

rites of passage: Rineke Dijkstra's *new mothers* and *bullfighters*

photographs

by

Erin Eileen Dunn

(Under the Direction of Isabelle Wallace)

Abstract

This paper considers Rineke Dijkstra's series *New Mothers* and *Bullfighters* in tandem, as works that are often exhibited in the same space and meant to address one another, but never conclusively or persuasively linked together. It is my argument that both series take motherhood as their ultimate subject although only one series directly illustrates it. The photographs are easily comparable on a surface level through their presentation of stereotypical notions of femininity and masculinity as well as physical similarities of exhausted bodies and blood. More subtly though, the works demonstrate that the bullfighters are tropes of manhood defined by their ritualized rejection of the maternal body through the bullfight, an event designed to transform boys in men. Jean-Joseph Goux's text *Oedipus, Philosopher* helps expound this idea through his exploration of classical Greek myths that model manhood's reliance on maternal destruction.

INDEX WORDS: Rineke Dijkstra, Photography, New Mothers, Bullfighters, *Forcados*, Jean-Joseph Goux, *Oedipus Philosopher*

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B.A., Emory University, 2012

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2014

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DEDICATION

For my parents. I love you and thank you for providing me with every opportunity to have the best education possible and for instilling in me a love of reading and learning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Isabelle Wallace for her invaluable help and advice as well as the considerable time she spent reading and rereading drafts of this thesis. Thank you for encouraging me to be a better writer, student, and thinker.

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CHAPTER 1

*His eyes did not close/ when he saw the horns near,/ but the terrible mothers/ lifted their heads./
And across the ranches,/ an air of secret voices rose,/ shouting to celestial bulls,/ herdsmen of
pale mist./ There was no prince in Sevilla/ who could compare to him,/ nor sword like his sword/
nor heart so true.*

Federico Garcia Lorca, *Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías*¹

¹Federico Garcia Lorca, *Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías*, accessed April 3, 2013, http://allpoetry.com/poem/8512753-Lament_For_Ignacio_Sanchez_Mejias-by-Federico_Garcia_Lorca. This poem memorializes the life and passing of Ignacio Sánchez Mejías, a famous Spanish bullfighter in the early 20th century.

I.

This essay explores the connections between two series by Dutch portrait photographer Rineke Dijkstra (b.1959): *New Mothers* (1994), a group of three full-length portraits of young mothers composed shortly after their experiences of childbirth and *Bullfighters* (1994, 2000), bust-length shots of Portuguese *forcados* fresh from a bullfight.² Frequently exhibited together in the same room, these works were first dramatically paired in 2003, in the context of the artist's Tate Modern exhibition *Cruel and Tender*.³ Subsequently, Dijkstra has confirmed that she thinks of the series in tandem, as an expression of an obvious male/female polarity— one she describes as a truthful cliché in her mind, as “women are more protecting and men are more fighting.”⁴ Linked by Dijkstra and the many curators who have followed her lead, these contemporaneous series beg comparison especially in light of Dijkstra's contention that these men and women exhibit particular but parallel responses to “exhausting and life-threatening actions.”⁵ But, I contend that the entwinement functions at a much deeper, interpretive level as well. For, although only one series directly illustrates the maternal figure, I will argue that, consciously or unconsciously, both take motherhood as their ultimate subject. In repeated installations, at the Guggenheim, SFMOMA, Tate Modern and elsewhere, the direct gazes of the subjects in the *New Mothers* and *Bullfighters* photographs seem to confront one another, often squaring off across the

² Rineke Dijkstra took four photographs of Portuguese *forcados* in 1994 and returned six years later in 2000 to take additional photographs, still considered as part of the same series. I will concentrate on the four photographs (2 from 1994 and 2 from 2000) that were exhibited alongside *New Mothers* in the SFMOMA and Guggenheim retrospectives.

³ Most recently, the series have been linked at Dijkstra's retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City in 2012.

⁴ Rineke Dijkstra, “Rineke Dijkstra: Cruel and Tender,” *Tate Modern* video, 5:08, June 5, 2003, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/rineke-dijkstra-cruel-and-tender>.

⁵ Claire Bishop, “Rineke Dijkstra: The Naked Immediacy of Photography,” *Flash Art* 31.203 (Nov. 1998): 89.

expanse of a gallery.⁶ I will suggest in the course of this thesis that this stand-off ought not to be read as an unavoidable form of hostility between man and woman, but as evidence of a universal, psychological struggle through which manhood is ensured via the opposition to and ritualized rejection of the maternal body.

II.

One does not bear children in pain, it's pain that one bears: the child is pain's representative and once delivered moves in for good....But a mother is also marked by pain, she succumbs to it. 'And you, one day a sword will pass through your soul.'
Julie Kristeva, *Stabat Mater*⁷

Before *New Mothers* and *Bullfighters* can be effectively linked, more must be said about their individual properties and the context in which they were made. The series *New Mothers* (Figure 1), completed in 1994, consists of three large-format color photographs, 117.5 cm high by 94.5 cm wide, bordered in white and surrounded by an unobtrusive light brown wooden frame.⁸ The series maintains uniformity through its presentation of the women as centralized, full-length nudes, each holding her delicate infant. Set in unremarkable interior spaces, in which bare floors offer little more than a sense of depth and spatial recession, the photographs in fact show each woman in her house, where it is common for Dutch women to give birth.⁹ Yet, the

⁶ Dijkstra, "Rineke Dijkstra: Cruel and Tender." This literal face-off can most clearly be seen at the beginning of the video showing the *Cruel and Tender* exhibition at the Tate Modern where *New Mothers* and *Bullfighters* are placed directly across from one another on their own sides of the room.

⁷ Julie Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," in *The Female Body in Western Culture*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 104. The line "And you, one day a sword will pass through your soul" refers to Simeon's prophecy to Mary in Luke 2:34-35 where he tells her that Jesus will "cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." He reminds Mary that her son will cause her grief as well, because of their mutual love.

⁸ There is also a pendant work often shown with this group titled *Tia* (1994) that consists of two headshots of a woman named Tia, one taken three weeks after she gave birth and a subsequent photograph five months later. My paper will not contend with this work on account of its lack of continuity with the other *New Mothers* photographs, and its interest in change over time rather than immediacy.

