



Drilled Choreographies: Interventions on Preparing for the Active Shooter

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Abstract

In the United States, safety preparation in the form of active shooter trainings is a quotidian practice performed in nearly all K-12 public school systems. This study works to understand how active shooter trainings in the United States advance a history of policing and surveillance through choreographic methods. It also combines movement scores and performance analysis derived from practice-based research to understand how safety preparation's choreographies battle the potential for risk by compromising dance as a practice of freedom. In order to address this denial of liberty, this study argues that active shooter drills must be discussed through a feminist and abolitionist lens to interrupt the police state's choreography with a reparative ethics of care.

Keywords: choreography, safety preparation, policing, abolition

2009:

You sit in a classroom.

Code Red.

Stand quickly. Scrape your chair across the tile.

A desk stands empty next to you.

Slide it, quickly, against the now looming entryway.

Swipe your folders and textbook off your own desk.

Stack it.

The doodled sides of the desks now touch.

You've created a barricade—keep moving.

Quickly, now, crouch below the whiteboard.

The small of your back presses against the wall, your tailbone on the cold tile.

Your knees compress against your stomach.

The classroom goes dark.

You are one of many frozen bodies waiting for the school resource officer to check in.

All clear.

The above movement score outlines a lockdown drill I rehearsed in the United States with my classmates in high school in 2009. It was the first time my peers and I would learn and perform a choreography that protected us from an active shooter. My high-school Spanish teacher began the first day of class reviewing the syllabus and class policies, including the plan if “code red” was ever announced over the loudspeakers. As a student sitting at one of the desks closest to a door connected to an adjacent classroom, I prepared to perform my duty with a quick readiness. Given the appropriate signal, my job was to slide my desk against the door, take another empty desk—that would remain vacant and ready for this exact purpose throughout the school year—and stack it to create a barricade. Then, we would huddle below the whiteboard out of view from the windows or entryway.

My time in high school was couched between the shootings at Columbine High School in 1999 and Sandy Hook Elementary in 2012, two events that radically changed the way schools in the United States prepare for this type of emergency. Now, active shooter drills are a nearly universal practice in the US, with 95% of public schools mandating a version of this kind of safety preparation (Everytown Research & Policy, 2020). Over the past two decades, the movement scores for this type of perpetual rehearsal have become increasingly simpler, with the goal of clarity, efficiency, and speed in a moment of crisis.

Emergency drills are akin to rehearsals, embodying potentially dangerous scenarios through pre-planned movement vocabularies

and spatial patterns. Drills rely on choreography as a safety mechanism to mitigate risk and anticipate danger by training the body to make predetermined decisions in response to a particular cue. Scholar Francesca Laura Cavallo (2019) termed these types of rehearsals as “pre-enactments” or “performed futures that fictionalize reality to allow risk to be experienced” (p. 180). Pre-enactments, in other words, allow society to understand how social and political life is governed through a particular conception of risk or perceived danger. Similarly, emergency operation plans (EOPs) operate on this type of perception and take the form of movement scores, outlining how and when a body should execute a particular set of rote choreography. Theater and performance scholar Tracy Davis (2002) also described this anticipatory performance as the theater of emergency in the context of Cold War era duck-and-cover drills, exploring these “enactments” as organizational methods that would encourage civilians to be self-sufficient and play an individual role in “crisis management” (p. 14). Now, decades later, preparing a school body for a violent incident that recurs in US contexts requires students, teachers, and administrators to participate in rehearsals and scenario-based training. In other words, they must enter a moment of imagination and enact their response to a potentially violent scenario. While the definition of an “active shooter” or “school shooter” still remains malleable and varies from district to district, both tend to encompass an incident where an individual (most often a white male, current or former student) fires a gun on school property during school hours with the goal to maim or kill the general public. Given a particular cue in response to this threat, whether it be “code red” or a teacher’s instructions, students in the US today deploy a particular movement vocabulary geared toward streamlining and controlling a mass population or collection of bodies against this all-too-common phenomenon. Therefore, drills ultimately operate to prepare bodies in danger by mandating choreographic imperatives that promise security. But, as dance scholars have observed, choreography often constructs a story of power (Foster, 2010; Goldman, 2010; Lepecki, 2013). In other words, choreography rarely exists in a silo or

without some effort toward coordination and control. Therefore, I am interested in the instances under which choreography is performed, who generates its vocabulary, and who moves as a result. In the case of active shooter drills, the choreographer is the police.

