Reinventing the Peabody Sisters

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University of Iowa Press

Iowa City

Elizabeth Peabody on the "Temperament of the Colored Classes"

African Americans, Progressive History, and Education in a Democratic System

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The prevailing critical notion of Elizabeth Peabody is that of kindergarten crusader, eccentric, and peripheral Transcendentalist. However, her letters and essays disclose a great deal about nineteenth-century culture and reveal that Peabody's educational philosophy is significant. Perhaps most interesting, Peabody's educational work both anticipates and responds to shifts of ethnological theory, especially those theories that are historically based, while it also comments on her notions of race and education. Examining Elizabeth Peabody's educational writings reveals that Peabody struggled to balance her belief in the ability of education to effect individual change with her belief in a more biologically influenced, progressive historical march to a Christian finale.

Peabody's pedagogical work occurred during one of the most tumultuous periods of educational development in U.S. history. At the start of the century, the public schools were a nascent movement that would by the end of the antebellum period develop rapidly into a large and formalized school system. In the early 1800s, educational theoreticians and school officials began to emphasize education as a means to form a citizen of the democratic system. Boston Mayor Josiah Quincy claimed that the city would "educate better men, happier citizens, more enlightened statesmen; . . . elevate a people, thoroughly instructed in their social rights, deeply imbued with a sense of their moral duties; mild, flexible to every breadth of legitimate authority; unyielding as fate to unconstitutional impositions" (qtd. in Schultz 44). While education was seen as potentially uplifting, "there was

also," as Michel Foucault theorizes, "a military dream of society; its fundamental reference was not to the state of nature, but to the meticulously subordinated cogs of a machine, not to the primal social contract, but to permanent coercions, not to fundamental rights, but to indefinitely progressive forms of training, not to the general will but to automatic docility" (169). The hope for the elevated citizen became enmeshed with the desire for a less rebellious, less troublesome citizen: a cog in the machine of democracy.

Like that of her contemporaries William Ellery Channing, Horace Mann, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Elizabeth Peabody's educational work reflected this early antebellum educational ideology. Peabody insists that "a true education will keep all the powers of man in harmony" and "prevent this prodigious force of blind will making disorder & originating evil" (*Letters*, 350, 361); education becomes for Peabody, as Bruce Ronda argues, "the great mediating activity of life, negotiating the competing claims of self and other" (*Reformer*, 8). The early antebellum view of an education of control and the deemphasis of individuality, adopted by Peabody, would remain under debate during the nineteenth century, particularly regarding the African American population.

Early antebellum theories about education's ability to affect African American children were primarily based upon concepts of race and environment. In *Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species* (1787; enlarged ed. 1810), Samuel Stanhope Smith, a dominant figure in ethnological thinking, argues that all races "were members of the same species and had a common remote ancestry; differences in color, anatomy, intelligence, temperament, and morality could be attributed to differing physical and social environments, especially climate and the contrasting habits of life produced by 'savagery' and 'civilization'" (Fredrickson 72). Assuming a monogenetic origin which made whites the dominant race, he believed that blacks could leave their "negative traits" and color behind, through changes of environment (Fredrickson 72). And Smith was not the only theorist who claimed environmental changes could affect race. George Louis Leclerc Buffon, a leading authority on natural history from 1749–1804, argued essentially that environmental difference precluded people of color from becoming white. He believed that excessive heat, land altitude, the proximity to the ocean, diet, and social customs were some of the reasons that Africans were black.[1] Race, writes Buffon,

"persists as long as the milieu remains and disappears when the milieu is changed" (qtd. in Gossett 36).

An avid reader of European philosophers and ethnologists, Peabody was aware of such theories. Her mentor, William Ellery Channing, also accepted that environment could play a key factor in the education of African American children. Channing argued that African American "modes of life would vary if instruction is early given. A school may interest them. Their [African American] present evils—dirt, bad air, crowded rooms, and their poverty—originate in thoughtlessness, intemperance, etc." (qtd. in Rice 64). Educators working from racialized ethnological theories regarded African American children as unregulated. Initially blaming these children's so-called difference on environment, particularly the lack of proper domestic training, such educators assumed that African American children received little instruction at home or, worse, were subject to devious domestic influences. Peabody, likewise, was intrigued by the role of environment in education, often comparing the school to an extension of home; she would experiment with this perspective in her early teaching, most notably in her work at the Temple School.[2]

