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# Artistic Expressions of the Covid-19 Pandemic: Ideology and Otherness in the digital comic "The Wuhan I Know" by Laura Gao

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the graphic memoir "The Wuhan I know" (Gao, 2020) that was published on the WWW and social networks during the first stage of the Covid-19 pandemic. The comic narrates the discrimination towards Asians and in particular towards Wuhanese in the United States during the pandemic. The comic is approached from a postcolonial perspective and nodal conceptual concepts such as ideology, identity, and Otherness. Umberto Eco's theory (2008) has been followed to study the structure of the comic as an ideological statement. The analytical reading concludes that in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, "The Wuhan I Know" acquires epistemic salience in a continuum of discriminatory discourses that it attempts to deconstruct.

**Keywords:** covid-19 pandemic- graphic memoir- ideology-otherness-Laura Gao

## Introduction

In the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, art, as an aesthetic, political, and social activity, became one of the many forms of agency to re-signify the emerging worldview generated as a result of the pandemic mega-crisis. Our condition of "*homo narrans*" (Fisher, 1985, p. 74) was located at the epicenter of the crisis and many of the artistic productions emerged *in situ*. One of the novelties of the artistic sphere during the quarantine period due to Covid-19 was precisely the synchronic character of the productions. The processes of genesis, creation, transmission, reading, visualization, and social materialization of artistic creations took place simultaneously with the experience of the global critical scenario. In addition to this, digitalization and virtualization were almost *sine qua non*-conditions of the artistic fact, since the forms of production and circulation during the isolation period were carried out through social networks and the World Wide Web. Virtuality as an emerging logic generated a transnational flow of artistic productions during the quarantine that made it possible to cross national borders.

According to philosopher Byung-Chul-Han, the covid virus is a mirror; it shows the society in which we live (in Sigüenza and Rebollo, 2020, paragraph 8).

From an ethical and aesthetic responsibility, it is then worth asking ourselves: What aspects does this mirror reflect, therefore, that have been irradiated during this planetary crisis? Thinkers such as Zizek (2020), Morin (2020), Byung-Chul Han (2020b), among many others, highlight some idiosyncrasies that the crisis of the coronavirus has exposed: the failure of capitalism and globalization, the violence that human beings practice on nature, human fragility, the erosion and disarticulation of modern institutions, the accentuation of social classes, the expulsion of Otherness, the decline of religious creeds, etc. For Gonfiantini (2020), the virus exposes a crisis of neoliberalism within a society that expels the different, the Other (p. 167). Our work is interested in this latter aspect: Otherness intensified, stereotyped and recrudesced by the pandemic, as one of the many thematizations that burst into art from the isolation generated by the state of sanitary, economic, political, and socio-cultural crisis caused by COVID-19.

Art has always channeled representations and configurations of pathogenic crises. The theme of plagues covers a wide range of discursive genres, formats, and artistic languages: literature, cinema, plastic arts, comics, photographs, etc., which are distinguished not only for representing the sanitary reality of the crisis but also for deploying metaphors and meanings that thematize the concern about the attack on human life at both biological and socio-cultural levels. Since ancient times, chaos and social collapse in the wake of an epidemic crisis have been a recurring theme in art, in which, according

to Girard (1974), the victimization of the Other has been used as a mechanism of cathartic purging (p. 842).

Based on the relationship between the Covid-19 pandemic and the construct of "Otherness", this paper proposes a critical reading of the autobiographical comic "The Wuhan I know" created by Wuhanese-American artist Laura Gao and published on the web and social networks during the quarantine. We start from the hypothesis that in this comic the condition of being the Other emerges as part of a complex web of the pandemic crisis, revealing the tension between the enduring dichotomy "selfhood and otherness" established by the ideology of capitalism in modernity (Dussel, 1992). The frame of interpretation will be given by theories that, based on postcolonial paradigms, explore the otherness-identity binomial along with processes of othering and stigmatization. A postcolonial perspective makes it possible to unravel underlying aspects of the pandemic by taking into account, according to Go (2020, p. 10), the invisible structures of imperial domination and their correlates, which shaped the current social systems, problems, and challenges exposed by the pandemic, left by former colonial governments or oppressed regimes. As it involves power relations and structures, such a problem necessarily requires a conceptualization of ideology, which we take from the proposal developed by Ludovico Silva in *Teoría y práctica de la ideología* (1978). Silva defines ideology based on Marx's theory but complements it with contributions from the contemporary historical moment (a critical theory of society). We also have

recoursed to Umberto Eco's view in *Apocalípticos e Integrados* (2008), which will also allow us to question the structure of the comic as an ideological statement.

