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“Rape is a four-letter word”: Psychosis, rape, and abortion in the 2012 election

Sarah Stone Watt

Abstract:

Republican candidates made headlines during the 2012 election for their offensive statements regarding rape when defending a comprehensive ban on abortion. Using Lacan’s theory of psychosis, this article exposes unconscious rhetorical structures that may have contributed to the repetition of those gaffes even after the Party advised all comments, during and after candidates’ attempts to retract their inaccurate statements, was the result of a foreclosure in the minds of some candidates. The discursive structure of their comments provides evidence that some candidates were unable to reconcile white patriarchal subjectivity with the inability to protect against rape.

Keywords: rape, abortion, political rhetoric, psychosis, psychoanalysis

During the 2012 election season, multiple Republican candidates made headlines for seemingly ignorant responses to questions concerning rape and abortion. One of the most famous was Missouri Representative Todd Akin’s line, “If it’s a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to shut that whole thing down.” The comments were controversial, even within the Republican Party; prominent Party members called on those making the statements to do everything from apologize to withdraw from their respective races. After two Tea Party Republicans lost their 2012 Senate races as a result of comments concerning rape, GOP strategist Kellyanne Conway declared, “rape is a four-letter word” and advised candidates to avoid the topic altogether (Sherman and Bresnahan).¹ However, impending congressional debates over the renewal of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and state-level debates over policies concerning

reproductive health made Conway's simple directive nearly impossible to follow. Over the next year, men and women politicians at the state and federal levels continued to make egregious comments demonstrating a misunderstanding of sexual assault and female biology. The proliferation of inaccurate comments concerning rape and abortion leading up to the 2012 election mobilized a vocal feminist response. The comments were used as evidence for claims of a Republican "war on women" and, some speculate, may have played a part in the Party's failure to recapture the Senate (Abdullah; Arduser and Koerber 119; Ferguson; Lake and Pickering 188).

The Party responded to the temporary political losses by reaffirming its pro-life stance while distancing itself from the controversial statements. As the election passed and shocking headlines on the topic faded, it was tempting to believe that the 2012 rhetoric was an anomaly. It was not. Rhetorical scholars have demonstrated that the 2012 "war on women" has deeper roots extending to the earliest days of the Republican pro-life position (Arduser and Koerber; Lake and Pickering). However, the 2012 election cycle was somewhat distinct in that "anti-reproductive rights discourses occupied center stage throughout much of the 2012 campaign" (Arduser and Koerber 121). It was also distinct in the frequency with which politicians consistently reiterated cultural rape myths even after political allies rebuked them.

Randall Lake and Barbara Pickering have explained the ways that the 2012 debates about abortion extended the trajectory of anti-choice arguments, and Lora Arduser and Amy Koerber have shown how those arguments constituted women as biocitizens, limiting their political agency. These studies reveal how Republicans' rhetoric concerning the morality of abortion is "continually reshaped and presented together in a seemingly logical manner" to justify government control over women's bodies (Arduser and Koerber 119). What is missing is an

explanation of how candidates' comments that appeared to be illogical and detrimental to the Party's rhetorical strategy could advance the moral undercurrent of the argumentative trajectory even after being so harshly condemned. The constant repetition, despite condemnation, indicates that something other than the conscious political strategy drove the comments. Combining psychoanalysis with feminist rhetorical criticism fills this gap in the existing rhetorical scholarship by working to understand both the "social and psychical structures" (Gunn, "Refiguring Fantasy," 55) that contributed to the persistence of rape myths in 2012 and beyond. Whereas most scholarship concerning political rhetoric begins with the assumption that political strategies are consciously constructed and refined to attract voters, psychoanalytic criticism offers "new tools to understand the underlying discourses" inherent in the argumentative trajectory (Matheson 188).²

Drawing on Jacques Lacan's structural approach to psychosis, I argue that the repetition, retraction, and revision of problematic comments concerning rape is indicative of a larger psychical structure of the Party's sacred rhetorical approach to abortion. Republicans' sacred rhetoric is heavily invested in white patriarchal protection of women and children, particularly the unborn. While this structure has historically provided a path toward political success with the Party's base, some candidates' inability to reconcile their subjectivity with the reality of rape fostered their investment in delusions. Those delusions relied on a catachrestic repetition of common yet inaccurate cultural myths concerning rape and/or controversial religious doctrine of predestination to explain the candidate's opposition to abortion. Catachresis is "a metaphor without a literal referent" (Spivak 211), which many interpret as banal, but its seeming banality

As a foundation for this argument, I begin by reviewing Lacan's theory of psychosis to cultural myths persist even when they contradict a more commonly accepted social reality. My

review builds on existing scholarship concerning intersections between psychoanalysis and rhetoric broadly and the paternal signifier in psychosis specifically to demonstrate the function of language in the structural formation of delusions and their compulsive rearticulation. Then, I highlight the role of Republican's rhetoric concerning fatherhood and the sanctity of human life in political debates of the time and explain how that platform relied on sacred rhetoric—an investment in ideological absolutes that cannot be justified through reason giving—to reinscribe the Party's position as the patriarchal protector. Beginning with Akin's controversial comment, I unpack the repetition of repudiated comments to show how they provide evidence of a gap in the symbolic order that prompted overinvestment in the sacred rhetoric Republicans used to justify the Party's platform on abortion. While many Republican candidates addressed possible exceptions to an abortion ban in cases of sexual assault, I focus specifically on those cases where the Party denounced the candidate's response and that response continued to chain out in their own statements or in statements by surrogates defending their position. After exploring the most prominent delusions—legitimate rape and divine predestination of rape to create life—I conclude with implications for rhetorical scholarship and ongoing political debates.

Psychosis and social imagination

Lacan explains the process by which an individual perceives their connection to a larger social reality using the concept of the Imaginary. He challenges the notion of the rhetor as an autonomous subject, articulating instead an understanding of the individual as fragmented and their rhetoric as a Symbolic reflection of the desire for unattainable unity through imaginary identification with and against the other (Biesecker 225; Gunn "Refiguring Fantasy" 44; Lacan "The Mirror Stage" 5; Lundberg 4). Neither the Symbolic nor the Imaginary are static but rather

adjust over time as people pursue their unquenchable desire to understand nature, or the Real (Biesecker 223; Johnson and Asenas 155).

