[2] The songs analysed responded to events such as military conflict, slavery, social injustice, unemployment, exploitation, and natural disasters. Folk songs dealing with at least some of these topics have been around for centuries all over the world, but have mostly been apolitical in nature, often fatalistic in response to injustice or evil. The songs discussed here have attempted, to greater and lesser degrees, to fight, to take a stance and to take sides in a historical conflict or development.

The origins of one the most well-known and beloved American folk songs, "Yankee Doodle," are, like many old folk songs, difficult to determine. The melody has been traced to precursors from various regions of Europe. The song, however, became emblematic of the American War of Independence (1775–1783) and the immediately preceding events. Several variants of this song exist, but I focus here on the most well-known. The first verse is unremarkable, describing soldiers preparing for battle under the leadership of a Captain Gooding. Later, however, General Washington is referred to:

> Father and I went down to camp,
> Along with Captain Gooding;
> And there we saw the men and boys,
> As thick as hasty pudding.

The second verse, which appears to be a later addition, has now become the most famous part of the song.

> Yankee Doodle went to town,
> A-riding on a pony,
> Stuck a feather in his cap
> And called it macaroni.[3]

[2] One could easily continue with a breadth of relevant material for analysis, in particular anti-war songs in the second half of the 1960s and punk rock, rap and hip-hop in the 1970s. Given length limitations, however, the first half of the 1960s was chosen as the cut-off point. This music has also been analyzed in depth elsewhere.
[3] The texts of traditional folk songs are taken from the classic collections compiled by John and Alan Lomax.

The lyrics are said to have been created by British soldiers to mock the rustic nature of their colonial counterparts. The word "Yankee," arguably of Dutch origin, had become derogatory when used in reference to Americans by the late eighteenth century. The words describe a country bumpkin who tries to affect the airs of a gentleman, but who can afford only a feather for his cap instead of the stylish "macaroni," a term for the elaborate wigs worn by sophisticated Europeans. The word "doodle" insults his lack of taste and intelligence . Similarly, riding a pony, implies that he cannot afford, or doesn't have the ability, to ride a real horse. The song is also understood to be a condescending comment on the Americans' lack of stylish uniforms, unlike the well-dressed British "redcoats":

> Yankee doodle, keep it up,
> Yankee doodle dandy;
> Mind the music and the step,
> And with the girls be handy.

This chorus is said to have been added by the Americans in response to the belittling tone of the earlier verse, inverting the negative labelling and turning the insult into a compliment. The new lyrics celebrate the Americans' democracy and egalitarianism, as opposed to pompous British elitism. No longer an uncultured rube, Yankee Doodle is now a charmer, popular with girls, living his best life. In *The Penguin Book of Folk Songs*, Alan Lomax quotes a British soldier who wrote that, "After the affair at Bunker's Hill, the Americans glory in it. "Yankee Doodle" is now their paean, played in their army… After our rapid successes it was not a little mortifying to hear them play this tune when their army marched down to our surrender" (Lomax 1964, 23).

"Yankee Doodle" became an unofficial anthem for the American soldiers during the Revolutionary War and remains among the most iconic songs in the national consciousness. It is the official anthem of the state of Connecticut, and has become a stalwart classic on the soundtrack for many historical American films and documentaries. It provides a vivid portrait of the social dynamics of late eighteenth-century America, while also providing a basis for discussing the evolution of the term "Yankee," which underwent a shift in meaning later in the nineteenth century, becoming a reference to someone from the northern states, and a further shift in the second half of the twentieth century to a derogatory term for Americans abroad.

John Shaw, in *This Land That I Love* argues that this Yankee Doodle approach has since become a defining feature of country music, and American culture in general, celebrating our rural, diverse identity: "The fight sparked the American Revolution, and the singing of 'Yankee Doodle' commenced an American tradition. The colonists reclaimed the insult and threw it back in the would-be oppressor's face. The move became a classic gesture of the confident underdog, seemingly self-deprecating but slyly a boastful taunt" (Shaw 2013, pp. 41, 42).