### Theoretical Framework

#### Otherness, Identity and Ideology

For Ludovico Silva (1978), ideology is a system of values, beliefs, and representations necessarily self-generated by societies in whose structure there are relations of exploitation, to ideally justify their material structure of exploitation, consecrating it in the minds of people as a "natural" and inevitable order, or philosophically speaking, as "an essential note" or *quidditas* of the human being (p. 20). Therefore, the "ideas" of ideology are not simply a system of ideas, nor do they allude to the science of ideas. For Silva, the ideas of ideology are beliefs; they are not judgments, they are prejudices; they are not the result of an individual theoretical effort, but the social accumulation of *idées reçues* or commonplaces; they are not theories created by individuals of any social class, but values and beliefs disseminated by the economically dominant class.

In the same order of things, Silva (1978, p. 24) points out that it is not ideas that dominate history, but rather, it is history that dominates ideas. In this sense, the idea of coloniality and colonization is not the one that has produced a colonialist and a colonized society, but instead, colonialism has emerged from productive material forces, that is, as a justification of a material state that caused the colonialist society, and then the ideological justification of colonialism has arisen

(Silva, 1978, p. 25). Thus, the construction of a demonized and stereotyped Other emerged as a necessity to justify the material apparatus of imperialism.

With the beginning of modernity (1492), "the era of the production of the Other" (Baudrillard, 2000, p. 113) is inaugurated and we enter into an exponential relationship with an artificial other, the fruit of a relationship of inequality. Also, for Dussel (1992), the Same/Other tension begins with the growing installation of modern coloniality; the dominant identity imposes the value of its singularity and devalues Otherness by imposing discriminatory, prejudiced, and stereotypical measures.

From modernity onwards, the configuration of identities and Othernesses has been determined by categories constructed by westernism and coloniality. For Hall (1999, p. 351), who follows Foucauldian thought, every regime of representation is a regime of power formed by the fateful duplicity of knowledge/power. Power regimes not only position certain identities as the Other of their dominant discourse, but also subject them to that knowledge not just as a problem of imposed will and domination, but also thanks to the power of internal coercion and subjective shaping concerning the norm. Silva (1978, p. 20) emphasizes that ideology works in the non-conscious zones of the psyche, preserving (in a false consciousness) representations that seem forgotten but which act as a "moral imperative" and determine the functioning of a society. In this aspect, he coincides with Quijano's

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decolonial conceptualization of the coloniality of power, which leads to internalizing and naturalizing hegemonic thought and to acting accordingly.

Specifically, about comics, Silva (1978) points out that there is ideology in comics, and it is specifically an imperialist ideology -when he refers to the U.S. cultural market for comics (p. 123). The ideological form is the hidden message, which consists of the assumptions upon which the comics are developed. Assumptions such as that the Chinese are communist and therefore bad, and Americans are democratic and good, create a gigantic hidden network, like an internal mesh that constitutes the ideological picture suggested or assumed by comics (p. 124). Other comics present more overt messages, that is, the ideology is not concealed but communicated explicitly. Whatever the case may be, Silva proposes, on the one hand, to detect and unmask ideology in comics, and on the other, to combat such ideology with the same weapon: comics.

On a similar level, Umberto Eco (1984) suggests a critical look for reading comics that takes into account not only the structure, the plot, and the stylistic means but also the level of implicit ideological values. Eco's approach focuses on exploring the comic's form but also on linking how its particular *koiné* deploys an ideological statement concerning a universe of values. For Eco, the semantics of the comic therefore includes iconographic elements that communicate certain ideological meanings.

