

THE VIOLENCE OF CHANGE: THE PRICE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Any traumatic or unexpected life event that bursts into our lives is able to catapult or be a catalyst for a process of change or transformation; especially if it is an extreme event, which entails such violence that it fractures our sense of what – up to that point – was how we understood our own *consciousness of ourself*.¹

When a relationship ends, be it romantic, friendly or, even therapeutic, anyone of us can suffer such an internal breakup that all the structures of our psyche are shaken to the point of “losing the connection to the center”. We feel undone, because all the certainties that we had about ourselves and the surrounding world have ceased to make sense, and at the same time, a series of psychological unknowns emerge. This emergence has the possibility to reveal not only how we were, but, how we might become and to reveal a truth we were not ready to see before this cataclysm, the truth of how essence of the relationship was masked behind a quasi-mystical identity or participation mystique, an unconditional surrender, worship of the other which had remained hidden beneath the surface.

In order to survive, we learn to adapt. Those old adaptations that allowed us to coexist and to withstand the personal relationship that felt so wrong to us are commonplace among couples.

¹ We call a trauma any unforeseen stimulus lived through by the Person which is unable to assimilate. The immediate response to a psychological trauma is shock; , in this fashion, retrospectively and unexpectedly, the later effects are either spontaneous recovery (which is analogous to spontaneous healing of physical traumata) or the development of a traumatic neurosis, trauma in this sense produces anxiety, which is followed either by spontaneous recovery of the development of a psychoneurosis. Cfr. Charles Rycroft A CRITICAL DICTIONARY OF PSYCHOANALYSIS Nelson. London 1968

This mutual complicity often defines these relationships. Both partners believe that this kind of adaptation is necessary for the relationship to exist until, of course the breakup occurs.

The figure of the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo and the way she transformed her intolerable physical and internal suffering into an artistic expression communicates the richness of emotions, sensations and images that she experienced, both psychologically and physically. The creative process which gave meaning to her life and the way it reflects on her relationship and breakups with Diego Rivera are the subject of study of my work here today. Her paintings express certain aspects that come into play in a relationship when there is a breakup of the couple: the violence, the narcissistic injury, and the subsequent need to mourn what has been lost. Frida's creative expression provided a safe container for the emotional upheaval she was going through. For the purpose of this presentation, I will limit myself to an analysis of three of Frida Kahlo's most important paintings.

Every human being undergoes pain with the breakup of a romantic relationship or the loss of a loved one. The most immediate sensation is that of a profound sadness and intolerable emotional pain; a sense-memory of being wounded. At that moment, there is a psychological earthquake that opens up the ground under one's feet and old wounds from early childhood with fears of abandonment are re-activated. This early wounding is embedded in childhood experiences of maternal mirroring which was not "good enough" and did not provide the necessary elements for the development and strengthening of the ego.

As we know destruction is sometimes necessary for creation ⁽²⁾ a relationship breakup can be an opportunity for transformation, but the process of transformation comes at a price...

Jung speaks about loss and renewal in so many of his writings and deals with how this issue is a both personal crisis and a collective issue. The loss of a guiding principle in life amounts to a crisis of faith—what previously seemed meaningful, is no longer meaningful. In *Mysterium* he refers to how the problem of loss and renewal is expressed symbolically in mythology as it relates to aging, death and rebirth. He goes on to say that when the psyche no longer feels contained in the ruling archetype then this produces a reaction that attracts other parts of the psyche to fill up the gap.³

The break up of a relationship causes within us a chaotic disruption and intense suffering, as the person can be affected in their feelings of self worth which were nurtured by the presence of the partner. This type of mirror-reflection meant that the person had always been looked upon and respected, and most importantly their existence confirmed in a positive way.

This lack of mirroring also leads to painful, deep and alarming feelings, such as self-hate, rejection and self-deprecation. Because in every narcissistic personality there is significant difficulty in the way in which the person is able to understand, the relationship between him/herself and another. The loss of the partner can hardly be grasped or understood, and doesn't even seem real. The narcissistic personality seems to require something that has a concrete form, something that can be seen and touched, that has presence; because the narcissist finds the loss unbearable, she/ he longs for something which will relieve the absence, anything that will calm the hurt emanating from the narcissistic wound. So, what they will require in a relationship and what they will demand after the breakup are things that have a material presence and can be

² "Destruction as a Cause of Coming into Being" , Sabina Spielrein in "A Most Dangerous Method", John Kerr, Vintage Books, New York, 1994.