The beginnings of the African American spiritual, another genre of political music that tells stories from the perspective of the oppressed, can be traced to the early days of slavery, with rhythms originating in West Africa. Slaves in the Deep South and elsewhere were rapidly converted to Christianity and exposed to biblical stories and European hymns. The words of this tradition were consequently "translated" into the idiom of the slaves and often made into song. Christianity was seen by many white Americans as a way of controlling slaves and reconciling them to their lot, similar to Marx's view of religion as "the opium of the people." However, biblical narratives, especially those in the Old Testament dealing with the captivity and liberation of the Israelites, resonated with the slaves' own struggle for freedom. Many spirituals tell the story of Moses, a symbolic leader ushering his people toward freedom, as opposed to "Old Pharaoh," who represented slave-owners and the political leaders of the South. Prophets such as Elijah in the spiritual "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" symbolize righteous voices of dissent to the institution of slavery. The river Jordan, referred to in the spiritual "Roll Jordan, Roll," among others, symbolises cleansing and the ultimate attainment of the Promised Land. The source of spirituals is almost exclusively stories from the Old Testament.

The development of the genre is similar to that of nineteenth-century Blackface Minstrelsy, in which white performers and musicians adapted, appropriated, and mocked African American culture and traditions. The texts and themes of spirituals were taken from the religion of the oppressor but modified to protest against them and to bolster hope and community. Many spirituals contained veiled messages about escaping slavery or predicting divine punishment for slave owners.

One of the most celebrated spirituals, "Go Down Moses," was described by Alan Lomax, musicologist and collector of field recordings, as "the finest of American folk songs" (Lomax 1964, 82). The story, imagery, and language are taken from the

book of Exodus, which tells of the struggles of Moses who, with God's help, gained freedom for the Israelites enslaved by the Pharaoh in Egypt. A version sung by the Fisk Jubilee Singers in 1872, was one of the first spirituals to be preserved in sheet music:

> When Israel was in Egypt's land
> Let my people go
> Oppress'd so hard they could not stand
> Let my people go
>
> Go down Moses
> Way down in Egypt land
> Tell Old Pharaoh
> Let my people go

Unlike some other spirituals, the message of this one sounds out loud and clear and would undoubtedly have made white slave owners fairly apprehensive:

> Thus said the Lord, bold Moses said,
> Let my people go
> If not I'll smite your firstborn dead
> Let my people go
>
> No more in bondage shall they toil
> Let my people go
> Let them come out with Egypt's spoil
> Let my people go

Various theories exist regarding the authorship of this spiritual, including potential contributions from abolitionist Harriet Tubman. Even if she did not write it herself, she made use of it as one of the coded songs that were used to help slaves escape using the Underground Railroad. The song has been performed by many artists, including Paul Robeson, whose deep bass voice gave the spiritual an aura of poignancy and grandeur .

Many well-known political songs emerged from the Civil War, two of which are the focus of this section. In 1859, Daniel Emmett, a composer in the Blackface Minstrel tradition, wrote "Dixie" or "I Wish I Was in Dixie," which later became the unofficial anthem of the Confederacy during the Civil War:

> I wish I was in the land of cotton,
> Old times there are not forgotten;
> Look away! look away! look away! Dixie Land.
> In Dixie's land, where I was born,
> Early on one frosty morn,
> Look away! look away! look away! Dixie Land.

Emmett was from Ohio, one of the Northern states, and he wrote the song in the minstrel tradition that idealized pre-war plantation life in the South. Lines like "I'll take my stand" soon made a powerful impression. According to John Shaw, "Published in 1860, it was an immediate hit. When eleven Southern states seceded the next year, the strutting march rhythm, indelibly catchy melody, and proudly sectional lyrics of 'Dixie' made it a natural for a Confederate anthem" (Shaw 2013, 34):

> I wish I was in Dixie,
> Hooray! Hooray!
> In Dixie's Land I'll take my stand
> To live and die in Dixie.
> Away, away, away down south in Dixie.