⁹ Medical Billing and Coding, "The 10 Best Countries for Maternity Care," January 22, 2012, accessed December 1, 2013, <http://www.medicalbillingandcoding.org/blog/the-10-best-countries-for-maternity-care/>. Giving birth in the Netherlands is extremely safe and is designed around the care and comfort of the mothers. Thirty percent of all

barren environment thwarts any indication of the comforts of home. The built environment of hardwood floors and plastered walls sharply opposes the obvious, natural nakedness of the mother. The locus of the mother and child is the point of warmth and intimacy, their contact and comfortable fleshiness works to repudiate the empty externality of the constructed building in favor of the mother's body as home. The mother's arms encircle and contain the children as if a physical reminder of their origin within the gestational comfort of the womb. The exposure of the mother and child would perhaps not seem completely out of place in their house, but the glossy print indicative of the camera's penetrative presence calls attention to the unusualness of the situation as photographed. The photographs capture an elusive transitional state of women affected by and returning from childbirth: unclothed, unwashed, and exhausted. As a final indication of the camera's existence, each mother protects her child's face from the flash, obscuring the features and sex.

Rineke Dijkstra has said that she began the *New Mothers* series after attending the birth of a close friend's second child. Dijkstra noted that she was immediately struck by the variety of emotions apparent in her friend's face as she held her squirming newborn and that, as a photographer, she always strives to capture such dynamism in a still frame.¹⁰ In *Julie* (Figure 2), the first photograph of the series, we see the mother a mere hour after she gave birth. Reflecting on the process of making this particular photograph, Dijkstra recalled hearing Julie screaming during labor and remembered hesitating to intrude on such a "private moment."¹¹ Very little time had passed, though, before Dijkstra positioned Julie before her camera, capturing her image after

births take place in the home, while only ten percent use pain medication in assisting the birth. Those mothers that do give birth in the hospital are sent home immediately with the help of a maternity care assistant who stays for a week to support the new mother and child in a domestic context.

¹⁰ Rineke Dijkstra and Lisa Sutcliffe, "Rineke Dijkstra: A Retrospective," gallery exploration, podcast audio, MP3, 17:2, accessed December 1, 2013. <http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/podcast/150>.

¹¹ Jan Estep, "Being Open: Interview with Rineke Dijkstra," *New Art Examiner* 10 (July/Aug. 2001): 54.

only two frames. The resulting work depicts a wide-eyed Julie peering at the viewer from underneath disheveled chestnut brown hair. Her feet are bare and solid on the warm brown hardwood. Of the three *New Mothers* portraits, *Julie* is arguably the most modest nude, clutching her child in such a way that she covers her breasts. She wears the standard-issue stretchy hospice underwear and bulky, absorbent pad typically given to women recuperating after childbirth. She is obviously caught in a vulnerable state, as is her child, whose eyes Julie shields with a protective right hand. The child's delicate state is further emphasized by the brown-red blood clinging to the soft hair on the crown of the baby's head. With her left hand, Julie cups her baby's bottom and, in the process reveals her wedding ring, reminding the viewer of an absent father, excised from this family portrait. The tattoo on her right thigh peeks from beneath the sterile, tight underwear and intrigues the viewer with its unknown sentiment. Her face is a mixture of pride, weariness, and startled exuberance, which led Dijkstra to describe *Julie* as the best photograph of the three, the sitter's visage natural and protective like a "wild animal."¹²

The second photograph in the series, *Saskia* (Figure 3), depicts the mother and her child a week after giving birth via cesarean section. Saskia too stands in her home, in this case, a rather institutional atmosphere with cold, tiled grey floors and stark white walls. With a longer recuperation, Saskia's pose seems more relaxed and less feral. She is also the least covered of the series, revealing her engorged left breast, swollen stomach, and pubic area. Her recent cesarean-section scar's rawness threatens to reopen. She looks at the camera but also seemingly beyond it, with unreadable eyes as dark as her hair. It is her brightly stained cheeks that betray her exhaustion, her flushed face the same color as that of the child's skin cradled to her chest. Of undeterminable sex, the child is contained within Saskia's arms in a pose similar to Julie's baby.

¹² Estep, 54.

Little feet struggle for purchase on her stomach, but Saskia holds him or her by the shoulders and bottom, firmly pressing the baby's form to her flesh.

The third and final photograph in the series, *Tecla*, depicts the mother and child one day after birth (Figure 4). The room's plain white wall leads all focus to Tecla whose wispy hair is loose and falling softly around her face. With lips slightly parted, she conveys a look of tired confusion. Her child cradled in the crook of her elbow and possibly nursing, stretches out its leg, the tiny foot breaking the continuous line of Tecla's body. She appears to have an old vertical cesarean-section scar, perhaps from a former child, and her belly is distended, an emphatic contrast to her otherwise small frame. In a surprising show of intimacy, a streak of blood runs down her leg, a bright red stain arresting the eye of the viewer.

When taken as a whole and viewed against the long history of mother and child images, Dijkstra's *New Mothers* series reminds the viewer that the phenomenon of childbirth disturbs the conventional sense of the body, and especially the female body, as an autonomous containable entity. As Lynda Nead has fittingly put it; historically, "the forms, conventions, and poses of art have worked metaphorically to shore up the female body— to seal orifices and to prevent marginal matter from violating the boundary dividing the inside of the body and the outside, the self from the space of the other."¹³ In the case of Dijkstra's *New Mothers* series, however, Dijkstra submits her photographs as evidence that the recently traumatized bodies of the mothers do not and should not return to that counterfactual myth of self-containedness. Dijkstra's sitters, with their swollen bellies, surgical scars, and bloodstained thighs dramatically instantiate that through childbirth, the internal becomes external, an extremity that is both literal and conceptual. The photographs capture women whose bodies are in flux, at once powerful and transformative but they simultaneously demonstrate that the body is breachable and bloody. The tousled hair,

¹³ Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, (London: Routledge, 1992), 6.

visible scars, and drops of blood serve as anxious reminders that women's bodies and their experience in childbirth could indicate a loss of something vital and whole.