Rhetoric provides a symbolic materialization of the unconscious ways an individual imagines their relationship to self and others—their subjectivity (Brennan 2, Gunn “On Dead Subjects” 502). Similar to rhetorical style or genre, psychical structures are evidenced by patterns that reoccur and predispose people “toward particular kinds of relations with others” (Gunn “On Political Perversion” 167). Psychoanalysis offers rhetoricians a helpful way of understanding “controversial figures and their words” because “it has wrestled with the ontological status of the subject in the treatment of psychological disturbances, straddling the singularity of an individual’s experience with meaningful patterns that inhere in culture” (Gunn “On Political Perversion” 167-8). Therefore, this analysis is not about diagnosing a particular rhetor’s mental health but about highlighting those patterns that reoccur in similar contexts.

The role of the signifier

Drawing on the work of Saussure, Lacan recognizes the signifier as the mental experience a person has in connection with what is signified through language. Yet, where Saussure’s formulation conceives of concepts (signified) as prompting the mental experience (signifier), Lacan’s reliance on Freud leads him to theorize the process in reverse. He argues that the mental experience actively determines the words a subject uses to name their view of reality. Freud theorized the unconscious as the space where a kind of “double play of combination and substitution” occurs such that the signifier produces the signified (Lacan “The Instance” 578). Thus, speech reveals symptoms of an unconscious process relying on rhetorical tropes (Lacan “The Instance” 506).

The signifier is similar to a highway along which a person travels—“a path of communication” (Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 290). Words and sentences connect in a linear chain so that they create the expectation of another word or sentence to follow. Typically, people move along the highway, connecting signifiers in a chain that serves to connote, but not define, the combine minor paths, more or less separate modes of grouping meaning, with one another [to] go from one point to another” (Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 290). Focusing on the signifying chain, Lacan outlines a material and structural method for studying psychosis through speech. His method begins with the observation that psychosis is the process by which a subject relates to a given signifier differently from how most people typically engage the broader signifying chain (Vanheule 45).

Foreclosure and delusion

Lacan illuminates three symbolic structures that reoccur compulsively: psychosis, neurosis, and perversion. While anyone can express traits associated with these structures, the compulsive repetition of a particular set of strategies and defenses indicates dominance of one of the structures in the way the subject signifies their relationship to the social order (Gunn “On Political Perversion” 167-8). In psychosis, a particular signifier is foreclosed, “simply absent from the mental universe” of the subject, destabilizing the Symbolic (Leader and Groves 106; Vanheule 50). There is no mental representation of the signifier in the Imaginary and it can “only be experienced in a hallucinatory way” (Vanheule 67). The neurotic has a general sense of what is appropriate and can comply with the social order through repression, and the pervert knows how to comply with the social order but says or does what is wrong anyway. However, Gunn explains, “whatever the psychotic says, at base there is no understanding of what is or is not culturally appropriate” (“On Political Perversion” 170). Foreclosure means that the person

cannot say the right thing because that signifier is unavailable to them. The foreclosed concept reemerges in the Real as a hallucination or delusion.

It is possible to observe symptoms of the missing signifier by examining a speaker's description of their delusion (Lacan "On the Possible Treatment" 184). Therefore, a rhetorical critic may be able to discern latent "unconscious desires and motives" that influence conscious choices (Gunn and Treat 162). Gunn and Treat explain that these unconscious desires may appear, "when a fully formed idea or thought occurs to one suddenly—such as 'the solution of some difficult intellectual problem which has previously for a time baffled one's efforts.' . . . [or] in so-called 'slips of the tongue' whereby one unintentionally verbalizes a previously unconscious thought" (161). These symptoms may make the speaker uncomfortable when they emerge, prompting the person to resolve their discomfort by attempting to explain their understanding of the utterance (Žižek 206). Both the utterance and the attempted explanation are part of a longer chain of signifiers. The fact that delusional signifiers seem absurd does not necessarily indicate that they are inconsistent with the larger discursive system (Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 120).

Rather than a symptom in the medical sense of the word, the delusion is a symptom of foreclosure. An encounter with a "Real person," one that is not understandable in terms of the individual's own image or normative ideas about how people and things should be (Vanheule 88), prompts them to consider their subjectivity in relation to that person. Basic questions of subjectivity include "Who am I?" and "What do you want from me?" In psychosis, the person cannot access the necessary signifiers to respond to these questions. When this happens, "the subject reacts to the signifier's absence by all the more emphatically affirming another one that as such is essentially enigmatic" (Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 194). Stijn Vanheule contends that

understanding the process in this way “invites us to de-pathologize hallucinations” by understanding them as an “attempt at recovery” (89). However, he explains that despite its usefulness for understanding how these questions of subjectivity “take shape for each individual,” it is not possible to predict in any situation “whether or which event may evoke questions of the subject’s identity and thus provoke a psychotic hallucination” (90). In other words, Lacan’s work on psychosis assumes that while the symbolic may provide evidence of foreclosure, it does not indicate the precise cause of that foreclosure. All that is evident are the moments in which a subject responds through delusion to a hole in their symbolic order.

The paternal signifier

To illustrate how the phenomenon emerges structurally in language, Lacan offers the case of a man who had led an exciting life and “had become an ideal for the entire family” (*The Psychoses*, 306). Yet, he begins to experience hallucinations when a woman he is “in possession of” announces that she is pregnant. The man had no way of knowing whether the baby was his.

Lacan explains,

Barely had it been announced to him, You are going to be a father when a character appeared to him telling him, You are Saint Thomas The annunciations that followed leave no room for doubt—they came from Elizabeth, the one to whom it was announced very late in life that she was going to bear a child. (*The Psychoses*, 306)

While this hallucination may appear extreme compared to myths expressed in the 2012 election, it highlights three elements of Lacan’s theory that are informative for understanding the candidates’ comments: attachment to paternity as an essential signifier, recognition of the Judeo-

Christian tradition's view of subjectivity, and explanation of the role of mental automatism in repairing ruptures in the signifying chain.

Feminists have debated whether Lacan's theoretical investment in "patriarchal structures of language," particularly the Oedipus complex, precludes the theory's usefulness in breaking down those patriarchal structures (Brennan 2). In this case, the reliance on paternity as an essential signifier proves useful for explaining 2012 candidates' overinvestment in patriarchal control. For Lacan, the "name of the father" is what preserves the symbolic order (*Écrits*, 67). When it is foreclosed, delusions repair the gap. The delusions that chained out among Republicans in 2012 relied heavily on paternity, either in human or divine form.

