

Erasure and Assertion in Body Aesthetics:

Respectability Politics to Anti-Assimilationist Aesthetics

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I. Introduction.

Everyday body aesthetic practices have helped marginalized people claim personhood from the mainstream.¹ By personhood, I mean full membership in a moral community and the right to be treated as a full member of the community. In this paper, I contrast an assimilationist body aesthetic practice, respectability politics, with anti-assimilationist practices.

Respectability politics is historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's (1993) term for a set of strategies Black women used to counter hypersexualization and hypervisibility in post-Reconstruction, pre-Civil Rights United States. Hypersexualization and hypervisibility were used to justify violence against black women, including in the workplace, and violence against Black people more generally.² Nicole R. Fleetwood describes the dynamic as one in which black women were "rendered invisible as subject, and yet hypervisible as abject," thereby "familiar and domestic ... but also aberrant" to white or mainstream perspectives (2011: 90–91).³ Hypersexualization frames "the dominant viewing public as the victim of ...

¹ "Body aesthetics" describes aesthetic practices, including evaluative ones, having to do with human bodies, in "real life" as well as in artworks (Irvin, 2016). Body aesthetics overlaps with Richard Shusterman's somaesthetic project (Shusterman, 1999, 2008, 2012). Both approaches recognize "a crucial thing about bodies is that they are not detachable from the persons whose bodies they are" (Irvin, 2016: 1). In addition to the examples I discuss throughout this paper, some others include: *khadi* as an anti-colonial clothing (Chakrabarty, 1999), veiling (Sheth, 2009), bodily deportment as a way of caring for others (Saito, 2016), lipstick as a personal rejection of ableist beauty standards (Brown, 2017), and other adornment as a rejection of cisnormativity (Cray, 2021).

² The white mainstream also created the hypervisibility and hypersexualization that respectability politics sought to redress. This paper will sometimes use "white [mainstream]" and sometimes "mainstream" to indicate that white and bourgeois perspectives are not limited to white and bourgeois people. The paper is ambivalent on the political efficacy of a capital B in Black, and does not adopt consistent usage; see (Whittaker, 2021) for a defense of such ambivalence and a critique of the choice to capitalize. If, after this paper is published, the capital letter is shown to materially improve black people's lives, I will of course adopt it consistently.

³ While abjection is important in Fleetwood's project, it is not a key term in the rest of my sources or in my own analysis. I take it my argument here is consistent with agnosticism about abjection as a technical term.

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the woman of color [who] threatens the social fabric of white heteronormativity and public decency” (Fleetwood, 2011: 131). Respectability politics urged women to dress neatly, modestly, and blandly in public and adopt similar interpersonal manners. I argue that the aesthetic strategy was two-pronged. The “negative” approach (§II) disguised hypervisibility and hypersexualization through manners, clothing, and hairstyles. This is an assimilationist strategy: it asks that a marginalized group conform to the mainstream. However, the negative approach is in tension with its own aims (§III).

The essential tension in respectability politics is that it rejects the conclusion that black women could be treated however it suited whites to treat them, while keeping the heuristics used to justify that treatment. That is, it locates the “problem” in Black people, not their oppressors. Photographer Carla Williams’s work critiques respectability as “the cultural imperative in black communities to cover – to hide one’s flesh and de-emphasize black female corporeality ... as a response to dominant culture’s probing, dissecting, and displaying of black female bodies” (Fleetwood, 2011: 121). The “negative” project thus erases Black people from their own claims of personhood. The second prong, the “positive” approach (§IV) contextualized hypervisibility through expanding beauty norms. While the positive project did not erase Black people, it was an assimilationist project that endorsed classist, colorist ideals. It also accepted the dominance of the mainstream. While my first project is highlighting the role of body aesthetics in a specific social-political project, my second is finding a body aesthetics which claims personhood without erasure or capitulation: an anti-assimilationist body aesthetic, which does not accept mainstream dominance or conformity (§V). I use Chike Jeffers’s (2013) defense of sagging pants to demonstrate that blandness and erasure are not the only aesthetic options in claiming personhood. Similarly, Janell Hobson (2003, 2005) offers a method of cultivating love and value for Black people by learning to aesthetically value the butt. Anti-assimilationist body aesthetic practices claim

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personhood without succumbing to the tension in respectability politics. They give us reasons (beyond the pragmatic) to keep body aesthetics in social justice movements.

Respectability politics persists in contemporary life, though it has lost some of its gendered emphasis. When I draw on historians' work, my argument emphasizes Black women's experiences. But contemporary work emphasizes the legacy of those strategies and a similar set of expectations demanded of Black men.⁴ Both historical and contemporary accounts of ethico-aesthetic agency in non-ideal contexts show where assimilationist approaches to justice succeed – and fail. The philosophical thesis, that embodied aesthetic practices are personally and communally meaningful for (among other things) their ability to express and communicate a sense of self, but that oppression can twist aesthetic practices to its own ends, emerges from the descriptive project. So, too, does the second part of the thesis: that we nevertheless have reasons to retain body aesthetics in resisting oppression.

II. Defensive Dress

Here, I will show three things about respectability politics. First, as activities and expressions of taste, they combine ethics and aesthetics. I will use both historical and contemporary accounts of respectability politics. Second, in people's daily lives, it involved presenting the body to be “respectable” at work and in the public sphere. Third, this strategy generally required a body aesthetic of erasure and invisibility. The positive aesthetic project, to include black women in mainstream beauty standards, also redresses hypersexualization, and I will discuss it in §III. Historians do not explicitly present respectability politics as an aesthetic

⁴ Higginbotham and the historians following her use “politics of respectability” to describe a strategy of racial uplift which lost currency as the Civil Rights and Black Power movements developed. However, as an aesthetic practice, respectability politics remains current. In fact, it was an aesthetic strategy *of* the Civil Rights Movement. It has a complicated history in queer movements, too (Jones, 2022; LaFleur, 2019; Robinson, 2021). I discuss contemporary examples here, but there are more than one paper can discuss. I am also not able to discuss more mainstream uses of the term, including occasions where it has been claimed by white women as an object of critique (Cooper, 2011; Hobson, 2011) or as a strategy employed by “upwardly mobile young people of low socio-economic status” in contemporary online life (Pitcan, Marwick, & boyd, 2018). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this journal and Brian Soucek for drawing my attention to these parallels.

practice, so this analysis brings out a latent aspect of historical work in the course of making a philosophical point.

