DIGITAL ALTERNATIVES: MOBILE-CENTRIC CREATIVES

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Introduction & Overview

In the City of Cape Town, the legislative capital of the Republic of South Africa located on the Southern tip of Africa; the visual creative industries (such as graphic design, web design, game design, industrial design, fine arts, fashion design, to name a few) have experienced a slow transformation 20 years after the advent of democracy. A quick look at the most recent statistics for the design industry show that merely 9.4% of businesses in the visual design sector are owned by "previously disadvantaged individuals" [1]. In other words, People Of Color (POC) who were systemically excluded from economic participation until the fall of Apartheid in 1994 are not being represented in the creative economy. Considering that 91% of the country's population are POC – this frames an urgent issue of social and cultural inequality. From a cultural studies perspective, this also problematizes the visual cultural production that is currently originating from the country – whose stories are being told? And whose voices are silenced? Art and visual design produce and reproduce ideology [2] and by extension, the global imaginaries of everyday life in a particular geographic location [3]. As political scientist Joost Smiers argues extensively in his tome *Arts Under Pressure* [4] – plurality of creative and cultural expression, particularly in an age of globalization, is fundamental to the creation of knowledge and skill infrastructures that can compete in the global creative economy. Today, the entirety of Africa has less than 1% share in this industry, according to a recent United Nations report [5].

Creative careers are typically built upon years of training in visual arts, visual methods and more recently, experience in the creative use of information technologies [6]. The cultivation of these skills takes a dedicated variable of *time.* As such, most of the formal positions require University degrees or extensive portfolios, at the very least, to prove competence. In practice, this has lead to a very exclusive community of artists and designers, who have the power of accreditation and dedicated training, and by extension, the power to visually create the spaces that come to constitute both the physicality of the city, and it's visual and cultural imaginaries.

Post-Apartheid, around 1% of school-going students have access to visual arts and information technology as subjects until a school-leaving level. This means that around 1% of students stand any chance of being accepted into highly competitive visual arts degrees. Conversely, most of the schools that offer art or technology as subjects are located in the geographic centers of economic privilege – quietly continuing the modus operandi of apartheid right into the year 2015. Effectively, these systems contribute to silencing the artistic voices of POC's who do not have access to the resources that might offer access to cultural and economic participation. Although there have been extensive white papers drawn up over the short course of the post-94 political history to address creative participation [7], these strategies have been slow in empowering more young people to participate in structuring a diverse and rich picture of art and design in South Africa.

Although art education at schools and access to computers and broadband internet is still only accessible to a minority group in South Africa, the increasingly pervasive access to mobile phones has hinted at an alternative, and increasingly accessible, tool for digital creativity. Mobile phones have often been hailed as the device that will connect Africa to the global information economy [8]. Yet, research on their usage is currently predominantly described in terms of the consumption of, or access to, information toward "developmental" purposes (such as access to health care, employment, banking, business, and education). Few studies have explicitly looked at mobile phones as a tool for generating original creative content [9].

As smartphones are becoming affordable to a larger portion of the South African population, this might signal an increase in such visual cultural production – allowing a new generation of visual creatives a platform for networked artistic expression and instrumental visual design. Providing a ticket to participation on the 'visual web' – a means to compete in the attention economy [10] that drives international socio-economic agendas.

This research paper describes the implications of two selected case studies that were explored through an Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach [11] (which includes ethnographic methods, Research through Design (RtD), and Participatory Design (PD) in uncovering the emerging creative ecologies among a group of young creatives (n=33) who are from "previously disadvantaged" backgrounds, and enrolled in Extended Curriculum Programs[1] for Visual design at two institutions in Cape Town. I focus on evoking an understanding of the media ecologies that lead to their acceptance into these courses, based on two illustrative case studies.

The findings presented here include the emergence of amateur 'kasi[2]'-inspired fashion brands, networked and crowd-sourced over social networks such as *Whatsapp, BBM*

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[1] The Extended Curriculum Program is a government initiative that aims to broaden access to courses that would usually require extensive training at a secondary school
[2] "Kasi" is a local slang word that directly translates to "the hood" – a term used to refer to the townships in South Africa.

and *Facebook*; the utilization of free image editing tools to produce promotional materials and decorative images; mobile photography as a means of documenting, editing and sharing work; self-taught proficiencies through free online resources on platforms such as *YouTube*; and the emergence of informal learning communities on Facebook. These often networked designs are providing "new social, emotional and creative cartographies" [12] for young people who seek agency and a means of personal expression – cultivating a 'first touch', as Beth Kolko [13] would frame it, of instrumental visual design.