³ Carl G. Jung. *Mysterium Conjunctionis. Collected Works*, 14. par.505

physically grasped. The ability to symbolize is quite distant from them, especially at these intense moments of longing.

Although, in these circumstances, originally very painful and distressing, the feelings have the potential to be transformed into elements that will lead the way to a process of change for those involved, and as we all know such transformation will exact what we may call *the price of consciousness*.

That is to say: in other words, prior to the breakup, every effort was made to maintain the certainty of the nature of the relationship and this, in turn led to an increasing rigidity of the relationship. In order to permit a transformation of those involved it has to move to a level where the experiences of pain, loss and hate produced by the break up of a relationship in its most profound intensity are part of every day life. We could say that what is necessary is the need to “touch bottom”, in order for an authentic self-awareness to place us before the infinite possibilities of life.

In Memories, Dreams and Reflections Jung again refers to the loss of the old way of functioning. “It is so painful when the old way of functioning continues blindly, even in the face of growing restriction of functioning. People are more deeply embedded in a particular way of going about life than is generally realized; they cannot turn out the old king because they have no trust in the possibility of another emerging.”⁴

⁴ *Ibid.* p.71

The inner consequences of the breakup of a love relationship are felt like a state of emotional exile: one's partner as a reference center and as a reflection in the mirror of ourselves that the partner carried has been lost. Nevertheless, this state of exile should be understood as a process. Transformation entails that we experience and submit to the violence and the pain of a breakup; this is the *price of consciousness*. Transformation requires a symbolic death and rebirth, however, sometimes the death does not feel uniquely symbolic.

Here I would like to make a brief reference to some considerations regarding the narcissistic wound. I mentioned above that faced with loss, the narcissist re-experiences the original wound. When a relationship ends the first thing that is threatened is the stability of the narcissistic ego in control. The narcissist is destabilized because the person is faced with the disintegration of both the self and the other as mirror. This loss resounds within like a ruthless echo of the primary wound awakens anxieties and early fears which the ego will seek to fend off in an attempt to restore that initial experience that made him/her the center of the relationship.

Loss of love can leave a permanent wound in the self, creating what we have come to know as a narcissistic wound. This can cause a distortion in character which may be manifested in feelings of inferiority, inadequacy or in perverse fixations. In a similar way, **even** physical changes undergone at an early age can leave narcissistic wounds. These will be touched upon when we refer to the specific circumstances of Frida Kahlo's life.⁵

In referring to the narcissistic personality, it is clear that the absence of the image which represents the maternal archetype leaves a traumatic imprint, which will unfurl throughout life.

⁵ Octavio Chamizo. Seminario *El narcisismo y las adicciones*. México, D.F.

To expand on the violence that threatens to come with a breakup or the end of a relationship, we understand that what the narcissist has lost is the way in which he/she chooses a person to act as mirror: one loves what one is; what one was; what one would like to be and the person who was part of oneself. Thus, the narcissistic personality seeks relationships that will restore their image; in other words, *I love him or her who*, will restore and reflect the image of what and who I am.

In other words, the partner as a real, unique separate person is irrelevant. Their only use is to serve as a mirror that will restore the image of what I am, what I was or what I long to be. What they long for is “the mirror”, a reflection of how they need to see themselves in the gaze of the other.

What is sought is that initial instant, where the mirroring with the mother did take place, where “the baby perceived, or hoped to see itself and its mother as a single entity”.⁶

To move on to the following portion of this presentation it is necessary to establish the following thought: the mourning process requires the awareness of the absence of the other.

The process of mourning implies saying: the object is no longer with me. This is fundamental, because it is from this moment of recognition that *I exist without the other*. Mourning is similar to the process generated at the moment of artistic creation. “To lose one’s center” is to lose one’s points of reference. This is also similar to what happens in a creative process.

⁶ Didier Anzieu. *El yo piel*. Biblioteca Nueva. España, 1998. pp. 48-50

Artistic creation can become an avenue for the mourning as well as a channel to **“access deeper aspects of one’s being”**.