Lacan explains that "the signifier being a father is what creates the highway" (*The Psychoses* 293). The signifier is grounded in the subject's knowledge that copulation leads to procreation, but it is elaborated through clusters of cultural exchanges that help him to imagine what it means that the baby belongs to him.³ When the subject experiences a rupture in the signifier, they imagine an alternate path. Extending the highway metaphor, Lacan explains that when the highway is not available, drivers must use signs to find their way along side roads. When someone verbalizes their delusion, Lacan argues, they reveal "the signs along their little path" (*The Psychoses* 293). Similar to Lacan's patients, comments made by some of the 2012 Republican candidates may reveal their alternate path to *being a father*.

The man's hallucination that the biblical figure of Elizabeth appeared to him and declared that he is Saint Thomas reflects his attempt to repair the rupture in his paternal signifier by situating himself in direct relationship to God through interaction with and embodiment of biblical figures. Lacan identifies the manifestation of God as the Word (logos) who says to Moses "I am who I am" (*New International Version*, Exodus 3:14) as "one of the most profound

characteristics of the mental foundation of the Judeo-Christian tradition” in that “against it speech clearly profiles the being of the I as its ultimate ground” (*The Psychoses* 287). In this way, God serves as the Absolute Other against which the subject must always justify themselves (Benyamini 3). In psychosis, this drive toward justification may also manifest in delusions concerning the nature of God.

Although delusions may not make sense to anyone else, they are deeply significant to the individual because their ability to move from one signified to another is impossible without that signifier (Matheson 193). In explaining the man’s hallucination, Lacan elucidates, “precisely because he is interpellated on terrain where he is unable to respond,” his only defense is to retreat into “mental automatism” (*The Psychoses* 307). Relying on Aristotle’s concept of the automaton, Lacan demonstrates how the delusion emerges in language to close the gap without the speaker making a conscious choice. When the psychotic attempts to explain their undesirable utterance(s), they are unable to pinpoint the origin of the signified because the signifier they are searching for is inaccessible. What appears instead is a distortion that allows the subject to relate to the other through a “skewing” of that relationship (Lacan “On a Question” 478).

In the next section, I describe how sacred rhetoric structures the Republican’s argumentative trajectory on the topic of abortion and positions the Party and its representatives as patriarchal protectors. Then, I demonstrate how some candidates responded to an apparent failure of the symbolic order to account for sexual assault by articulating a delusional order that relied on cultural rape myths and distortions of Christian doctrine to repair the rupture. My analysis builds on Calum Matheson’s work on the Sovereign Citizen Movement, which demonstrates how delusions can have collective effects. He argues that in psychosis, “the subject is fully capable of investing meaning in words, but is unable to fully grasp the mechanisms by

which meaning is distributed in the economy of the Symbolic” (Matheson 194). Therefore, psychotic delusions invest the subject in a “specific economy” of language that may be shared with others even though it is disconnected from the “general economy” (Matheson 194). In such a case, repetition and reiteration of signifiers can function as a protocol that makes meaning for rhetors even when they are dismissed by the broader social order.

Protecting the unborn

The GOP has long succeeded in mobilizing its base around abortion through a strict rhetorical adherence to ideological conservatism. Scholars have highlighted at least two key themes in the GOP rhetorical strategy on abortion: the deployment of sacred rhetoric and appeals to paternal authority (Lakoff 106, 120; Marietta 2). Morgan Marietta explains that sacred rhetoric is not always religious or pertaining to a higher power, but it employs an absolutist form of reasoning that downplays or refuses to acknowledge the trade-offs of the position. Sacred rhetorical strategies rely on appeals to a strong authority figure to reinforce core values that cannot be justified by reason giving. Advocates on both sides of the abortion debate have used sacred rhetoric to justify their position. Republicans base their opposition to abortion on a non-negotiable value to life, whereas feminists base their support for abortion on a woman’s non-negotiable right to control her body (Lake and Pickering 189). Each side has been successful in motivating adherents with sacred rhetoric because a sacred stance creates a “clash of cultural authorities,” in which “invocations of moral outrage engender a more strident form of politics” by activating emotional attachments to a particular position (Marietta 21). Republicans’ sacred rhetoric relies on “family values,” largely defined by conservative white evangelicals, which provide a natural authority figure (Dowland 13). George Lakoff argues that Republicans have succeeded politically by emphasizing the formulation of a strict paternalistic family, which

operates with a clear sense of right and wrong, enforced by the father figure. Seth Dowland points out that GOP family values are both gendered and racialized as they rely on the notion that a strong white “breadwinning father, stay-at-home mother, and well-scrubbed children” can guard against the threats that liberals—feminists and Civil Rights advocates in particular—pose to status quo power structures (16). In 2012, prominent Republican candidates, including Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich, and Rick Santorum extended this strategy by campaigning on both literal and figurative appeals to their status as fathers (Burnette and Fox 84).

That year, the GOP platform on sanctity and dignity of human life clearly demonstrated the Party’s investment in the sacred rhetorical strategy, positioning the Party as champions for the rights of the unborn. The platform explained:

Faithful to the “self-evident” truths enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, we assert the sanctity of human life and affirm that the unborn child has a fundamental individual right to life which cannot be infringed. We support a human life amendment to the Constitution and endorse legislation to make clear that the Fourteenth Amendment's protections apply to unborn children. We oppose using public revenues to promote or perform abortion or fund organizations which perform or advocate it and will not fund or subsidize health care which includes abortion coverage. We seek to protect young girls from exploitation through a parental consent requirement; and we affirm our moral obligation to assist, rather than penalize, women challenged by an unplanned pregnancy.

(Republican National Committee 13-4)

In this description of their political position, Republicans reiterate their paternalistic protector status in relationship to “the unborn child,” “young girls,” and “women challenged by an unplanned pregnancy.” The platform frames each of these groups as unable to act for themselves.