Arthur Danto argues that taste is an aesthetic practice “concerned with how people believe they ought to live” (2003: 72).⁵ Here, Danto is thinking not of taste in artworks, the aesthetician’s usual topic, but of rituals and everyday aesthetic practices. Beliefs about how people ought to live are reflected in respectability politics’ attention to clothing, hygiene, and comportment. As part of racial uplift efforts, respectability politics reflects black people’s own beliefs about how they should live: primarily, with access to economic and social opportunities, with physical security in the workplace, and as an acknowledged member of the moral community. As moral equals, they were not appropriate targets of violence, specifically, sexual violence in the workplace (Higginbotham, 1993: 193–194). The workplace was often a white home. In response, black women used body aesthetic practices that signaled they, firstly, met white Victorian bourgeois moral standards and, secondly, had lives of their own. This facilitated racial uplift, the project in which bourgeois blacks were responsible for improving the moral, social, and economic situation of the black community – and working class and poor blacks were responsible for being improved.⁶ The vision of how people – black and white – should live reflects the standards of the dominant group, and so the vision of how to live is also assimilationist.

Body aesthetic practices constitute a significant portion of the methods for realizing such a vision. Perhaps an assimilationist aesthetic could demand flamboyance from marginalized groups - but given the existing racial framing for black communities, flamboyance was *not* demanded. Instead, respectability politics guided black women toward blandness and erasure as necessary, so their “bodies [became] as inconspicuous and as

⁵ See (Riggle, 2015) for a discussion of personal style and its relation to selfhood.

⁶ For further discussions of racial uplift see (Banks, 2006; Gaines, 2012; Reed, 2008)..

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sexually innocuous as possible” (Cooper, 2017: 9).⁷ This expectation creates “paranoid” and “self-policing” subjects (Fleetwood, 2011: 101).⁸ Middle-class reformers guided their communities to bland self-presentation and, in the cases where blandness would not do, toward erasure of culturally- and racially-specific features of their embodiment.

2.a. High-stakes good taste: historical and contemporary contexts

At least two kinds of good are at stake in the politics of respectability. First, the moral well-being - and therefore the physical well-being, of black people. Second, the social standing of black communities. Uplifting black communities was meant to redress both concerns, against a specific historical background and using a Victorian moral vocabulary and concept of taste.

Several proponents of respectability politics were Victorians, for whom it made good sense to adopt Victorian sexual morals. Later proponents were responding to the wilder behavior that followed World War I, which partly coincided with a wave of migration to Northern cities. These migrations “generated a series of moral panics. One serious consequence was that the behavior of black female migrants was characterized as sexually degenerate and, therefore, socially dangerous” (Carby, 1992: 739). In northern cities during the Great Migration, white reformers like New York’s Frances Kellor explained black women’s lower economic status by appealing to hypersexualization: “given the limited employment available to [black women] and their ‘desire to avoid hard work’ [they] will sell their bodies. Therefore ... bodies ...need stringent surveillance” (Carby, 1992: 741). Within their own communities, Southern black women migrants were seen as preventing integration

⁷ Alison D. Ligon’s (2015) “Striving to Dress the Part: Examining the Absence of Black Women in Different Iterations of *Say Yes to the Dress*” discusses some contemporary, intergenerational contexts in which black women are discouraged from displaying their bodies. I will return to this topic in discussing Janell Hobson and black women artists.

⁸ Fleetwood says this about colorism, but her work links skin color with other racialized physical features, including bodily shape, and with the expectation to minimize oneself. So, the paranoia extends beyond skin color.

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because they lowered the moral profile of black people in general (Carby, 1992: 741). Respectability politics were both a remedy for low morals and a rebuke to whites who claimed an inability to “imagine such a creation as a virtuous black woman” (qtd. in (Higginbotham, 1993: 190; Wolcott, 2001: 15)). To present black women as virtuous, black reformers had to retain aspects of whites’ accounts of virtue. Disproving negative ideas about black women’s ethical possibilities required a common conceptual ground of ethical standards. As a result, the politics of respectability challenge a relatively narrow set of racially biased normative claims, while accepting others about the good life, ideas of virtue, or what behavior merits respect.

Higginbotham makes the complex dynamics of respectability politics clear: these strategies “rallied the poor working-class blacks to the cause of racial self-help” and support of the black middle-class, but “the effort to forge a community that would command whites’ respect revealed class tensions among blacks themselves” (1993: 14–15). Frederick C. Harris (2014) describes respectability politics as a way of framing “the virtues of self-care and self-correction . . . as strategies to lift the black poor out of their condition by preparing them for the market economy.” Respectability politics located the underlying problem in poor and working-class black people, especially women, whose “deviations” from the mainstream must be corrected.⁹ Respectability politics began a microethical project using assimilationist aesthetics to reach the social and political goals of the black community.

Contemporary criticism has focused on that intra-racial class tension, in part because the “class policing that anchors respectability discourse remains persistent and troubling,” but Brittany C. Cooper argues the focus on “elitist class politics” sometimes obscures the work respectability politics does to address gender-based violence, for maids, cooks, and public

⁹ See also Michelle Smith (2014): “marginalized classes will receive their share of political influence and social standing not because democratic values and law require it but because they demonstrate their compatibility with the ‘mainstream’ or non-marginalized class.”

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intellectuals (2017: 15–19). Cooper argues that “the sexual and gender policing at the center of ... calls for respectability, conservative as they are, emerge as a reasonable, though not particularly laudable, approach to protecting the sanctity of Black women’s bodies” (2017: 15). Cooper’s analysis recognizes the ambivalent record of respectability politics – it has notable successes, even if those successes were self-undermining.