Nine months of gestation and childbirth have left these mothers with swollen breasts and rivulets of blood, evidence of the transmutable maternal body. The photographs show how the dramatic transgression of their own borders in childbirth seems to have furthered their desire to maintain wholeness in the face of loss, an idea played out in protective gestures that minimize the distinction between mother and child. Each mother holds her child to her chest. Both Julie and Saskia press her child to their bodies in such a way that mother and child form a single indivisible shape, separate but indistinguishable in silhouette. Tecla's cradling arms allow the baby's foot to protrude, but no further than the crook of her elbow as if to insist that the child's sovereign extremity still resides within the confines of her own body. Furthermore, the child's helpless state and reliance on the maternal body somatically maintain the once internal attachment. Anne Higonnet astutely notes that "The moment of Dijkstra's photographs is the moment in which the mother and baby have to re-negotiate a relationship apart from each other, in the outer world...In Dijkstra's images, the infant has no other protection but its mother's body."¹⁴ Indeed, the mothers' protective holds make clear the vulnerability of the children who cannot yet walk, talk, or eat on their own. Although no longer physically connected by umbilical blood, an omphalic attachment remains, between two kinds of extremities: the start of a life, and, more conventionally, the arms that work to contain it.

New Mothers exemplifies a desire evident in Dijkstra's larger *oeuvre* to pierce through the tedium of fixed stereotypes in favor of revealing states of transition and vulnerable rawness. Building on her background as a fashion photographer, Dijkstra, who typically uses a 4 by 5 inch

¹⁴ Anne Higonnet, "Making Babies, Painting Bodies: Women, Art and Paula Modersohn-Becker's Productivity," *Women's Art Journal* 30.2 (2009): 21.

field camera, takes several minutes setting up her lights and tripod, thereby giving her subjects ample time to compose themselves or, in some cases, become unsettled in front of the camera lens. This process allows for large-format prints that capture intricate detail with a crispness that often prompts the mistaken notion that they are digital reproductions.¹⁵ Critical reception of her work oscillates from readings that see her photographs as evidence of a positive, sympathetic regard for her subjects, to those interpreting a clinical, almost ethnographic approach. Indeed, some of her critics condemn her method as ruthless and unforgiving, or what Julian Stallabrass has called “the victory of the image world over its human subjects.”¹⁶ For Stallabrass and others, Dijkstra’s hyper real images of important states of transition are falsely controlled through the medium of photography. Furthermore, he writes that the almost life-size depictions reduce complex emotionality of the actual subject as well as the viewer to the silenced inhumanity of a glossy print.

Predictably, Dijkstra objects to reading her works as dispassionate,¹⁷ claiming that she intends to make photographs that register as images of real people with universal experiences and emotions.¹⁸ In an interview with *Artforum* she said “I want to awaken definite sympathies for the person I have photographed.”¹⁹ That sympathy often responds to an aspect of vulnerability within the subjects she has chosen, which the viewer can presumably sense in himself or herself. Dijkstra rarely gives instruction as she shoots her subjects, so their susceptibility and concern over the imminent image often rise to the surface as they struggle to convey what they think she

¹⁵ Higonnet, 20. They are in fact analogue photographs.

¹⁶ Julian Stallabrass, “What’s in a Face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography,” *October* 122, (Fall, 2007): 71-90.

¹⁷ This characterization recalls Susan Sontag’s account of Diane Arbus’ famous photographs of “freaks.” Arbus is a noted influence for Dijkstra as a photographer interested in vulnerable figures and transformational moments. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York: Picador, 1977), 32-45.

¹⁸ Wendy Ewald, *Photowork(s) in Progress/Constructing Identity*, (Exhibitions International, 1998), 24.

¹⁹ Andy Grunberg, “Out of the Blue: The Photographs of Rineke Dijkstra,” *Artforum* 36. 9 (May 1997): 87.

wants. By silencing herself, Dijkstra strives to reach the “gap between intention and effect,”²⁰ or between image and its meaning. This lacuna has been discussed most often in relation to her *Beach Portraits* (1992), a series featuring awkward youths on beaches in the United States and Eastern Europe standing uncomfortably in their ill-fitting swimsuits (Figure 5). As Dijkstra herself puts it, “People think that they present themselves one way, but they cannot help but show something else as well. It’s impossible to have *everything* under control.”²¹ I believe that Dijkstra’s interest in transitional moments finds its fullest potential when she concentrates on people who have recently been through a traumatic experience that taxes the subject beyond any attempt to modulate their emotions or appearance. Indeed, *New Mothers* and *Bullfighters* rely on the exhaustion of the sitters to avoid artificial poses and overly managed emotions.

By way of returning to a more general discussion of the series, I argue that Dijkstra’s *New Mothers* are as much about the traumatic, transformative experience of childbirth as they are about the dynamic between mother and child. This equalization between experience and aftermath separates her work from many past representations of mothers and children in the history of art. These earlier depictions tend to characterize motherhood in terms of instruction or nurturing, thereby judging women binaristically as good or bad.²² The subject of secular motherhood has many precedents in Western art’s history ranging from the rococo sweetness of Fragonard to the intimate closeness of Mary Cassatt. These representations, including Dijkstra’s *New Mothers*, each represent a different perspective of the mother-child relationship, while recalling at their core the Madonna and Child archetype. The depictions of the Madonna and

²⁰ A quote originally by Diane Arbus and appropriated by Dijkstra. Cited in Rineke Dijkstra and Katy Siegel, *Rineke Dijkstra: Portraits*, (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2001), 10.

²¹ Ibid.

²² For a more thorough discussion of the changes in the role of motherhood in history and in the visual arts, Carol Duncan describes in her article how motherhood changed when marriage was redefined to be about love rather than money in the 18th century. Mothers found themselves as purveyors of love and moral instruction. Carol Duncan, “Happy Mothers and Other New Ideas in French Art,” *The Art Bulletin* 55.4 (December 1973): 570-583.

Child reflect Christianity's designation of Mary as the paradigm of motherhood, the giver of life who redeems Eve's original sin and the pain of childbirth with which God punished her. Of course, Mary is the impossible mother freed from sexual sin or pain, and established by the church as *Aeiparthenos* or an eternal virgin.²³ Portrayals of the Madonna and Child show her as nurturing and loving, the pair's intimacy is established by a delicacy of touch. Often, the child's soft hand rests on the Virgin's veil, the Virgin holds Christ in her arms or standing on her lap, or, their faces rest against one another in tender, mutual absorption.