While pro-choice advocates have long challenged this positioning of the Republican Party as protector of women and children, their opposition intensified in 2012 amidst congressional debates over the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and renewal of VAWA. During debate about the provisions of the ACA, images circulated on the Internet of all-male panels convened on Capitol Hill to discuss the issue of contraceptive coverage. These images provided evidence of the Republicans’ approach to protecting women from themselves by excluding them from the debate entirely (Bassett and Terkel). Additionally, as debates about federal funding for abortion coverage intersected with debates about the government’s response to sexual violence by way of VAWA, pro-choice advocates argued that sexual assault exacerbates the problem. They challenged the Republican position saying it would force a woman to carry the offspring of the rapist and continue to relive the trauma of the assault. The intersection of rape and abortion became a significant concern in the 2012 election and subsequent state and federal debates as lawmakers sought to defend their party’s platform, including the decision to ban abortion even in cases of rape, incest, or danger to a woman’s life (Hohoman).

The majority of GOP candidates maintained that the platform conveyed their unwavering respect for human life, and they avoided addressing the issue of rape or they acknowledged that rape was a horrible act but maintained their position that all life is sacred. These candidates focused their arguments on the assertion that abortion is never warranted because all life is a gift from God. For example, early in 2012, talk show host Piers Morgan interviewed Santorum and asked the candidate to consider his response if his daughter were to become pregnant as a result

of sexual assault and wanted to terminate the pregnancy. Morgan's hypothetical scenario positioned Santorum in relationship to his own daughter, allowing him to respond from his subject location as a father. Santorum explained, "I believe and I think that the right approach is to accept this horribly created, in the sense of rape, but nevertheless, in a very broken way, a gift of human life, and accept what God is giving to you" (qtd. in Walker). His response was consistent with his campaign's reliance on the trope of fatherhood. Morgan's framing of the question gave Santorum agency as a father only after the rape had occurred—in other words, he could not prevent the rape. Thus, Santorum advanced the Republican position by invoking his subjectivity as a father protecting the unborn child and the young woman while simultaneously acknowledging that rape is a horrible thing. Although Santorum drew predictable criticism from opposing political parties, Republican allies tended to support his statement. While Santorum's comments in this instance are similar to those that caused so much controversy, they are also distinct in the way he situated himself in relation to the other.

The following analysis will examine instances where candidates were not able to follow Santorum's path. In these cases, candidates drew significant criticism when they came in contact with Real contexts—those they could not grasp in terms of their own image as patriarchal protector or reconcile with their understanding of how rape occurs—and were unable to access the necessary signifier to respond to the situation. These candidates tended to rely on catachresis in response to the foreclosure of the necessary signifier to reconcile their subjective status as patriarchal protector of women and children. Despite the Party's overt rebuke of the comments, each articulation of the delusion propagated cultural rape myths to reassert the white patriarchal logics of racism and sexism underlying the GOP's sacred rhetorical strategy.

Imagining paternal subjectivity

In 2012, many Republicans, particularly those aligned with the Tea Party, struggled to navigate questions concerning abortion in cases of sexual assault. In these unscripted moments, candidates speculated about the legitimacy of women's rape claims and the nature of God's will for women's lives. Their comments were criticized for being inaccurate and for relying on cultural myths about rape or on religious extremism. When criticized, candidates retracted or revised their statements. Their revisions, retractions, and even apologies drew further criticism as they failed to resolve the initial offense and often reiterated the problematic delusions. Many commentators framed the statements as indicative of individual ignorance, yet the repetition of inaccurate statements—even after retraction and by so many different individuals—suggest that a more nuanced explanation accounts for how members of a group reason together.

Legitimate rape

The most controversial delusion that reverberated through Republican comments was rooted in the cultural myth of “legitimate rape.” Public questioning of the legitimacy of women's rape claims has long suppressed reporting of the crime, shamed victims, and prevented proper treatment (Berger 25; Conaghan and Russell 28). Legitimacy is one of many “generalized and false beliefs about sexual assault that trivialize sexual assault or suggest that a sexual assault did not occur” (Franiuk et al. 790). Renae Franiuk, Jennifer Seefelt, and Joseph Vandello argue that cultural rape myths persist because of “their utility to protect us from uncomfortable truths about the victims and perpetrators of sexual assault” (791). The myth of “legitimate rape” implies that women lie about sexual assault or create conditions that invite sexual encounters that they later regret. This myth “provides controllable attribution that allows people to protect themselves from the suggestion that they or their loved ones could be victims as well” (Franiuk et al. 791). While not overtly racist, this myth maintains the original logic of rape laws in the United States which

were established “for the protection of men in the upper classes whose daughters and wives might be assaulted” (Davis 172). These laws were often employed to justify violence against the Black community by framing white men as protectors of white women who were allegedly vulnerable to attack by Black men and to shield white men from rape allegations by framing Black women as promiscuous and deceptive (Curry 297; Davis 173; Phillips and Griffin 36-37).⁴ Legitimate rape became a prominent pattern among ideologically conservative candidates in the 2012 election as they rejected the possibility that a situation could ever arise in which an abortion may be justified. When confronted with the possibility that patriarchal protection could not prevent rape, white male candidates in particular imagined that either the body could prevent pregnancy and/or that women were simply lying.

The most famous articulation of the legitimate rape delusion came in August 2012 when Todd Akin, a six-term Republican Representative from Missouri and Tea Party-endorsed candidate for U.S. Senate, discussed his campaign on a Sunday morning talk show. There, Akin made his now famous statement concerning abortion for rape victims saying,

It seems to me from what I understand from doctors, that’s really rare. If it’s a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down. But, let’s assume that maybe that didn’t work or something. I think there should be some punishment, but the punishment ought to be on the rapist and not attacking the child. (qtd. in Jaco)

Like Lacan’s patient who encounters a situation in which he cannot imagine being a father, Akin’s comment demonstrates an inability to reconcile his subjectivity as patriarch with his inability to protect a woman who has experienced rape. Akin invokes the metaphor of legitimacy to ground his delusion that the female body can prevent pregnancy. This portion of the statement

acknowledges that rape sometimes happens but invokes the cultural myth that true rape is rare. In those rare cases, Akin imagines that the female body will protect them. This move reduces the woman to her biological capacity to reproduce and indicates foreclosure of woman as sentient being. The second half of the comment further forecloses consideration of the woman's subjectivity as Akin imagines his role in punishing the rapist and protecting the unborn baby from attack. In this second half of the comment, the woman disappears from the delusion altogether. What is left is a criminal rapist and an innocent baby.

