

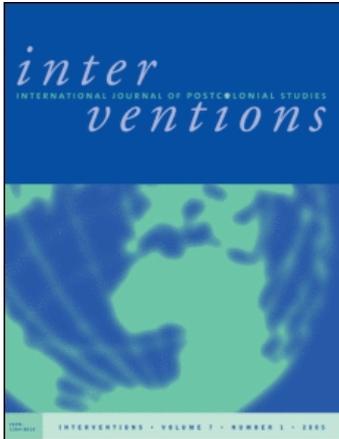
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BETWEEN SUBALTERNITY AND INDIGENEITY

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introduction

BETWEEN SUBALTERNITY AND INDIGENEITY

Critical Categories for Postcolonial Studies

Jodi A. Byrd and Michael Rothberg
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

.....

**American
Indian studies**

**incommensur-
ability**

indigenous

**postcolonial
studies**

sovereignty

Spivak

subaltern

This introductory essay addresses the conditions for possible exchange between subaltern studies and indigenous and American Indian studies. It highlights the special significance of Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' as an inaugurating moment of postcolonial studies in the US with important implications for those working in indigenous studies. Scholars in postcolonial and indigenous/American Indian studies share an interest in challenging the logics of colonialism and deploying incommensurability as a critical tool. However, the essay also points to tensions between postcolonial and indigenous studies that derive from indigenous people's sense of living under ongoing colonial projects – and not just colonial legacies – and from postcolonial studies' over-reliance on models of colonialism in South Asia and Africa that do not necessarily speak to the settler colonies of the Americas, Australia and New Zealand. Besides tracing the convergences and tensions that mark the relation between indigenous and postcolonial critical tendencies, this essay introduces the contributions to this special issue and seeks to prompt further dialogue that continues the project of interrogating subalternity.

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In bringing together the categories of ‘subalternity’ and ‘indigeneity’ this special section of *Interventions* seeks to inaugurate a conversation that has been waiting to happen for at least two decades – at least since the definitive entry of subaltern studies and postcolonial theory into the North American academy around 1988. In that year alone, Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak published their co-edited anthology *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Spivak put out her own essay collection *In Other Worlds*, which included her first translations of Mahasveta Devi’s stories as well as her influential essay on Devi, ‘A Literary Representation of the Subaltern’, and, perhaps most consequentially, Spivak’s ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ appeared in the collection *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson. Some critics cynically read the inclusion of a school of historiography dedicated to the non-elite histories of the Indian subcontinent within the very different context of the Reagan/Bush I-era American academy as the expression of a depoliticized appropriation of radical thought, yet the travels of the subaltern concept have been very much a part of its history from the beginning.¹ Drawing inspiration from Antonio Gramsci’s writings on the ‘Southern Question’ in Italy, which adapted the military term ‘subaltern’ to describe uneven national development, as well as from structuralist and poststructuralist theories of discourse, subaltern studies took shape in the 1980s as a project for rewriting the history of South Asia outside the bounds of colonialist, elite nationalist, and Marxist frameworks. The subaltern studies scholars sought to bring attention to peasant insurrections that had remained invisible in dominant and even much leftist historiography by developing alternative models of history and politics attuned to the agency of subordinated social groups. Spivak’s appreciative but critical engagement with the subaltern studies project brought the work of the collective to the attention first of postcolonial scholars and soon thereafter to scholars and activists engaged with ethnic and minority critique on a global scale.

1 For a critical take on the institutionalization of subaltern studies in the US academy, see Beverley (2000). For a more general critique of postcolonial studies along these lines, which also includes reference to subaltern studies, see Dirlik (1994).

The same decades that have seen the emergence and institutionalization of postcolonial and subaltern studies have also been productive ones for American Indian studies and indigenous studies more generally. As post-colonial studies emerged against the backdrop of earlier anticolonial struggles and the era of decolonization, American Indian studies emerged out of the political struggles of the late 1960s and early 1970s associated with the American Indian movement and the occupation of Alcatraz Island. Inspired by foundational texts of the late 1960s such as M. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* and Vine Deloria, Jr.’s *Custer Died for Your Sins*, the emergent discipline of American Indian studies prioritized sovereignty, self-determination, treaty rights, and linguistic and cultural revitalization. The pan-Indian perspective that arose in the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s increasingly took on distinctly transnational, transoceanic, and

transhemispheric dimensions with the (contested) appearance of ‘indigenous’ as a category for organizing political and intellectual intervention in the wake of the United Nations’ 1993 ‘Year of Indigenous Peoples’ and the 2007 ‘Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples’ (a declaration opposed, it should be noted, by Canada, New Zealand, and the United States).

