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Reading with and against in the times of Trump

Submitted to the international journal of qualitative studies in education

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I wonder on how to differently teach in the times of Trump where the old masks of domination (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia) are made more explicit *while* also critically bearing in mind how other larger discourses like neoliberalism shapes our responses to the fascist leanings embodied in Trumpism. I explore how the backdrop of US cultural politics and white supremacy is also shaped by a new form of neoliberal multiculturalism that is meant to further divide collective efforts on the parts of racialized and classed marginalized communities. I close by offering concrete pedagogical strategies so to challenge activist researchers and educators to reconsider how to collectively navigate and resist the impulses inspired by this explicitly bigoted neoliberal times we live in.

KEYWORDS

Trumpism; critical literacy; intersectionality; neoliberalism; pedagogy

Since the election of Trump, navigating social justice work in the current political climate demands different kinds of action in response to the carnivalesque times we reside in (Stallybrass & White, 1986). During these times, both unwieldy and violent, our responses to injustice as activist researchers and educators demand and position both teacher educators and students to further name and rename the many facets of an unjust society. We need to challenge the historical and more recently explicit inequities faced by marginalized youth and their communities within the structures of public schools. I spend significant effort demanding that students read both the word and world (Freire, 2002) and to take up a similar stance in making sense of their own identity investments. And yet, during these strange times of the post-2016 election of Trump, where 'fake news' runs rampant beyond a time and place and where reason or even ideology itself seems to no longer matter, I wonder if my historical use of critical literacy (Janks, 2009) shaped by Freire's (2002) ideas remain relevant in my research and teaching that challenges students I work with to engage in activist struggles.

In this article, I wonder on how to differently teach in the times of Trump where the old masks of domination (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia) are made more explicit *while* also critically bearing in mind how other larger discourses like neoliberalism shapes our responses to the fascist leanings embodied in Trumpism. Specifically, I explore how the backdrop of US cultural politics and white supremacy is also shaped by a new form of neoliberal multiculturalism that is meant to further divide collective efforts on the parts of racialized and classed marginalized communities so to further organize hegemonies that are determined to discipline

(Foucault, 1977) justice work. I begin by tracing this complicated relationship philosophically and I close by offering concrete strategies from my teaching post-2016 election for other activist researchers and educators to reconsider how to collectively navigate and resist the impulses inspired by this explicitly bigoted president, our neoliberal times, and the kinds of populisms the designers of Trump (e.g., Steve Bannon) have organized to keep and further gain the political power they and others hold and intend to further reorganize towards their own hegemonic use.

Since the election of Trump in particular, I have especially challenged my students to first acknowledge and make sense of how their standpoints (Harding, 2004) shape who they believe themselves to be and how they read with and against the often-conflicting social worlds they engage with. I model my own understanding of personal identity investments as a teacher educator and researcher who grew up in Flint, Michigan as a working-class white queer woman who survived childhood and adolescence domestic violence and explore how my standpoints continue to (re)shape my justice work in research and teaching (Pyscher, 2017, 2019). And yet, I find myself in a state of uncertainty in how to reorganize my activism during these times defined by a president like Trump.

Resisting essentialization of the marginalized other by engaging in a different kind of critical literacy

Living under Trumpism and advancing justice against the past and the politics organizing during our current times never exists in a vacuum and has always required direct action and yet, it is crucial to analyze these times through multiple lenses and not rest upon our wariness within the times we face. For me, being from a white working-class community of Flint, Michigan, it became clear on the night of Trump's election that poor and working-class whites from places like Flint overwhelmingly left the Democratic party in droves and literally elected Trump president. These people included childhood neighbors who mentored me and my own brother. Analysis from the *Guardian* (Olson, 2018) captures their collective power that created the narrow path of victory for Trump in 2016 in what popular media refers to as the 'Obama-Trump' voters:

Data from the Voter Study Group show that 9% of Obama's 2012 voters, nearly 6 million people, switched to Trump in 2016 ... President Trump and the Republican party owe their current dominance to this person. They were largely white people without four-year college degrees, and their strategic placement in the Midwest allowed Trump to win five of the midwestern states that had backed Obama twice, thereby giving Trump an electoral college majority and the presidency ... Without the Obama-Trump voter, there is no Trump and no Republican Senate majority.

