

Construction and Deconstruction: Self-Identity in Abeyance in Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (1953)

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Abstract

Modern concerns for identity reinforce self-image as an interplay between the desire for individualism and the inevitability of categorization. Self-identity looms not only as a philosophical and/or political claim to self-realization, but also as the disembodiment of Descartes' *cogito*. The implications are numerous: abolishment of the Nietzschean willpower, post-structuralist legitimation of the decentered subject, borderland identities, systematization of social relations, and self-contestation. The aim of this paper is to explore the ways in which Richard Wright constructs and deconstructs identity as a socio-political and cultural statement. The central character of *The Outsider*, Cross Damon, attempts to dismantle the self from the webs of self-identification and social recognition in order to attain a newly-forged identity. Stemming from an innate longing to evade past and present Afro-American subject-roles, Damon's utopian attempt to a future identity ends in an epic-like defeat against the enormous powers of social constraint and surveillance, as embodied in the hunchbacked District Attorney, Ely Houston. The binary relation, personified in Cross Damon and Ely Houston's clash, poses Richard Wright's existential quest for meaning and a critique of society. Richard Wright's dominant query is to what extent the socio-political consolidation and/or claim to self-identity dominates over the dynamic potential of self-construction/sufficiency.

[**Keywords:** Identity, subject, borderland, recognition, post-structuralist, binary]

“Imagine a society like that! It would be an elaborate kind of transparent ant heap in which the most intimate feelings of all the men and women in it would be known, a glass jailhouse in which the subjective existence of each man and woman would be public each living moment [...] And if an alien happened to show up in that ant heap, it would at once become evident because that alien would be at once opaque and, hence, known as alien. And for his spying in this ant heap, each spy would derive, as his reward, a satisfaction from the godlike position which he could assume in relation to his neighbor. This spy would be a complete god, of course; being a complete god would be reserved for the complete dictator. But being a little god was better than being no god at all”

(*The Outsider*, Wright 453).

In a 1953 interview with Hans de Vaal, Richard Wright pinpointed the theme of his novel *The Outsider* (1953) as “man without a home, without rest, without peace, in an industrial culture. The main character of the novel is a Negro,

who does not react as a colored person in a dominating white world, but as a human victim of social circumstances” (158). The specification of the novel’s thematic concern suggests that Wright was combating the political bias of a strictly racialized mode of writing. According to the renowned Afro-American writer, the politicization of Afro-American social presence had impinged heavily upon the canon of Negro literature. Moreover, Wright connoted to an interpretation of the “human soul” not as a color-bound destiny, but a social enactment imprisoned in the vast politics and policies of world affairs.¹ The aim of this paper is to explore the hermeneutics of selfhood and identity in the odd life of an Afro-American character, Cross Damon, who oscillates between the exigencies for freedom and the inability to evade the tenuous codes of social being. The philosophical context, which informs the present reading of Richard Wright’s *The Outsider*, is formulated out of three separate and yet correlated post-structuralist lines of thinking: first, Michel Foucault’s spatialized socialization in the symbiotic discourses of surveillance and discipline; second, Homi Bhabha’s notion of hybridity in the signification of a “third space” in culture and selfhood; and finally, Pierre Bourdieu’s temporality of self-identity. Drawing from the above philosophies of subjectivity and selfhood, the intention is to unravel the extent in which Richard Wright refutes the omnipotence of individual identity, to look into how meaning is attached to selfhood, how identity is caught up in an eternal interplay of extraneous codes of existence, and to reflect on the abeyant experience of the (post)modern subject.

The Outsider comprises of five sections called “Books.” These sections trace Cross Damon’s rite from social conformity and submission to rebellion and deviance, concluding in the protagonist’s tragic annihilation by his alter ego, personified in the hunchbacked District Attorney Ely Houston. Damon is so possessed by hunger for freedom that he ceases the opportunity to adopt a new identity. A subway accident in Chicago enables Damon to evade the harsh realities of his social being and to flee to New York. Once freed from self-representation constraints Damon resumes the role a god: he uninhibitedly toys with people, meddles with social norms and finally commits a series of murders. “Book One: Dread” delineates the main character of the storyline as the typical postal clerk, a quasi-educated Afro-American of the 1950s who performs low-paid duties. Damon comes from a dysfunctional family background, since he was conceived in the unfortunate relationship between his pious mother and a wandering soldier, who shortly after Damon’s birth abandons his family in search of further sensual pleasures. The absence of a father-figure looms heavily upon young Damon. As an adult, he reflects on his past and strikingly halts upon his mother’s obsessive piety, only to explain her odd behavior as a pathetic purging mechanism for her unfortunate choice of a spouse. In fact, Damon is reminiscent of his mother’s desperation to expiate herself from her carnal sins, and this behavior becomes the eminent ground upon which the son plots out the deconstruction of the mother figure. Damon demystifies his mother: he construes her as an insufficient guardian