### **Otherness and Pandemics**

According to Banerjee, Kallivayalil, and Rao (2020), processes of othering and segregation have been accentuated during epidemics and pandemics. During epidemics, societies develop defense mechanisms against their fear of the unknown, loss of control, and related social, political, and economic consequences. The "Other" is objectified for the purpose of blame and also to establish boundaries between identities, stigmatizing immigrants and other marginalized groups as "disease transmission" (Castañeda, 2010, p. 10). During the bubonic plague of the 13th century, the Catholic Church blamed the Jews for poisoning the water and spreading the disease; many Jews were burnt as punishment for being responsible for the plague (Banerjee, Kallivayalil and Rao, 2020, p. 103). Another classic example is that of leprosy, which historically was a disease of stigmatization, hatred, and marginalization. Those affected were considered "sinners" and were socially marginalized. Consequently, they were victims of neglect and defective treatment (p. 104). A further example might be those Chinese migrants to North America who were regularly scapegoated during episodes of smallpox outbreaks in the late 19th century (Dionne and Turkmen, 2020, p. 216).

The naming of epidemics, plagues, and viruses in certain ways has also reflected attitudes of hatred and socio-cultural stigmatization. Generally, labels based on nationality, ethnicity, class, or gender have been used to name pathogens.

Such is the case of "the gay plague" to refer to the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome; "Spanish fever" to denote the 1918 H1N1A influenza outbreak; "Typhoid Mary" to label the woman identified as the first carrier of the typhoid virus in the New York outbreak in the early 20th century; or the "Ebola" virus, named after a river in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Banerjee, Kallivayalil, and Rao (2020, p. 104) point out that with the use of such designations, over the years people tend to forget the true origin of the disease and only remember the label associated with it. In the current COVID-19 crisis, because the epicenter of the pandemic occurred in Wuhan, China, US President Donald Trump referred to the SARS-CoV-2 virus as "Chinese virus" or "Kung Flu". The viralization of such expressions, fueled by fear of the virus and the unknown, alongside the need to find a scapegoat, perpetuated anti-Asian sentiments and xenophobia, especially during the early stages of the pandemic. Such statements, being ideological and prejudiced, might have the function of justifying and preserving the material order of the economic-social formations of the US, to gain and dominate the global market by annihilating its giant competitor, China. In other words, the racist ideology against Asian minorities in the US is the self-generated justification of a material structure of exploitation that is promoted as a natural social order.

### **"The Wuhan I know": Coronavirus and Otherness in a Narrative of the Self**

Retaking the idea that Ludovico Silva presents in "Los comics y

suideología, vistos al revés"<sup>1</sup>(1978), one way to combat discursive ideological penetration in a society is by using the same weapon: mass media discourse. Such seems to be Laura Gao's perspective when publishing her digital comic "The Wuhan I know" since it constitutes a statement of dissent against the anti-Asian discriminatory discourses that circulated in the US during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Writer and comic artist Laura Gao was born in Wuhan (China) and at the age of 3 moved to the US, where she has resided ever since. In March 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Gao published a graphic memoir called "The Wuhan I know" shortly after her hometown made headlines around the world as the "culprit" geography of the pandemic. In this memoir, the voice of Otherness is perceived; as a first-person voice, that attempts to de-stereotype a city, its inhabitants, and its culture, of which the narrator is a part.

"The Wuhan I know" is a short autobiographical comic narrated from the margins, both in terms of the genre chosen to write and from the socio-cultural place from which the author writes. As a cultural artifact, it is located on the border of canonical genres: Gao's narrative is a graphic memoir, a genre not usually contemplated by the hard critical apparatus as part of the canonical universe, and for a long time cataloged as a cultural by-product. One of the most important contributions in this sense is that of Italian

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<sup>1</sup> Comics and their ideology, seen upside down (author's translation).

semiotician Umberto Eco, who has constituted comics as an object of criticism, considering them as messages of great relevance and respectability. As for graphic autobiography, in particular, more recent critical perspectives, such as those of El Refaie (2012) and Herman (2002) consider it as a genuine artistic product, whose porosity builds a hybrid idiosyncrasy both from the literary arena and from the visual arts. Graphic autobiography, also called graphic memoir, autographic (Whitlock 2006), or autobiographical comic (Beaty, 2007) imbricate visual and verbal textual modes that construct a narrative of the self. Unlike the more extensive graphic novels, graphic memoirs stick their narrative to a particularly significant moment or episode in the life of a subject (Herman, 2011).