While standard Christian iconography of the Virgin and Christ typically places Christ in relation to a seated or half-length Madonna;²⁴ in contrast, Dijkstra includes and emphasizes the standing, whole body of the mother in *New Mothers* and seems to downplay the presence of the child by averting its face from the viewer and containing it within the framing shape of the mother. Of course, the motivations behind each set of images differ. Whereas Madonna and Child paintings are icons of Jesus Christ as a baby with the Virgin as his intercessor, Dijkstra's portraits reverse that traditional focus, and concentrate on the women they depict, showing them as triumphant mothers holding an embodied symbol of their accomplishment, responsibility, and power. In comparison to Madonna and Child images, Dijkstra's mothers may appear less affectionate initially, but I would argue that the absence of mannered presentation and symbolic accouterments signals their distinctly natural engagement with motherhood. They do not present their children to the viewer, but instead offer themselves as affirmation of their own struggle and accomplishment. By shielding the child's face from the camera, the viewer reads the women as central, with their children as a proud product of *their* labor.

²³ Kristeva, 103.

²⁴ Stewart Buettner, "Images of Modern Motherhood in the Art of Morisot, Cassatt, Modersohn-Becker, Kollwitz," *Woman's Art Journal* 7.2 (Autumn, 1986-Winter, 1987): 15.

Briefly consider a representative example of a Madonna and Child portrait. Leonardo da Vinci's *Madonna and Child (Madonna Litta)* (Figure 6) portrays a youthful Madonna holding a large Christ Child before a window that reveals a fertile landscape. He suckles at her breast and gazes out at the viewer, while she looks down tenderly at him. While Dijkstra also situates the mother and child in solitude without a male figure, her mothers are naked, and look out, fully in control. Dijkstra's photographs inevitably remind the viewer of the archetypal Madonna and Child, but subvert the conventions of this genre through the concentration on their bodies as sites of powerful struggle that produced a child. Additionally, their utter normalcy and corporeality strip them of any sense of a virgin birth, free from pain. Dijkstra's photographs are blatantly about real, as opposed to quasi-divine women; she depicts recent mothers as tired but aware of and reconfiguring their role as woman and as mothers.

If Dijkstra's photographs cannot escape the idea of the Madonna and Child, they also conjure another conventional image—that of the nude, an idea notably associated with male control over female sexuality. The nude as a category of art presents an aestheticized, idealized, passive feminine body on display for visual consumption and mastery by the presumptively male viewer. In *Old Mistresses*, Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker discerningly write:

In art the female nude parallels the effects of the feminine stereotype in art historical discourse. Both confirm male dominance. As a female nude, woman is body, is nature opposed to male culture, which, in turn, is represented by the very act of transforming nature, that is, the female model or motif, into the ordered forms and colour of a cultural artefact, a *work of art*.²⁵

²⁵ Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, (New York: Pandora Press, 1991), 119.

In contrast to nude bodies, *New Mothers* shows distinctly naked women²⁶ and Dijkstra's photographs revel in the power of the naked female body to harbor life in concurrence with the sensual desire that perhaps produced these children in the first place.

Dijkstra's work challenges the need to smooth lines, erase stretch marks, and remove pubic hair by presenting an uncontained, tangible body. Opposed to supine nudes like Giorgione's molded and curved *Sleeping Venus* (1510) (Figure 7), the *New Mothers* are upright, staring directly at the viewer, exposing their pubic areas, and holding the children produced by their bodies. While uprightness does not necessarily indicate a challenge to the category of the nude, the extreme frontality and rigidness of works such as Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (Figure 8) often describe that stance as an allusion to violence and sexuality. According to the myth, Venus was forcefully born from the castrated genitals of the sky god Uranus; hence from a Freudian point of view, her stiff posture is a form of phallic compensation. Her visual beauty and available body, appropriate to her role as goddess of love and sex, complicate the circumstances of her origin. The push and pull between desire, love, and violent births are certainly pertinent themes of *New Mothers*. The meaning of the vertical poses of *Julie*, *Saskia* and *Tecla* and their anxious holds on their children will be explored further in the next sections, which attend explicitly to the fraught topics of sons, sexuality, and castration.

²⁶ Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), 23. In an art historical context, Clark associates the naked body with embarrassment and shame to be without clothes, but the nude body as beautiful and representative of a "body re-formed."

III.

It is the matter of death that makes all the confusion. Bullfighting is the only art in which the artist is in danger of death and in which the degree of brilliance in the performance is left to the fighter's honor.
Ernest Hemingway²⁷

While the full-length shots of Dijkstra's mothers establish their body as evidence of the exhaustive effort that ended with the very child in their arms, in the *Bullfighters* series, the nature of the blood on and activity implied of the depicted men, is confused by Dijkstra's portrait style. She photographed the young men from the chest up, a close range portrait that focuses on their faces and omits any background setting. The *Bullfighters* prints are 90 cm high by 72 cm wide, slightly smaller in size than *New Mothers*, and displayed in white mattes with thin brown frames (Figure 9). The men are all dressed in the traditional costume of a Portuguese bullfighter or *forcado*: brocaded short jackets with slits in the armpits for a full-range of movement, thin ties (black or red), and a red cummerbund. Although their entire body is not shown, one can assume that they also don the traditional khaki knickers, stockings, and black shoes. The sartorial choice, tight and brightly colored, is tailored to exhibit each man as a "herculean and muscular figure...athletes forged in iron and not emaciated sissies."²⁸

Dijkstra completed the series in two phases, the first in 1994, and the second in 2000; however, the photographs are aesthetically coherent and appropriately viewed as a continuous series. Firstly, *Villa Franca de Xira, Portugal* (Figure 10), shot on May 8, 1994, shows a dark-haired young man in a three-quarter view. He looks out at the camera with palpable exhaustion, his lips parted unwittingly. Blood is splattered across his nose and upper left cheek, dotting his tan skin. The viewer is left unsure of whether the blood is his own, that of his fellow *forcados*, or

²⁷ Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*, (New York: Scribner, 1996), 91.