Now we can understand that, for the artist, creative expression is one way to symbolize psyche. Creative expression gives a sense of oneness, of wholeness, of being. This is what we will be able to identify in Frida Kahlo.

With regards to the violence that can be experienced with the loss of a love object in the narcissistic personality, I would like to offer examples of three paintings by the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo.

Approaching them from a profound psychological perspective, these works expose what I call the *price of consciousness*: Frida’s process of transformation as a result of her love relationship, with the chaotic and painful breakups and separations, with the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. I will analyze three paintings, *Diego and I*, *A few Small Nips* and *the Two Fridas*, for their symbolic contents because these pictures were created at critical moments in the life of Frida Kahlo.

In *Diego y Yo (Diego and I)*; we can observe the most intense moment and highlight of Frida’s and Diego’s romantic relationship. At this point, the relationship was as she imagined it should be: an undifferentiated representation, what Jung referred to as a participation mystique.

With *Unos cuantos piquetitos (A Few Small Nips)* I will point out what we may interpret as the “murder” of the narcissistic ego of the artist. Finally, with *Las dos Fridas (The Two Fridas)*, one of her most spectacular and important works, we will explore the “price of consciousness” Kahlo

had to pay for the transformational process that enabled her to recover, through artistic expression, a fuller image of herself.

Frida Kahlo was born in Mexico City in 1907, just before the outburst of the Mexican Revolution; an agitated period that transformed the face of the country and gave rise to a new national and personal consciousness to which the artists of the time not only bore witness, but were fundamental participants in.

Frida was born a year after her mother had lost a baby boy. This situation drove the mother into a deep depression, preventing her from breast feeding and caring for Frida, her newborn girl. As a result, a wetnurse was hired to take care of her. From this information about her early infancy, we can imagine that the mirroring experience between Frida and her mother was likely inadequate. We can further surmise that these early circumstances contributed significantly to the formation of the first narcissistic wound that Frida suffered at the beginning of the development of her sense of self and emerging ego.

This wound left an imprint that we can understand in terms of what Andre Green mentions in his chapter *The Dead Mother*, where he reflects upon the internal representation of the mother in a son who is “looked at” by her but she is absent, perhaps due to a depressive disturbance.

“...the oldest form of primal narcissism involves in a confused way .including the primal love for the object and even what we could call, symmetrically, the primal hate for the object; in

effect, it is this lack of primal subject-object distinction which characterizes the type and quality of the investments”.⁷

Frida was born under difficult circumstances, in a depressive environment where the mother’s eye was still searching for the lost object. Frida, did not receive her mother’s gaze. This leads us to interpret that, throughout her relationships and love life, Frida experienced what we could call the “repetition of an infantile depression”, not due to the real loss of the object – the mother – but suffered in the presence of the object, itself absorbed in mourning”. We may then conclude that in Frida there was no inner representation of the mother.⁸ ...The gaze she received, although partial, was from her wet-nurse - as a vicarious object. The importance of the glimpse of her wet-nurse is reflected in the symbolic representation of her in some of her paintings.

At six years of age, Frida fell ill with polio. This left her with one leg shorter than the other. Years later, when she turned 18 and was in preparatory school, the bus she was riding was hit by a streetcar. The accident changed her life dramatically; a pipe ripped through her abdomen and she suffered multiple fractures in the spinal column, pelvis, legs and ribs. From that moment until her death, she underwent thirty-five operations and the grief of two abortions

Bedridden after the accident, a situation which she would revisit periodically, she passed the time drawing and painting in order to bear the pain of her convalescence. That terrible accident which, perhaps destined her to become an artist, left an imprint of a fragmented body image

⁷ Andre Green. *La madre muerta*, en *Narcisismo de vida, narcisismo de muerte*. Amorrortu editores. Argentina, 1993. p 233.

⁸ Andre Green. *Ibid.* p. 216

which exacerbated her extant narcissistic wound. Both wounds were determinant and, in a way, the creative aspects of the Self tried to heal them through art.

All of this is a backdrop to the fateful meeting with Diego Rivera, who was painting a mural at the preparatory school Frida attended. This event rooted in her a profound love for the person who would be, for the rest of her existence, her life-partner. Thiers would be a tempestuous relationship full of vicissitudes, breakups and betrayals.