For scholars in American Indian studies and indigenous studies, the category of indigeneity marks an intellectual theorization located at the crossroads where analyses of colonization intersect with peoples who define themselves in terms of relation to land, kinship communities, native languages, traditional knowledges, and ceremonial practices that are foundational to the maintenance of what Alfred and Cornthassel have theorized as ‘oppositional, place-based existence’ (2005: 597). Indigeneity also marks an intellectual project that challenges and disrupts the logics of colonialism that underwrite liberal democracies in order to question Euro-American constructions of self, nation-state, and subjectivity that have also been the purview of postcolonial theory. Those familiar terms pose ontological and epistemological problems for *and in* indigenous studies; too often they erase indigenous perspectives completely, especially within the juridical exercises of colonialist power that deploy and constrain sovereignty as justification for land dispossession. In a historical moment when imposed displacements and diasporas, volatile borders, and coerced exiles confuse and obliterate human perspectives, ‘indigeneity’ holds the promise of rearticulating and reframing questions of place, space, movement and belonging. Work by scholars such as Maaka and Fleras (2005), Stewart-Harawira (2005), Moreton-Robinson (2007), the Native Critics Collective (2008) and Kauanui (2008) provide signposts for how the field of indigenous studies is tackling these questions.

Because of its (often warranted) suspicion of certain tendencies in the academy, the development of an indigenous critical theory interrogating the concept of indigeneity may seem far from the interrogation of subalternity by postcolonial thinkers. Yet the conjunction of these two intellectual and political traditions – with their overlaps as well as tensions – can lead to important illuminations. Thus far, however, the potential reframing that a focus on indigeneity can offer to metropolitan postcolonialisms has been largely foreclosed. While postcolonial studies in its various forms, subaltern and otherwise, has flourished in the North American academy, it has been less successful at engaging some of the more obvious ‘local’ issues of coloniality in its surroundings than it has in engaging ‘what’s out there someplace else’, as Robert Warrior notes in his essay in this issue. In particular, and despite some notable exceptions, relatively little has been said about whether and how the colonization of American Indians and other indigenous peoples might fit within the postcolonial frame. There are important exceptions to this rule and some postcolonial scholars have

worked hard to include indigenous perspectives (e.g. Desai and Nair 2005). Yet many scholars in indigenous studies have remained suspicious of postcolonial theory – and of institutionalized critical theory in general – even if, as Warrior’s essay here on his relation to Spivak and his other writings on Edward Said demonstrate, grounds for working together already exist (cf. Warrior 2006).

The uncompleted dialogue between postcolonial and indigenous perspectives is in part a result of the infamous and falsely periodizing ‘post’ in postcolonial: the misleading suggestion that colonialism is over, which has been often and productively discussed by scholars of both indigeneity and colonialism such as McClintock (1992), Shohat (1992), Smith (1999), Silva (2004), Womack, Weaver and Warrior (2006), and many others. Since confronting the ongoing colonization of native lands remains at the top of the agenda for indigenous peoples, many indigenous intellectuals have been reluctant to sign on to a theoretical project that appears to relegate their dilemmas to the past or an achieved ‘after’ (even if, in practice, this has rarely been the project of postcolonial studies). Related, and equally significant, is the question of the ‘fit’ between models developed as a response to the colonization of the Indian subcontinent and (to a lesser extent) Africa, on the one hand, and the settler colonies of the Americas, Australia and New Zealand, on the other. This question of fit suggests that at stake in exploring the resonance between the categories ‘subaltern’ and ‘indigenous’ is a matter of urgent translation – translation in all its senses, linguistic, cultural, and spatial. Indeed, the question of translation goes beyond the question of how to relate two autonomously developing intellectual traditions to each other (indigenous studies and subaltern/postcolonial studies) and is in fact already fundamental to each of the two key terms that orient our investigations here. Both ‘subaltern’ and ‘indigenous’ name problems of translation and relationality; or, to put it slightly differently, subaltern/indigenous dialogue is, among other things, a dialogue within and about incommensurability. Bringing together the subaltern and the indigenous takes us in a different direction from the important investigations into the ‘subaltern citizen’ begun in the pages of this journal under the aegis of Gyanendra Pandey (2008). While Pandey’s project seeks to bring the subaltern into the field of the modern democratic state, the conjunction of subalternity with indigeneity suggests claims less obviously commensurable with the dominant terms of liberal citizenship.