There already exists a body of research and activism addressing how police presence in schools reinforces the school-to-prison pipeline and the school's role in the prison-industrial complex. Numerous researchers in this area have noted how the disciplinary structure of school-based policing ushers primarily Black and brown students into the criminal justice system (American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), 2017; Center for Public Integrity, 2021; Monahan & Torres, 2010). Safety drills to prepare for school-based violence fall into this nexus as rehearsals that move in law enforcement's best interest. In other words, my goal with this research is to understand how safety—in particular, the safety measure taken to prepare for a school shooter—reinforces a sense of *necessity*, the desperate need or impetus to “be prepared,” while further implicating students and teachers in the school-to-prison nexus. By using choreography as a means to instruct young people, the police state can secure its presence within the body without a police officer present. Put differently, safety preparation's choreographies battle the potential for risk by compromising dance as a practice of freedom (Hartman, 2019). In order to address this denial of liberty, I argue that active shooter drills must be choreographed and approached through a feminist and abolitionist lens in order to interrupt the police state's choreography with a reparative ethics of care.

In the following piece, I trace and examine the choreographic orders of safety preparation in the form of movement scores to examine how the police state choreographs against a potential threat. Throughout this study, my definition of “choreography” encompasses the powers that assemble bodies in public space toward a particular goal. Performance studies scholar André Lepecki's (2013) notion of “choreopolicing” helps animate this specific definition, where in moments of protest and assemblage, the police manage bodies' spatial patterns and movements based on permissibility and control. Similarly, throughout this work,

choreography acts upon the body as a marker of power—where the relationship between the maker and mover is hierarchical by design. While safety preparation and its choreographies often manifest in the form of small movements, strategies, and structured improvisation that lean on situation awareness to address an oncoming threat, this is not the only model that protects schools, bodies, and communities. I conclude this work with an investigation of how choreography can expand to push against the police state and manifest in collectivity and activism. Put differently, I examine how the hierarchical dynamic between maker and mover might dissolve to make room for a choreography that is ongoing, reparative, and focused on mutual aid.

Additionally, it is important to note that throughout my analysis, I examine the *preparation* for moments of crisis, not the tragedies or moments of emergency themselves. Whether or not they make the news, tragedies continue to occur and make quotidian news in the United States. They elicit reflections that consider the shortcomings and fatal errors on the part of law enforcement or the school's preparatory safety measures. While these moments of recollection are certainly important, I believe we need to consider what structures we have put in place so that generations of young people are now familiar with the same choreography. We carry these choreographic imperatives in our bodies and are ready to launch into action but have spent little time considering how this also requires us to embody the police state's choreographic imperatives. Drills, rather than emergencies themselves, reinforce order and surveillance over a student body. They reinstate a form of readiness and training that relies on choreography as a tool for control.

To animate how safety and policing move hand in hand, I will offer a close reading of movement scores derived from fieldwork and safety trainings I have attended as a dance scholar. The movement scores I point to push and pull at what "choreography" entails, stretching its bounds from micro-movements aimed at preparing the body to larger directives toward structured improvisation. My goal is to illuminate the players involved with school safety and to underscore how choreography

ultimately fosters policing as a durable mainstay in public schools. To begin, we'll recall how the police packaged safety as a hierarchical and unidirectional imperative between authority and subject.

1968:

Officer Friendly Rules

1. *Play in your yard.*
2. *Play on the playground.*
3. *Obey all traffic signs.*
4. *Cross the street at the corner.*
5. *Never run into the street.*
6. *Roller skate on the sidewalk.*
7. *Use your eyes, ears, and head.*
8. *Be a friendly helper at home.*
9. *Be a friendly helper in school.*
10. *Be my friend, always.*¹

Before the school shooting at Columbine High School launched decades of active shooter preparation and placed law enforcement as a permanent fixture in US schools with school resource officers (SROs), police officers initially entered public schools to monitor desegregation in the late 1950s and eventually became pedagogues to general traffic safety (Onion, 2020). Officers visited schools to encourage conviviality and allegiance between young people and local law enforcement. Familiar choreographic imperatives, such as *look both ways before crossing the street*, entered young people's safety arsenal. The choreographer for these imperatives would become the omniscient entity, "Officer Friendly," the nomenclature for a program designed to encourage cordial social relationships between children and police officers. Officer Friendly's rules would foreground a variation of "choreopolicing," or the ways in which the police determine the