During Peabody's time at the Temple School, she and Bronson Alcott experimented with educational theories based on environmental influence, and, though Alcott's conversations and emphasis on introspection raised eyebrows in Boston, Peabody initially supported his techniques, noting in an 1835 letter: "I am more & more convinced that Mr Alcott's school is not understood, even by those who are most interested in it; and long for the first of August to come when my Record of a School will be published" (*Letters*, 151). Peabody's early support stemmed from a worldview that Alcott shared; like Alcott, Peabody observed that "children should be encouraged to speak naturally and freely of all they see, think, and feel. Thus their conversation will be what it should be, the perfect relation of all objects, coloured by the individual soul" (qtd. in Ronda, "Views of the Child," 107). Peabody's acceptance of the development of the individual's soul through education centered on a commitment to use the environment to modify behavior, as early antebellum ethnological theories suggested. Indeed, her acceptance of environmental influence would continue as a theme in her educational writing throughout her life, as is clear in her 1863 *Moral Culture of Infancy and Kindergarten Guide*. The appendices to

Moral Culture include letters from Mary Peabody, written in 1841, that Elizabeth Peabody uses to exemplify positive educational practice. One feature of Mary Peabody's letters is her long description of the poor quality of many schoolrooms. She writes of "benches without backs . . . crowded and ill-ventilated rooms, tedious periods of idleness in which little darlings had to sit up straight and not speak or fidget," in stark contrast to her own "pleasant school-room" (qtd. in Ronda, *Reformer*, 292). Elizabeth Peabody's inclusion of her sister's letters supporting the use of the schoolroom environment to control student behavior attests to the connection Peabody saw between education and the environment, a connection that she explored throughout her lifetime, even in the face of increasing acceptance of theories of polygenesis by the mid-nineteenth century.

Not surprising, then, is the emphasis on a carefully constructed schoolroom environment found in Peabody's description of the Temple School. The Temple School was located in the neo-Gothic, marble, Masonic Temple on Tremont Street in Boston. The schoolroom, entered through an internal, winding staircase in the twin towers three stories above the street, included the "upper part of the Gothic window to light it" (*Letters*, 134). A huge room, 65 feet by 40 feet, with a 19-foot ceiling, the space, which mimicked a church, became a stage for objects that had a pedagogical purpose: "Conceiving that the objects that meet the senses every day for years must necessarily mold the mind, he [Alcott] chose a spacious room, and ornamented it, not with such furniture as only an upholsterer could appreciate, but with such forms as would address and cultivate the imagination and the heart" (qtd. in Haefner 51). The schoolroom space paid homage to Peabody's and Alcott's insistence upon the moral and religious impetus of education, while the furniture and pieces reveal their faith in the potential of environment to affect the intellect of the child.

The belief in the environmental contribution to education was evinced by the room's furnishings. Both Alcott and Peabody contributed to appointing the schoolroom, with Peabody borrowing illustrations from her landlord, Mr. Rice, and adding her sofa and table (*Letters*, 134). The room also contained plants, wall pieces, statues, such as busts of Socrates and Plato, pictures of "an ancient temple and festival . . . some fine mountains" and of Channing, and a bas-relief of Christ. The floor of the school was carpeted, and the students, wrote Peabody, sat in "very pretty desks all

round the room—with pretty chairs for the scholars" (*Letters*, 134). The beauty, balance, and comfort of the room was completed by a "half moon" teacher's desk, not raised, but set within easy access of the students, arranged in a semi-circle around Alcott. Peabody's reported classroom details—the architecture of the classroom, the arrangement of the desks, and the decorations—were all designed to create an environment of harmony and balance that nurtured the internal child. The influence of environment on education would, with some alterations, remain a theme in Peabody's educational theory throughout her teaching career.