"Dixie" eventually became identified with Southern racism and was received as a glorification of slavery; it remains controversial today, not being out of place, for instance, at a Ku Klux Klan meeting. The question arises whether it should be played at all, considering these associations. Some commentators argue that it should, if situated in the context of the time.

Similarly, Union troops embraced the folk song "John Brown's Body" as a de facto anthem; the song tells the story of Brown, an abolitionist who led several destructive raids across the Mason-Dixon line that resulted in several deaths. On each side of the border, opinions regarding Brown were very different: in the eyes of many Northerners and African Americans, he was a martyr for a righteous cause, but many Southerners regarded him as a murderer and terrorist. The song depicts Brown's actions in laudatory Biblical language:

> John Brown's body lies a-moldering in the grave
> But his soul goes marching on

Glory, Glory, Hallelujah
Glory, Glory, Hallelujah
Glory, Glory, Hallelujah
His soul goes marching on

He captured Harper's Ferry with his nineteen men so true
He frightened old Virginia till she trembled through and through
They hung him for a traitor, they themselves the traitor crew
But his soul goes marching on

This song became popular among Union soldiers and is said to have been deliberately sung within earshot of Confederate troops to provoke them. Several different versions exist; the most well-known is "Battle Hymn of the Republic" (1861), written by author and activist Julia Ward Howe:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword;
His truth is marching on.

Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
His truth is marching on.

Apocalyptic language is used to depict the struggle against slavery, with words and melody designed to arouse the emotions. Over the years, many other groups, including several British football clubs, have adopted the song, demonstrating its power to create unity and enthusiasm . John Steinbeck quoted a phrase from the second line as the title of his best-known novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

Moving into the twentieth century, Joe Hill, born Joel Emmanuel Hägglund, was a larger-than-life figure, achieving immortality through his political songs. Born in Sweden in 1879, he immigrated to the United States and became a prominent labour activist as a member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), also known as the Wobblies. Hill wrote several classic labour songs, usually giving new politicized lyrics to the melodies of familiar Christian hymns, as was the established practice throughout the organisation, with the songs even published and widely circulated in their *Little Red Songbook* (1909). Hill was arrested and executed in Utah in 1915 for a

murder which was generally interpreted as a political assassination; as a result, he became a martyr not only for the American labour movement, but also for is international counterpart.

His classic song "The Preacher and the Slave" (1911) parodies the Christian hymn "In the Sweet By-and-By," written by Sanford F. Bennett in 1868, with its promise of eternal reward and solace in the afterlife:

> In the sweet by and by
> We shall meet on that beautiful shore.
> In the sweet by and by
> We shall meet on that beautiful shore.

Hill's song, conversely, viciously attacks the naiveté and dishonesty of the sentiments of the hymn, particularly when addressed to working class labourers living a hand-to-mouth existence. This song gifted the English language the phrase "pie in the sky," which labour scholar Archie Green refers to as "the most significant Wobbly contribution to the American vocabulary" (Green 1960, 210). The song's force is enhanced by its use of call and response, inspired by African American musical traditions, and by the surprise, alternative version of the concluding chorus, which takes an opposite approach in response to the so-called grafters (opportunists, corrupt officials):

> Long-haired preachers come out every night
> Try to tell you what's wrong and what's right
> But when asked about something to eat
> They will answer with voices so sweet:
>
> You will eat (You will eat) bye and bye (Bye and bye)
> In that glorious land above the sky (Way up high)
> Work and pray (Work and pray), live on hay (Live on hay)
> You'll get pie in the sky when you die (That's a lie!)
>
> And the starvation army they play
> And they sing and they clap and they pray
> Till they get all your coin on the drum
> Then they tell you when you are on the bum[4]

[4] All the lyrics by Joe Hill are taken from the website "Songs of Joe Hill," https://joehill100.com/songs-of-joe-hill/.