I was angry and confused as to why 'my people' organized wildly around the rhetoric of Trumpism. I wondered how Trump and the designers of Trumpism (e.g., Steve Bannon) tapped the resistive shared expressions of anarchy that hooks (2009) speaks to between poor black and white people in Appalachian country and carnivalesque materialism that Stallybrass and White (1986) describe in times of social disruption and upheaval that shape the psyche of poor and working-class white people embodied in places like Flint and other post-industrial wastelands of the Midwest. It was a disorienting couple of weeks. I had left Flint when I was 19, and only returned infrequently to visit my mother. I fell into the one-dimensional thinking that childhood and adolescent neighbors who mentored me when I ran away from my parent's home at the age of 15 voted for Trump because they were simply racist bigots. Like many progressive activists that make up my community today, I lost touch of my intersectional sensibilities that Hooks (2009) and Collins and Bilge (2016) always demand we pay attention to. Hooks (2009) revoices consistently in her work the shared blight and anarchy spirit between Appalachia blacks where she grew up and the poor and working-class white people who co-reside in (post)industrial spaces like Appalachia and Flint. She describes this shared blight and anarchy as a way to resist

hegemonic struggle: "Neither of these groups lived near the real white power and privilege governing their lives" (p. 9). She speaks of a particular intersectionality shared between poor and working class black and white people who co-reside in these kinds of spaces:

Efforts on the part of conservative white Kentuckians to exploit and oppress black folk were congruent with the effort to erase and destroy the rebellious sensibility of white mountain folk. The anarchist spirit which had surfaced in the culture of white hillbillies was as much a threat to the imperialist white supremacist capitalist state as any notion of racial equality and racial integration. Consequently, this culture, like the distinctive habits of black agrarian folk, had to be disrupted and ultimately targeted for destruction" (p. 13).

Hooks speaks to the traditional imperialist, white supremacist force that both unites and splits the shared resistance of marginalized communities across race and class. Yet still, I wanted to believe that my family members and neighbors I loved did this solely because of their hidden racism that now explicitly had a stage to stand on with the election of Trump and his vile and explicit expressions of white supremacy. I believe a large number of liberal and progressive activist scholars did the same and continue to do so today.

I then begin to realize that there were strange signs that the people of my mother's poor and working-class neighborhood showed over the past two election cycles of Obama prior to the election of Trump. I was confused and yet still, I held the problematic reality that only 10 years ago when I would drive down my mother's street, I saw waves of Obama signs exuding a feeling of hope from these same neighbors, and when I returned again during the re-election of Obama 4 years later, the signs were mostly gone, and then once again, when I returned in the summer of 2016, Ben Carson and Trump signs reappeared. It was a peculiar experience and yet I held firm in my assumptions that these poor and working-class white people that I knew so intimately must have shown their true bigoted selves. Michael Moore, a popular and outspoken progressive voice of Flint, Michigan has voiced a similar experience too (Boston's NPR news station, October 4, 2018). In fact, his prediction that Trump would win is based on this anecdotal evidence of similar yard signs displayed by the people of Flint and Michigan statewide.

More recently after talking with and interviewing some of these working-class white people of my childhood and adolescent past, my uncomplicated essentialization of them started to unravel. For instance, I interviewed a 64-year-old man who mentored me as 15-year-old runaway talk about his own critical whiteness (Lensmire, 2014) in ways that far surpassed most to all liberal and progressive activists in my life (Pyscher, 2018). Unsolicited, he talked vividly about his struggle to reconcile his own racism and his need to work through his desire to know his personal racist intentions when working with both African-American and Latino cement layers for over 40 years. During the collection of data within these interviews, I also returned to the work of hooks (2009) who painfully and agentically describes her 'coming home' from a long exile to the post-industrial Appalachian mountains of Kentucky. It is here that I was reminded that the words of some poor and working-class whites in the post-industrial wasteland of Flint, Michigan mirrored the shared relationship of anarchy across marginalization that hooks so powerfully captures. I discovered that some neighbors voted for Trump because they were radically interested in tearing down the current system of economics and government. They talked about the kinds of bone breaking labor they endured under the guise of neoliberalism and the conditions of economic recession and other recent policy decisions like the poisoning of the Flint water supply that has shaped the psyche of all Flint residents for the past three or four decades (Pyscher, 2018). They surprised me. One particular neighbor talked at length about his desire for another Jimmy Carter or Bernie Sanders, but did not believe that this type of "kind" president could disrupt the structure. He voted for Trump although he described Obama as a "true gentleman." Although they were disgusted by Trump's overt racism and misogyny, they thought he could be used as a tool to tear it all down. For me, the impact was immediate. My convenient assumptions about their voting intentions did not fit the narrative I placed on them. Both personally