These case studies are of general interest to members of the Internet Studies community, but particularly to those who focus on the cultural role that mobile phones may play in low-resourced contexts, from a social science and cultural studies vantage point.

These findings are also of interest to scholars of Human-Computer-Interaction, who may gain on-the-ground insights of personalized usage among an emerging wave of technology users. From this perspective, these case studies hint at the implications for the design of creative technologies made exclusively for use on mobile phones as a standalone platform, for use among mobile-first young people who might not have access to exclusive formal design courses. The exploration of alternative access points to creative participation might signal the emergence of functional, if not accredited, designers and artists. The continuation of such research also feeds into the emerging field of post-colonial computing, and challenge the from-the-west-to-the-rest model of technology design and appropriation [14].

Overview of the Study

This study was undertaken over a period of 18 months between two classes of visual design students. The first class was composed of 28 students who were in a mixed foundation course for Fashion Design, Industrial Design, Surface Design, Jewellery Design, and Graphic Design. The Second comprised 36 students who were in a foundation course for Graphic Design only.

I spent a period of 4 months at each site to conduct participant observation, and identify students for unstructured in-depth interviews. In total, I conducted 33 in-depth interviews with students for a period of one and a half hours each. These sessions included discussions of visual artifacts that participants had produced on their mobile phones and elsewhere. I obtained signed consent forms, and followed standard ethics guidelines for each of these interviews. I also "hung out" with these selected students in an informal capacity to observe their lives outside of the university context (ethics protocol was followed with these encounters as well) – activities included going shopping, hanging out with friends, or working on projects at home. This gave me deeper insights into the socio-technical and material affordances of these young people.

After this period of research using ethnographic methods, I conducted three participatory design sessions with 9 students (which varied between six days, and an afternoon, in length), and two user-testing sessions, in the development of a mobile app called "Molio" (the mobile portfolio). For the purposes of this paper, and the limitations of its scope, I will not explicitly focus on these sessions. Instead, I present a picture of the systemic inequalities that make it difficult for young people from low-resourced backgrounds to gain access to the skills and epistemologies that are required for access into exclusive design courses. Then, I offer two case studies of young people who have hacked the system to forge their interests into careers, re-mixing technologies to suit their situations, and along the way have used what they had to their disposal to create, sustain and learn. In both cases, these pictures have a shared mediator: the mobile phone.

Creative Inequalities and Mobile Emancipation

Beyond the schooling system, access to the technologies that enable creative production and participation in online creative spaces remain limited beyond mobile access in South Africa. According to a recent study [15] on access and digital technologies – 34% of the adult population in South Africa now actively access the internet in one way or another. The majority of these users are young, black and live on less that R1500 a month ($118). Of these internet-accessing young people, almost three-quarters use their phones to go online. The report frames this group of users as "the new wave" of internet users in the country – young people who have only recently gained access to a wider repertoire of online activities from their phones. This can be framed as the result of ever-cheapening internet-enabled handsets, and specialized data packages that offer deals for 'pay-as-you-go' mobile users. Very recently, *Facebook* and *Wikipedia*, among many other curated sites, have fallen into a zero-rating tariff, on local service provider *Cell C* under the global initiative *Internet.org*. Exorbitant data costs mean that the majority of young people have limited access to the web [16].

Among my participants, this research is reflected: 30 of the students interviewed had access to internet-enabled handsets at the time of our interviews. Students spent on average R50 (approximately $4) per month on airtime, and employed a number of strategies to extend this value: including switching off online service, only visiting trusted low-data websites, and owning multiple sim cards to make use of a full spectrum of deals from service providers. More than half of these students relied on their phones to do research for University courses when away from University resources. In the interview process, I directed questions towards comparisons of past and present, over a period of an averaged two years, I asked young people how they decided on their chosen career; how teachers, mentors, parents and peers played a role in that decision; their ideals, their goals; and their changing use of information technologies over the period before coming to university.