That day, portions of the interview re-aired on Fox News and gained coverage from multiple online media outlets. Commentators criticized the statements and prominent Republicans, including Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan, distanced themselves from Akin (Arduser and Koerber, 132). Members of his own party denounced his perspective by going so far as to encourage him to drop out of the race (Zengerle). Akin refused to concede the race and issued an apology but not before Iowa Republican Representative Steve King, his co-sponsor on the "No Taxpayer Funding for Abortion Act," publicly defended him and added to the controversy.

Shortly after Akin made headlines, King appeared on a local news show to talk about campaign issues and was asked to comment on Akin's remarks. King characterized the controversy as a "petty personal attack" and affirmed Akin as a "strong Christian man with a wonderful family" (qtd. in Leigh). His references to Akin's religion and family life attempt to re-situate Akin within the general economy of the Republican social imaginary. Even as King declined to make specific comments regarding Akin's claim, he simultaneously advanced delusions regarding Akin's patriarchal authority and legitimate rape. He explained that he and Akin's co-sponsored abortion bill would solve the problem by limiting federal funding for abortion to cases of forcible rape. The Federal Bureau of Investigation defines forcible rape as

“the carnal knowledge of a female forcibly against her will” (“Forcible Rape”). The use of this definition to reduce federal funding for abortion would further codify legitimate rape in legislation, overriding existing exemptions for multiple manifestations of the crime and denying the Department of Justice’s expansion of the definition of rape earlier that year to include “any gender of victim and perpetrator” and any instance “in which the victim is unable to give consent” (Carbon). When asked about the implications of the legislation “for victims of statutory rape or incest—for example, a 12 year old girl who gets pregnant,” King responded, “Well, I just haven’t heard of that being a circumstance that’s been brought to me in any personal way” (qtd. in Leigh). King’s comment conceded that those cases might exist, and he followed up with a comment that he would be willing to discuss those cases, relying on the myth that there are a limited number of legitimate rapes. King also clarified that legitimate rapes are forcible rapes, like those he had heard of and, presumably, those Akin would go on to affirm in his apology. News outlets reported King’s support for Akin and some chastised King for adding his ignorance to the controversy (Amira). A spokesperson for King’s campaign later explained, “Of course King is aware that girls have been impregnated by statutory rape or incest,” and the spokesperson said, “King supports people who have not been forcibly raped receiving federal abortion coverage through a rape exemption” (qtd. in Amira). King’s retraction and Akin’s apology perpetuated the legitimate rape myth and demonstrated foreclosure of the multiplicity of women’s experiences with sexual assault.

Akin’s apology avoided directly addressing the trope of legitimacy and reiterated the Republican investment in a paternalistic capacity to punish perpetrators. He said:

Rape is an evil act. I used the wrong words in the wrong way and for that I apologize. As the father of two daughters, I want tough justice for predators. I have a compassionate

heart for the victims of sexual assault. I pray for them. The fact is, rape can lead to pregnancy. The truth is, rape has many victims. The mistake I made was in the words I said, not in the heart I hold. I ask for your forgiveness. (qtd. in Zengerle)

Akin acknowledged that he was wrong about the body preventing pregnancy, but that admission would not stop additional politicians from repeating the biological delusion later in the election cycle. Even after acknowledging that he “used the wrong words in the wrong way,” Akin’s apology could not resolve the offense as it continued to foreclose women’s subjectivity. Similar to Santorum’s interview with Morgan, the apology relied on Akin’s position as a “father of two daughters” to respond to basic questions of subjectivity such as “Who am I?” and “What do you want from me?” (Vanheule 89). The statement situated Akin as the subject who has two daughters. As the patriarch he desires “justice” (earlier, punishment) “for predators” (earlier, rapists). The daughters, victims, and predators appear here as objects in need of patriarchal protection/punishment, not as subjective agents.

Akin’s apology remained invested in the cultural myth by adding further detail to describe what a legitimate rape looks like. The apology extended the delusion through the tropes of “victims” and “predators.” His focus on “victims” responds to foreclosure of women’s subjective experiences with sexual assault by imagining in their place a unified object of “victim.” It is not surprising that Akin would return to the legitimate rape myth as interpreted through the lens of deviant predators preying on innocent victims, because this is one of the most prominent cultural rape myths (Conaghan and Russell 28). In fact, legal scholars have established that this myth tends to function “as a cognitive schema for organizing and evaluating the circumstances which surround a particular rape.” “Real rape,” Joann Conaghan and Yvette

Russell contend, “tends to operate paradigmatically, not as an appeal to truth, but as a heuristic device for reading, interpreting, and evaluating information of rape” (43). They explain that even when jurors in rape trials do not claim to believe in the myth concerning “real rape,” the ubiquitous nature of the cultural myth “almost certainly informs their cognitive operations” (43), and it is disproportionately applied to cases in which the victim is Black (Curry 300; Donovan 723). The myth of legitimate rape continued to chain out as his colleagues sought to defend and/or revise Akin’s statements, or simply to defend their own. The cultural myth provided a protocol that made meaning for rhetors who could not connect their subjectivity with that of a woman who experienced sexual assault. These rhetors invested in two primary manifestations of the myth: that women lie about rape and that in legitimate rape cases the body can protect against pregnancy.

Women lie

In a close race for a seat in the Wisconsin legislature, Democratic challenger Stephen Smith seized the political moment associated with Akin’s comments to call attention to a sentiment offered by his opponent, Republican Representative Roger Rivard, nearly a year earlier. At the time of the original comment, a local paper asked Rivard for his thoughts on rape allegations made against a high school senior. Rivard told the newspaper, “his father warned him, ‘some girls rape easy’—meaning that after the fact they change what they said about the sex being consensual” (Marley). When the comment resurfaced as part of the political campaign, Rivard attempted to explain what he meant. He told the *Journal Sentinel* that the description of his father’s warning about premarital sex was taken out of context and clarified,

He also told me one thing, “If you do (have premarital sex), just remember, consensual

sex can turn into rape in an awful hurry,” Rivard said. “Because all of a sudden a young lady gets pregnant and the parents are madder than a wet hen and she's not going to say, ‘Oh, yeah, I was part of the program.’ All that she has to say or the parents have to say is it was rape because she's underage.” And he just said, “Remember, Roger, if you go down that road, some girls,” he said, “they rape so easy.” (Marley)

Rivard’s explanation made plain a core assumption of the legitimate rape myth—that most women lie. Rivard’s memory of his father’s instruction perpetuates an image of “women as liars and deceivers who habitually make false allegations of rape, thereby creating a climate of skepticism applied to all women who allege rape” (Conaghan and Russell 28). Establishing that women lie bolsters the delusion that pregnancy resulting from rape is rare because there are so few legitimate rapes—women, or their parents, only cry rape when sex results in unwanted pregnancy.