This song makes explicit reference to the Salvation Army, wittily phrased as "Starvation Army," and sharply critiques its musical tradition and money-raising approach:

> Holy Rollers and jumpers come out
> They holler, they jump and they shout
> Give your money to Jesus they say
> He will cure all diseases away.
>
> If you fight hard for children and wife
> Try to get something good in this life
> You're a sinner and bad man, they tell
> When you die you will sure go to hell

In line with the socialist doctrine of the Wobblies, the song calls for a common, international front on the part of the working class against the capitalist establishment:

> Working folk of all countries unite
> Side by side we for freedom will fight
> When the world and its wealth we have gained
> To the grafters we'll sing this refrain:
>
> You will eat (You will eat) bye and bye (Bye and bye)
> When you've learned how to cook and how to fry (and bake a pie!)
> Chop some wood, 'twill do you good
> And you'll eat in the sweet bye and bye (That's no lie!)

The call and response of the final altered version of the chorus turns the tables and holds out hope that the exploitative types will, either by force or by choice, abandon their dishonest practices and finally put their shoulders to the wheel.

Hill and his fellow Wobbly songwriters revolutionised folk music, using words and song to further their political agenda. Hill himself describes this new-found approach in one of his letters: "A pamphlet, no matter how good, is never read more than once, but a song is learned by heart and repeated over and over" (Kelly 2018). Franklin Rosemont aptly summarises the impact and artistry of Hill's songs, arguing that they were aimed, "not so much at the literary-minded individual as the hard-pressed crowd, his bold and vigorous verses tend to avoid the contemplative, private,

and subjective, and instead tell stories, poke fun, provoke laughter or (less often) tears, and all along the way convey fundamental Wobbly aims and principles" (Rosemont 2015, 21). Hill's songs, memory and legacy are still very much alive, not only in our minds and hearts, but also in at least (temporarily) some people's stomachs.[5]

Other Wobbly/hobo songs appear to celebrate the shirking of work, but actually refuse the then current mainstream capitalist "wage slave" (a term they often used) situation. Among the best examples is "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum," attributed to Harry McClintock (1882-1957), among others. As with many Wobbly songs, it is set to the melody of a familiar hymn, "Revive Us Again" (1867). The original version is notable for its piety and orthodox theology:

> We praise Thee, O God! For the Son of Thy love,
> For Jesus Who died, and is now gone above.
> Hallelujah! Thine the glory. Hallelujah! Amen.
> Hallelujah! Thine the glory. Revive us again.

In comparison, "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum" irreverently embraces the hobo lifestyle. The song does not promote the avoidance of work, but instead reveals the harsh reality encountered by itinerant workers seeking paid employment:

> Rejoice and be glad for the Springtime has come
> We can throw down our shovels and go on the bum
>
> Hallelujah, I'm a bum, Hallelujah, bum again
> Hallelujah, give us a handout to revive us again
>
> The Springtime has come and I'm just out of jail
> Without any money, without any bail
>
> Why don't you work like other men do
> Now, how can I work when there's no work to do

The song depicts the everyday realities of unemployed vagrants who faced imprisonment, starvation and social condemnation.

[5] Joe Hill's ashes were consumed, in a manner mirroring the Last Supper, by some of his successors, most famously by the British punk folk singer Billy Bragg.

Woody Guthrie was influenced not only by the hobo movement, embracing the lifestyle himself for periods of his life, but also by the political leanings of the Wobblies. In line with their songwriting philosophy, he often took the melodies of his songs from hymns that speak of eternal reward and consolation in the afterlife, and transformed them into songs with hard-hitting lyrics about social injustice and the power of the working man to improve his lot through union activity and empowerment. He was arguably one of the first protest singer/singer-songwriters in the United States, if not the world, and he practically single-handedly defined the genre for future generations. This, of course, depends on how you define the genre, but I am thinking along the lines of a lone performer with a guitar writing his or her own lyrics with an emphasis primarily on the message of the song, not necessarily on the virtuosity of the performance.