This investigation was aimed at mapping the role that information technologies played in creative production, exposure to artistic resources, and enabling networks of people. Questions were also directed towards eliciting the material and socio-cultural values of information technologies throughout their teenage years.

Many of the participants, particularly those from township-settings, have described their phones as an invaluable tool for allowing them to become familiarized with their chosen career choices before enrolling, to make contact with course conveners or older students, to archive their creative images, and in many cases, a means to find images for design purposes, share creations, and oftentimes, find jobs with their creative skills. Below I describe two case studies that illustrate these alternative spaces and media for participation.

The Couturiers: Kasi fashion

I meet Bongani for an interview on the field adjacent to their university design studio. He wears a red snapback cap and black skinny jeans. His hair is intricately braided, and his *Adidas* sneakers gleam. When I compliment his outfit, he let's out a low whistle, "All you see is *swag* nê, but I had to go through a lot...a *lot* to get here."

At the age of 16 Bongani's grandmother sent him to live with his aunt, in the largest township in Cape Town – a place called Khayelitsha. Both of his parents died of AIDS-related illnesses when he was very young, and his grandmother took him and his two younger brothers under her care. Bongani was a "difficult child" – and was "mixing with the wrong crowds" back in his native Port Elizabeth, according to his grandmother. A creative child, with a keen interest in Hip-Hop subcultures and fashion design, he was oftentimes in trouble with his teachers. His school did not offer visual design or information technologies, and Bongani remembers that the subjects were boring to him: "my school didn't have anything to do with art and things like that, it's just study study study..." The final straw was drawn when Bongani was caught drinking at school, and he was put on probation pending a disciplinary hearing. His grandmother decided to send him to his aunt who had a strict, hands-on attitude toward raising children. His grandmother worked as a domestic worker for a local family who lived in the suburbs, and in Bongani's words, "She didn't have like money or time to spend on me, and the drinking…it was…well honestly, it was *bad*. And I had my brothers. Two young ones, and then my cousin-sisters. So, she was like *aiiiiii*….you musn't show these kids to be like that, you must go be with your strict aunt."

His aunt had personal connections at a local school, and was able to secure a place for him in the 10th grade. At first, he disliked the city, "People here were different than in P.E. I didn't like anybody, it was more dangerous and I just wanted to go home to my friends..." But he recalls a change as he entered the 11th grade. He recalls the period when he received his first mobile phone (a Nokia 500) for his 18th birthday, "you can be

in your room, and talk to people far. My own thing. Like the best thing". He spent hours chatting to strangers on the Internet on *Mxit*[3] and later *Whatsapp*, and met a peer who shared his interests and lived nearby. Soon, Bongani became friends with a group of young people from his neighbourhood who were interested in spending constructive time playing music, rapping and creating art. "Like our school had *one* computer, but there were more computers around the kasi. And people were making Hip Hop. So I liked it. And I got to know some guys…So ja, we just started this crew."

Their crew, whose central interests were American Hip Hop, freestyle rapping, and skateboarding, called themselves "The Riot Squad". With mobile phones in hand, they began sending images of their crew, stylized and posed, to friends on social media such as *Mxit*, Black Berry Messenger (BBM) and then later, *Whatsapp*. According to Bongani, the image grew: "People were like, that's cool. We like the style. It says something about where you are from and where you want to go. Like, we *'kasi*, it's rough but we *cool*. We can have the lifestyles too."

They fashioned a logo on an older friend's laptop, using Adobe *PhotoShop*, "*yooooh!* That laptop. *Yoh*! Man, and the program was a bit broken…like, sometimes it wouldn't…it would just [makes low buzzing noise]…"

Despite the technical constraints, Bongani and his friend managed to export the file, and visited a local print shop to have t-shirts made. Soon, a few friends asked for shirts, and Bongani saw a business opportunity, "I said ok. Give me R120, I'll make you a shirt. Then I go to the print shop and they print the t-shirt for R70…maybe R60…but that's not so nice the material…but so we make maybe R50 per shirt." Soon Bongani saw value in extending the brand. They took photographs of them wearing the shirts on a friend's Samsung Galaxy S, which had the best camera among them. Then they used the Image Editor to stylize the image, and another app (he had forgotten the name) to overlay text on the image. The text simply read "order Riot Squad" with a BBM pincode and a telephone number spaced below it. The idea was that friends in their networks could contact them directly, via *BBM* or *whatsapp*, to place an order. Effectively producing micro-advertisements, on mobile for mobile.