and a travesty of the noble feelings she preaches. Quite similarly to his mother, though, Damon has for a while cherished the possibility of studying philosophy in academia, only to withdraw from that dream and generally relapse to the cliché of a menial negro worker. Through his readings of philosophy, Damon has tried to tame his reigning inner chaos and acquire trust in human existence. In short, by delving into the world of philosophy, Damon attempts to transpose the practicalities of life in the abstract. Ironically though, he emulates his mother's futile search of inner appeasement through religiosity, but his search differs in that his choices are steady strides towards nihilistic knowledge. Put differently, Damon yearns for reconciliation with world affairs, but is unable to trace the discourse where that communication can thrive.²

Damon is the subject in abeyance *par excellence*. He is ensnared, first by the need to reconstruct his self-identity and second by his drive towards havoc. In his rite to self-awareness, Damon equates social being to a vain game between pretension for the construction of an identity, and compliance for the deconstruction of the very same identity. At the onset of the novel, Damon enacts a process to self-destruction. The text unfolds the profile of the protagonist as the son of a religious, law-abiding woman, the ex-husband of a strict, vindictive wife, the father of three children, the colleague of a set of drunk, uneducated, light-hearted postal clerks and the boyfriend of a voluptuous underage girl. The realities of his every day life are becoming such an unbearable burden that Damon endures true experience through the consumption of alcohol. Momentarily, he confronts the futility of his existence, and so the introduction of the storyline coincides with the contemplation of a suicide attempt:

“He had not eaten all day and, as the alcohol deadened the raw nerves of his twitching stomach, he thought: I'll do it now; I'll end this farce [...] He'd not crawl like a coward through stupid days; to act quickly was the simplest way of jumping through a jungle of problems that plagued him from within and without [...] [H]is chest heaved and he was defenceless against despair. He sprang to the dresser and yanked open a drawer and pulled forth his gun. Trembling feeling the cold blue steel touching his sweaty palm, he lifted the glinting barrel to his right temple, then paused. His feelings were like tumbling dice [...] He wilted, cursed, his breath expiring through parted lips. Choked with self-hate, he flung himself on the bed and buried his face in his hands” (16)

Damon perceives of his life as a “farce,” or the interplay of numerous discourses against his individuality. These discourses comprise of a series of organized human activities, which are essentially processes of surveillance and normalization. In Damon's case, the discourse of surveillance is realized first in the immediate form of familial and work relations, and second in the more abstract and looming control of judicial, religious and penal codes of control. Thus, Damon feels numb

in a state of social entrapment as plotted out by his family, personal relations and a set of state controls, which all overmaster his freedom.

“Choked with self-hate” and pursued by the “pending threat of annihilation,” Damon is ambivalently in full awareness of his desire to live and flinches from suicide (22). However, he is knowledgeable of his inability to master his sense of dread. His nightmarish experience unfolds at the point where he battles between his longing for life and the overwhelming terror stemming from the realities of his personal and social deadlock. Hence, he roams the streets of Chicago in despair, spiritually mutilated by his mother’s austere religiosity, Gladys’s desire for money and Dot’s demand for legal recognition of her pregnancy. Damon wishes that he could “close his eyes and sleep this nightmare away” (87). Lifeless and in agony,

“[h]e felt as though he were already dead and was listening to [Gladys] speak about him. He went out [of the Post Office Union] and did not glance back. He was so depressed that he was not aware of the trampling through the deep snow. About him were sounds that had no meaning” (88).