and then later pedagogically with undergraduate students during the Fall of 2018, I decided to engage in a *different* critical reading of “my” people set within the politics of our times as a way to directly challenge the use of those politics by the designers of Trumpism.

Reading with and against ‘texts’

While I have always used critical literacy to read the word and the world (Freire, 2002; Janks, 2009; Shor, 1999) in order to recognize social inequities and promote social justice in both my research and teaching, I fear, like other critical literacy scholars during these times (Dixon & Janks, *In Progress*; Crampton, 2018), that it is no longer an effective approach to making sense of the times we live in where fake news is rampant and where ideology no longer seems to matter. Still, the traditional notions of critical literacy is an important analytic method to understand how marginalized people question power relations, discourses, and identity investments “in a world not yet finished, just, or humane” (Shor, 1999, p. 2). Yet, I feel compelled to engage Janks’ (2019) most recent argument that we move beyond critical literacy’s typical use that “focuses mainly on reading *against* texts” and seek a broader perspective, even if it is uncomfortable for the analyst where in the times of ‘beyond reason,’ “reading *with* and *against* texts requires all students [analysts] to move outside of their discursive comfort zones because it is difficult to read *against* a text you agree with, or with a text you disagree with” (p. 13). I realized that I needed a different kind of critical literacy to understand the impulses behind why some white people of Flint, especially the Obama-Trump voter, could first vote for Obama and then Trump and/or vote for what they described as a despicable president while they desired a president like Jimmy Carter or Bernie Sanders. I had no analytic tools to reconcile these competing differences. Indeed, their desires transgressed ideology. While engaging in this different form of critical literacy, it is also important to ground our critical intentions within the larger discourses shaping our times before, with, and beyond the current impulse of Trumpism. Towards this end, I situate this new critical literacy analytic (Janks, 2019) within the relationships between neoliberalism, multiculturalism, and Trumpism when reading *with* and *against* marginalized others.

Opposing a dangerous conflated discourse: neoliberalism, multiculturalism, and Trumpism

During these times, we also need to reconcile our activist efforts with the advent of neoliberalism (Brown, 2006; Darder, 2012) that emerged in the mid-1980s and identify and resist the confluence between Trumpism, neoliberalism, and what some scholars are calling a neoliberal multiculturalism (Boccarda, 2011; Kymlicka, 2013; Thobani, 2018). Many critical scholars have critiqued this unique brand of global capitalism (neoliberalism) and how it discursively reshapes itself within an old blend of Western epistemologies set in differing phases of modernity (Bauman, 2013) and bigotry (e.g., market driven white supremacies). As an educator and researcher, I remind myself and my students that “neoliberalism is not simply an ideology,” but rather “... constitutes a change to the very nature of political activity itself” (Boccarda, 2011, p. 13). If we assume it is a truism that neoliberalism has become an ontological phenomenon rather than an ideological position, critique of ever emerging forms of neoliberal hegemony must be persistently named and (re)challenged if we intend to reorganize and resist in our research and teaching during this time of Trumpism. Although it is a painful realization, Trump and Trumpism is set in the neoliberal times we exist in. Another competing factor in the difficulty of these times to challenge Trumpism is a more recent emergence of what some critical scholars, who are primarily located outside of education studies, call the rise of a neoliberal multiculturalism. The conflation of these discourses (neoliberalism, multiculturalism, and Trumpism) organize as an

effort to hold back the justice work of the past 50–60 years as seen in the old formation of social multiculturalism.