 "I didn't know what you even called that back in the days…" Bongani says about making the logo, "and then one guy asked me, 'so are you the graphic designer for Riot Squad?' and I was like 'yes', so now…I know that one day I want to be good at this. I

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[3] Mxit is a South African developed chat-based social network. It gained huge popularity due to it's low-data considerations, and was the largest social networking site on the African continent until 2010. It works on over 10000 different handsets and mobile devices. This feature-phone dominant model of chat is now, due to cheapening smartphones, directly challenged by mammoth companies such as *Whatsapp* and *Facebook*, resulting in plummeting user numbers.

want to be a graphic designer. So I *google* this on my phone, where can you do this graphic design? And this school was covered by the NSFAS[4]."

When he suggested this idea to his aunt, she went with him to visit the campus and find out about the courses. "I knew I had to send in this portfolio. We were given a list of the portfolio, what to do, things to draw like that. So there were different things whereby you had to draw on the paper, you draw a shirt and then you have to write a name on that shirt. So you could use pencil, pencil crayons; those are the two things that we used. Then there were tasks like drawing someone who's making a sandwich, and then you draw a shirt, then you draw a plastic bottle on top of a table and shoes, things like that and a book on top the table…I was like…now I must practice drawing."

During our interview, Bongani pulls out his phone, he scrolls down his photo album on his Nokia 500, and shows me a few photographs of pencil drawings on blue-lined folio paper. On one image, he points at a photograph of a skull tattoo, framed next to a drawing of the tattoo, "I googled for 'skull art', and then I put the phone here [indicated with his hand to the left of him on the desk] and I look, and on the paper, I try to make it just like that. Luckily I was good. I draw a lot when I was little, I just had to find the talent again."

Learning how to draw: libraries, BlackBerry and candlelight

Neo is a 21-year-old from Gugulethu, another townships located on the Cape Flats. Since he was young he loved drawing, and when he finished school (where Art as a subject did not exist) he had a vision of studying art or design, "So every day I was drawing and even at school I was not good with those major subjects like maths and physics and stuff. It was the next level, my dream to be a famous artist."

Neo faced a number of difficulties over the course of his young life, "So actually it's like: I'm coming from the poor background where there is no opportunities to succeed, where there is lack of knowledge on some stuff especially in township schools there. It's sort of like a village you know, and we're like Xhosa so there's nothing that is coming like "wow", we're not rich and get those things. I was not good at school, during those periods for maths I'm drawing comics, making jokes and so on. You know like I'm also in touch to technological stuff you know, it's like every time I would borrow my friend's cell phone. I would like to chat or download games or just something graphic you know?"

Neo and his younger brother, older cousin and younger sister live with his aunt. His father passed away when he was very young, and his mother died of an illness a few years prior. For many years his aunt worked as a packer at a nearby grocery store, but

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[4] NSFAS is the South African government student loan and bursary scheme that offers funding for students who can prove financial need.

had started acting erratically over the last few years, and lost her job in 2012. After a 5-month struggle, she was finally diagnosed with schizophrenia at a local mental health clinic. Although she had received treatment, she is still unable to work and relies on government grants to look after the children. In Neo's mind, "I am the parent now. And when I am not home, then my cousin is the parent."

Neo tried to apply for the Graphic Design course for both the 2012 and 2013 intake, but did not make the cut in either year, "I was not accepted because I didn't meet the minimum requirements, and secondly my drawings were poor that time." Instead, he did some work at their church, and decided it was his duty to help support his family by taking any jobs he could find. "On 2013 I didn't get school, I didn't get any job, I didn't get anything like I was just sitting at home doing nothing. So I tried to get a job but I don't find job, I tried to get school but my dream was to be in university. When I was looking at my marks, maths and physics it's like elementary achievement so it's like where I'm going I didn't have that hope that I will one day be at university. But on that year 2013, I decided to just follow my dream, to continue what I'm doing and love, which is art, drawing, designing some stuff… I started to draw and to do research; every day I woke up and went to the library just to research about drawings, how to do realistic portraits, how to do figure drawings and some stuff. Keep on practicing up until I gained the skills, and after that during that year I decided to start my own business, a small business where I was doing portraits for people and charge them. Because you know at that time my brother didn't have money because he was not having a job in that year. To be able to have money I have to get clients to draw something for them so I was living that dream, like doing what I love. I was taking art as a business because I have no choice. I've tried to seek for jobs but I don't get any."