The emergence of the trans-modern paradigm has challenged stagnant assumptions not only about the forms that autobiography can take but also about who can legitimately write autobiographical accounts. Gradually, autobiography has been transformed into a writing tool for minority groups to express their voices and recount their experiences. Historically, autobiography emerged as a literary genre reserved almost exclusively for male voices, especially when the genre gained recognition in the seventeenth century. At first, scholarly debates about autobiography focused on texts by "great men" such as St. Augustine, Rousseau, or Wordsworth. In their debates, scholars tended to draw on essentialist notions of a unique, autonomous, rational, and coherent self (El Refaie, 2012, p. 17). For Hartman (2002, p. 10), the growth of

autobiographical literature in recent decades can be linked to the disruptive influences of increasing mobility, since in telling their life stories many people draw on experiences of displacement or diasporas, or living in a different culture. "The Wuhan I know" clearly positions itself in such a terrain, as it is an explicitly dialogic text that incorporates the voices and perspectives of an identity-Other. Gao, as a subject of the Asian diaspora, writes from the margins of the hegemonic host culture (US) and opts for the genre of the graphic memoir to configure a social and historical inscription of the self in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. The comic narrates the identity experience of being a Wuhanese in Texas, highlighting the racial prejudices underlying the pandemic.

"The Wuhan I Know" is spatialized through a series of vertically ordered vignettes in which Gao combines photographs of her life, drawings, and verbal texts. The vignettes have no frame, i.e., there is no indication of where they begin and end, and they are ordered from top to bottom, subverting the "iron code" from left to right described by Masotta (1970, p. 204) for graphic narratives, since being written and published for the digital space, this comic demands another reading path in the form of vertical sequencing. The memoir is structured in two major sections and a coda: the first section narrates Gao's experience as a Wuhanese in the USA and the discrimination she suffers during the 2020 pandemic. The second section presents Gao's description of her native Wuhan. Finally, the coda is the closing of the comic in which the narrative voice addresses the reader and

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her Wuhanese co-citizens with a hopeful expression.

The title of the memoir is positioned antithetically to the media discourse that went viral during the pandemic: the narrator announces that she is going to show the Wuhan that "she" knows, i.e. from a subjective-experiential perspective. Then, already from the title, a contrast is established between the stereotypical Wuhan that underlies the pandemic's imagination and the Wuhan that will be built through the comic, with a protagonist's point of view.

In the first section, cultural identity bursts through two images: two photos of Gao and his family, in 1985 and 2005, at the Yellow Crane Tower in Wuhan. The subjects, with oriental ethnic features, have the architectural shape of the tower as their background landscape, which reveals typical lines of millenary Chinese aesthetics. In terms of point of view, the photographs position the reader in the place of the photographer, who has immortalized the familiar moment in a culturally symbolic place in Wuhan. Eco (1984) defines this type of strategy as the use of the "subjective gaze," through which the objects and people in the photo are circumscribed to the point of view of the photographer, transporting the reader to the chronotope of the image's origin: a pre-pandemic Wuhan. The reader, who is also a spectator, occupies the same position as the subject who created the image, the photographer. Thus, the reader finds himself looking at a photograph in which the photographed subjects (Wuhanese) are at the same time looking

at him/her. A confrontation of gazes takes place: the reader's eyes meet the gaze of the Other, and this game favors a process of identification. Moreover, the inclusion of the photos brings an additional connotation to the comic: such elements of reality generate an anchoring of the comic to the empirical world: the narrator "documents" her hometown from archival elements that are linked to her memory. The insertion of the photos in the graphic world of the comic would seem to grant a greater degree of verisimilitude and reliability to the reader, favoring the suspension of his or her disbelief and the subscription to the fictional pact proposed by Eco (1994).