1. This set of instructions is quoted from a teacher's resource workbook provided by the Sears-Roebuck Foundation and as referenced in Rebecca Onion's (2020) article "Playing good cop."

circulation of bodies in public space through their physical presence (Lepecki, 2013, p. 16). However, a digestible list of rules—as shown in the above movement score—disassociates the officer’s presence from their mandates, rendering the police as an authoritarian entity that wields its power through its choreographic imperatives.

The list of 10 rules outlined above serves as an example of a movement score that bound young people and their local law enforcement as co-conspirators for personal safety. The final item, “Be my friend, always,” reinforces the goal of Officer Friendly programs, to trust in such officials and understand that their orders are for the constituent’s own good. The above 10 rules, concluded by an order for friendship, undercut what might already exist to its reader or recipient: community-based safety and/or an environment for play that is not ruled by policing and surveillance. The ultimate effect of such a movement score is a reinforcement that the police officers are experts or primary advisors in safety—which, as we know, for minority communities in the United States, has never been true. Nonetheless, these choreographic imperatives take the form of unidirectional orders that achieve control over an imagined body in danger. When we adopt these imperatives into our choreographic arsenal, we simultaneously rehearse to move in law enforcement’s best interest. “Officer Friendly” would become an explosive kernel to how police exist and operate in schools, especially when young people’s primary threat developed from general traffic safety to the active shooter.

The self-patrolling movement vocabulary of active shooter drills demonstrates how the police state currently operates as a choreographic lynchpin in US schools. Not only is law enforcement increasingly present in US schools with SROs, but police officers are also more prevalent in schools attended by Black and brown students and criminalize these young people at a much higher rate.² SROs blur the boundary between a school disciplinarian and a police officer,

2. It is important to note that SROs are not security guards, but commissioned, sworn law enforcement officers, meaning they are usually armed. See National Association of School Resource Officers for more details.

serving primarily as a law enforcer while taking on roles such as an informal counselor, a school disciplinarian, and sometimes a teacher. When inflicting order, these officers reportedly approach students “acting out” or resisting authority with tactics such as detaining, applying physical restraint, or handcuffing—acts that subject students to police violence in regular school settings (ACLU, 2017). Ultimately, Black students are more than twice as likely to be referred to law enforcement than are their white classmates (ACLU, 2017). This pattern seems counterintuitive since the SROs’ primary function is to act as an emergency respondent to active shooter events, and school or rampage shooters are overwhelmingly white men (Kimmel, 2017). Despite the investment in SROs to serve as the first communicator or line of defense in an active shooting, police presence is not enough but there needs to be (choreographic) training too.³ While drills and emergency training help protect schools, they simultaneously host a dark underbelly that upholds the school-to-prison pipeline—a process that disproportionately escorts low-income and minority students to incarceration—and is predicated on suppressing particular communities rendered dangerous or criminal, as defined by the police state (Monahan & Torres, 2010). In other words, safety preparation is not only about protecting those that populate a classroom but also a way to unite bodies in those spaces against an anticipated threat or perceived “enemy.” When writing about the spectator’s or witness’s complicity in performance, especially performances that memorialize trauma, Diana Taylor (2011) expresses, “I do participate in a political project that depends on making certain populations disappear. I am constantly warned to keep vigil, to ‘say something’ if I ‘see something’” (p. 75). Here, Taylor reiterates the New York City subway’s post-9/11 choreographic imperative: ‘If you see something, say something,’ or to keep vigilant and keep watch and report suspicious activity to police officers. The result of that choreographic imperative is not only grounded on communal safety but also predicated on the target

3. A report released by the Urban Institute revealed that annual expenditures on SRO salaries and benefits are \$2.12 billion nationally (Avila-Acosta & Sorensen, 2023).

and arrest of others. Protecting oneself as an individual is no longer enough. One must also rehearse sounding the alarm. Such preparation disseminates the police's choreographic imperatives into multiple bodies and, therefore, multiple institutional surveillance systems to alert against a potential threat, often defined along lines of disability, class, and race.