"So when I started that business I was always getting one client per week, I didn't have that marketing strategy you know. And I didn't have that skill like to make things digital because I was not used to softwares for computers and some stuff. There was this guy there in my community, he was a Graphic Designer. Ya so he picked me up and said, 'You know what, when you are free you can just visit me at my home and say'. He showed me everything, I was like wow…you know, he told me that, 'you know what, you've got skill bro, you've got talent that can make you go far' and some stuff you know? 'But the only thing you need to do is to get in the institution and learn more; don't take yourself as, okay you know it all because you've got a talent, but talents is something that needs to be submitted of which education is the key'. So he told me that he's a Graphic Designer and he's a third year student at the University doing graphic design, and graphic design includes this and this. He showed and briefed me about graphic design and I was so excited. I was so excited in the case that there are those softwares you use to transform things and some stuff. I didnt know much about graphic design; the only thing I know about graphic design is that they do logos, but there are people that does those things without formal training. So he tells me that I can do these things called tutorials to improve my drawing. I should look on the computer at the library on *YouTube*." Suddenly Neo was exposed to graphic designers the world over, and spent his 35 minutes of free internet allowance at the library watching tutorials on drawing techniques. A technical assistant at the library saw what he was doing, and

suggested that he download videos onto his phone so he could take them home with him. But at this stage, Neo did not have a phone.

He remembers telling a friend at church that he was looking for a mobile phone, and a lady at church gifted her old *Blackberry* 9320 to him later in that same year. Neo brought his *BlackBerry* to the library, and the technical assistant plugged it in and showed Neo how he could copy videos that he could later watch at home, "sometimes the power was out, but then the phone makes some light, or then I take a candle and turn the screen down a bit so it lasts longer." Neo remembers sitting awake for long nights, concentrating on improving his drawing. During this 6-month period, he continued working as an artist in his community, volunteering at his church, and getting paid to help out at a local orphanage, keeping him busy during the days. Now, at night, he could work through a handful of videos, cultivating his skills without needing to heed library times and usage rules.

In January 2014 Neo was accepted into the Extended Curriculum Program for Graphic Design. Today, he is one of the top students in the class, with a full scholarship.

However, the foundation year was tough. He did not have enough money to purchase materials and food. Additionally, he struggled to concentrate on his schoolwork while living with his family. He nearly failed the mid-year theory exam because he had a crisis with his aunt at home. In response, his lecturers asked for an urgent placement for him in residence. An attentive lecturer also helped him out with groceries and materials, and suggested he share his story on a local radio station. After the radio exposure, a cereal company offered him a generous scholarship. He has since made appearances on television and in print: to many, his story of overcoming adversity in the face of extreme poverty is a great inspiration.

At the time we spoke, his obligations had put him in a complex moral position: "I like the res and I love class, but sometimes it doesn't feel right…you know, when I'm here it feels wrong, and then at home people maybe are not doing well, or my aunt is walking around the streets. Now my sister is in charge and it's difficult for her. But I can always just send a *whatsapp*, and then go home if they need me."

Discussion & Conclusion: The new mobile creative

Both Bongani and Neo's case studies illustrate the complex relationships between family, school, technology, sub-cultures, peer groups, materials and chance encounters, in assisting young people to access a formal creative education. Mobile phones have played an integral part in facilitating the pathways that have enabled these young men's journey from the kasi to the studio.