Also in the first section, the narrator begins with a brief account of her biographical information: "I was born in Wuhan, China. When I was three, my family settled in a small town in Texas..." (Gao, 2020). Here, the narration adopts a handwritten typography, with casual features, which generates a sense of spontaneity of the story. The handwritten narration, which will dominate the rest of the memoir, and which contrasts with the depersonalized Roman typography of the photo caption, generates a feeling of greater closeness to the reader and appeals to his empathy. Wuhan is described as "more foreign than Mars" (Gao, 2020) and it opposes the cultural locus of the "collective self" (US) making the narrator feel "(...) embarrassed by it every time anyone asked" (Gao, 2020). Thus, the narrator and her homeland are revealed as a "geographical Other" (Staszak, 2012): "here" is inhabited by the hegemonic culture, and "there" houses the others, the

different and the unknown; in this case, the Wuhanese. Such a presence of a geographical Other can be seen as what Marx calls "*ideelle Ausdruck*" (in Silva, 1978, p. 50), ie. the dogmatic ideas that arise from the American ruling class and the dominant material relations of that class.

In the next panel of the first section, we are presented with the caricatured embodiment of the narrator: a self-portrait of Laura Gao-girl. Mimetically, the drawing communicates her feelings of otherness and cultural non-belonging: an oriental face with features of discomfort (embarrassment, slight flushing of the cheeks, sadness). The self-portrait body language communicates the girl's disturbance: the eyes look to the side in search of an escape path and the left-hand hold the elbow of the right arm, which remains straight at the side of the body, as a sign of submission and/or rejection. Gao's caricature becomes an iconographic element with canonical features associated with oriental cultures recognizable to the reader: slanted eyes, black and shiny straight hair. The panel also introduces an interlocutory function, which contributes new conceptual elements through dialogue. Laura Gao appears surrounded by balloons that interpellate the invisibility of her place of origin and suffocatingly circumscribe her: "Woo-huh?", "Is that where (other Asian kid in class) is from?" (Gao, 2020). Finally, Gao relents and responds, "Forget it, it's nowhere" (Gao, 2020), but the balloon that materializes her response appears isolated and detached from the previous interrogation. The message has a voice, but it is faceless. The

narrator's "harassment" presented in the previous plane makes her image -the interrogated identity- disappear and only her resigned voice remains.

The verbal text that follows Gao's self-portrait establishes a sharp contrast with the closing of that section. The invisibility of Wuhan in Gao's childhood in the US, and consequently of her cultural identity, becomes "But now, it's on everyone's map" (Gao, 2020). The image of an American city, identifiable by the iconic yellow cab, becomes the environment that stages the virtualized discourse about Wuhan as the "culprit" of the pandemic. A newspaper headline expresses "Wuhan virus: why you should be scared", the sign of a cab shows the legend "Wuhan deaths in 1000s" and a cell phone projects a news item about "Wuhan's uncivilized diets" (Gao, 2020). Despite the economy of discourse and image, the idea of Wuhanese Otherness is constructed as dangerous, uncivilized, polluting, or as Duschatzky and Skliar (2001, p. 188) indicate "the other as the source of all evil." The Wuhanese and Asian Other are needed to name the disease, the virus, and the pandemic and for the self/we (American white citizens) not to be that. The different Other functions as the depository of all evils.

The authorization of Wuhan and its inhabitants as the culprits of the pandemic is directly linked to the narrator in the next panel. We are presented with a mirror image of the first self-portrait of Gao-girl, but this time, it is the image of Gao-adult in the pandemic present. The self-portrait mirrors the same body posture, equally

circumscribed by the harassing dialogue balloons conveying a clear accusatory message: "Don't bring your Wuhan germs near me!", "Y'all deserve it for eating weird stuff!" (Gao, 2020). The image of the narrator translates the psychological density of the character into graphic mimesis through the simplicity of the lines (a resource that Eco calls "psychological stylization", p. 165) projecting on Gao's face a mixture of weariness, sadness, and shyness. The gray color of the background contributes to accentuating the somber atmosphere of the panel whose ideological conceptualization is the circumscription and stalking of the narrator by the discriminatory discourse of a prejudiced cultural context.