Although much of my argument here focuses on respectability politics’ historical applications in black women’s work lives, a contemporary instance of respectability politics as a response to police violence demonstrates the ongoing pressure to develop an aesthetics of blandness. The writer Garnette Cadogan, after moving from Kingston to New Orleans, describes the process and the reasoning behind it:

I got out of the shower with the police in my head, assembling a cop-proof wardrobe. Light-colored oxford shirt. V-neck sweater. Khaki pants. Chukkas. Sweatshirt or T-shirt with my university insignia. When I walked I regularly had my identity challenged, but I also found ways to assert it. (So I’d dress Ivy League style, but would, later on, add my Jamaican pedigree by wearing Clarks Desert Boots, the footwear of choice of Jamaican street culture.) Yet the all-American sartorial choice of white T-shirt and jeans, which many police officers see as the uniform of black troublemakers, was off-limits to me—at least, if I wanted to have the freedom of movement I desired. (2016: 133–134)

Cadogan’s description echoes the strategies endorsed by late 19th-century politics of respectability, whose advocates also claimed their moral worth and right to move unmolested through aesthetic choices. Like many uniforms, Cadogan’s clothing uses an aesthetic vocabulary to convey a message: “I belong here, don’t worry about me.” Later, he describes an embodied, emotional respectability, having to behave calmly, passively, “non-threateningly,” when a group of NYPD officers bear him to the ground and rough him up

because he (sort of) matches a description (Cadogan, 2016: 139–141). His strategy in that encounter matches one some black parents recommend in encounters with police: “Use your Sunday School manners” (qtd. in (Hughes, 2014).

Cadogan is alive to tell us about his strategies. He also knows, because the police captain tells him, that these strategies were effective in preventing his arrest. His careful selection of clothing and cultivation of an “un-threatening” manner attempt, in the first instance, to render him invisible (or at least unremarkable), while in the second, they aim at establishing his humanity. Cadogan’s strategies resist white supremacy because they free up some space to live under white supremacist rule. He describes assimilation prompted, not by internalized racial shame, but by a learned understanding of the way his racial identity gets read and the consequences that can follow from that reading. Like modest clothing that wards off sexual assault, Cadogan’s choice of clothing and demeanor accept the idea that clothing and demeanor can render assault and sexual assault “acceptable.” Cadogan’s acceptance is pragmatic and, as we see, critical. All the same, it participates in a dynamic where victims are made responsible for their own abuse.

2.b. Respectability politics as microethics

Respectability politics creates a program of self-regulation, self-help, and self-care. Although its aims are general, it focuses on individual actions and mundane events. It is this sense in which it is a microethical strategy. Microethics refers to “frequently occurring situations in everyday life in which the stakes are seemingly low but in which there are nonetheless potential conflicts of interest between the individuals involved. Microethical situations are often strategic in nature – that is, the outcomes for each person involved depends [sic] on the actions of the others It is precisely in these everyday situations that one must regulate oneself” (Sarkissian, 2014: 101).

There are strong considerations in favor of microethical approaches to life and its problems. They are proactive and minimize conflict. Respectability politics strategizes ways to forestall conflict or remove the possibility of conflict from everyday social interactions and adjust the mundane facets of one's life to effect change. They are also pragmatic, since they focus attention on things under our immediate control. In the historical cases, the calls for self-regulation seem to follow upon a recognition that mainstream white society will not reliably self-regulate, and so blacks interested in preserving their lives took on a disproportionately large expectations to self-regulate. A more just society would distribute such expectations equitably. In the absence of one, self-help is a meaningful expression of moral agency. Cadogan's approach is similarly pragmatic, responding to racial and class stratifications without agreeing to them.

Randall Kennedy (2015) explains the respectability politics with which he grew up as “a particular sense of racial kinship: in our dealings with the white world, we were . . . ambassadors of blackness. Our achievements would advance the race, and our failures would hinder it. The fulfillment of our racial obligations required that we speak well, dress suitably, and mind our manners.” Respectability politics make one's private life relevant to public life (the political status of one's community), such that the aesthetic features of “respectable” private lives – such as a clean home and neatly-dressed children – become relevant to one's experience of public life. These aestheticized, embodied behaviors make respectability politics pervasive.

2.c. Bland body aesthetics

So, the aesthetic facets of respectability politics underline its microethical focus, as well as making it a practice of taste. Respectability politics aimed for blandness, achieved through clothing, hygiene, and deportment, which were cast as methods of “contest[ing] the plethora

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of negative stereotypes” of black women (Higginbotham, 1993: 191). The aesthetic practices suggest a mix of priorities, which sit uneasily alongside each other. They seek to counter hypersexuality by creating an image of morally upright, sexually modest black women. Such an image also asserts, though perhaps only minimally, a moral agent – a person.

Simultaneously, they seek to counter hypervisibility by removing any evidence of a bodily presence. Strategies like modest clothing, clean bodies and homes, using work clothes to draw boundaries between public and private life, and proper hair styles demonstrate the conceptual tensions respectability politics navigated.

The minimal moral project of minimizing disgust accompanied a finely grained set of aesthetic practices, which extended beyond bodily appearance. Aspirants to respectability were “helped” to order their bodies through hygiene practices. Pamphlets or “tract literature,” which guided readers through everyday acts of self-presentation, included “How to Dress” and “Take a Bath First” (Higginbotham, 1993: 195). Reformers tackled “racist representations of black women as unclean, disease-carrying, and promiscuous, conjoined with representations of black households as dirty, pathological, and disorderly” (Higginbotham, 1993: 202). Though a pamphlet with advice on getting rid of bed bugs is useful, and perhaps even racially neutral, the white slur that blacks were fundamentally dirty renders advice about bodily care more fraught. Reformers and their pamphlets look to minimize disgust as well as advertise their community members as respectable.

Minimizing disgust could be more complex than simply trying to smell nice. Too-generous applications of perfume at a 1921 Detroit baseball game, attended by a mixed audience, earned negative comments in the white press (Wolcott, 2001: 39). It’s not clear what qualified as “too much” scent in this context, but negative comments on the use of perfume are consistent with a desire not just for blandness, but for erasure. The white attendees seem to think themselves generous for looking at black people, but their sensory

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engagement ought not extend further. Cosmetics were an instrument of feminine rebellion in the 20s—acceptable if not quite respectable. Middle- and upper-middle-class white women could publicly apply lipstick to signal their disregard for old-fashioned values, including notions of feminine propriety, without necessarily signaling their sexual availability. For black women still wrestling with hypersexualization, a version of modesty that directed attention away from the body took precedence over flouting traditional sexual mores.