Damon is at the threshold of a personal crisis. In fact, he is confronted with the lack of logic in personhood. In contrast to the religiosity of his mother, who fervently advocates the necessity to control one’s instincts and to affirm the righteous against the deviant, and much against western society’s demands for compliance and submission to the socio-cultural norm, Damon discerns no rationality in being. In other words, he emerges from within modern metaphysics only to deconstruct any sense of rational personhood. To explain, the western description of self-identity delineates the person as “a centre of awareness, an integrated universe and a distinctive whole [and thirdly as] a bounded entity set contrastively against other such entities” (Shotter 8). However, Damon deconstructs the above tripartite set of personhood since he conceives of identity as “broad, basic definitions of existence [...] already contained implicitly in the general scope of other men’s hopes and fears” (115). In his most sincere phase of self-awareness and just before boarding the subway train, Damon tackles with the world as a vast web of meaningless symbolic practices. Damon boldly defines the individual as a pre-given essence--one that is subjected to the irrational codes of the outside world--or as “a living and acting [that] commenced long before he could have been able to give his real consent” (115). In resonance to the above, “Book One” uninhibitedly reveals the dehumanization of the individual in post-war US and the dread, which overwhelms Damon, springs from the awareness that self-identity is the mediated personhood of an irrational society.

At the beginning of *The Outsider* the discourses of surveillance and discipline impend upon Damon in order to enfeeble his self-control. To align with post-structuralist theory, self-identity is essentially incommensurate as it cannot

be detached from the chaotic extraneous signifier. Society represents this amorphous signifier and the individual is the signified. The process in which the signified (or the individual subject) complies with the socio-cultural norm is materialized through the practices of surveillance and discipline. In the same theoretical context, Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1979) approaches modern society as a mechanism of coercion directed against the individual. For Foucault, organized society is essentially a power structure, which is measured upon the efficiency to regulate the individual's experience in time and space. And the power to control the thoughts and desires of human subjects is best displayed in the jailhouse design of the Panoptikon. To explain, the architectural complex of Jeremy Bentham's Panoptikon is a spatialized form of surveillance, where a building with a tower at the center allows the empowered to watch the prisoners, without the latter having the ability to see or communicate with the other inmates or the wardens. In the Panoptikon, the dual concepts of gaze and visibility become sites of empowerment: the inmates know that they are constantly being watched, a fact which deprives them of physical freedom. Yet, the prisoner, who is the recipient of the power of the gaze, is at the same time the bearer of the knowledge of the gaze, which is being directed at him. And much in similarity to how the prisoner functions in a "gaze" discourse, the warden--who unleashes the inspection--is simultaneously aware of the fact that the power of the gaze may be steered towards him/her at some point in life. Foucault's theorem is that the prisoners and the wardens are at the antipodes of the same system of power relations, and as collectivities--having been emplaced in a given social and spatialized order--they may be representing differing values, they are nevertheless operating and functioning under the same order of things. In short, power relations may be practiced among specific subjects, but the rules and codes of subjugation permeate the whole of society.

In the Foucauldean paradigm of the Panoptikon, gaze and space become the foundational operations of a disciplinary society. As a result, the individual breeds the self with the reality of visibility and the possibility of penetration. Subsequently, modern man/woman reduces self-identity to a disciplinary process for the normalization of subject-difference(s). *The Outsider* commences with the metaphor of difference in an "ant-heap" society, and Damon is the site where this difference is dramatized (453). Damon is an Afro-American who complies with society's dictations in "Book One," but who is also stifled by his lack of individuality. His self-identity of a low-class drunk, who finds himself in legal trouble because of his extra-marital relationship with Dotty, fully implements society's expectations from an Afro-American subject. On the other hand, he transgresses societal norms, when he cherishes his philosophical readings, attempts to deduce a core meaning from social transactions, deconstructs human relations or rejects religion. "Book One" introduces the marginalization of Damon as both a social and a philosophical deviance, so by the time he has the opportunity to evade the (pre)constructed realities of his existence and reform his

identity, he simply reverses the order of social subjugation. In the random incident of a subway accident, Damon seizes the opportunity to escape the gaze of organized society, and in turn to direct his own gaze upon the impairments of social being. Damon does not transgress his experience in Chicago in order to escape his past, but attempts the reconstruction of his identity in New York as an empowered and austere social critic.