While Peabody was convinced that nurturing the internal child was important, she also believed that too much introspection would damage children. In early letters that praise Alcott, the germ of her concern is apparent: "It is his object to cultivate the heart, and to bring out from the child's own mind the principles which are to govern his character. The outward manifestations of learning are not great, therefore, but the self-control that the children exercise is of the first importance, and a foundation for all future good" (qtd. in Ronda, *Reformer*, 120). Peabody's faith in the educational environment and its ability to complement the internal was influenced by her interest in "self-control" during her Temple School tenure. Peabody began to conceptualize a proactive education that would influence children's development and shape self-control. The reformed child would become a "good citizen" in a democratic society, hence Peabody's insistence that education is the "foundation for all future good." The importance of self-control led Peabody to consider the education of the external, the body, as an equally important element of her philosophy. Disagreeing with Alcott, who "was convinced of the primacy of spirit and spiritual education" and "allowed his students a few minutes of unsupervised play on the Boston Common every day," Peabody began to believe that an education without some examination of the physical was incomplete (Ronda, "Views of the Child," 108). Critical of the lack of play that Alcott allowed, she advocated that children were "overflowing with animals spirits, and all but intoxicated with play" (qtd. in Ronda, *Reformer*, 118). As she would argue in her later writing on kindergartens, "romping, the ecstasy of the body," is key to a child's development (qtd. in Ronda, *Reformer*, 292). Exercise became crucial to the student's education because Peabody was convinced that play would allow the body to become regulated. Otherwise, the body's

animal spirits could become disruptive. But "playful activity" and precise education would temper the body and "prevent this prodigious force of blind will making disorder & originating evil" (*Letters*, 361).

Peabody's increased interest in the physical corresponds to contemporary challenges to environmentally based theories of race. The emphasis on environment in the early part of the century was recast as an emphasis on heredity and protogenetics by the time of the Temple School experiment, an emphasis that would evolve into an acceptance of polygenesis by midcentury. For example, Dr. Samuel George Morton's *Crania Americana* (1839) argues that blacks and whites are separate races, with whites "authentic descendants of Africa" and biologically superior to blacks (Fredrickson 74–75).[3] George Fredrickson describes this period as provoking the rise of the "American School of Ethnology": polygenesis "came to prominence in the 1840s and 1850s [and] provoked resistance from the religiously orthodox by presenting reams of 'scientific' evidence to support the proposition that the country's three main races—whites, blacks and American Indians—belonged to separately created and vastly unequal species" (66–67). Polygenesis, the theory of separate human lines, was supported by pseudoscientific analysis of skulls, body types, and other bodily traits, which increasingly portrayed the African American "as a pathetically inept creature who was slave to his emotions, incapable of progressive development and self-government because he lacked the white man's enterprise and intellect" (Fredrickson 101). The shift in theories, however, caused conflicts related to biblical interpretations of descent from Adam, certainly a key concern of Peabody's, given her Biblical approach to history.

The struggle between environmental and biological theories of race surfaces in Peabody's writing. In a May 1834 letter, Peabody reports a discussion between two abolitionists: "Mr. Lee is terribly provoked at Dr. Follen. He asked Dr. F if he should be willing to have Charley [his son] marry a negro—& he said *yes* if she was virtuous!!—!!—!!—Dr. Follen!!—!!" (qtd. in Ronda, *Reformer*, 263). Her comment highlights the growing philosophical struggle between the idea of the internal, represented by the woman's virtue, and the physical external, the black body. Peabody cannot refrain from viewing the body as a permanent sign of difference and disruption, signified by her horrified "Dr. Follen!!—!!."

While Peabody worked to balance the internal and external in her edu-

cational pedagogy, she became increasingly convinced of America's role in a historical progression governed by God, which in turn shaped her response to contemporary ethnological theories. The crux of Peabody's concern with historical progression is outlined by Nina Baym in "The Ann Sisters: Elizabeth Peabody's Millennial History," in which Baym argues that Peabody was a millennialist thinker who viewed history as a progression toward a perfect Christian end. Baym writes that "the temporal coincidence of Unitarianism with the formation of the American republic showed Peabody that for God, politics and religion were one—that the glorious destiny of humankind was to be realized through the agency of nation-states governed by religious purpose" (33). To Peabody, the United States was an ideal nation-state, created to realize the divine purpose of God. Therefore, all actions that furthered its development, such as an educational system that created a model democratic citizen, were viewed as part of divine destiny. While Baym's article examines Peabody's historical progression in light of women's roles, Peabody's worldview also helps to explain her tangled ideas about race.