Pamphlets also advised readers on negotiating public space while traveling: “Don’t stick your head out of the window at every station . . . don’t talk so loud to your friends who may be on the platform that a person a block away may hear you” (Higginbotham, 1993: 195). While this advice encourages a consideration of other people’s comfort, it also suggests that for black Americans the best way to make other people comfortable is to be silent and invisible.¹⁰

Reformers also attempted to draw a distinction between work and private life through body aesthetic practices. Women should avoid “bungalow aprons and boudoir caps” which marked the wearer as a domestic servant and other kinds of “distinctly Southern” dress, like “work clothes in public spaces, not wearing shoes in public” attracted negative attention from black reformers, in northern cities (Wolcott, 2001: 57–58). Changing into a maid’s or cook’s clothing at work reminded both employers and employees that employees lived lives outside domestic service. Drawing boundaries between different facets of one’s life can push back against instrumentalization, especially when that boundary is clearly, if indirectly,

¹⁰ My focus here is not on sound, but it is relevant to anti-assimilationist practices, including aesthetic ones. But perhaps bodily practices are not the most salient to the discussion of sound (though see Saito 2016 for relevant discussion). First, because quietness features in norms like respectability, but also in norms like coolness, which have a more complex relationship with race. Second, we have evidence that aesthetic practices like playing rap music loudly from car stereos is both anti-assimilationist (Lebron, 2015) and, at least in some places, something Black drivers are more likely to be punished for (McGlone, 2023). But this isn’t a bodily practice. It may be that the music is taken as evidence of racial identity, so ticketing Black drivers for loud music is another way the police target Black drivers. But this doesn’t mean driving is racialized, and it might not mean quietness is, either. Indeed, the negative effects of *noise* are both real (Neitzel, Gershon, McAlexander, Magda, & Pearson, 2012) and more likely to affect residents in Black neighborhoods (Casey et al., 2017). Sorting this out would be the work of another project.

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communicated through a change in self-presentation. Reminding others of one's independent existence and agency is one way to remind them of one's personhood.

A neat appearance, including a clean body and proper clothes, was one method of indicating moral standing and laying claim to fair treatment. Detroit's Dress Well Club "distributed cards and pamphlets on the importance of dressing well to migrants arriving at train stations" as well as people already living in Detroit (Wolcott, 2001: 57). The Detroit Urban League blamed black women migrants in "country" dress for increased segregation because, in the words of Forrester B. Washington, "loud, noisy, almost nude women in 'Mother Hubbards' standing around in the public thoroughfares" affirmed the image of black women as slatternly and indifferent to norms of propriety (qtd. in Wolcott, 2001: 56). However, the account of "modest" clothing complicates the advances such boundary-setting might make in communicating personhood. Modest clothing for young women required more than covering the body: color mattered, too, with "bright colors and other culturally unique designs . . . characterized as dissipating the high ideals of young women" (Higginbotham, 1993: 200). The thinking here seems to have been that bright colors were attention-seeking, or suggested greed or sexual license, but also that culturally specific aesthetic activities were risky. Such activities included "'gaudy' colors in dress, snuff dipping, baseball games on Sunday," communal activities respectability politics failed to acknowledge as "survival strategies ...[,] spaces of resistance" (Higginbotham, 1993: 15). The spirit is familiar to contemporary readers. As Cadogan's earlier account of police-proof dressing and the discussion of hoodies later in this paper indicate, mainstream pressure on marginalized people's clothing applies to masculine *and* feminine agents. Black women's "race-conscious programs of self-help" took place both "in concert and ... in conflict" with black men's social and community organizing (Higginbotham, 1993: 8). Cadogan writes, "my women friends ... best understand my plight" (2016: 142).

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Dressing well also meant wearing your hair in the right way.¹¹ Here, too, culturally and racially specific aesthetic practices were risky. Respectable hairstyles became another responsibility for mothers. The Dress Well Club advised women on ways to style their children's hair – or rather, on styles to avoid (Wolcott, 2001: 57). Respectability politics, as a strategy for racial uplift, treated hair as a source of both pride and shame. Inasmuch as hairstyles indicate pride in one's racial identity, rather than bowing to white beauty standards, they might coincide with notions of respectable self-presentation. At the same time, even well-kept natural hair was definitely *disreputable*. Harris describes a seven-year-old student at an HBCU-sponsored charter school being sent home from school for wearing “dreadlocks tied in a bright pink bow” (2014). The school's policy banned dreadlocks and other “‘unusual hairstyles’ that distract from the school's ‘respectful’ learning environment;” similarly distracting hairstyles included weaves below shoulder length (Harris, 2014).¹² Hair practices are a potent example of the ambivalent relationship between uplift and assimilation.

Hair styles also show the relationship between respectability politics' “negative” aesthetic project and its “positive” project: demonstrating that black women could be and were beautiful by mainstream standards. This project also linked aesthetic and ethical ideals together, still in the service of racial uplift.

III. Trouble in Two Directions

There are two kinds of trouble here. First, respectability politics cannot achieve its aims – it is in tension with itself such that it is self-undermining. Second, it looks like a problem for body

¹¹ Black hair practices are much discussed: see Tate (2009), Taylor (2016). A good non-academic work on the topic is *Hair Story* (Byrd & Tharps, 2014).

¹² Harris also describes the school's standards for parental behavior; “female parents are banned from entering the school or going on field trips braless; male parents are prohibited from wearing pants that sag . . .” (2014).

aesthetic practices – and for taste – more generally. We'll start with the tension, and then explain the problem for body aesthetics.