Wright's most salient argument in *The Outsider* is that the reconceptualization of post-war US does not mean that societal values perish. More to the point, the text suggests that the codes of identity formation persist despite one's efforts to evade them. Thus, in "Book Two: Dream" and "Book Three: Descent" Damon enters the same world order in New York albeit from a different standpoint. After the subway accident, Damon re-surfaces social relations first with the power of the gaze to himself, and second from the vantage point to examine and oversee the operative rules of society. Put differently, the subway accident validates a change of space and a reversal of power relations. As for the term space, it does not relate simply to the actual geographical presence of a given subject. According to Michel de Certeau, the term space relates to the cultural trajectory that determines "conditions of possibility. It is the practice of space that is already constructed when it introduces an innovation or a displacement. By 'place' [de Certeau] mean[s] the determined and differentiated places organized by the economic system, social hierarchies, the various types of syntax in a language, traditions of custom and mentality, psychological structures" (145). In short, the term "space" relates to all forms of socio-cultural practice, and the reshuffling of space relations is ultimately a political act of reversal. In alignment with de Certeau's post-structuralist theory, "cultural operations are movements" (145). And in Damon's case the operative system he devises as being within and at the same time outside society is a political act *per se*. In fact, after the subway accident Damon does not pursue personal freedom or bliss. Instead, he appears to immerse himself in an obsessive reassessment of standardized values of selfhood.

Damon embodies the act of migration, but not in the sense of an outlaw or anarchistic creed. If anarchy is the political act of fleeing from all forms of organized social formations in order to upturn them, Damon does not truly escape any socio-political system and in no point of the story line does he exemplify the wish to overrule any order of things. Damon may be fleeing from the past, but his detachment is a transposition and not a metamorphosis. In different terms, Damon is transferring or migrating the self from a certain spatialized dimension in Chicago only to enter the same social context in New York. The description of the train ride in Chicago just before the crash scene is symbolic of his impending rebirth and comeback:

"Diving into the subway, he paid his fare and, two minutes later, when a train roared up, walked into the first coach and sank into a seat, closing his

eyes. The train pulled into motion; he opened his eyes and noticed that another Negro, shabbily dressed, of about his own color and build, was sitting across the aisle from him. The movement of the coach rocked some of the tension out of him, but not enough to let him relax. Restlessness made him rise and go to the front window and stand looking at the two ribbons of steel rails sliding under the train. A moment later, when the train was streaking through the underground, darkness suddenly gouged his eyes and a clap of thunder smote his ears. He was spinning through space, his body smashing against steel; then he was aware of being lifted and brutally catapulted through black space and, while he was tossed, screams of men and women rent the black air" (92-3).

The train is the capsule which releases Damon to the world; the underground tube is the route he follows out of the womb of Chicago, and the mother figure is symbolically perceived as vast society. Damon's embryonic and nullified state on the train is revitalized in the crash; and the train ride becomes the site of his resurrection. However, the monstrous prodigy that Damon becomes in New York is persistently alluded since "Book One" delineates society as a chaotic point of origin.

While Damon switches roles of social enactment, he nicely fits the metaphor of migration. His migration is a motif which suggests "the activity of displacement" (Bhabha 210). The protagonist of *The Outsider* retreats from a certain subject-role in order to rehash a new name-identity without though changing the cultural practices and priorities which he enters and re-enters in the ensuing four sections of the novel. Damon's migration stems from an elusive yearn to reassess his self-identity within the allegories of a racist, interpolated social status quo. In different terms, Damon commences his pilgrim to self-identification from the position of having lost "the sovereignty of the self" (Bhabha 213). The loss of the individual dimension and the entailing empowerment of society are the driving forces behind his multiple transformations. So, once released from his tenacious self-representation in Chicago, Damon relocates himself in the organized life transactions of New York and toys with the characters involved in them. In fact, he becomes a trickster figure, who appears and then vanishes from the plot with the charm of a mischievous first born. In consequence, he willingly and gladly socializes with a hotel prostitute, affiliates a gullible woman in New York, enters the world of the Communist Party and astonishingly revels in the philosophical conversations he holds with the District Attorney Ely Houston.