Bongani's connection to a peer group that shared his interests was mediated by his access to a mobile connection. In addition, his phone allowed him to search images, document his own creations, produce content for distribution and start up a DIY enterprise. "The Riot Squad" as an identity construction, also points at a subversion of the typical media images of township life. Bongani and his crew have, through processes of visualization, crafted their own images of personal identification. Through his access to digital creative media, Bongani can play with these constructions and produce artifacts that are not only artistic and cultural expressions of a lived reality, offering and broadcasting a new imaginary of himself and his peers, but has also found a way to monetize these digital cultural objects through their duplication and media displays over ubiquitous social networks. By using mobile creative technologies, Bongani is able to recreate the workflow of a small fashion brand on a micro-scale.

Additionally, Bongani is actively hacking the materials available to him, to familiarize himself with literacies and skills that he would otherwise have not been exposed to. He is piecing together an education that is directly influenced by the conditions of his lived reality: the materials, technologies, cultures and social configurations that are immediately available. In his particular case, these tools have also allowed him to leverage his entertainment-driven interests into enrolment towards a formal degree.

For Neo, his escape from a life of poverty was a direct result of his artistic talent. However, talent alone did not allow him access into a formal visual design course. Due to the direct disadvantages of not having art at school, Neo was not able to spend dedicated time on refining his skills enough to produce a satisfactory portfolio for access into the university course. However, through his chance encounter with a graphic design mentor, he was introduced to the world of online tutorials. Although Neo had already utilized the library as a safe space to practice his drawing skills, the addition of *YouTube* tutorials on library computers expanded his self-education. On top of this revelation, a mobile phone that could store and save videos even further expanded his resources: Neo was now able to access these educational resources from anywhere, and document his work for display on-the-go. The mobile phone offered him an extension of time and space – a means to hack out his own 'leisure time' necessary to acquaint himself with the epistemologies and culture of his chosen profession. Bourdieu [17] would surely see this as a hack – leisure time is a privilege that is usually reserved for the upper classes: "presuppose not only dispositions associated with long establishment in the world of art and culture but also economic means...and *spare time*." [17]

Neo and Bongazi present merely two instances of young people who have been able to remix their affordances into tertiary education. Many of the young creatives interviewed for this project have hacked informal mobile handset tools to produce instrumental visual designs that have directly helped them socially or economically. For students who are not trained in Visual Design or Information Technology at a secondary level (like 99% of their peers in South Africa) this passage into the elite world of formal design training (which is predominantly based on particular cultivated literacies such as perspective drawing and familiarity with international industry-sanctioned software that run on fast-processing desktop computers) can be incredibly difficult. This transition

also raises questions around the training of visual designers, and the technologies that "legitimize" such practice.

In many ways, access to mobile phones and custom remixing of available resources allowed these young people a means to exercise their talents and leverage them into an economic product – in the case of Bongani's t-shirts, and Neo's portraits. For both of these students, the University offers a pathway to formal industry. Yet, these courses remain exclusive, and the yearly intake of ECP courses are limited. What happens to all of the students that do not make it into such courses?

Access to custom tools for mobile, or tools that are built on ruminations of these demonstrated ad-hoc applications and strategies, could perhaps offer 'lifelines' or 'passports' to young people who are unable to discover these connections and resources for themselves. Such tools also contribute to the development of alternative spaces for creative practice, removed from the bottle-neck of university accreditation. At the same time, these digital expressions and related material objects indicate an emerging creative economy that plays out on mobile screens – offering a new imaginary of township life, which is dominated by negative stereotypes. Instead, these young people assert agency through creativity and innovation.

Through this paper I invoke a call to artists, visual designers and developers to take the torch and explore mobile phones as a stand-alone design platform and learning aid for young aspiring designers. The purpose of developing such an application would be to support and enhance formal (educational and instrumental) and informal (entertainment-driven and non-instrumental) participatory cultures amongst young people who do not have primary access to computer-based design or editing software for visual creativity. In effect, such apps and tools would attempt to afford a larger demographic of young people the ability to create functional visual designs (that are for example, printable) for everyday design purposes. In addition, I advocate for the collocation of emerging design aesthetics, fostering an alternative space for visual creativity, and allow for learning that is in line with the ethos of new DIY and maker movements: informal, networked, peer-led, and shared. Ultimately, Universities can only take in a handful of young people such as Neo and Bongani, and access to such courses do not guarantee the successful completion of the degree. Participation remains difficult for students from township settings. Perhaps ever-cheapening smart phones offer a valid digital alternative for an emerging generation of mobile-centric creatives.

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