Postcolonial studies can and does provide important conceptual tools for indigenous scholars, even if postcolonial scholars rarely consider that the inverse is also true. However, for postcolonial work to resonate in indigenous contexts it must be careful about the way it translates its terms. Jodi Byrd’s essay in this issue provides an example of such a problematic translation in her genealogy of the concept of ‘internal colonialism’.

An important entry point for theorizing subalternity, which is sometimes conceived as a form of uneven development within the space of the nation, the category of the ‘internal’ threatens to cover over the incommensurabilities that define the dilemmas of indigeneity. As Byrd writes:

the emphasis on the *in* as the necessary condition of subalternity presents fundamental problems when applied to understanding American Indian nations *vis-à-vis* the United States precisely because that *in* cathects the United States as the overarching state authority and is always already a colonial spatialization.

For Byrd, the project of indigenous critical theory involves decathecting from the *space* of colonization, just as for Elizabeth Povinelli and María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, in their contributions, such a project also involves reimagining the *temporality* of empire. As Byrd’s essay demonstrates in its complex mapping of the controversy around the citizenship of Cherokee Freedmen, however, decathecting from empire is a multi-levelled process that involves confronting head on the fact that the logics of colonization are often contradictory and even incommensurable.

It is no accident that incommensurabilities should prove central to the dialogue between indigeneity and subalternity, since a notion of incommensurability lies at the heart of Spivak’s field-defining essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ That essay, which has appeared in several different versions, is a long and complex text that tackles multiple discursive sites and weaves together diverse thematic threads – from colonial law to French theory. Its most famous moment – and an obvious starting point for our dialogue – is its end: the anguished declaration that ‘the subaltern cannot speak’ (Spivak 1988a: 308). The source of much (understandable) misunderstanding, this concluding remark famously glossed the suicide of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, a young woman in 1920s Calcutta, who had tried to speak with her body in taking her life. While, it later emerges, she had in fact committed suicide after failing to fulfil a mission for a revolutionary political group, Bhaduri’s act was consistently misread as the outcome of an illicit affair – even though she had, in Spivak’s reading, deliberately staged her suicide while menstruating in order to ward off talk of an unwanted pregnancy. As even a brief retelling of the story already suggests, and as Spivak would later clarify in *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, her dictum was meant to signal less a problem of articulation than of reception: ‘She “spoke”, but women did not, do not, “hear” her’ (Spivak 1999: 247).² While many scholars in ethnic, indigenous, and postcolonial studies have been troubled by the notion that marginalized subjects cannot ‘speak’, the focus on the inability to ‘hear’ opens up the possibility for building bridges across marginalized locations. Indeed, this salutary shift from the conditions of (failed subaltern) production to the conditions of (failed elite) reception is one of the things that

2 For an illuminating critical account of Spivak’s essay on which we have relied here, see Sunder Rajan (2010).

makes the dialogue between postcolonial studies and indigenous studies simultaneously possible and desirable, as both movements struggle with how to articulate the tensions between overweening colonial power and resilient, resistant actors. Incommensurability in ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in other words, refers to the gap between the ‘sender’ and ‘receiver’ of messages inflected by power, a gap that has considerable implications for the writing of subaltern and indigenous histories, as various contributors to this issue demonstrate.

It is important to be precise about the kinds of non-reception at stake. Failed reception can certainly mean a complete lack of reception, that is, a relegation of subaltern subjects to silence, absence and non-recognition. But perhaps more invidious are forms of partial and distorted reception: reception that fails to acknowledge an incommensurable relation to the source of the message, an incommensurability that is not a ‘natural’ product of cultural difference but derives from established power differentials. Indeed, imperial powers are more than willing to ‘listen in’ on the subaltern, whether through surveillance, bio-piracy or reified forms of consumption. Well aware of the political stakes of such listening in on the subaltern, Spivak’s essential point in ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ and in other texts that engage critically with the question of subalternity, such as ‘Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography’ (Spivak 1988b: 197–221), has been to cast productive doubt on the benevolence of the ‘information retrieval’ technologies of the colonial and neocolonial powers – including those technologies of knowledge deployed by apparently sympathetic scholars and activists.