²⁸ A quote by F. Bleu, an early 20th century author in his text *Antes y Despues del Guerra* cited in Adrian Shubert, *Death and Money in the Afternoon: A History of the Spanish Bullfight*, (Darby, PA: Diane Publishing Company, 1999), 96.

the bull's. The shadow of a beard is beginning to show, reminding the viewer that of the hours he has spent in the ring. The blood smudged with sweat and dirt stains his collar and echoes the bright red of his tie. A rip threatens to pull apart the sleeve of his jacket, a savage gash heightening his physical vulnerability beneath the decorative fabric.

Montemor-o Novo, Portugal (Figure 11) taken a few days earlier on May 1, 1994, reveals a tragic visage accentuated by a slumped torso. The man's left shoulder slopes down while his head tilts ever so slightly to the right. His brows are low and dark on his forehead framing his weary eyes, and signal a look of controlled distress, physically evident in his askew tie, stained collar, and unkempt hair. His nose also sits off-center on his face, possibly broken in a former bullfight. He looks piteously at the camera, dried blood congealing on his chin and soaking into the collar of his white shirt. His bright pink jacket, with its double rows of brass buttons droops wearily from his shoulders.

Forte da Casa, Portugal (Figure 12) taken on May 20, 2000, maintains the same format as the previous works. The man looks disconcertingly young, with a round face and side-swept hair mussed from the battle. He is angled slightly to his right, showing his left cheek and forehead speckled with brownish blood. His gaze seems calmer and more collected than the other photographed men and he affects an air of dignity and pride. His poise is only ruffled by his startling youth and the blood on his face and tie that remind the viewer that he faced possible death.

Finally, *Forte da Casa, Portugal* (Figure 13), taken on the same day on May 20, 2000, is the most unnerving among these portraits. The anonymous sitter's hair is close-shaven and he half-smiles at the camera, his lips parted to show his teeth, as if proud of his adventure. His injuries look painful and fresh, blood covering his right cheek and nose, leading to the thick

bandage under his chin, which covers an obscured wound, reminiscent of Julie's absorbent, padded underwear. The red fluid stains the lapel of his jacket and shirt, while his rumpled tie twists unheeded to the side.

Bullfighters can be most basically linked to *New Mothers* through the presentation of the aftermath of grappling with an exhausting, transformative event. However, Dijkstra hesitates to unequivocally equate their experiences as "women make this kind of extreme physical effort. You can't give birth without it, while the men search for it as a kind of adventure."²⁹ It is important to my discussion that these men seek out risky undertakings instead of experiencing fear and pain naturally like the mothers. Their "adventure" is a planned event that designates them as men based on their performance. The mothers have no choice but to give birth.

In Dijkstra's *Bullfighters*, all signs point to instability of identity outside of the performed and sought after role within the ring. The range of expressions from exhausted bewilderment to calmly displayed pride signals the variable outcome of an event that on a surface level should be straightforwardly triumphant. Ostensibly, the viewer did not see the event and therefore cannot determine the artfulness and bravery of each man, but is left to judge them on their bruised faces and torn clothes. Separating them from more conventional images of bullfighters that feature the fighter in the space of the ring, is the fact that Dijkstra does not actually show the "bullfighters" in the ring and the viewer is left to evaluate their identity as such based on their exhausted portrait. Their status as bullfighters and, significantly as men remains in flux. Unlike the women who hold the products of their laborious effort, these men are left on their own to interpret the outcome of the ritualized experience. The women in *New Mothers* are distinctly women, denoted as such by the event of childbirth that grants them that designation without hesitation. Indeed, they have been women since their first menstrual period, whereas boys are held on the tentative

²⁹ Bishop, 89.

clasp of boyhood until some exploit marks them as a man. Certainly the bullfight is a bold manner of destroying childhood with the stab of a sword and the shedding of blood, not unlike a ceremonial menstruation.

These photographs offer the viewer masculine faces attached to the staged battle of a bullfight, a sport with deep symbolic meaning as a formative event for young men in Iberian culture. To become men they must earn that designation through an explicit display of bravery. While most cultural understanding of the bullfight is based on the Spanish model, these men are actually Portuguese bullfighters. Their version of the bullfight still features *cavaleiros* stabbing the bull with *banderilleros*, but does not end in the final match between the *torero* and the bull. Instead, the Portuguese *forcados* work in a group of eight to subdue the bull rather than kill it.³⁰ This does stand in stark contrast to the Spanish bullfight which aims to end in the graphic death of the bull when the bullfighter moves over and between the two horns as if spread legs, thrusting the sword with penetrative finality into the neck of the animal. In Portugal, the bull is butchered out of sight after the event. In both versions of the bullfight though, the bull is no older than four or five years of age and must be a virgin, both sexually and to the sporting event to maintain his virility and likelihood to respond to the taunts of the bullfighters. Although the *forcados* do not engage in the ultimate death of the bull, the threat of death does remain a possibility and their victory still indicates a subtle defeat of the controlling forces of life. Dijkstra's photographs recognize their battle (through blood and exhaustion), but ultimately question its achievement.

³⁰ The Portuguese bullfight is composed of two parts. Firstly, *cavaleiros*, or riders on horseback, work to jab small javelins into the provoked bull's back. The men in Dijkstra's photographs are part of the second half of the entertainment in which a group of eight men stand in the ring with the bull unaided by weapons. One man performs the *pega de caras* (face catch) where he provokes the bull into a charge and then grabs the bull by the horns as he runs forward, while the other men quickly come to his aid to subdue and wrestle the approximately 2,000 lb. beast to the ground.

The construction of manhood through a ritualized event and in opposition to femaleness is ever present in the Portuguese conception of the event. The bull stands at once as a symbol of brute force bested by male power and also as a domineering force to be controlled by the men. The sexual parallels are drawn out by anthropologist Carrie Douglass, who finds constructive similarities in the treatment between the virgin bull and women bound to the Honor Code central to Iberian cultures. For her, while the bull is physically male, “various themes emphasized for women in the Honor Code are echoed in the life of the bull: purity, virginity, marriage enclosures/containment, control by a man.”³¹ Certainly, the spectacle relies on the assertion of control and domination by the bullfighter, a relationship that overrides any sustained concern over the gender of the animal. That the bullfight is a microcosm of larger issues has inspired other psychological interpretations of its relationship to manhood and family.³² I assert that the bullfight cannot be unhinged from matters of sexuality because its goal is the attainment of manhood through an event that is cloaked in perceived masculine qualities such as strength, bravery, and aggression.