More or less recovered from her accident, Frida decided to visit Diego at the preparatory school where he was painting his famous murals to ask him whether her paintings were any good. With that act, symbolically, Frida clearly projected the *animus* onto Diego, a man she would look up to as a great personality, the God image who would be the only one who would heal her wound: I will be your woman, we will be accomplices, no matter what you do.

It is as though she offers herself to him as a sacrificial victim: that he marry her, that he get her pregnant despite the abortions, that he take her into account, that he love her, that he confirm her as an object, and that he betray her. In this utopian fantasy Frida would attempt to extinguish the early wound that accompanied her throughout her life.

She would refer to the love she felt for Diego in the following manner These are her own words about her feelings for him :

No one will ever know how much I love Diego...If I had my health I would want to give all to him, if I had youth, he could take it. Not only am I his mother,I am the embryo, the germ, the first cell that was waiting to give birth to him. I am he from the most primordial...the oldest cells, that with time became “sense”.⁹

This obsession/possession/surrender, is also a type of spiritual system, and is expressed in the artistic language of the painting **Diego y Yo**. In it Diego is “magical”, he inspires her and allows her to live. She presents Diego through the image that she has formed of him from the beginning of the relationship, an image that captures her psyche. When Diego is near her, Frida feels complete; this makes her feel at the center of Diego’s life, a life she pretends to engulf and possess by painting him as a boy, as a baby-Diego in Frida’s arms. She wants to transcend the common limitations of wife and lover and imagines herself as the Great Mother, a common womb from which the entire cosmos, who is Diego, has sprung. This idea, that dominated her feeling for Diego during their entire relationship, was expressed by Frida in 1949:

“I won’t speak of Diego as my husband, because it would be ridiculous. Neither will I refer to him as a lover...because it encompasses more than sexual limitations, y if I were to speak of him as a son, all I would do is describe o paint my own emotions... my self-portrait, not Diego’s...Diego has the manner of an intimate monster, to whom the...Old Concealer, the essential and eternal matter, the mother of all men and of all gods... THE WOMAN, among all of them – ME – I would like to always have him in my arms like a newborn baby”¹⁰

When pretending Diego is her son, she is in reality projecting onto that image and onto Diego her own desires. First, she sees herself as the beloved daughter of her mother; then she sees

⁹ Carlos Fuentes. Introducción, en *Diario de Frida Kahlo: autorretrato íntimo*. Nueva York, Harry N. Abrams inc. Strauss & Giroux, 2000.

¹⁰ Le Clezio, J.M.G. *Diego y Frida*. Diana, México, 1997. p. 163.

Diego as that son-man-lover made in the image of her fantasies, the son who is really Frida's idealized ego. She is now completely in the grip of this animus possession.

We can refer back to that first moment in which Frida could not *find herself reflected in the mirror of her mother's face*. The lack of maternal mirroring left Frida to relentlessly seek to try to repair this lacuna through her paintings. These can be interpreted as self-portraits but, deep down, what they express is her most profound wound due most likely to the absence of the confirming and reassuring mirror of the caring mother.

With *Diego y yo* and with Frida's description of what Diego represents to her, we can understand what Christopher Bollas writes in his book **The Shadow of the Object**¹¹ when he asks regarding the patient's story: Who is speaking? To whom does he speak? What does he speak about? Bollas responds that the patient, given the endless subtleties of transference, will always place in his speech the internal representations of the object. The transformational object is the first subjective experience that the infant has of the object, which is identified as a life happening by the infant with processes that alter the experience of himself.¹² The imprint left on adult life by that early link will determine what will be unconsciously sought or projected in a relationship. Whether we call it projection or fantasy, it is what we understand as love desire or its fiction. That being said, we realize that *Diego y yo* establishes for Frida a link with the hope for transformation, since *Diego y yo* is identified as an object of satisfaction and of change.

¹¹ Christopher Bollas. *La sombra del objeto. Psicoanálisis de lo sabido no pensado*. Amorrortu editores, Argentina, 1997.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 33.

With **Diego y yo**, as with all her art, Frida aesthetically re-designs what remains of the internal representation of her mother and, in a futile search for the lost primal object, she turns Diego and her relationship with him into a reverential object.