The neoliberal takeover of historical social formations of multicultural justice work has been critiqued by many critical scholars interested in disturbing the relationship between neoliberalism and multiculturalism (Boccaro, 2011; Hale, 2002; Kymlicka, 2013; Thobani, 2018). Kymlicka (2013), a scholar who researches neoliberal multiculturalism, suggests the cumulative effects of the original social and cultural forms of social liberal multiculturalism morphed more recently into a neoliberal logic that inspired a radical atomization of society (e.g., along racial and classed marginalized experiences) where the essential splitting of shared interests of marginalization for people across race and economic marginalizations has occurred. He (2013) argues: “In the name of emancipating the autonomous individual, neoliberal multiculturalism has eroded the social bonds and solidarities upon which individuals depended, leaving people to fend for themselves as ‘companies of one’ in an increasingly insecure world” (p. 99). He and others suggest that there is a market value for such essentialization and atomization of marginalized others from each other, while holding back a more radical and progressive form of multiculturalism and justice work. For instance, Boccaro (2011) claims that this market driven splitting effect “Puts the accent on a politics of recognition and involves the essentialization of cultures ... and the rendering invisible of structural socio-economic inequalities” (Boccaro, 2011, p. 14). The splitting effect is especially made clear in Larson’s (2018) analysis who builds off of Hale’s (2002) founding critique of neoliberal multiculturalism, when he argues that this newer brand of neoliberal multiculturalism can be seen as “a set of political ideas and practices through which elites allotted a ‘minimal package of cultural rights’ to indigenous groups, but with them introduced ‘an equally vigorous rejection’ of broader demands for collective economic and political justice (Hale, 2002, p. 485).” He argues that “in the process, they created a distinction between the reasonable multicultural reforms supported by ‘recognized’ indigenous cultural groups and the threatening demands of ‘recalcitrant’ Indians” (p. 23).

In my most recent writing I attempt to capture this relationship in my own analysis set in an interview with the 64-year-old cement layer neighbor who I mentioned earlier (Pyscher, 2018). In this context of my personal analysis and in my teaching, I realized that when I used critical literacy as an analytic and not just a tool to understand one’s ideology, it helped to reveal *ontological locations* rather than ideological meanings of why and how marginalized poor and working-class white people of Flint make sense of their own marginalized realities then and now. This type of analytic helped to force me as an analyst to re-engage in a particular intersectionality where I forced myself to read *with* and *against* the transgressive desires of the people I interviewed rather than seeking meaning through my essentializing assumptions about poor and working-class white people in the post-industrial Midwest.

Upon my return from Flint, Michigan during the summer of 2018, I decided I needed to also change my pedagogical commitments in a similar fashion. For the remainder of this article, I describe how I changed my pedagogical commitments to meet this challenge with students during the Fall of 2018. I integrated this same analytic into my own teaching during the post-election times of Trump so that we, my students and I, could attempt to trace a more complicated and painful intersectionality in our work together outlined by Collins and Bilge (2016). I offer a concrete example of what and how this analytic was used in my classroom and the kinds of complicated analyses’ that emerged and how to some extent, offered new strategies in countering the effects of the times we live in under Trump and in this time neoliberal multiculturalism. I came to see that my assumptions of the people of Flint I knew were situated within these hegemonic impulses. I pedagogically illustrate how we engaged in this different form of critical literacy (Janks, 2019) as an effort to dismantle the splitting effects across marginalizations created by the times we live in—both within the discourses of neoliberalism and Trumpism.

Resisting and naming contradictions within a new critical literacy: a teaching example

During the Fall of 2018 I begin to engage in this kind of critical analysis with my students in my Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS) senior seminar themed course. It served as a capstone seminar in WGSS. It involved reading research and popular social media texts related to the relationships between culture, power, and politics as related to trauma, bodies, and resistance. Texts and discussions drew on a wide range of theoretical perspectives ranging from feminist, queer, and postcolonial theory to sociocultural and critical approaches, to name a few. We primarily focused on traditional and recent scholarship of theorists, legal professionals, and activists alongside popular critique to define the relationships within and across trauma, bodies and resistance and to counteract the social processes and theories that “normalize” popular, and often deficit perspectives on the basis of race, gender, domestic violence, sexuality, disability, class, etc ... As a small group, we started with my research related to trauma, bodies, and resistance (2018 & 2016) and then deconstructed what other feminist, queer, and scholars of color had to say about this topic and ended the course exploring what students had to say about the topic within their individual student projects where they reconstructed and mapped intersections between these three areas of study that are undertheorized.