The police have harnessed choreography as a powerful asset in formulating a society that is always watching itself. Moreover, as the Officer Friendly's movement score demonstrates, when it comes to public safety, the line of command between choreographer and mover is hierarchal. This dynamic still persists as one of the ways we listen and absorb public safety information. One of the clearest ways to understand this line of command is a directive one can learn in cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) training to beat the bystander effect: "YOU. [Point to your intended subject.] Call 911." This explicit instruction is reflective of a choreographic imperative—the choreographer's instructions, guidelines, or orders serve to spring a particular body into action. Similarly, a school's EOP functions as a list of instructions or commands. Orders move from an invisible but omniscient entity to the subject in danger. As a result, such choreography assumes that its mover embodies passivity and can be trained to move in accordance with protocol. Ensuring that everyone is "under control" is the ultimate goal, which occurs through choreographic planning and choreographic imperatives.

2020:⁴

RUN. HIDE.** FIGHT.****

** Be aware of your exits. Running makes you harder to hit and improves your chances of survival. Empty hands up, follow law enforcement's instructions.*

*** You have other options to help you survive. Lock and barricade the door. Turn off your phones and make a plan to defend yourself.*

4. Run, hide, fight was made widespread by the FBI in 2020 but has origins and in Houston, TX as early as 2011 (Fanning, 2016).

**** You have to fight to survive. This is a last resort. You control the weapon, you control the shooter. Don't fight fair. You can survive a mass shooting—if you're prepared.*

The FBI released a training video with the above threefold movement imperative in 2020.⁵ Since then, it has found its way into multiple EOPs as a familiar touchstone for what to do in case of an active shooter. Its directives move through the police and toward a single body or subject in public space. Its imperatives are clear and in the order in which they should be executed with caveats that instruct which actions to be taken given the mover's circumstances. Given the appropriate cue, usually in the form of gunshots, one must evaluate their surroundings and follow this score of structured improvisation, making pre-determined choices based on their position in space. While some EOPs in schools aim to close or lockdown a classroom, keeping students in a contained and secure area, this three-part choreographic imperative maintains prominence in how students should navigate space if they hear gunshots outside a classroom.

In the summer of 2023, I attended the National School Safety Conference in Las Vegas, Nevada, an annual gathering attended by nearly 1,400 SROs and administrators. Midway through the conference, we gathered in a large ballroom at the Tropicana Hotel during a townhall session on the current state of school safety. Amid the discussion, one panelist based in Florida interrupted with an urging to reorder the above movement score and choreographic imperative, "Run, hide, fight." He shook his head, "I can't believe we are training people to believe 'fight' is a last resort." He went on to elaborate that he purchased baseball bats, hockey sticks, and similar make-shift weapons in his schools to help embolden teachers and students to combat a violent intruder—and to not shy from using these items as a primary tactic. "No guns yet," he added, referring to the current legislative push to arm teachers and administrators, "but we're close" (Centegix Technologies 2023).

5. For the full FBI training video, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TeOdxKozra0>

I sit cross-legged in the back row of the chilly ballroom and imagine this possibility. Like the first two components of this emergency response and movement score, "FIGHT" encompasses critical caveats, such as "fight like hell" and "don't fight fair," or a mode of structured improvisation that might involve throwing or wielding quotidian objects as weapons to defend against a shooter. I am struck that the panelist's suggestion for a simple reordering of the movement score could inspire such a violent image of what law enforcement considers care: building a generation of self-sufficient combatants who will always be prepared and confident in their ability to respond to an active shooter. I am also stirred by how close this choreographic imperative and movement vocabulary sits to our current reality. Throughout my research and fieldwork, law enforcement officials encouraged confidence that we, as individuals, should not shy from creating a plan to attack a gunman. Especially if the shooter is a student, more often than not, "they aren't good shots," officials ensure. Oftentimes, law enforcement officials point to the Pulse Nightclub shooting in 2016 in Orlando, Florida, as an example: reportedly, the shooter's gun was jammed mid-attack, stalling him enough to prompt a quick YouTube search on how to fix his weapon before carrying on with the shooting. He was allegedly idle for four minutes and no one attempted to "take him down" (Favors & Skillestad, 2021). It seems that survival in this era of violence is predicated on securing a ready-made public army, always prepared to deploy choreographic maneuvers whenever a threat presents itself. Ultimately, schools are a key place to rehearse and mold students into militants against the impervious threat of a gunman in public space.