Unsurprisingly, society defines masculinity and femininity in stringently dialectical terms. However, in the undisturbed silence of the womb, every fetus begins as female. Undifferentiated at conception, men and women are charged by culture to differentiate their

³¹ Carrie B. Douglass, “‘toro muerto, vaca es’: An Interpretation of the Spanish Bullfight,” *American Ethnologist* 11.2 (May 1984): 250.

³² Of course there are many other interpretations of the bullfight that I will briefly mention to reveal the metaphorical richness of such an event. For example, in Winslow Hunt’s sociological account from his text “On Bullfighting” (1955) the bull and the young matador represent “the story of a battle between a father and a son...after the series of encounters [the son] dominates and defeats the father” (343). L.A. Zurcher and A. Meadow in their article “On Bullfights and Baseball” (1967) consider the event as a symbolic depiction of “the power of the father, the subtle demands of the mother and the fear of the child” resulting in the “child-matador” rejecting and exploding authority by defeating the bull (116). Manuel Delgado Ruiz in *De la muerte de un Dios* (1986) positions the mothers as the victorious figure in the fight, writing that “The triumph of the mothers; a symbolic reenactment of the fate of Spanish men who flee the control of their mother for a temporary freedom that is brought to an end by marriage. The bull is the young man whose dream of freedom is destroyed by the bullfighter, who represents Woman, acting as the agent of the Community, which must impose order on disorder” (167). Since the bullfight ends in the death of the bull (or sometimes of the bullfighter), these interpretations work to explain such a dramatic resolution to a sport as representative of something deeper in the culture.

identity outside the womb that denies that initial oneness. *New Mothers* retains the sense of femaleness by covering the faces and genitals of the children against the bodies of the women. The juxtaposition of the photographs and the lack of a visible phallus on the children held by their mothers in *New Mothers* underscores the need for a masculine identity as drawn out by the *forcados* in *Bullfighters*. In order to establish a separate identity, the men must perform a drastic action such as a bullfight to establish independence and to be publicly marked as heroic and triumphant men.³³

IV.

*Something must be cut: a powerful vital link, an umbilical cord, must be painfully and irreversibly severed.*³⁴
Jean-Joseph Goux

Literary theorist Jean-Joseph Goux's research, namely the book *Oedipus, Philosopher*, provides a productive avenue for considering ritualized rejections of the maternal body, such as the slaughter of a bull in the ring. In his treatise, Goux explores the story of Oedipus in comparison with typical Greek heroic tales in order to point out differences that posit Oedipus as the original philosopher. Goux notes that Oedipus is an anomaly in Greek mythology because he does not follow the traditional outline for Greek heroes. More often, stories follow an older king who, fearing usurpation by a younger man designs to kill his rival; the young hero must escape from the planned murder only to be subjected to other tasks designed for his death; he often must

³³ When I return to this topic I would like to also explore the bullfighters and the mothers in terms of the double-sided Byzantine icon featuring the *Virgin Hodegetria* and the *Man of Sorrows*. The icon has compelling parallels to my comparison of Bullfighters and New Mothers because it features the Madonna and Child on one side and a half-length depiction of Christ after he is taken down from the Cross on the other. He is represented with an expression of sorrowful grief. Discussing the *Man of Sorrows* would also work eloquently as a Christian parallel with my description of New Mothers as modern mothers still associated with the Madonna. Also, the icon would be appropriate in a discussion of bullfighters due to the extreme Catholicism of Iberian cultures. A pertinent example can be found at <http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/features/byzantine/virginmanofsorrows.html>.

³⁴ Jean-Joseph Goux, *Oedipus, Philosopher*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 41.

fight a monster with the help of some sage (god, muse, wise man); and, ultimately, he triumphs, allowing him to marry the daughter of the evil king. This structure defines the myths of Jason, Bellerophon and Perseus. The Oedipus myth differs from a traditional narrative in many ways: he has no help from the gods, he kills the king at the outset, defeats the feminized sphinx through his intellect, and then marries his mother instead of the beautiful maiden. Goux begins to dismantle Freud's Oedipus complex as an essential misunderstanding of the myth, noting that the Sphinx does not stand in for the murder of the father (since Oedipus had already killed the father) and that instead, “matricide is the great unthought element of the Freudian doctrine.”³⁵ Goux emphasizes that in order to avoid Oedipus’ mistake of marrying his mother, a man has to “engage in a confrontation in which his own life is at stake.”³⁶ Because Oedipus did not participate in a violent act toward the “mother-monster,” he is doomed to commit incest.

As I read it, the young men in Dijkstra’s *Bullfighters* are stand-ins for the archetypal hero, just as *Julie*, *Tecla*, and *Saskia* are individuals, while also standing for the idea of the mother. If we follow Goux, the bullfighters can only prove their manhood through a battle that pits their strength against the suffocating bond of motherhood, established at their own bloody birth. Their rebirth as heroes viable to obtain a young, non-incestuous female depends on their ability to participate in a ritualized event of killing a monster such as a bull that is representative of the mother’s encompassing control. The presence of bulls in Greek mythology further substantiates their symbolism as monsters to be defeated. The founder-king of Athens, Theseus, began his reign by slaying the horrendous Minotaur, a man with the head of a bull, dwelling at the center of the Cretan Labyrinth.

³⁵ Goux, 26.

³⁶ Ibid, 27.