Traditional songs from the Interwar period usually contain little or no personal or political commentary, but Woody Guthrie, a proud Okie[6] who experienced the Depression-era tragedy of the Dust Bowl, with its cyclones, windstorms, and ensuing poverty first-hand, used folk music to generate compassion and sympathy, and to criticize the government, the capitalist system, and the lack of opportunities for working-class people who were most severely affected by these disasters.

An example of this new approach to songwriting and performing appears in Guthrie's "So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh/Dusty Old Dust," from what is perhaps the first concept album, *Dust Bowl Ballads* (1940):

> I've sung this song, but I'll sing it again,
> Of the place that I lived on the wild windy plains,
> In the month called April, county called Gray,
> And here's what all of the people there say:

In contrast to earlier disaster songs, which almost invariably described historic and current events objectively, this first-person account is related by someone who lived through the disaster, which is described in vivid detail. The chorus captures the atmosphere as the storm hits, with the victims wondering if the end of the world has

[6] A native of the state of Oklahoma; Oklahomans were hard hit by drought in the 1930s, and their story is famously told in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

arrived, and the aftermath, as survivors frequently had no choice but to pack up and go west in search of a new life:

> So long, it's been good to know yuh;
> So long, it's been good to know yuh;
> So long, it's been good to know yuh.
> This dusty old dust is a-gettin' my home,
> And I got to be driftin' along.

The song describes what Guthrie's family and friends thought of the disaster: "We talked of the end of the world," or "Instead of marriage, they talked like this," and goes on to criticize the preacher of the local church, who takes collection in the midst of the dust storm: "He said, 'Kind friend, this may the end;/An' you got your last chance of salvation of sin!'" Guthrie's account of the disaster also criticizes the government, and how it failed the working people, and of institutionalized religion, which provided nothing but the weak solace of "pie in the sky".

Guthrie's music is at the core of American folk music and national identity; his most famous song, "This Land Is Your Land," has rightfully become an alternative national anthem and expression of genuine patriotism. His music definitely has a didactic slant, something of which he would be proud, not ashamed. Conservatives have argued that he, along with Pete Seeger and other protest singers, used music as propaganda. Guthrie responded to such critics as follows: "Left wing, right wing, chicken wing – it's the same thing to me. I sing my songs wherever I can sing 'em" (Cray 2004, 139).

Together with Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger defined the concept of folk singer or singer-songwriter as we understand these concepts today. Before these two, country music tended to be apolitical in its philosophy and approach. Seeger's politics have often overshadowed the other qualities of his work: like many of his fellow musicians in the 1940s and 50s, Seeger had leftist sympathies. He joined the American Communist Party in 1941, but left it in 1949. Throughout his career, Seeger untiringly supported a wide range of left-wing causes, including union labour movements. In 1955, during McCarthyism and the Red Scare, he was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee, where he famously defended his actions with the words: "I am not going to answer any questions as to my association, my philosophical or religious beliefs or my political beliefs, or how I

voted in any election, or any of these private affairs. I think these are very improper questions for any American to be asked, especially under such compulsion as this" (Dunaway 2011, xiii). He asked the committee if they would allow him to play and sing one of his songs for them and was, not surprisingly, denied. Although the committee found him guilty, he was never sent to prison. Nevertheless, he was blacklisted for several years and had difficulty finding work either recording or performing.

In 1964, Seeger made a tour of the Soviet Union and several other Communist countries, and later admitted to naiveté in his view of them. He spent the blacklist years taking whatever work he could find. He performed at many union events and at a number of schools from primary to university level. His union involvement had even earlier roots, and continued until the end of his life. The union songs from his time with the Almanac Singers were mostly written by Woody Guthrie, including the classic "Union Maid," and became a fixture of his repertoire. His affinity for working-class movements was not limited to his native country, as shown by his cover version of "The Bells of Rhymney" by the Welsh poet Idris Davies, a lyric which chronicles the struggle of Welsh coal miners:

> Oh, what will you give me?
> Say the sad bells of Rhymney.
> Is there hope for the future?
> Cry the brown bells of Merthyr.
> Who made the mine owner?
> Say the black bells of Rhondda.
> And who robbed the miner?
> Cry the grim bells of Blaina.