Like many other liberals and intellectuals of the early nineteenth century, Peabody was intrigued with the Colonization movement, which advocated removal of African Americans from the United States as the best solution for dissolving slavery. In an 1835 letter, Peabody writes of her contact with abolitionists William Henry Furness and James Clarke: "here boarding in this very house in this nest of Abolitionists [is] Gurley the Colonization agent—over whose life of Ashmun I had been weeping with enthusiasm & love" (*Letters*, 149). Ralph Randolph Gurley's *Life of Jehudi Ashmun, Late Colonial Agent in Liberia* (1835), which traced the life of white colonization agent Jehudi Ashmun, fascinated Peabody. Regardless of her belief in environmental influence, she had trouble imagining a solution that was not impinged upon by bodily constraints, the very constraints that ethnological theorists began to see as racially marked bodily differences during the same period. Using language reminiscent of antislavery opponents when referring to the "nest of Abolitionists," Peabody makes clear that a more radical solution to slavery is not consistent with her views. As Baym rightly argues, "the abolitionist attack on the Constitution (to her a holy document, the national temple reared on the Pilgrim foundation)" would challenge the divine plan, hence Peabody's hesitation to side with

the more radical abolitionists and her interest in colonization in the 1830s (40). On the other hand, to accept polygenesis would be to reject the Biblical story of creation, clearly a position that Peabody would not adopt.

Ashmun's biography, a spiritual narrative of a white man who becomes a Christian martyr for the cause of colonization, appealed to Peabody's growing belief in Anglo-Americans' role in the evolution of God's divine plan, which necessitated the dissolution of slavery: "to think there was martyrdom even now inhibited with humility—& for the blacks—& in the Colonization Society—of which I think more highly the more I know of it." What also appealed to Peabody about Ashmun's biography is its author's "self government"; she writes, "It is a comfort to see a man who does not get into a passion on the subject—but it would be horrid to see want of self government in one who was privileged to acquaintance with Ashmun in his day of [word illegible] in African—and who [MS torn] saw his dying moments.—I am on fire with enthusiasm about this hero—statesman—martyr —who even under the horrors of Calvinism pursued the '*splendours of holiness*'" (*Letters*, 149). Peabody's emphasis on self-government and her belief in tempered emotion are linked to her views on historical progression. The abolitionists, whom many antebellum whites perceived as radicals who utilized emotional appeals to end slavery immediately, would have exasperated Peabody's belief in the rationality of the mind. Though she began to move toward a call for the immediate end to slavery by the war's outbreak, her support of abolition would continue to be bound by her understanding of divine progression and the intricate balance between environment and bodily stasis.

For example, Peabody championed Martha Griffith, a white, Catholic slaveholder, who published the 1857 fictionalized melodramatic slave narrative *Autobiography of a Female Slave*. Peabody believed that, in Griffith, she had "found a person more profoundly alive on the subject of human rights—& the sin & spiritual suicide of slaveholding—& who gave me a more terrible impression of the sum of human agonies that slavery is—than any thing I ever had seen or heard or imagined" (*Letters*, 285). Peabody's emotional response to Griffith's account, rather than to known narratives and oral recountings by ex-slaves such as Frederick Douglass, was not unusual in the late antebellum period, as the popularity of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* attests. But Peabody's emphasis on the white

story, "the sin and spiritual suicide of slaveholding," points to her preoccupation with the divine plan and the role that Anglo-Americans should play in its progression. An immediate end to slavery became more appealing because it ended the "sin and spiritual suicide" that impeded America's progress toward the divine end. In addition, Griffith assumes the role of the white martyr, willing to sacrifice her income to free her slaves while in pursuit of the eventual greater good, the dissolution of slavery as advocated by the divine historical progression. Equally important to Peabody is the way in which education functions in the narrative. She likens Griffith to a "grown up" Eva "who had out gone our wisest ones in the depths of her observations & the profoundness of her deductions—If ever one got an impression of a mind taught by the Spirit of Truth—I got one from my first conversation with her. Neither Christian saint or political philosopher can teach her for she *knows*" (*Letters*, 285). Griffith becomes the ideally educated woman who, through internal searching and communing with "the Spirit of Truth," does her part to dissolve slavery and promote the divine historical progression.