Historians of respectability politics recognize the strategy's ambivalence. Above, Cooper finds it "reasonable" but not "laudable." Chris Lebron diagnoses respectability politics as "in tension with its very aim: to secure *respect* for blacks" (2015). Cadogan's account of the way safety from police requires servility also demonstrates the tension. The police, though the ones in the wrong, do not leave with a sense that he is a moral equal. Their right to beat people has not been challenged, just the idea that Cadogan is the proper person on whom to exercise that right. Warding off violence, which respectability politics may do successfully, is a different project than securing respect. Conflating the two brings about the tension Lebron points out. The tension is further illustrated in the body aesthetic practices of respectability politics, which attempt to assert membership in the moral community by erasing bodily – and aesthetic – evidence of the people seeking membership.

The tension lies in respectability politics' theoretical structure, but also in its method. Self-presentation is for other people, even if it is also for oneself. Goffman describes norms of comportment when interacting with authority: "While bathing is a way of paying deference to the doctor, it is at the same time a way for the patient to present himself as a clean, well demeaned person. . . . [L]oud talking, shouting, or singing . . . encroach upon the rights of others to be let alone, while at the same time they illustrate a badly demeaned lack of control over one's feelings" (1997: 27). Goffman's examples do not come from a racially integrated context, but still articulate the Anglo-American (white) norm which respectability politics navigates. Bathing habits and house dresses don't, at bottom, speak to one's moral status – though they do identify social status. And they may, further, reflect one's reaction to that social status. Do you pick deference or rebellion? Do you pursue invisibility or attempt to reframe your hypervisibility?

Deference and rebellion, at least in the context of self-presentation require cooperation with others. Respectability politics uses self-presentation to communicate practitioners' status in a white, bourgeois framework. Effective communication requires a common vocabulary and set of concepts.¹³ Dominant groups are positioned to dictate the vocabulary and contexts, even to people who reject the terms of the discussion. At the same time, an aesthetics which rejects the dominant perspective might still center it: you can't *épater les bourgeois* unless *les bourgeois* are paying attention to you. Maids, cooks, and train porters, of course, made Victorian bourgeois life possible – so there was some mutual attention built into the arrangement.

Finally, it is not clear that, historically, Black communities who advocated respectability politics *wanted* to reject the ideals of the white bourgeoisie – rather, they seemed to be arguing for their rightful place among those ideals. Respectability politics' advocates were often women with significant social power, but they did not challenge or reject white ideals of femininity. Instead, they argued that black women had a right to those ideals, too. The reformers who fought for beauty challenged white supremacist aesthetic values without fully rejecting them. They tried to show the white mainstream was wrong about blacks who were willing to conform to its standards, but not that the mainstream standards were wrong.

All of this leaves the aesthetic in a troubling political spot. The body aesthetic practices, including judgments of bodily beauty, that I have discussed here are basically part of social life. Furthermore, the way we engage these practices *does* communicate things about us, including our moral attitudes and how we would like to be treated. Such practices are not private, but collective and communal. As such, we might wonder if they will always be captive to dominant norms, or if the most we can hope for is a lively tradition of

¹³ This common vocabulary is also part of communicating sexual identity (Brennan, 2011).

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subcultures. If the dominant norms are dehumanizing ones, lively subcultures will not be sufficient for moral progress. Cadogan's strategies, which put him in some conflict with himself and do not fully insulate him from violence, may be the best many could hope for.

It seems, then, that body aesthetics can give us breathing room, but not personhood. This result seems undesirable, since the body aesthetic practices are concerned, as Danto reminded us, with ideas about how we should live. Additionally, aesthetics are an important component of a meaningful human life, and while many such components may conflict with each other, that conflict should not be as total as this one now seems to be. The tension which pervades respectability politics might also affect body aesthetics more generally.

I've described the tension as arising from attempts to assert presence through creating an absence. But the beauty reformers are not best described this way, despite relying on colorist and classist standards of feminine beauty. Rather, beauty reformers showed how Black women were already properly included in mainstream beauty ideals. While that initial project might rely on assimilation to white, middle-class standards, beauty reform didn't rest there. Respectability assumes the injustice it attempts to defray, but beauty talk does not. Additionally, beauty reformers worked in support of Black nationalist projects, not only assimilationist ones, articulating a distinctly Black beauty norm. Though beauty talk may be ambivalently positioned in many ways, it shares with anti-assimilationist projects a straightforward interest in asserting – and inserting – black people as community members and moral equals.

IV. Respectable Beauty

Respectability politics has a two-pronged aesthetic strategy, and we've been discussing the "negative" prong of blandness. By arguing for Black women's proper inclusion in mainstream beauty standards, antiracist reformers created a positive aesthetic project. Both

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blandness and beauty reject hypersexualization and objectification (or instrumentalization) by the white mainstream. While blandness makes you invisible, beauty re-contextualizes your visibility. Claiming beauty allowed black women to “redefine their bodies by . . . reasserting their womanhood” (Hobson, 2005: 7). While “the widespread assumption that bodily beauty and deformity covary with moral beauty and deformity as well as with general cultural and intellectual capacity” prevailed, white supremacist beauty norms prevented black women’s claims to virtue (Taylor, 2016: 58). Claiming beauty for black women was part of claiming humanity for black people.¹⁴ This project might be further subdivided: first, as about adjusting beauty standards, second as recognizing Black people’s participation in an aesthetic ideal, not just a set of social norms. The beauty standards project is, at least historically, part of respectability politics’ aesthetic wing, while a focus on beauty fits better with anti-assimilationist projects discussed in Section V.

White beauty standards tracked multiple ways of understanding social and ethical value. White skin tracked white women’s ethnicity and family history: “to be a lady is to be as white as it gets” (Dyer, 1997: 57). It suggested class status: on the one hand indicating freedom from bodily labor and on the other making her eligible for genteel jobs (Peiss, 2012: 232). It also highlighted her distance from blacks. Though Anglo-American beauty ideals “were continually asserted in relation to people of color around the world” black Americans’ purported “ugliness” formed the definitive comparison for white beauty, constituting the “antipode of the dominant American beauty ideal” (Peiss, 2012: 31–33). Whites used

¹⁴ Beauty has its skeptics, still: judgements of attractiveness mask other kinds of merit (Rhode, 2016); beauty expectations are unfairly gendered (Archer & Ware, 2018); the idea of beauty upholds existing and unjust power distributions (Snider, 2018); beauty standards are increasingly demanding, generic, and moralized (Widdows, 2018). Inasmuch as these accounts are talking about *beauty standards*, they are accurate. However, these accounts often fail to meaningfully acknowledge a difference between beauty and beauty standards; I discuss this issue in (Martin-Seaver, 2023). Fully accounting for this difference is beyond the scope of this paper, but I will note two immediately relevant considerations. First, these critiques of beauty standards are most pressing for assimilationist beauty practices, discussed in this section. Second, the anti-assimilationist accounts discussed in IV are not going to be troubled by these skeptical arguments (at least, in the same way) – partly because they are not arguing for inclusion in mainstream “beauty standards” but they *do* address beauty.