Reliance on the legitimate rape myth persisted even after Akin and Rivard lost their respective elections. In January of 2013, Republican Representative Phil Gingrey, co-founder of the GOP Doctor’s Caucus, spoke at a Chamber of Commerce meeting in his home state of Georgia. One of the topics of discussion was a recent state law that made abortion more difficult based on fetal pain. Gingrey invoked Akin’s stance on rape and attempted to reinterpret the comments to make them more socially acceptable. Gingrey explained,

[Akin said,] “Look, in a legitimate rape situation” — and what he meant by legitimate rape was just look, someone can say I was raped: a scared-to-death 15-year-old that becomes impregnated by her boyfriend and then has to tell her parents, that’s pretty tough

and might on some occasion say, “Hey, I was raped.” That’s what he meant when he said legitimate rape versus non-legitimate rape. I don’t find anything so horrible about that.

(qtd. in Gillooly)

His attempt to justify Akin’s comments failed and instead perpetuated the legitimate rape myth by advancing Rivard’s explanation that pregnancy is a motivator to lie about rape. The revision of the delusion aligns with the longstanding cultural practice of questioning the legitimacy of a woman’s claims concerning rape.

Gingrey’s office later released a statement saying that the comments, which were directly quoted in the piece and circulated on video, had been misconstrued. He claimed that he did not mean to support Akin’s claims but rather to “provide context as to what I assumed they meant” (qtd. in Galloway). This response reveals that, while Gingrey may have intended to clarify and distance his position from Akin’s, he unconsciously adhered to it. Gingrey is one of many rhetors whose efforts to clarify Akin’s comments ultimately advanced the delusion in some way. While Gingrey’s comments focused on the legitimacy of rape, others emphasized Akin’s sentiment that pregnancy is an unlikely result of rape, and therefore no exemption is necessary.

The body shuts down

Gingrey unconsciously affirmed Akin’s comments on legitimate rape, but he refuted the myth concerning pregnancy rates by arguing that women who ovulate prior to their assault are likely to become pregnant. Some people did the opposite: they rhetorically distanced themselves from claims regarding legitimate rape, only to perpetuate delusions concerning biology. Despite statistical evidence that “rape pregnancy rates significantly outpaced consensual pregnancy rates” (Gotschall and Gotschall 14), multiple politicians distanced themselves from Akin’s

symbolic reliance on legitimate rape while maintaining his delusion that trauma causes the body to “shut the whole thing down.”

Some observers assumed that this myth could only persist in the minds of men, but in early 2013, even after Conway’s suggestion that candidates avoid discussing rape, a woman’s voice joined the chorus. Celeste Grieg was head of the California Republican Assembly, a volunteer organization that helps elect GOP candidates to office. She was a prominent voice as the leader of the oldest and largest GOP group in the state, one that President Reagan called “the conscience of the Republican Party” (Terkel). On her way to the GOP spring convention in Sacramento, Grieg criticized Akin’s remarks to reporters saying that his comments were insensitive. However, she went on to say, “Granted the percentage of pregnancies due to rape is small because it’s an act of violence, the body is traumatized” (qtd. in Terkel).⁵ Even as she set out to criticize Akin’s position on legitimate rape, Grieg perpetuated the myth that pregnancy is rare because the body shuts down when traumatized, which affirms the delusion signified by the legitimate rape myth. Two months later, with her support waning, Grieg lost her position. The vote was not a landslide, however, which some interpreted as underlying Party support for Grieg’s position on the issue (Foster).

While Akin and Grieg assumed that in a legitimate rape, trauma would compel the body to prevent pregnancy, others relied on the assumption that when the body does not end the pregnancy itself, certain medical technologies (not abortion) offered preferable forms of containment. In June of 2013, the Texas legislature entered into a widely publicized debate over restrictive anti-abortion legislation. During those debates, Texas State Representative Jodie Laubenberg affirmed both the legitimate rape trope and a version of the body-shutting-things-down narrative by arguing that, “In the emergency room they have what’s called rape kits, where

a woman can get cleaned out” (qtd. in Wing). Although her primary argument had to do with timing, and she explained, “The woman had five months to make that decision, at this point we are looking at a baby that is very far along in its development” (qtd. in Wing), it was overshadowed by her comment on rape kits. Her remarks drew fire from all sides of the political spectrum, primarily for their ignorance concerning biology and the purpose of rape kits. Her comment relies on the delusion that abortion is unnecessary because the immediate reporting of a legitimate rape allows for the patriarchal protector (in this case, a doctor) to intervene and aid the body in solving the problem.⁶

Predestined rape

Akin and his supporters’ unconscious reliance on legitimate rape and related cultural rape myths to justify the Republican abortion platform was one of the most prominent controversies in the 2012 election. However, politicians who adhered more closely to the traditional sacred rhetorical strategy for addressing abortion still found themselves invested in delusions that reaffirmed patriarchal authority in ways that were inconsistent with both their Party and the public’s understanding of reality. In these cases, the biggest problem candidates faced was not their adherence to cultural rape myths, though some did that too; it was their attempt to explain God’s will. These candidates responded to foreclosure of their own subjectivity by articulating a delusion that God uses rape as a means to create life.