Peabody's "Primeval Man," begun in 1854 and not published until 1881, reveals that the author's obsession with historical chronology allowed her to resolve her concerns about the conflict of shifting ethnological theories by developing an ideology of race set within a divine plan. Peabody argues that "the earliest traditions declare the unity of the human race, not merely by referring man, bodily, to one progenitor (of which there is reasonable dispute), but by referring civilization to one law-giver" ("Primeval Man," 154). Her acceptance of a unified human race, then, is a deliberate statement refuting the contemporary acceptance of polygenesis. She goes on to counter polygenesis proponents, arguing that while it might be difficult to accept that the human race was initially unified bodily, it is fully acceptable that all of civilization is bound to the same code of behavior formed under the same God. If, as "Primeval Man" suggests, Peabody understands that all civilization is under "one law-giver," then all who refuse to follow the path toward a divine plan are thwarting the rule of God. And, in accordance with this view, various races would follow different paths to fulfill the millennial view of history. In "Primeval Man," Peabody relies on descriptions of African tribes from Herodotus and "modern travelers" who report "that nomads neither deteriorate nor improve in the lapse of ages.

Their office seems to be to keep up the wild stock of the human race, with a protest against that subjection of one class of men to another which can only take place in any nation by some men's arrogating a divine right, which is, in fact, inherent in all, or in none" (163). Peabody's acceptance of the "wild stock" of Africans, who maintain a stable position within nations throughout history, reveals that she has not abandoned her understanding of the stability of body and race. But stability of races does not equal a polygenetic origin, in Peabody's view. Instead, slavery provides a moment for a nation to prove its worthiness and compliance with the divine plan. If the United States was a superior nation blessed by God, then it was up to whites to "protest against that subjection of one class of men to another." Hence, Peabody's continued fascination with the Anglo-American martyr to the cause of African American freedom.

According to Peabody's divine design, those teaching an educational program that trains both the internal and external person to realize the goal of divine progress are contributing to God's plan in much the same way a martyr would. As Bruce Ronda writes of Peabody, "the real issue, she was coming to see, was the training of the whole person, shaping not just the intellect but also the moral and spiritual sensibility, together with a sense of collective identity, of belonging not simply to oneself or one's family but to the entire human race" (*Reformer*, 87). The "sense of collective identity" stressed in education would balance "intellect" with "moral and spiritual sensibility." Peabody's comments reveal that she believed race could only be balanced—not wholly modified—by the influence of education, hence her insistence on the seemingly conflicting views of environment and body throughout her educational writing. As Baym cogently notes, "In general it would appear that for a long time, and without deeply considering the matter, Peabody assumed that spiritual and intellectual differences among races made some of them less fit for, or at least less likely than others to develop, republican governments and Christian religious beliefs" (40). And with this differentiation in mind, Peabody would build educational projects that reworked her early faith in educational environment and the internal to include her conception of the body and race.

Peabody's postwar educational projects stress that she came to rely increasingly on education as a tool to further both divine plan and patriotic duty. The integral relationship surfaces in Peabody's promotion of Bem's

chart, a visual representation of world history.[4] Describing the chart, Peabody emphasizes that "details show the activity of the finite mind, and the action of second causes; outlines mark the decisions of the Divine mind interpreting events; and the workings of the Divine will controlling them. . . . The lesson to be learned is, how to employ one's energy, whether in antagonizing or cooperating with Providence." By couching history as a divinely inspired progressive march, Peabody positions teaching, particularly of history, as a duty that will teach children to cooperate with God. Regardless of individual actions and resistance, "the will of God will certainly always be brought about, in the long run, but the weal and woe of nations depend upon whether it is brought by French revolutions, or American revolutions; by the growth or destructions of the instruments" (qtd. in Ronda, *Reformer*, 236). Resistance to the divine plan, then, becomes resistance to the eventual. And while Peabody had always perceived education as a "patriotic duty" (Baym 31), in her later writing she more forcefully posits education as an integral part of democracy. In a letter to Rawlins Pickman, Peabody argues that history lessons are crucial to "our young republicans . . . & this instruction must be given in the public schools & effectively" (qtd. in Ronda, *Reformer*, 236). As late as 1881, Peabody continued to push for a democratic education. Writing to Massachusetts Governor John David Long, she insists that he and other politicians "*must do* something for the *radical* Education of the South, in the interest of the *Union*" ("Letter to Governor," 1–2). Without the proper education, then, God's plan for America will be impeded. Peabody continued to believe that the only way to promote the divine historical plan was to rely on education to create a student, whether white or black, ready to be inserted into the democratic society.