In US schools, policing occurs overtly, through SROs, surveillance systems, and other means, but it also occurs through rehearsals of choreographic imperatives. Drills that place students and teachers in a perpetual state of readiness is a choreography that allows policing to happen at the level of the individual body. Those under this choreographic surveillance in the United States operate in a Foucauldian (Foucault, 1977) state of docility, and their bodies "object[s] of control" that through discipline and efficiency can be rendered useful

(p. 137). Under this notion, students are responsible for remembering and maintaining their individual protocol or choreographic arsenal. While similar in structure and rehearsal, teachers hold the twofold responsibility of following orders toward personal safety while taking care of the classroom. In order to be safe, both must follow orders. The police are the choreographic makers, and they are the movers.

Safety, in this era of school shootings, looks like policing. Fear and anticipation lock police-based safety methods in schools and have prevented an imagining of what safety might look like that does not follow the hierarchical and linear order between authority and subject. This results in the police state's choreographies upholding cultures of surveillance and criminalization of minority students that buttress the school-to-prison pipeline. What would safety preparation look like if it were to disavow these systems? Rather than hierarchical linearity and individualism, how might we choreograph through a feminist ethics of care? What could safety look like if it were to move with the project toward abolition?

2023:

Are you safe? If so, proceed.

Call 911. YOU. Call 911.

Apply a tourniquet 2–3 inches above the wound. Turn until you've heard "ouch" three times.

Write the time.

Pack the wound to fill the void.

Compress.

Don't start over.

No peaking.

Remember, slow is smooth and smooth is fast.

A few months after the National School Safety Conference in the summer of 2023, I attended "Stop The Bleed" training, an initiative launched by the American College of Surgeons in 2015 in response to the onslaught of mass shootings. I rehearsed packing a wound on a synthetic limb with hemostatic gauze and placing a tourniquet on a partner's upper

arm. The room was quiet during early morning training, something that public school teachers across the state needed to attend. My hand movements were still discovering the optimal pathways needed to be quick and efficient as I rehearsed with the imagined context of tending to an open wound. Pressing downward on a synthetic limb, I leveraged gravity and my body weight to create pressure and “stop the bleed.” Control and command from the police seemed to melt from this rehearsal as I worked one-by-one with another body and an imagined wound. Despite the calmness in the room, I was keenly aware of the unspoken pain and stress that would be involved in carrying out such choreography. Nonetheless, “Stop The Bleed” is the first training I’ve attended that was not run by a law enforcement official. After all, this type of training sparked as the result of a national emergency response protocol aimed to assist EMTs and first responders in the event of a violent incident. Now, the state of Texas, where I currently reside while finishing my dissertation, mandates that “Stop The Bleed” kits be available in every Texas public school.

As I expected, the protocol we learned and rehearsed followed the same instructional format of a choreographic imperative. An omniscient authority figure—this time a medical professional—instructs an individual on their own movements, the first being to make sure their own well-being is secure. But this time, the choreography leads the mover to care for someone else. If I employ my imagination, “Stop The Bleed” appears to be moving toward an initiative that is focused on collectivity and care within a potentially violent scenario. I consider this as I pay close attention to our instructor’s presentation and during our practice rounds. A large part of me is eager to know this information if I ever need to help someone profusely bleeding from an injury. I store my own “Stop The Bleed” kit that I received at the end of my session, packed with gauze, a tourniquet, scissors, bandages, and foil blankets, carefully in my car. I consider how this particular training simulates the idea of being in a community. The choreography could be applied to oneself, but the training focuses on offering help to others. “This training doesn’t have to only be useful if there’s a shooting,” the

instructor caveats, "Anyone can fall or get injured at any time." *Sure*, I think. But like all the other movement scores I've collected in this research on school safety, these choreographies exist as a means to survive within violence. The constant perpetual threat of gun violence goes untended, but numerous choreographies, regular rehearsals, and the implementation of didactic movement scores proliferate.