The song is an adaptation of the classic nursery rhyme "Oranges and Lemons," which lists the various church bells of London and which was famously made use of by George Orwell in *1984*.

In the early 1960s, Seeger returned to the public eye, becoming involved in and supportive of the Civil Rights movement. Songs such as "We Shall Overcome" became major anthems of the time, often sung by African Americans and their supporters during sit-ins, protests, and marches. Martin Luther King Jr took an immediate liking to the song and quoted it many times during his sermons; the song

was sung at his funeral by thousands of grief-stricken but undaunted mourners. Incidentally, the Almanac Singers back in the 1940s were ground-breaking in being racially mixed at times, with their inclusion of Leadbelly, Josh White, and others. Seeger's remarkable television program, *Rainbow Quest*, which aired from 1965 to 1966, also had a multi-cultural, interracial cast of musicians including African Americans, Native Americans, Cajuns, Latinos, British, Irish, and others.

Pete Seeger was active during the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement, singing songs and encouraging people of all ages to action. After being vilified in the 1950s, Seeger came full circle in 1994, when he was awarded the Presidential Medal of the Arts.

Just as Woody Guthrie had personalized and politicized the disaster song, Bob Dylan had a similar effect on the genre of the murder ballad, which dates back to the Middle Ages, with its plot line having emerged even earlier (in the Biblical story of Cain and Abel). One of the most widely covered and best-known songs of this kind is "Tom Dooley," which tells the story of a North Carolina man who murdered his sweetheart in 1866. The song is told in a dispassionate, unemotional voice, and gives no real explanation for the evil deed. Dooley seems to have killed on impulse, only to realise too late the consequences of his actions:

> I met her on the mountain
> There I took her life
> Met her on the mountain
> Stabbed her with my knife

Many other murder ballads popular in the folk music genre, such as "Stagger Lee," "Pretty Polly, "Banks of the Ohio," and "Long Black Veil," follow similar lines.

Dylan, a self-avowed disciple of Guthrie early in his career, performed an act much like that of his mentor, not with disaster songs, but with murder ballads. An excerpt from "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," which tells of the 1963 murder of a 51-year-old African American barmaid by a wealthy 24-year old white man named William Devereaux Zantzinger in Maryland, epitomizes Dylan's accomplishment:

> William Zanzinger killed poor Hattie Carroll,
> With a cane that he twirled around his diamond ring finger
> …
> But you who philosophize, disgrace and criticize all fears,
> Take the rag away from your face, now ain't the time for
> Your tears.

Zantzinger was convicted of assault and sentenced to six months in jail. Dylan's topical song politicizes the popular folk form of the murder ballad and established a blueprint for many who followed.

A decade later, Dylan's "Hurricane," like "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," tells the story of wrongly accused African American boxer Ruben "Hurricane" Carter, using the tradition to hold society accountable for racism and injustice.

The songs discussed in this chapter span almost two hundred years and encompass a range of musical genres including war songs, spirituals, union songs, murder ballads, and disaster songs. The examples selected demonstrate how political developments led composers and singer-songwriters (first anonymous writers, later popular artists) to use their art to combat perceived enemies (either military foes or oppressive regimes), social injustice, and societal oppression. The arguably most political phase of American popular music soon followed the last-chosen text for analysis (Dylan's "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll"), this being the protest music inspired by the Vietnam War and the Counter-Culture movement of the late 1960s. Political popular music continues to thrive up to the present time, flourishing in a range of musical genres: rap, hip-hop, rock, folk, and even alt-country. Thanks to the legacy of the songs and artists mentioned above, folk/popular music remains relevant and in tune with the spirit of the times.

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