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stereotypes of “kinky hair, dirty or ragged clothing, apish caricatures, shiny black faces” to justify dehumanizing treatment of African Americans, including denial of full participation in social and political life (Peiss, 2012: 33). No surprise, then, that physical beauty is a “long-standing preoccupation [of] African-American activists” (Taylor, 2016: 57). The post-Reconstruction writer E. Azalia Hackley claimed, “The time has come to fight, not only for rights, but for looks as well” (qtd. in Peiss, 2012: 204). The fight for beauty was often pragmatic, as when reformers sent black women who conformed to white beauty standards on job interviews, or prioritized light-skinned women’s opportunities over dark-skinned women’s. By acting as the thin end of the wedge in factories and department stores, these women, it was thought, would open opportunities for other African Americans. Cooper’s characterization of respectability politics as a “reasonable, though not particularly laudable” strategy is once again relevant.

By “fighting for looks,” reformers reclaimed beauty from its alliance with whiteness, even while they retained (though sometimes with a great deal of skepticism) the alliance of beauty with virtue. So long as beauty and virtue were seen as closely allied, pointing out that black women could be beautiful was a way of claiming that black women could also be virtuous. The claim to virtue mattered because it improved their moral standing in a racist society. Virtue and respectability differ, but seemed to stand in for each other – in part because of narrow standards for women’s virtue (Peiss, 2012: 24). Women who guarded their virtue were really guarding their sexuality, not aspiring to wisdom, courage, or hope. *Categorically* ugly women – that is, ugly by virtue of their racialization – were presumed to have no virtue to guard. Like virtue, respectability was closely linked with sexual purity, and presenting as respectable was a way of presenting as ineligible for consequence-free sexual violence. The claim to beauty mattered for itself, as well as for its ethical persuasion.

Though beauty talk and respectability politics converge on each other, they do not have the same relationship to white bourgeois ideals, or to white supremacist ones. However, including Black women in mainstream standards does not manifest the tension between erasure and assertion that characterized the first prong of respectability aesthetics. Instead of erasing human bodies, it attempts to reframe human bodies, to imbue them with value. It still takes on board assimilationist, colorist, and classist views. And it may be ambivalent in other ways, since beauty standards will sometimes coincide with patterns of sexual objectification, thereby stressing beauty standards as an argument for virtue. Anti-assimilationist body aesthetics go further in imbuing human bodies with value and in rejecting mainstream standards. They may be riskier but more rewarding.

V. Anti-Assimilationist Aesthetics: Respect Without “Respectability”

The beauty standards project addresses hypersexualization by reframing the visual aesthetic context in which black people, and specifically black women, find themselves. It is effective because of the existing relationship between feminine beauty and feminine virtue. But, by itself, beauty standards can't do enough to assert personhood. For one, the relationship between virtue and beauty standards is dubious. For another, mainstream beauty standards are assimilationist, if nuanced – so, as before, the idea of the person they suggest will be artificially and unacceptably narrow. Finally, the beauty standards project doesn't make much space for body aesthetic practices which reflect aesthetic ideals beyond beauty but which, in virtue of being expressions of taste, still speak to ethical ideals of personhood.

Two contemporary accounts of aesthetic agency develop anti-assimilationist body aesthetics. Recognizing the aesthetic's relevance to claiming personhood, Chike Jeffers and Janell Hobson guide us toward accounts of self-presentation which center Black people and reject white supremacist ethical norms. Jeffers focuses on a clothing practice typical of young

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black men: sagging pants.¹⁵ Hobson looks at photography, dance, and schoolyard chants to “reposition” black women’s butts “as a site of beauty and of resistance” (2003: 88). Both Hobson and Jeffers provide an aesthetics which reclaims visibility, though each responds to different elements of respectability politics. Jeffers’ defense of sagging pants recontextualizes distinctly black clothing styles, while Hobson recontextualizes the black female body. Both address ideas about what is “respectable” as a mode of self-presentation, and present reasons to honor purportedly disreputable body aesthetic practices and bodily types. Hobson, additionally, explicitly addresses hypersexualization and the need to develop a body aesthetic which rebukes hypersexualization through visibility. Both accounts recognize the risks visibility poses for vulnerable populations. But erasure poses risks, too.

Jeffers considers sagging pants, “a style popular among black kids that is undoubtedly, unmistakably controversial” both within the black community and outside it (2013: 135). Opposition might originate in antiracist resistance focused on a sense of self-worth, or Harris’s self-care and self-correction:

one might see the practice as communicating . . . a basic message of disregard for oneself and others . . . it can be seen as symbolizing a fundamental lack of seriousness about life. Such a message is clearly one to be avoided if black kids are to avoid reproducing the old stereotype of black people as constitutionally *lazy*. (2013: 135–136 Jeffers's emphasis)

Countering stereotypes of one’s community is important resistance work. On the other hand, the opposition to sagging looks an awful lot like an updated respectability politics (Harris, 2014). One could imagine the members of the Dress Well Club handing out a pamphlet called “Wear a Belt,” even if, as anti-assimilationists, they would accept Kente and kitenge.

¹⁵ The bulk of Jeffers’s article addresses hoodies, but sagging pants present a clearer case of contemporary respectability politics’s aesthetic practice. Additionally, Jeffers’s discussion of hoodies suggests there are strong reasons for thinking of them as a racially neutral garment. The same cannot be said of sagging pants.