Safety choreography, which tells so much about power at the level of movement and the body, is perhaps only useful for the police. Safety protocol in schools, as it stands, is not collectively built or designed to address the reason these choreographies exist in the first place. I wonder if it is possible for choreography to disavow this scheme or reject a system that criminalizes, polices, and incarcerates. Perhaps, the answer is not generating an alternative choreographic score but finding emphasis on *movement* and *mobilization*: collective efforts that support the project toward abolition feminism. Such efforts are not instructional movement scores but executed through presence. Their imperatives are not geared toward efficiency and execution or assume the relationship to be between maker and mover or authority and individual, but between multitudes and collective action. For instance, projects like One Million Experiments compile a database and network of community-based projects that reimagine safety without relying on police and prisons as the only solution toward security (2022). These projects are not necessarily didactic in the form of a choreographic imperative or movement score. Rather, they take the form of narratives, peopling these efforts with a multitude of voices. "We" becomes the operative pronoun, along with reflections on need, mutual aid, community, and coalition. There are no imperative sentences, where "you" is implied as the only recipient. As abolitionist and feminist scholars have articulated, "Individuals tire, fade. Movements deepen and continue" (Davis et al., 2022, p. 13). Put further, movements inherently rely on collectivity, experimentation, and imagination. Likewise, when theorizing dance's relationship to politics, Randy Martin (1998) offered "mobilization" as the process of how bodies assemble to "produce a space of identifiable demands through a practical activity" (p. 4). In short, from movement

and mobilization do not come choreographic imperatives, but rather urgent strategies that leverage community, where policing and safety are non synonymous with one another.

In the shift from choreography to mobilization, from imperative to imagining, we can begin to distinguish between a movement score and a call to action. The following text is taken from an infographic provided by [8toAbolition](#) (2020):

#8toAbolition

A world without prisons or police, where we can all be safe.

1. *Defund the police.*
2. *Demilitarize communities.*
3. *Remove police from schools.*
4. *Free people from jails and prisons.*
5. *Repeal laws that criminalize survival.*
6. *Invest in community self-governance.*
7. *Provide safe housing for everyone.*
8. *Invest in care, not cops.*

The above manifesto takes a form similar to a movement score, with seemingly step-by-step instructions toward safety without policing or prisons and without explicitly directing the body. Each numbered item is large in task, opening a definition of choreography and structured improvisation that slips into a broader conception of “movement.” Moreover, its numbered items are not directives geared toward an individual from an omniscient authority but a composition of urgent, ongoing actions. In other words, each item’s composition underscores the multitudes speaking to many. Activists have expressed this shift to be critical to abolition feminist work: “Abolition urges us to move away from myopic and individualistic conceits and to focus instead on how particular cases embody and reflect broader concerns and reveal greater threats to safety and freedom than would be evident when viewed in isolation from larger social contexts” (Davis et al., 2022, p. 47). In other words, abolition requires a pivot away from an individualistic and

unidirectional model of safety in order to both make change and realize what actions are implicated within larger systems. Policing, in the form of imperatives toward safety under this current era of active shooter violence, is a choreographic implication in the larger carceral system. Perhaps a choreographic model and drilled rehearsals are not what we need to see a future where safety and policing are contradictory. If an imperative must exist, maybe it can be toward mobilizing the community.

Choreography as a plan, blueprint, or protocol cannot mobilize or move a body into action. It attempts to preempt or suspend the body, and teachers, students, and administrators in the United States during this era of violence are certainly stuck. Without actionable items that focus on narrative or the "we," and by relying on imperatives that reassert authority and a hegemonic order, US school populations are condemned to *run, hide, fight*. As schools train for the perpetual threat of an active shooter, they are forced to simultaneously uphold school-based policing, the school-to-prison pipeline, and a culture where men manifest their humiliation and anger through violence and vengeance. The counter to this pattern is abolition feminism and the series of collective, actionable changes that disavow these larger, structural contexts. We can begin with dispelling choreography with movement and mobilization. By dismantling the choreography of fear and authoritarianism and fostering an environment where diverse voices and narratives are acknowledged, schools can evolve into spaces that nurture empathy and understanding. Abolition, coupled with intentional and inclusive practices, paves the way for a future where education transcends the confines of oppressive structures, enabling individuals to move beyond the constraints of the police state's choreographies.

Author Biography

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