On the heels of Akin’s controversial comment, another Missouri Republican attempted to defend Akin and failed. GOP 4th Senate District Committeeperson Sharon Barnes reaffirmed “what a great, conservative, godly man Todd Akin is,” and explained that he was trying to express his belief “that abortion is never an option...He just phrased it badly” (Weisman and Eligon). She went on to reiterate the myth that pregnancy was not likely to result from rape and

added that, “at that point, if God has chosen to bless this person with a life, you don’t kill it.” Barnes became another rhetor who, in attempting to explain “what [Akin] was trying to state,” found the necessary signifier foreclosed and replaced it with a new delusion. Attempting to invoke the sacred value of life, she imagined that God used rape to create life. By intertwining the sacred with the specific economy of the myth, Barnes unconsciously shifted from affirming the sanctity of life to framing rape as something God predestined. The woman remains foreclosed from Barnes’ statement and is replaced by an ambiguous person God has chosen to bless. Although her comments do not seem that far removed from Santorum’s explanation of the “gift of human life,” the distinction is evident in the way she framed God as making the choice to “bless this person with a life” through legitimate rape, rather than God simply responding to the horrible act of rape with the gift of life. It is unclear whether “this person” she refers to is the mother or the child, but in either case, the rape is a precondition for the life to exist. Many people were offended by what they interpreted as Barnes’ implication that legitimate rape is part of God’s plan for blessing someone with a child. Unlike Santorum, who avoided talking about rape and instead focused entirely on its result, Barnes’ delusion relies on the initial assumption that a legitimate rape occurred so that God could give someone the gift of life. Barnes’s interview appeared in *The New York Times*, and her comments were widely circulated in other news outlets where she was depicted as another misguided Akin ally.

The delusion concerning God’s role in rape also proved problematic for Indiana Treasurer and Tea Party-endorsed Senate candidate Richard Mourdock. When asked about his position on abortion during a candidate debate, Mourdock responded by affirming his pro-life stance and saying that the only exception he supported was when the abortion was necessary to save the life of the mother. He continued, “I struggled with it myself for a long time, but I came

to realize life is that gift from God. And I think that even when life begins in that horrible situation of rape, that it is something that God intended to happen” (qtd. in Groer). The “I” in the statement situates Mourdock as the subject determining what to do with a pregnancy resulting from rape. Unable to situate himself as protecting against rape, he defines his subjectivity in relationship to God. Mourdock’s comments instigated an ideological debate that involved competing fantasies about the nature of God. Those that refuted Mourdock did so by imagining the implications for women. His opponent, Democratic Representative Joe Donnelly, was quick to issue a statement in response to Mourdock claiming, “The God I believe in and the God I know most Hoosiers believe in, does not intend for rape to happen — ever. What Mr. Mourdock said is shocking, and it is stunning that he would be so disrespectful to survivors of rape” (qtd. In Groer). In response, Mourdock issued another statement clarifying his position that God does not want rape, which he characterized as “a horrible thing,” yet he stood by his claim that God did intend for a child to result from that “horrible thing” (qtd. in Groer).

The disagreement highlighted the way that each candidate’s discourse situated their subjectivity in relationship to God who functions as patriarchal protector in cases where they cannot prevent rape. Christian politicians on all sides of the political spectrum criticized Mourdock. President Obama called Mourdock’s comments “outrageous and demeaning to women” (qtd. in Camia). Mitt Romney, who endorsed Mourdock in an earlier campaign ad, also denounced Mourdock’s position. However, unlike Akin’s case where he called for the candidate to withdraw from the campaign, Romney continued to support Mourdock’s candidacy. In response, Mourdock did not revise his delusion of God’s will, but he did explain that any implication that he sanctioned rape was misconstrued. He reiterated, “I said life is precious. I believe life is precious. I believe rape is a brutal act. It is something that I abhor. That anyone

could come away with any meaning other than what I just said is regrettable, and for that I apologize” (qtd. in Camia). In his later statement, Mourdock attempted to return to the sacred value to life but could not undo his unconscious attempt to imagine God’s intent.

Despite multiple denunciations of the delusion that God would predestine rape to create life, the rhetoric continued to chain out. Supporters, including former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, affirmed “God’s will” as a reflection of their subjectivity, arguing that it was an articulation of what “virtually every Catholic” in the U.S. believes (Stephanopoulos). Despite Mourdock’s position falling flat and his public expressions of regret for having said it, many Republicans and Catholics, like Gingrich, defended Mourdock’s image of God as obvious. The fantasy of predestination illuminates how foreclosure of the individual’s patriarchal subjectivity magnified their investment in delusions that reasserted patriarchal control. In this delusion, adherents deny the religious principle of human free will and instead imagine God using rape as a tool to create a baby. This attempt to affirm the sacred value of life not only demonstrates foreclosure of the woman in the situation, but it also undermines Christian belief in the “good and perfect gift[s]” (NIV, James 1:17) from God and instead imagines God as an evil patriarch using any means necessary to impose His will (Levering 179).

Conclusion

Republican candidates’ comments during and after the 2012 election season concerning rape and abortion were popularly interpreted as individual ignorance and additional support for the “war on women.” In the most prominent cases, the candidates who advanced these delusions lost their elections, leaving many to assume that their individual opinions would no longer appear in the political arena. However, in 2013, the battle over abortion only intensified and myths regarding rape persisted. These myths appear even today in debates about abortion but prompt less shock

or concern than they did years ago. For example, when advocating for a restrictive abortion bill in Missouri in May 2019, Republican State Representative and former law enforcement officer Barry Hovis argued, “Most [rape cases] were date rapes or consensual rapes” (Ballentine, emphasis added). Similar to the 2012 comments, outcry was swift as was Hovis’ apology and claim that he “misspoke.” Rather than demonstrating a few isolated opinions, the controversial comments reinvest in the argumentative trajectory of white patriarchal power and control that forecloses the possibility of identification with or consideration of women who experience rape. The resulting delusions of cultural rape myths and controversial religious doctrine help people imagine their place in the social order even as they remain disconnected from it. That their comments persisted despite rebuke by the Republican Party and the majority of voters demonstrates the unconscious structure of the larger social imaginary that underlies anti-abortion politics.

Teresa Brennan argues that, “psychoanalysis is a thoroughly political entity” (1). She contends that Lacan’s theory of the symbolic enables scholars to understand the relationship between psychical reality and social context. Myths concerning the legitimacy of rape, the incidence of pregnancy resulting from rape, the body’s ability to contain itself or be contained by trauma, as well as attempts to imagine what God intends in a given situation are not new. Each of these delusions has been expressed before in debates concerning rape, and each of them, with the exception of God’s intent, has been scientifically refuted (Franke-Ruta). Yet, these delusions persist in the social imaginary. It is imperative that rhetorical critics mark the persistence of these delusions to prevent them from being set aside as anomalies in debates about women’s reproductive rights.