Our intersectional labor included the need to:

- Comprehend theories and theorize of/about bodies, trauma, and resistance and how these various disciplines relate to each other
- Situate traumatic, embodied, and culturally resistive experience(s) in social, historical, temporal, economic, and cultural contexts globally, nationally, and locally
- Articulate social justice and human rights possibilities and limitations as produced in and through intersecting these fields of study
- Explore new frontiers for their own engagement with these intersecting areas and/in related fields of knowledge and practice

Within the course we collectively engaged in critical intersectional rereading’s across marginalized communities (e.g., raced, classed, gendered, queered) perspectives but also reread (analyzed) above engaging with a genealogically eye towards understanding how our activist intentions are being disciplined by the discourses shaping our current times (Foucault, 1977). We documented how alliances and the dismantling of those alliances were set in larger disciplining effects including neoliberalism and white supremacies with special attention paid to understanding our assumptions applied to marginalized others set in neoliberal multiculturalism and Trumpism. It was in these moments that we started to identify the splitting effect between white and black poor and working-class communities that Hooks (2009) describes in her work. The discussions and applications were frank and powerful.

For instance, these pedagogical moves positioned us the ability to deconstruct and attempt to resist the desire to only read *against* our own positioning of poor and working-class white people and to also read *with* and *against* differing perspectives in the context of black liberation and resistance in these times. We started the course by unpacking the effects of what Adichie (2009) describes as the damage of the single-story narrative so to resist the agendas embodied in white supremacies of old, neoliberalism, and Trumpism. In this course, reading with and not just against the intentions of marginalized others required that we view “texts” as representations of the people of Flint and spaces that Hooks (2009) describes in the context of coal mining communities of rural Appalachia. We read both traditional scholarly work related to trauma, bodies and resistance and we engaged in popular texts like Collins and Bilge’s (2016) *Intersectionality*, viewing Moore’s new film *Fahrenheit 11/9* (2018), a documentary film titled *Hillbilly* (York & Rubin, 2018) that featured both poor white and queer perspectives alongside

bell hooks interviews within the film, and spent time at a four hour event on the Lummi Nation at a local First Nations Tribal University viewing the documentary film *Dawnland* (Mazo & Pender-Cudlip, 2018) followed up by contesting panel discussions by First Nation people's related to truth and reconciliation between the State of Washington, local white communities, and Salish Sea First Nation Peoples. We also engaged in the reading with and against other competing conceptualizations related to race and racialization in the U.S. context by engaging in rereading's of conflicting opinions (texts) related to black liberation and what resistance means within these conflicting contexts for black critical scholars. For instance, we critically read and discussed excerpts from Coates' (2015) popular text *Between the World and Me* and then read critique of this same text by black critical scholars like West (2017) and Stephens (2017) so to better make sense of what the contesting perspectives are related to black liberation and the relationship between historical racialized trauma, the impact of white supremacies on the black 'body,' and what black resistance (e.g., BLM) signifies in the current political climate shaped by neoliberalism and Trumpism.

The overall goal of the course was not to find consensus, but rather to better understand how to counter the current times that seem to socially split marginalized people from each other and across intersecting marginalizations as related to historical and real-time social trauma (violence), how often these splitting effects impact their material bodies (e.g., Flint water poisoning, reparations), and to document how they might or indeed, do, resist such disciplining effects. While most 'texts' provided the theoretical context for class discussions, a good majority of the critical and analytical work emerged as a product of the students' contributions, participation, and student work. For instance, student final projects included:

- A documentary film created by a transgender identified student that challenged the damaged single-story narrative of gender dysphoria.
- An emboldened previous student blog related to sexual violence that now includes interviews and analysis of CIS men making sense of their complicity and resistance to the notions of consent.
- A traditional academic paper titled "Biopolitics, Class, and Race in the Water Crisis of Flint, MI and the Lasting Impacts of Coal on Appalachian Health: Searching for a "What Now?" in the face of a Politics of Disability."