Goux determines that a substitution of female attachment, from the mother to the bride, is established through an act of violence not unlike the bullfighter's destruction of the all-mighty bull. He writes:

He can emerge triumphant only if he breaks the powerful bond, delivers himself from the lethal attachment through an act of bloody violence directed against the monster-mother, an act that is also a sacrifice of his own attachment. This matricide alone constitutes the liberation of women, it gives access to the bride, once the dark maternal element has been separated from the bright nuptial feminine element.³⁷

Bullfighters contends with the maternal body through the highly orchestrated performance of a very public ritualized event that marks the transition from boyhood to manhood, a movement negotiated through a declarative statement of manhood and virility. Put bluntly, bullfighting is an extremely gendered activity; socially, through a rigid construction of male machismo and honor, and metaphorically, through the bullfighter's desire to demonstrate mastery over the aggressive bull. The triumphant bullfight concludes with the escape from past reliance on the female presence in the form of the stifling mother to future independent mastery over a female bride. *New Mothers* frustrates the desired independence by foregrounding the hold that *Julie*, *Saskia*, and *Tecla* have on their children. The men's fear of returning to the initial oneness with the mother results in a dramatic resolution. In this case, violence directed to the bull can represent a severance of the umbilical attachment psychologically in place since birth. In order to avoid "the return to the cavern, to the uterus, to hell," the hero must face death and triumph over it, a symbolic rebirth achieved by destroying the "enveloping, clawing, stifling, all-encompassing part of the 'mother,' that part that prevents the young man's growth, keeps him focused on the

³⁷ Goux, 27.

past.”³⁸ I would argue, with the help of Goux, that the bloodied countenances of the *Bullfighters* are signs of their struggle to separate themselves visibly from their mother.

The bull is at once the necessary conduit for severing the maternal attachment, and also the stand-in for the mother-monster herself, just as in Goux’s reading, the Sphinx stands for the mother in *Oedipus Rex*. Oedipus failed to use force to destroy the Sphinx, instead relying on his wits, and in return for his hubris, and the lack of bloodshed, he is destined to consummate his marriage with his own mother. In contrast, Dijkstra’s *Bullfighters* are covered in blood with vaginal gashes on their decorative clothes and have demonstrated their participation in a bloody event to destroy the mothering force that binds the young men to boyhood. This primal mothering force is described emphatically by Goux:

The mother...who binds and captivates her son, holds him back, traps him in the numberless coils of her reptilian attachment. Indeed it is only at the end of a bloody battle against this oppressive and devouring female monster, only when the son has mobilized all of his manly energies to kill her, to free himself from her, that he can marry the princess, the girl he has been promised, who is *not* his mother, and whom the dragon was holding prisoner or to whom she was blocking access.³⁹

This quotation establishes the mothering bond as dangerous and regressive after a certain age of the child, a force that requires direct confrontation to move forward.

Returning to Dijkstra’s two series, and considering them now in tandem, we see that beneath their superficial play of opposites a deeper logic resides. The blood running down Tecla’s leg in Dijkstra’s photograph is indicative of an essential and natural struggle to bring life into the world, and also a reminder of the loss of what once composed and completed her body.

³⁸ Ibid, 27, 42.

³⁹ Goux, 25-26.

The blood smeared along the chins and collars of the young men in *Bullfighters* signifies struggle in the face of death and is received through a contrived, structured, and stylized attempt to attain manhood through the act of murder. Paradoxically, the blood splattered during the fight with the bull represents a freedom as well, since it signals a separation from the mother. Attending to Goux's account, the bullfighters' continued dependence on the mother would have ended in their demise. This transition from boy to man cannot be assumed without a rejection of the mothering body that anxiously sustains a connection with children as substantiated by photographs such as *Tecla*, *Julie*, and *Saskia*. Pointing out the obvious, these bullfighters all have mothers who bore them in pain and watched them subject themselves to potential death in the ring. In a sense, Dijkstra's series of young bullfighters can be symbolically viewed as the adult versions of the infants in *New Mothers*, finally given their own faces and control over their bodies to mark their differentiation from the body of their mothers.⁴⁰

V.

As I have tried to suggest, the power of the *New Mothers*⁴¹ and *Bullfighters* series stems from the sense of dynamism the photographs convey; their ability to suggest change instead of fixity within the static frame of the photograph. But, as I've also tried to argue, apprehension and uncertainty remain central to these captured moments of transition. The *Bullfighters* are anxious portraits of men inconclusively disentangled from the mother and likewise, the fate of Dijkstra's

⁴⁰ Dijkstra actually did return 16 years later in 2010 to photograph the now grown up children in *New Mothers* for *Vrij Nederland*, a Dutch magazine. The photographs can be found at the following website- <http://bintphotobooks.blogspot.com/2010/09/rineke-dijkstra-new-mothers-16-years.html>.

⁴¹ Another idea worth exploration is the difference in titles of the series. *Bullfighters* is purely laconic while *New Mothers* indicates that the newness can stem from their role as recent mothers or from something ideologically new about their position in the world as women and mothers. When I return to this topic I will perhaps address it through the ideas of Luce Irigaray. Her quote "We must not once more kill the mother who was sacrificed to the origins of our culture. We must give her new life, new life to that mother within us and between us," echoes the attempt to reconfigures the role of maternal bodies in society, an idea at play in Dijkstra's illuminating photographs.

New Mothers oscillates between wholeness and loss as they attempt to hold on to their children. The bodily phenomenon of birth not only reconstitutes the body, but more abstractly, it challenges the stability of identity as well. As Dijkstra's photographs of recent mothers attest, women labor to give birth to their children, but just as much, they labor to keep their children in order that their own identities are not threatened by the loss of this dependent, but physically autonomous appendage. Likewise, Dijkstra's photographs of the bullfighters, which stand in my reading as archetypal images of boys on the verge of manhood, evidence of an inconclusive struggle between the bullfighter and his unseen enemy whose defeat must be theatrically performed and ritualistically renewed. The implicit logic of exhibiting *New Mothers* and *Bullfighters* together, displayed within the single space of a gallery, results from their essential and fraught connection established at birth. They are shown separate from one another, but ultimately can never be conclusively divorced or disentangled.

FIGURES



Fig. 1: *New Mothers* exhibition photograph, NYC Guggenheim Museum, *Rineke Dijkstra: A Retrospective*, 2012.



Fig. 2: *Julie*, Den Haag, Netherlands, February 29, 1994, chromogenic print, 117.0 x 94.5 cm, Tate Collection.



Fig. 3: *Saskia, Harderwijk, Netherlands, March 16, 1994*, chromogenic print, 117.5 x 94.5 cm, Tate Collection.