Peabody's post–Civil War educational projects, whether promoting her niece Maria Mann's school for orphaned, black children in Washington, DC, or kindergartens for African American students taught by African American teachers, reveal that Peabody continued to stress the patriotic and spiritual impetus of education. Peabody condemned those who struggled against black education, believing that to do so was flouting the divine plan. In an 1881 letter extract, entitled "Training Classes for Colored Teachers," Peabody emphasizes the internal, where "the adult gives the children the love of time, space, and the language which represents this

love, and symbolizes the higher spiritual truths which the children give to them," while also arguing for the educational formation of an external system of control. Children are well educated "when they are wise enough to divine the scope and meaning of those spontaneous activities which embody mutual laws, and are alike in all children, giving a plane for the play of sociality" (736). Regardless of her belief that children are "alike," Peabody follows this statement with another that claims "the advantage that the temperament of the colored classes serve, is in the predominance of their aesthetic sensibility over the mere force of will. They are more in the natural equipoise of childhood, and in the case of their hearts take in broader impression and more various impressions before they begin to react." Clearly, Peabody does not believe all children are exactly alike; instead, she emphasizes that African Americans are more childlike and emotional than Anglo-Americans. She continues, "But this, in the long run, is an advantage if education comes in to give the opposite, directing their energies to active production of forms as expression, since production of form defines thought, and puts substance before words in their consciousness" (736). A good education for African Americans, then, is a different education, one that will mold their feelings into "substance." Peabody notes that "in the future interchange of their spiritual knowledge with the proud Anglo-Saxon's knowledge of this world's law, and even of that necessary correlation of cosmic forces which we call the material universe, they have the advantage" (736). Privileging a type of romantic racialism (African Americans are more spiritual than the legalistic Anglo-Saxon), Peabody once more credits the internal, the spiritual, while constricting the potential of African Americans by the innate difference that the black body supposedly contains.

At Elizabeth Peabody's funeral, 6 January 1894, Ednah Cheney highlighted Peabody's work with various groups, including African Americans, noting, "When she walked down the street arm in arm with a colored man the whole town was aflame with indignation while she was calm, dignified, and unimpassioned" (*Letters*, 399). Certainly, Peabody championed various oppressed groups during her lifetime, including African Americans and Native Americans. Yet Peabody remained bound by shifting ethnological theories that moved between the belief in environment and the belief in a static, raced body. With her faith in a divine plan of history, Peabody worked to mediate the educational potential of the environment on the in-

ternal child with the stasis of body and race. This conflict led to the—at times—disparate theories that Peabody constructed, though she always believed that education was a positive means to secure democratic citizens and a godly plan.

Notes

Thanks to the Massachusetts Historical Association for permission to use unpublished letters in their archives.

1. Additional theorists who focused on environmental causations of race were, among others, Dr. John Hunter, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, James Cowles Prichard, and H. T. Buckle.

2. The best known of Peabody's early school teaching occurred in conjunction with Bronson Alcott at the Temple School in Boston. Peabody's arrangement with Alcott was simple: she would teach Latin, arithmetic, and geography and transcribe the conversations that Alcott had with the children for "two hours and a half a day for a year at his school, for such compensation as he could afford to pay" (qtd. in Ronda, *Reformer*, 115). The Temple School opened 22 September 1834 with thirty pupils, including children from the elite Bostonian families of Mayor Josiah Quincy and Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw.

3. Theorists arguing for a biological approach to race construction included Louis Agassiz, Dr. Samuel George Morton, John Bachman, Josiah Clark Nott, and George Robin Gliddon.

4. Bem's chart is composed of grids of squares in various colors depicting individual nations, providing a visual aid for children studying history. Peabody drew and colored her own charts to use in the classroom, as well as to distribute to interested schools. The chart was not well received, and Peabody eventually abandoned her venture.

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