Some ending thoughts: creative resistance & intersectional rereading of the 'other'

If we are to oppose this newer form of white supremacist hegemonies embodied in Trumpism, I suggest we engage in the new kind of critical literacy that Janks (2019) calls for. To differently read the actions of multiple marginalized communities affords a turn back towards an intersectional understanding that not only Hooks (2009) describes in the resistance (anarchist spirit) shared across multiple marginalized communities, but to also resist these forces through similar kinds of analytics that Collins and Bilge (2016) and Angela Davis (2017) challenges progressives to reconcile how they lost poor and working-class whites in the post-industrial wastelands of the Midwest during the past election cycle. All three of these prominent female black critical feminist scholars asks us to (re)engage *differently* so to resist old and new forms of disciplining hegemonies (Foucault, 1977). This kind of commitment within our research and pedagogical projects will require activists to read *with* and *against* texts (Janks, 2019) in the ways that are especially needed during these times of Trumpism. Like other social critics, I argue that Trump won because he exploited these fissures (splitting) between marginalized peoples. Trump won because he successfully, or rather the designers of Trumpism like Steve Bannon knew *how* to

strategically exploit the raced and classed anxieties of marginalized others. Ironically, they too exploited and used this different kind of critical literacy for their own hegemonic purposes.

For me to reengage in this different kind of critical rereading is demanding at best because it requires me to listen contrarily to people I have lost love for and to also acknowledge my participation in a larger complicity set in the context of these neoliberal and fascist times under Trump. I am still reconciling why and how the poor and working-class white people of Flint, the people I am from, could vote for Obama and then overwhelming leave the Democratic party in droves to vote for Trump. Our actions will require that we reconsider how to mobilize within the 9% of what is referred to as the Obama-Trump voters or with some of the poor and working-class white populations living in post-industrial wastelands of the Midwest. I am not completely sure if or at least right now, that more radical activists and progressives can differently read and reposition the intentions of these specific marginalized others within an intersectional perspective. I have had so many go arounds with the progressives in my life regarding this dynamic, and for now feel like I found a less essentializing and shaky place to speak from in my effort to reconcile these effects on my personal life, writing, teaching, and activism.

To do such powerful intersectional justice work reminds us of two very powerful realities. First, that Trump and Trumpism is indeed a hegemonic response to the progressive justice work already accomplished over the past 50 or 60 years or so. Second, we must better understand and resist the constant foothold neoliberalism holds over all of our activist work, including its newest reshaping of original social activism (multiculturalism) that was meant and indeed did to an extent, dismantle all kinds of forms of discrimination, and yet, we have to also challenge ourselves to counter the advent of neoliberal multiculturalism that will transcend the current administration. There is no sign yet that neoliberalism nor neoliberal multiculturalism has intentions of ceasing on its own. Our resistance must reckon with this reality both in our activist writing and in our pedagogies. In the slow march of justice, we have to (re)imagine futures together across difference. When Angela Davis visited our campus (Western Washington University) during the Spring of 2017 and spoke about solidarity in the post-election times of Trump, she reminded us to remember the need to ground our collective resistance in black intersectional feminism and find connections across marginalizing experiences. She said:

Some of the same people who voted for Donald Trump were the same people who experienced those shifts, those political and economic shifts. And what I find so depressing, if anything is depressing now, is that we didn't figure out how to build movements that bring people together. Because those white people who ended up following Trump, people who suffered from the same shifts, the political and economic shifts [neoliberalism] ... as vast numbers of black and Latinx people in prison did. And why is it that we were unable to create a movement that allowed people to recognize their common predicament? ... This is what we are confronting now and these are questions that we have to take up ... it is all connected. This is why the feminist notion of intersectionality is so essential for us today (Davis, 2017).

I am making a similar suggestion in this article and I ask other educational activists to meet the challenge of hooks (2009) and Davis (2017) as a technique in engaging in this kind of resistance set in these neoliberal times. This requires us to read *with* and *against* all kinds of marginalized people's intentions not as exclusively ideological, but also ontologically as well. Perhaps this is one important antidote (form of resistance) to the times we have to endure under Trumpism. Equally important, we must find collective ways to continue to resist the discourses embodied in the ever changing neoliberal modernities we will continue to live under and organize against when Trump exits the stage. They will not cease once he disappears, in fact, Trumpism has helped to quicken the fracturing between marginalized others.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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