With passion and tenderness she wrote in her diary: “**eyes open, all senses Diego**”¹³, all her senses were to perceive Diego and to cling to the projection she had of him, revealing a desperate dependency. Her mutilated being implored that Diego’s eyes validate her. In her emotional chaos and state of mystical participation, Frida was incapable of telling apart her internal loves and hates and of separating them from the external projection onto Diego. Put another way, if the search for symbolic equivalents of the transformational object and the experience with which it is identified continues in adult life - as in Frida’s case, by projecting her transformational object onto Diego – we should not be surprised at the emergence of several psychopathologies in tyrannical relationships.

What is important to highlight here is that the wounded ego has created, a “Diego Universe”, because in it her being is confirmed. In **Diego y yo**, Diego appears as Frida’s third eye and he himself also has a third eye: it is as though Frida were capable of being clairvoyant through Diego who, in turn, is capable of seeing the intangible in Frida. This third-eye-Diego is an other-Diego, since through his eye she felt that she existed in a state of fusion with Diego.

In Frida’s narcissistic investment, what is at stake is the illusion that the selected object, Diego, is completely reducible to what she needs. That is why she searched for an object that would serve as the mirror to restore her image of an ideal ego. The tears in the painting

¹³ Carlos Fuentes. *op.cit.* p. 235.

symbolize the sadness for what Frida knew, her permanent wound: **Diego inside of me/Diego I have you not.**¹⁴

Earlier I mentioned that the relationship between Frida and Diego was tempestuous; it was also a relationship with mutual and profound tyrannical and sadistic overtones. This can be gleaned from the next painting I will analyze.

In 1935, shortly after discovering that Diego was having an affair with her own sister, Frida, inspired by a story about a homicide, painted **Unos cuantos piquetitos**. Diego's betrayal with Cristina Kahlo represented more than a simple betrayal. It was monstrous and unbearable. Cristina was the one woman with whom Diego could not possibly be unfaithful. Nevertheless, in doing so, Diego, evokes old phantoms and pain that lay dormant in Frida's memories. This betrayal turned out to be a fateful act whereby Diego destroyed a part of Frida.

Cristina Kahlo represented for Frida, more than her other sisters, her double. Cristina was the one she most loved and hated during childhood, the one with whom she shared the most, the one she waited for in vain as she lay in the hospital bed after the accident. This made the affair between Diego and Cristina, in addition to a betrayal, an act of cruelty.

Far from working through her fury, her despair and her mourning, Frida seemed to wallow in the pain, feeling the betrayal as a sort of murder: for years, Frida refused to exhibit **Unos cuantos piquetitos** and she stained both the canvas and the frame with her own blood.

¹⁴ Carlos Fuentes. *Idem*.

In the painting, which is a sort of open letter to Diego, Frida expresses the violence that she has been subjected to by being substituted, not just by another woman, but especially by her sister, Cristina.

In **Unos cuantos piquetitos** Frida paints herself naked on the bed. Next to the bed is the murderer, who appears – as in outer reality- not to grasp the extent of his action. It is as though Frida were saying through the painting that Diego did not think of her at the moment of betrayal, and that, Diego, the murderer, the killer of her love, is incapable of recognizing the pain inflicted in the depths of Frida. Through this betrayal, Diego showed they were not what she assumed they were as a couple. This huge affront to Frida's ego is what she experienced as the murder of her ideal ego: when Frida is killed in the painting, the murderer – an allegory for Diego – is killing the idol that he was to Frida. For Frida, this was an experience of death; it was as though she no longer existed.

Ernesto Aguirre, Frida's lover during the separation from Diego because of this betrayal, recounts that Frida used her sister's name to rent the room where they would meet. This could be interpreted as the shadow of Frida projected onto her sister, as though the representation of the sister's dark side would allow her to pull Diego back to her.

When Frida, overcome by loneliness, decided to go back to Diego, they reunited “with diminished pride but with unbroken love”¹⁵. For Frida this meant life with the memory of an open wound, as if her painting were the reflection of soul, a body lacerated with knife stabs,

¹⁵ Le Clezió J.M.G. *op. cit.* p. 134

perhaps evidence of what was falling apart inwardly. **Unos cuantos piquetitos** is the eternal violence of the knife of betrayal slicing through Frida's soul.