Fig. 4: *Tecla, Amsterdam, Netherlands, May 16, 1994*, chromogenic print, 117.5 x 94.5 cm, Tate Collection.



Fig. 5: *Hilton Head Island, S.C., USA, June 24, 1992*, chromogenic print, 167.9 x 141.4 cm.



Fig. 6: Leonardo da Vinci, *Madonna and Child (Madonna Litta)* ca. 1482, tempera on canvas (transferred from panel), 42 x 33 cm, Hermitage Museum.

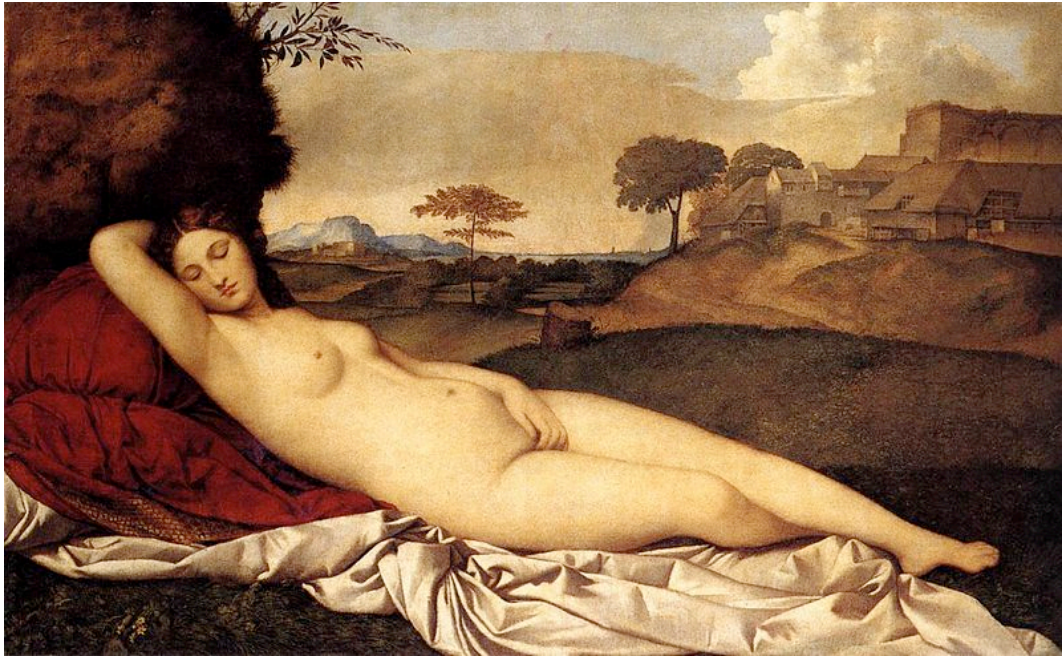


Fig. 7: *Sleeping Venus*, Giorgione, ca. 1510, oil on canvas, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden.

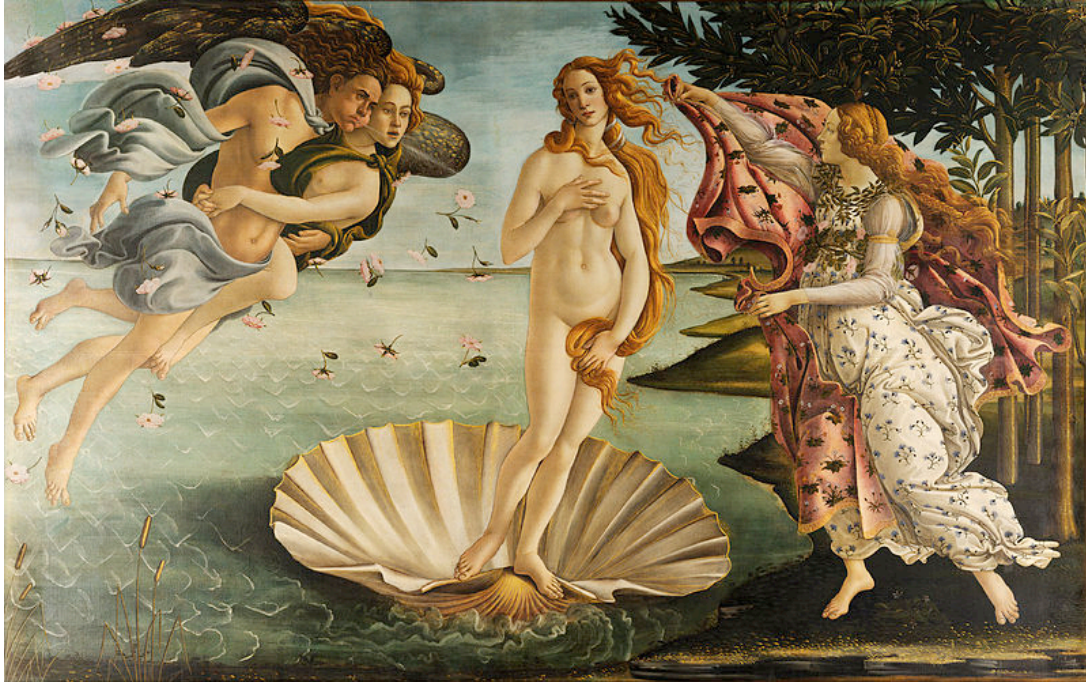


Fig. 8: Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, 1483-1485, tempera on panel, 278.5 x 172.5 cm, Uffizi, Florence.



Fig. 9: *Bullfighters* exhibition photograph, NYC Guggenheim Museum, *Rineke Dijkstra: A Retrospective*, 2012.



Fig. 10: *Villa Franca de Xira, Portugal, May 8, 1994*, chromogenic print, 90 x 72 cm, SFMOMA.



Fig. 11: *Montemor-o Novo, Portugal, May 1, 1994*, chromogenic print, 90 x 72 cm.



Fig. 12: *Forte da Casa, Portugal, May 20, 2000*, chromogenic print, 90 x 72 cm.



Fig. 13: *Forte da Casa, Portugal, May 20, 2000*, chromogenic print, 90 x 72 cm.

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