Without widespread support, it is possible to assume that such delusions persist only among the paranoid fringe. Some Republicans have advanced this argument by pointing to politicians like Iowa State Representative Rob Bacon and others who have argued for legislation that convicts rape victims of murder and sends them to jail if they obtain an abortion (Malloy). They have sanctioned Party members like Representative Steve King (a prominent Akin defender in 2012) by removing him from all congressional committees in 2019 and suggesting he “find another line of work” (Gabriel et. al.) after he appeared to defend both white nationalism and bans on abortion exemptions as he mused that “humanity might not exist if not for rape and incest” (Elthaway). As in 2012, King claimed his comments had been misconstrued (Gabriel et. al.). This analysis suggests that despite drawing staunch opposition from Party members, the delusions are not out of line with the Party’s established position. Instead, they persist in moments that rhetors are unable to reconcile their position as patriarchal protector with their inability to prevent rape. Since sacred values, by their very nature, cannot be rationally justified (Marietta 25), these Republicans rely on delusions about the nature of rape and the will of God to defend their position. Upon finding that their delusion was not acceptable to the social order, they attempt to redeem the offense by explaining that what they said was not what they intended. Those rhetorical moves indicate that the delusions were at least partially attributable to the role of the unconscious in the process of rhetorical invention. They appear in moments when the candidate was unable “to access the necessary signifier that would allow them to respond to basic questions of subjectivity” that would equip them to appropriately position their agency in a situation they could not control (Vanheule 89).

The persistence of delusions, even among those who recognize their inaccuracy, demonstrates the importance of the interplay between Symbolic and Imaginary as they work

through the unconscious to reconcile an ideological position with reality. Both during and after the campaign, Republican strategists attempted to suppress the delusions, yet they persisted. Strategists such as Kevin Madden, an advisor to Mitt Romney claimed, “This is actually pretty simple. If you’re about to talk about rape as anything other than a brutal and horrible crime, stop” (qtd. in Linkins). Others echoed the perception that avoiding such controversy should be as simple as treating rape as “a four-letter word” (Sherman and Bresnahan). If these comments operated at the level of conscious decision-making, such suggestions would indeed provide simple solutions. However, the comments persist because a signifier is foreclosed in the unconscious. In light of this analysis, a more complex solution proposed by Marina Ein, a public relations expert in crisis communication, may appear to be appropriate. She contended that, “If [Republicans] want to make inroads with women, then they need to subject every one of their candidates to sensitivity training — not to mention reality training” (qtd. in Nather and Smith). Unfortunately, Ms. Ein’s suggestion is unlikely to work due to the Lacanian observation that the Real will always evade our grasp. What does not evade our grasp is the delusion grounded in cultural rape myths.

Feminist research has consistently demonstrated that “myths about sexual aggression . . . serve to deny, downplay, or justify sexually aggressive behavior” (Gerger et al. 430). These myths, Conaghan and Russell argue, “take hold in recognizable cultural tropes and narratives to provide sources of meaning upon which we draw often unconsciously” (43). The 2012 campaign cycle illustrates how myths serve as unconscious fodder for delusion. It also highlights how the myths continue to operate as catachresis—a misuse of language that ultimately serves to reinforce an ideological or political position (Edwards 215). Catachresis involves misuse of words or metaphors for rhetorical effect, which “is achieved always against a background of

metaphysical and linguistic preconditions” (Levin 94). In 2012, candidates appear to have relied on these delusions to fill a gap in the signifying chain. Politicians’ continued reliance on similar delusions to justify ongoing attempts to control women’s bodies begs the question of whether the controversies are indications of a rupture or a continuation in the sacred signifying chain. There is not space remaining in this essay to outline fully the postcolonial critique of catachresis offered by Spivak and others, but I point to the idea to suggest the need for further investigation into the way that repetition of these delusions may serve to reinforce rather than undermine political power.

In an attempt to respond to 2012 political losses, the RNC convened a committee to review the reasons for their losses and outline a plan for future political success. The resulting Growth and Opportunity Project report recognized that the Party lost female voters in 2012 and they would have to “reverse this troubling trend, as women represent the majority of voters” (Barbour et. al. 12). The report also pointed to the need for a more “aggressive response” to accusations of a “war on women” but avoided addressing controversies surrounding rape and abortion in that debate. In subsequent years, the Party has attracted more white women through a “relentless pursuit of an unconstitutional ban on abortion” (Young qtd. in Ross). As these debates continue to unfold, rhetorical scholarship must attend to the ways that subjects’ participation in the tropological economy of cultural rape myths, as well as interlocking assumptions concerning race, sex, religion, and power, evidences a deeper investment in, or identification with, a problematic space within the Symbolic order.

Endnotes

¹ There is some dispute as to whether or not some individuals discussed in this essay, such as Todd Akin, were members of the Tea Party. I use this term to clarify that the group represented

here tended to be backed by the Tea Party and/or the most conservative wing (at the time) of the Republican Party.

² Ernest Bormann's work on group fantasizing has demonstrated how individuals unify around themes that resonate with their values. Political campaigns strategically refine these themes for deployment in the media (Bormann, 399). Following Bormann's logic, rejection of themes such as "legitimate rape" by the Republican Party should have prevented these themes from reoccurring in the campaign. However, Gunn has pointed to Bormann's attachment to the self-conscious nature of rhetoric as the major flaw in the theory's explanatory power. He argues that to avoid this "retreat into the humanistic imagination," critics should examine "fantasy and symbol [as] indirect signifiers of larger social structures, not individual motives" (Gunn, "Refiguring Fantasy," 32).

³ I use the masculine pronoun here as a particular referent to the male experience of paternity, not as a universal pronoun.

⁴ While this analysis focuses on rape and pregnancy and is therefore necessarily focused on women victims, it is important to note that the legitimate rape myth also perpetuates assumptions that perpetrators are always men and victims are always women. This mistaken assumption persists, even in prominent feminist scholarship on rape, despite the research indicating that roles are often reversed and that Black men "report higher rates of contact sexual violence" than men and women of multiple races (Curry 297-298).

⁵ In the 1970s and 80s some articles suggested the trauma of rape could prevent pregnancy. However, contemporary research strongly refutes those studies (see for example Holmes et al.).

⁶ Laubenberg's assumption concerning timing participates in another iteration of the legitimate rape myth, that in cases of "real rape" women report immediately and those who report later are lying. These comments appeared in Rivard's statements as well as those made by Ron Paul, Trent Franks, and others, but there was not space to analyze them in detail here.

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