The comic has gradually built up in crescendo the identitarian invisibility and discrimination towards Gao: as a child and then in her adulthood. Such progression reaches a breaking point through the firm statement "I'm done hiding away this time" (Gao, 2020). Graphically, there is a transition in the comic from the conceptual density of the previous panels demarcated by the gray color, which now degrades to white in the following panels, in which the narrator begins her visual and discursive reconstruction of Wuhan. The progressive shift from a gray background to a white one also accompanies a change of mental state: the narrator, who in the previous panel seemed to be on the verge of succumbing, in Foucauldian terms to the *power of internal coercion*, manages to overcome it. Gao makes her voice heard: "(...) amid all this panic, loss and finger-pointing (...) I want to shine a light on the beauty of my Wuhanese people and their

rich culture & history" (Gao, 2020). At this point, it is clear that the autobiographical comic assumes an inescapable function of representing the identity of the narrator and the cultural collective of which she is a part. By talking about Wuhan, Gao participates in the act of representing it, that is, she participates in the act of constructing her subject-place position.

The second section of the graphic memoir narrates Laura Gao's depiction of Wuhan. What aspects of her homeland does she choose to map in her narrative and why? The first section, "The Facts", accounts for relatively factual information (geographic location, commercial activities, population, etc.) that allows the reader to construct an empirical positionality. "History and Landmarks" describes architectural monuments and narrates brief historical episodes leading up to the shaping of modern Wuhan. Drawing on history allows Gao to project cultural identity in all its dimensions, showing that Wuhanese has a shared common past and ancestry. Hall calls this dimension "a truly collective self" (1999, p. 349), which is constructed through the act of retelling the past via memory. It is not coincidental that the last idiosyncratic aspect Gao chooses in his depiction of Wuhan is food: this last section deconstructs the public accusation "Wuhan's uncivilized diets to blame for new viruses" (Gao, 2020) presented as a newspaper headline in the first section. The stereotypical Wuhanese diet, labeled in the comic as "weird," "unhealthy," and "uncivilized" by the mystifying voice of the West, is deorientalized through

vibrantly colored images and descriptions that present it as "unrivaled" (Gao, 2020). A framework of multiculturalism is also constructed through scriptural hybridization: the descriptions in English interact with the names of local dishes written in Chinese. These signs, although probably linguistically indecipherable for many readers, nevertheless construct a signifying practice by conveying a sense of codified cultural identity. Something similar occurs in the coda that ends the memoir: the narrator, from her place in the Asian diaspora, ends with an encouraging phrase in Chinese "加油武汉!"<sup>2</sup> (Gao, 2020). The sign becomes here a resource of resistance and cultural identity.

### Conclusions

By humanizing and giving an identitarian dimension to his hometown, Gao's "The Wuhan I Know" contrasts with the racist rhetoric of the dominant regimes that aim at representing Otherness during the pandemic; a "neo-orientalist" rhetoric in terms of Said's (1978) theory. Thus, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, this graphic memoir acquires epistemic salience in a continuum of discriminatory discourses that it attempts to deconstruct.

Moreover, the value of the comic under analysis here also rests on the very configuration of Otherness. In this sense, Otherness becomes essentially ideological, since it results from the intrinsic connection of the material relations of the postcolonial world. It is not by chance that

"The Wuhan I Know" has emerged from a subaltern cultural identity of a Western power center during the pandemic. It is the relationships that occurred in the pandemic, intimately linked to two geographies (Wuhan and the United States) which give rise to the experiences narrated. The construction of Otherness underlies the comic as, in Silva's terms, an "ideological fetish" (1978, p. 22) produced by the U.S. capitalist society which has developed its ideological formation and special means of dissemination. However, the devilish idea of Asian Otherness as a "virulent affliction" is not only the product of an ideology disseminated by the mass media; it also arises from the need to justify the material apparatus of U.S. capitalism during the pandemic.

Being fictionalized as essentially chronotopic, Otherness in this graphic memoir carries an emotional value that functions as the organizing center of the main events of the fiction created by Laura Gao. The time, space, and plot of "The Wuhan I know" revolve around an identity-Other that claims an ideological metamorphosis for the post-pandemic world.

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<sup>2</sup> Keep on going Wuhan! (Laura Gao's translation in Instagram).

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