Damon is the trickster figure *par excellence*. He is the character who appears and re-appears in the *mise-en-scene* of social enactment, juggles with the misconceptions of other characters and relishes the insanity of modern life. In view of that, he shows no remorse over the murders he commits because he has leapt into the dimension of a semi-god, a deity who despotically resumes the right

to grant and abolish life. “Book Four: Despair” depicts Damon as a ruthless perpetrator and anti-social abuser:

“There was in him no regret for what he had done; no, none at all. But how could he have done it? He [...] had acted like a little god. He had stood amidst those red and flickering shadows, tense and consumed with cold rage, and had judged them and had found them guilty of insulting his sense of life and had carried out a sentence of death upon them [...] He had assumed the role of policeman, judge, supreme court, and executioner,- all in one swift and terrible moment” (308).

Damon’s newly acquired polysemous identity after the accident in Chicago is not an identification, but a mere hovering over social-life. According to Homi Bhabha, “identification is a process of identifying with and through another object, an object of otherness, at which point the agency of identification-the subject- is itself always ambivalent, because of the intervention of that otherness” (211). In the same mode of existence, Damon opts for a different identity, but he does not legitimate this self-difference with the basic human instinct to socialization. Simply put, Damon denies both identification and collectivization, a denial which in turn positions him in a hybrid state of existence. Hybridity is a state of constant displacement, or according to Bhabha “the third space which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom” (211). Similarly, Damon devises a “third space” in New York, which does not connote to a fixed reality, but to a hybrid sense of existence.³ Moreover, this displaced sense of being, which refutes the dogmas of a holistic identity and of organic society, is a political act of weakening what Bhabha calls society’s “received wisdom.”

In the same frame of thinking, “Book Two” shows Damon savouring of his hybridity in the philosophical negotiations he holds with Ely Houston on the train to New York. Damon performs a sincere and daring dismantling of religious and political matrixes, which is his tactic at deconstructing the stability and sovereignty of the modern self. In fact, the initial encounter with Ely Houston dismantles Damon’s nihilistic theory of human existence:

“Is not life exactly what it ought to be, in a certain sense? [...] If you’ve a notion of what man’s heart is, wouldn’t you say that maybe the whole effort of man on earth to build a civilization is simply man’s frantic and frightened attempt to hide himself from himself? That there is a part of man that man wants to reject? Man may be just anything at all. And maybe man deep down suspects this, really knows this, kind of dreams that it is true; but at the same time he does not want really to know it?” (171-2)

According to Damon, man is elusive because “he hides from himself” (171). The protagonist of *The Outsider* perceives of man as caught up in a psychological agony to escape the awareness of his inner chaos, which in turn gives rise to a symbol-framing type of existence. Social values, cultural symbols, religious icons and political creeds are mere means of covering up man’s hollowness. Damon’s hybridity--or displaced self-identity--arises from the fact that the deconstruction of man’s identity cannot be supplemented by attempts to reconstruction. In New York, Damon assumes an impervious stance to world affairs: he devises the role of an outsider or an untouchable, who ponders over everyday experience without wishing to participate in it as a legitimate subject. At no point does he venture on the reformation of the world nor does he exhibit any true altruistic emotions. Instead, he plunges into a philosophical demystification of socio-political norms without exemplifying any desire to re-enter and relocate himself in social interactions.

The train accident validates the illusion of freedom from legal commitments to Damon’s ex-wife, sons and girlfriend, from the financial bindings to the post office union and from the ethical responsibility to his mother. However, this accidental state of civic and moral non-existence is at the same time a point of reference for the future. In Pierre Bourdieu’s terms, Damon’s *habitus* is what relates the past, the present and the future in a complex bounded whole. According to Bourdieu, *habitus* “is a product of history [...] a system of dispositions- a present past that tends to perpetuate itself into the future by reactivation in similarly structured practices, an internal law [...] the principle of continuity and regularity which objectivism sees in social practices” (54) Damon is trapped in a temporal interplay between past, present and future. Hence, the subject’s present attempt at articulating a novice identity is always already in abeyance because such an attempt relates either to a pre-existent or to a hypothetical future temporal dimension. As a social subject Damon falls in the pitfall of falsely believing that he can strip the self from emotions and attachments aligned to the past. First, by eradicating family ties with his mother, ex-wife and three children, then by refuting the responsibility to stand by Dotty on her out of wedlock pregnancy and also by dislocating the self from the webs of his work and social environment, Damon attempts to break free from a previous self-representation. Damon’s former identity profile in Chicago may well be perceived as a construction or a post-structuralist product of social, cultural and political broodings. In different terms, the text alludes to a fragmented sense of the self as it springs out of the foundational categories of race, class, and culture. And in an epic-like fashion, Damon feels the immense weight of those normalising social processes, disavows them and then tries to reconstruct who he is. However, this present attempt relates to past experiences; and both past and present formulate the future: what Damon becomes in the present is indissolubly connected to who he was and who he aspires to become.