The relationship with Diego lasted 25 years, through break-ups and reconciliations. Frida's condition to agree to a second marriage was to live in separate houses: this shows that a part of her psyche was aware that she needed distance while the strong link to Diego was the center of balance – or unbalance – of Frida's psyche. Although it is impossible to state that Diego was her only creative source, it is evident that from the beginning of the relationship he became the focus point of increased consciousness that accompanied her in her journey toward life.

Since life, for Frida, was a spiral of vindications, faced with the violence of accepting Diego's infidelities, sometimes anticipating them, the pain of her internal fragmentation and the loss of the image of the absolute in Diego, Frida would undergo a profound transformation: the acceptance of her condition with Diego notwithstanding the violence and the pain. Frida brought this acceptance to expression in her master piece **Las Dos Fridas**.

The creation of **Las dos Fridas** came about after Diego Rivera asked Frida for a divorce in 1939. This painting can be understood as the materialization of the psychic pain Frida experience with this separation. The wrenching experience of the separation allowed for the creation of a masterpiece where the profound fragmentation of her ego is seen as expressed in her personal and transpersonal wounds.

At a personal level, this painting depicts Fridas' experience – her wounded body that prevented her from becoming a mother and her relationship with and love for Diego – which lead her to create the woman and her double in the painting as one and the same. It is as if the one displaced the other and where we understand that the displaced body is seen as a vehicle to restructure and put together the fragmentation.

What happened to Frida when Diego asked for a divorce was a psychological fragmentation of such magnitude that Frida was initially unable to recover.

Eventually she was able to give artistic expression to one of the clearest works of art on psychic fragmentation known in the 20th Century.

Anzieu points out that, the violence that the psyche of an artist suffers is expressed as the dismemberment, that compels him to produce his work of art.“ To create an oeuvre is to try to mitigate and contain the effects of the fragmentation of a psycho-physical personality in the unity and integrity of the person.

When we observe the creative and psychological development of Frida, what becomes evident is the extent to which the body of the artist, both real and imaginary-fantastic, is present as a manifestation of her pain.

In the same way, we can glean from the painting **Las dos Fridas** the *price of consciousness* that Frida paid for this transformation. The blood transfusion between the two Fridas, which could be interpreted as a symbol of her physical and psychological agony also symbolizes the

substantive matter that will keep them alive. That is to say, Frida in pain “gives her blood’ to that other Frida who is able to complete the synthesis of transformation: Frida’s past – represented in her indigenous costume – and her present – represented in the union of both women through the intravenous tube are united in the pain of the separation with her love object. The metaphorical reconstruction depicted here shows tension between Frida and her double both nurtured by an artery connected to a source of life which is the image of the boy Diego. “The boy Diego can be interpreted as Frida’s life source, a self symbol, which, till the divorce she had projected onto Diego her entire life.”

Having said that, we can also see that **Las dos Fridas**, goes beyond a simple representation of Frida’s fragmented psyche. We can interpret it as an image that permitted Frida to take in and accept the violence of the separation and the loss of the love object. The painting shows Frida’s acceptance of the pain of the rupture of the relationship based on a dependent and co-dependent complicity of torturer and tortured. It was the progressive dissolution of the conviction of her narcissistic ego that she could not exist without Diego, that became the form through which she could *have* herself through the metaphor of her double in the painting, as though she was giving birth to herself. The boy Diego could now be a metaphoric source of life for her. Frida’s willingness to accept the violence and the pain, which she expresses in her painting, **Las dos Fridas**, reflects, at the same time, the price of consciousness paid by Frida for transformation.

These images that I have shown you here, which cannot, of course, express completely in words the creative process, we can see that the images created by Frida are the imprints of her internal representations. These imprints beautifully depict her sensations, her experiences and

her suffering. Through them, we can see how creative expression, via the medium of art, offers the possibility of expressing the process of transformation.

Frida was able to represent several elements of her internal conflict, to elaborate on them and to eventually find, “the option of life when faced with the lethal components of crisis”. Her paintings are her legacy to us and reflect the price that consciousness demands.

I wish to thank all of you for your attention, thank you for being kind and patient with your time and my English Thank you very much indeed, for receiving me at this meeting.

END

(An artistic example of this type of reflection in relationships is suggested in the painting *Los Amantes 4* (The Lovers) of another Mexican artist, Remedios Varo, whose image speaks for itself.

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