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Jeffers' defense of sagging hinges on values firmly opposed to respectability: sagging pants might communicate "an unruly sense of *freedom* and the refusal of *black cool* to be kept tightly bound. Such a message is not so much self-denigrating as it is pointedly anti-assimilationist" (2013: 136 Jeffers's emphasis). On this reading, sagging communicates rejection of mainstream standards of respectability, while also promoting some goals of racial uplift. It does this, however, by rejecting blandness. Sagging pants is neither a bland nor neutral aesthetic choice: the layers of underwear, basketball shorts, jeans, and belts may be quite elaborate.¹⁶ Though young men who sag their pants generally do not display much skin, the practice calls attention to the body rather than erasing it.

By embracing sagging pants, and the young men who wear them, Jeffers's aesthetic centers a set of moral values which do not originate in white supremacist or bourgeois values. His account *also* recognizes that young men sagging their pants on the street may wear a suit to their cousin's baptism. The distinction between public and private spheres, which respectability politics rejected, re-emerges in Jeffers's account; additionally, his analysis treats black youth as members of their communities, but at the same time recognizes particularity. To "explain" sagging, we should know about the person doing the sagging:

Imagine a young person . . . exemplary in just about every respect: he excels in school; he is active in his community through volunteering and mentoring younger kids; he is respectful of women, of elders, and of people in general; and he strives always to honor the legacy of his people. Now, imagine that, in non-formal settings, he often dresses as many of his peers do, which includes sagging his pants. My intuition is that the message communicated by this young man's style of dress involves the valuing of black youth creativity without any endorsement of the

¹⁶ Consider Fahamu Pecou's vibrant and compelling paintings of young black men in sagging pants and the response to these paintings at the 75th ASA Annual Meeting (Taylor, 2017).

negativity often tied to the style through racist stereotypes or the effects of social disadvantage. (2013: 136–137)

Taking Jeffers’s imagined young man on his own terms shows how sharply he differs from Kennedy’s “ambassador.” Likewise, we can think of the police officers Cadogan dresses to avoid or appease, and how they refuse to extend to him this sense of particularity. Jeffers articulates an aesthetic of self-presentation which claims particularity, though, thinking still of Cadogan, not without risk.¹⁷

Janell Hobson’s “liberatory discourse on black bodily beauty” likewise calls attention to the body, especially the butt (Hobson, 2003: 89). Since Sarah Baartman’s coerced performances as “the Hottentot Venus,” black women’s rear ends have been the subject of prurient and appropriative white interest (Hobson, 2003). Hobson shows that Baartman’s rear end became the archetypal black rear end, the essential sign of black women’s bodies. Making “the rear end . . . a signifier of deviant sexuality” associated black women’s bodies with “hypersexuality and animalistic characteristics” (Hobson, 2003: 92). Though Baartman was primarily viewed by European audiences, her treatment by the scientific community and popular culture helped entrench the “‘ugliness’ of her *race*” across the globe (Hobson, 2003: 94, emphasis original).¹⁸ Higginbotham’s chronicle of respectability politics describes one response to this narrative, but we have already seen the pitfalls of that method. Hobson asks for attention to stay on the butt and the body. She turns to different aesthetic forms to model how this attention might look: photography and dance.

The Black photographer Carla Williams (cited above) creates “a vibrant and self-defined sensuality” through self-portraits like *Venus*, which like Venus Kallipygos, “known

¹⁷ To the extent that Jeffers’s young man engages in code switching in this passage, Cadogan and Jeffers offer entirely compatible accounts. They come at the question from different angles, but I do not take them to disagree.

¹⁸ Hobson discusses other notable black women, including Josephine Baker and Serena Williams. Fleetwood links these figures together, too: “The explicit black female body is an excessive body (from the Hottentot Venus to Josephine Baker to Millie Jackson, Pam Grier, and Serena Williams in her cat suit)” (2011: 109).

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for her beautiful backside . . . possesses the power to gaze . . . at her own buttocks and thus to reclaim her body as an erotic site of beauty” (Hobson, 2003: 98). Williams does not produce works for the gallery or collectors, but “for her own private consumption, although she shares her work occasionally. . .” (Hobson, 2003: 98). Williams likewise produces her photographic self-portraits privately, in her home; in these portraits, Williams “captures her own image for her own gaze” (Hobson, 2003: 98). In doing, she creates an image of black female sensuality, and asks that black women learn to see “each other as black female subjects,” rather than “policing” each other’s sexuality as the proponents of respectability politics did (Hobson, 2003: 100).

Lorna Simpson’s photograph *Club Savage* depicts respectability politics and a challenge to it. The photograph shows “one black woman looks with disapproval” at a second, “who displays with pride her endowed behind, outlined in a tight-fitting dress” (Hobson, 2005: 100). This second woman has not adopted the respectable practice of “tucked in” self-presentation, where the butt is “made as invisible as possible” (Hobson, 2003: 100). Hobson reads the photograph as “call[ing] for all black women to question the ‘shamefulness’ and negative views of their behinds” and, by extension, their bodies (2003: 100). This call rejects assimilationist beauty work as well as the erasure and blandness of respectability politics. The photograph does not ask for inclusion through capitulation, but suggests black women are already sufficient. It valorizes anti-assimilationist modes of self-presentation.

These photographs engage in beauty-reclamation and address – reject – the blandness of respectability politics. While both photographs reclaim beauty, they do not attempt to show that black women’s bodies are part of white beauty standards. Williams positions her own gaze as the appreciative one, though she is in conversation with white aesthetic traditions, her work does not assimilate to them. Simpson’s photograph visualizes the intra-

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racial tensions that emerge from attempts to assimilate to white aesthetic and ethical expectations in order to reject both expectations and tensions. The photographs support an anti-assimilationist aesthetic appreciation of black women's bodies by taking their presence matter-of-factly as well as celebrating it. The photographs demonstrate that to have a black body and be a person are not in conflict.