In conclusion, the fact that Damon immediately summons the opportunity of the train crash in order to refute the webs of his legal and moral entrapment betrays a nascent desire to re-articulate his self-identity. Yet, he does not do so in order to distance himself from society or to reform his immediate past existence, since he ironically re-enters the same social context he escapes. Moreover, Damon is neither pursuing a reformation of a given world order, nor does he persistently intervene the allegories or allocated subject-roles of post-war US. Instead, he embarks upon a solitary pilgrim to individual insight. Damon negotiates the past, but in a solitary mode. In other words, he does not exhibit any wish to re-empower his self-identity within world affairs in a legitimate or recognizable way. More to the point, he encounters the fully immersed members of society with a sadistic aura: the way he addresses the characters he meets, whether Afro-Americans in the ghetto, white-American racists working in public offices, the police or members of his family, is devoid of any humanitarian purpose. His transactions reveal a hedonistic desire to toy with the world and laugh at an irrational world order. At no point in the storyline does Damon show any appreciation of social life nor does he connote to any optimism as far as social being is concerned. And this is where Damon commits the ultimate sin against society: by assuming the role of an outsider Damon misappropriates his social invisibility, encroaches upon human gullibility and abuses his authority as a non-subject to steer and govern human relations. Damon's hubris is dramatized when he re-enters society in defiance of the absolute power of organized life. And the concluding pathos of Cross Damon's death enacted in Richard Wright's *The Outsider* is the epic punishment impinged upon a character who contemptuously and sacrilegious disregards the supremacy and predominance of a harsh society.

Notes

¹In 1955, notably a heated period of time before the outburst of the Civil Rights Movement, Richard Wright gave an interview to *L'Express* which was daringly entitled "Richard Wright: I Curse the Day When for the First Time I Heard the Word 'Politics.'" To the question "Are your favourite heroes in real life in literature?," Wright responds "I have no political heroes in life; all politicians to me are misfortunes. My heroes are medical and scientific ones [...] In literature some of my heroes are Rashkolnikov in Dostoevsky's 'Crime and Punishment'; The I of Proust's 'A Remembrance of Things Past'; K for Kafka's 'The Trial'; Melanctha of Gertrude Stein's 'Three Lives'; and Nietzsche in his own 'Thus Spake Zarathustra'" (165). Wright candidly distances himself from political mechanisms, and directs his focus and admiration to those seminal literary texts which tackle with the processes of identity-formation and self-conceptualization.

² The notion of discourse, which is in its essence a system of statements that can be made about peoples and among communalities, is drawn from Said's *Orientalism* (1978). According to Said, the world's groups of people are involved in political, ideological, cultural and ethical discourses, where power relations are played out and the sense of one's self is formulated. To quote Said: "A discourse is a system of statements within which, and by which, the world can be known. Rather than referring to 'speech' in the traditional sense, [the] notion of discourse is a firmly bounded area of knowledge. [...] [T]he world is not simply 'there' to be talked about, rather it is discourse itself within which the world comes into being. It is also in such a discourse that speakers and hearers, writers and readers, come to an understanding about themselves, their relationship to each other and their place in the world (the construction of subjectivity). It is that complex of signs and practices that organises social existence and social reproduction, which determines how experiences and identities are categorized" (3).

³ According to Homi Bhabha "the importance of hybridity is that it bears the traces of those feelings and practices which inform it, just like a translation, so that hybridity puts together the traces of certain other meanings or discourses. It does not give them the authority of being prior in the sense of being original: they are prior only in the sense of being anterior. The process of cultural hybridity gives rises to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" (211).

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