Even more promising than photography, for Hobson, is butt-centered dance like Urban Bush Women's piece *Batty Moves*, which "constantly fluctuates between the gestures of ballet - . . . which require the strict, rigid, and disciplined nonmovement of the derrière – and the butt-accentuated moves in Afro-based and Caribbean dances" (2003: 101). The piece is "defiant," even literally: it originates in a dancer hearing an audience member's surprised gasp at her body – her butt (Hobson, 2003: 102). The dance rejects traditions of hypersexualization which deny black beauty and of respectability which deny black bodies (even as a strategy to keep them safe). *Batty Moves* emphasizes black butts, not "as fetishes but as expressive extensions of [dancers'] mobile, energetic bodies" (Hobson, 2003: 102). By "claim[ing] the black female batty as visible, pronounced, sexy, *and* beautiful," the work and performers reject the historical degradation of black women (Hobson, 2003: 102). Valorizing the body, including and especially its "disreputable" components, contradicts the aesthetics of blandness demanded by the white mainstream. Hobson's artists assert their bodies and their personhood in public spaces.

Jeffers's teens and Hobson's artists share a few things which distinguish their projects from that of respectability politics. Both Jeffers's teens and Hobson's dancers participate in communities and historical traditions, without having to take up the role of "ambassadors." Their particularity matters. Similarly, Williams and Simpson's photography responds to historical views of black women, and their bodies, from the perspectives of specific black women. These perspectives may speak to white and bourgeois attitudes on bodies, sexuality,

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and morality, but they are not primarily *about* or *for* the systems or people upholding white and middle-class values. Rather, these practices and perspectives center the people who take them up. Hobson and Jeffers articulate a body aesthetic without the ideological tension undergirding respectability politics.

Hobson and Jeffers describe a body aesthetic grounded in positive, rather than negative, accounts of personhood and agency. Instead of linking personhood to bland aesthetic practices or erasing bodily presence, Hobson and Jeffers locate moral agency in culturally specific aesthetic practices. They recognize the diversity of practices agents might engage, and so they recognize the multiple roles a single agent might meaningfully take on. While respectability politics attempted this in, for example, encouraging women to draw boundaries between paid work and private life, this action aimed at employers much more than it aimed at maids and cooks. That approach still favors the mainstream perspective.

Hobson and Jeffers also improve on beauty reformers, who were also committed to an assertive body aesthetics, but did not reliably encourage black people to assert themselves. In both cases, arguing that bodies are worth aesthetic appreciation goes hand in hand with arguing people are worth moral and political recognition. However, Hobson and Jeffers switch the focus from the mainstream to the marginalized. Rather than asking the mainstream to make room for the marginalized, their accounts take marginalized people as similarly worthy to the mainstream for guidance on moral and aesthetic ideals. This lets black people theorize themselves and take themselves on their own terms. It also suggests ways for the white mainstream to loosen, and perhaps surrender, their grip on controlling images.

Still, we might have a few worries left. First, we might worry that artworks and clothing are fundamentally different practices – clothing is for real life in a way artworks are

not. Second, we might worry that the artworks Hobson considers, if they *are* effective in real life, preach to the choir.¹⁹ I'll try to address each worry.

The distinction the first worry posits is especially important if one thing some art should do for marginalized people is offer "relief" from real life. But what do we mean by "relief?" We might mean an escape from real life. Relief could also mean an area where the risks attached to exploring alternatives to racist norms are lower, absent threats of physical violence and because an artwork can consider (purportedly or genuinely) outrageous ideas without encountering immediate pushback. Audre Lorde urges this second kind in "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," and I take it to be Hobson's interest, too (Lorde, 1984). Dance performances like *Batty Moves* are places to try out new ideas and imagine new worlds. If I may briefly speculate beyond the bounds of the paper, an embodied art form like dance seems especially effective here because it both imagines a new way for bodies to be or be valued and presents the audience with the actualized possibility. Photography does something similar, without asking the audience to literally share space with the new idea. Finally, everyday aesthetic practices and artworld practices mutually inform each other. Young black men sag their pants on the street, in music videos, and canvases on museum walls.

However, the second worry remains. There are two ways of putting it, I think. One is the preaching to the choir worry. The second is that as the choir expands, the anti-assimilationist aesthetic is co-opted by the mainstream. I expect that, in the second case, anti-assimilationist aesthetics will just adapt to target new concerns. The first worry requires a wider variety of responses. The first one is that in real churches, choirs need preaching as much as congregations. Jeffers's and Cadogan's accounts both show that choir members go out into the world and encounter pressures to assimilate, sometimes from their own communities. Sometimes, too, they participate in mainstream practices. Second, this could

¹⁹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising these questions.

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suggest an anti-assimilationist spin on Kennedy's "ambassador" image – we take ambassadors on their terms, not ours. Finally, a good-making feature of anti-assimilationist positions is supposed to be that they no longer cater to the mainstream. Instead, they provide living, robust examples of what the mainstream neglects or disdains. Some members of the mainstream miss this, but that is not the responsibility of anti-assimilationists.

VI. Conclusion.

So, anti-assimilationist accounts of body aesthetics improve on assimilationist ones even where their social and political goals overlap. Though both approaches to body aesthetics express agency in non-ideal situations, respectability politics shows us how some expressions are self-defeating. This is true even though respectability politics may be especially effective in non-ideal situations. But if personhood is in doubt, an aesthetics of blandness and erasure will not effectively assert it. The police release Cadogan because he makes himself unthreatening, not because they see him as fully human. Other marginalized groups who find themselves asked by the mainstream to prove their membership in the moral community – Asian Americans, queer people, disabled people – may find themselves similarly pushed to assimilation or erasure.

By contrast, anti-assimilationist body aesthetics assert personhood by asserting the body. The assertion is probably clearest in Hobson's account, but Jeffers also gives us a good look at everyday aesthetic agency. Both accounts point toward ways of moving beyond the white, middle-class ideals which still operate in public life. In so doing, they both describe the role aesthetics plays in political projects centering around personhood – and argue for new, better norms of personhood. Together, Jeffers and Hobson also show us how everyday aesthetic activity can fulfill the role Danto allots it: demonstrating our commitments and vision for our collective existence. Anti-assimilationist accounts point toward a pluralist

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conception of worthy aesthetic practices. Also, by linking aesthetic activities with personhood, including using the aesthetic to emphasize the fullness of a person, anti-assimilationist aesthetics can be used by other groups to envision and model new relationships.

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