Spivak’s necessary scepticism about the forms of imperial reception provides a bridge to indigenous scholars who remain rightly concerned, in the words of Dale Turner, ‘to assert, defend, and protect the rights, sovereignty, and nationhood of indigenous communities’ (Turner 2006: 95). Turner draws our attention to the risks that inhere in the particular forms of ‘mishearing’ that take place even and especially in the state’s recognition of indigenous rights. Thus, he cites the Canadian Supreme Court decision *R v. Van der Peet* (1996), which, ‘while supposedly making room for Aboriginal forms of evidence in determining the content of an Aboriginal right, dictates the language from which the evidence is to be articulated and understood’ (Turner 2006: 83). Demonstrating an unselfconscious forthrightness that can come only from the occupation of a distinctly non-subaltern position, the court simultaneously acknowledges and disavows indigeneity in the same sentence: ‘The court must take into account the perspective of the aboriginal peoples, *but that perspective must be framed in terms cognizable to the Canadian legal and constitutional structure*’ (qtd. in Turner 2006: 83; emphasis Turner’s). Here, as Povinelli remarks in her contribution to this issue, we touch on the structure of incommensurability that the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard called the *differend*

(Lyotard 1988). A legal term for a situation in which the two parties to a case do not share a common language in which to articulate the wrong at stake, the differend describes the bind in which the state repeatedly places indigenous communities. In Povinelli's words, 'While the justice of an indigenous claim always seems to confront the law with a specific face, the law of recognition always demands that this specific face speak its difference within a legislated norm.' The perspective of indigenous scholars (and scholars of indigeneity) in the face of these legislated norms helps us to supplement Lyotard's explorations of the differend, which sometimes seem to suppose that the two parties to such incommensurability are equally situated on either side of misunderstanding. Paying attention to indigenous and subaltern problematics reveals that incommensurability often functions as the raw material of the state's translational powers (as the Canadian Supreme Court decision demonstrates in generating commensuration out of incommensurability), but also that incommensurability marks the place of a form of difference yet to be acknowledged.

Povinelli's exploration of what an 'indigenous critical theory' might look like takes off from this dilemma and, not unlike Spivak, casts doubt on the desire to give content to 'the indigenous'. As with the subaltern, the indigenous can fall victim not only to a structural lack of hearing, but to the kinds of substantive mishearing that Spivak identifies in the case of Bhaduri and Turner finds in the Canadian Supreme Court. Referring back to the Canadian context, Povinelli notes that the rendering commensurable of incommensurability has become an 'increasingly modular form', with Australia following Canadian precedent: 'In [the 1992 Australian High Court decision] *Mabo*, the court also finally recognized native title but recognized it as a feature of Australian common law rather than a concept foreign to it.' Once again we see how the differend becomes a double bind: indigenous difference is identified and recognized, but only in order to be translated into a language commensurable with the very state that is structured on the disenfranchisement of fundamental indigenous claims. This bind leads Povinelli to formulate the double task of indigenous theory: 'There is a phenomenon to which the explanatory framework of indigenous critical theory is bound. But the difference between this phenomenon and any determinate content of social difference is vital to what indigenous critical theory is and might be.' Through 'its inability to guarantee the content of its difference', indigenous critical theory 'infects broader issues of political theory, social theory and humanist ethics (obligation)'. Povinelli refers at one point to the work of anthropologist Audra Simpson, who shows what such an 'infection' might look like in practice when it grows out of a 'refusal' of the ruse of state recognition. Investigating discourses surrounding 'indigenous trade and traffic in cigarettes' along the US/Canadian border, Simpson argues that Iroquois traders 'revealed the fragility of the sovereign

status of the settler state, which had never achieved a proper or robust form of consent from the indigenous political subjects themselves, who refused to act as subjects and be contained’ (Simpson 2008: 214–15). While incomensurability signals the presence of a power differential between settler and subaltern, the work of Povinelli and Simpson reveals how it can also lay the groundwork for the destabilization of that very differential.

In his contribution to this issue, Gaurav Desai also looks to ‘trade and traffic’ as a way of teasing out the relation between subalternity and indigeneity. He does so by triangulating our two key terms around a third term that has played a significant role in postcolonial studies: diaspora. While aware of the risks of substantializing indigenous difference that Povinelli points to, Desai nevertheless provides a pair of case studies in the form of a travel narrative in order to think through questions of diaspora, rootedness and belonging. Reflecting on Otavalo and Cotacachi, two indigenous communities in Ecuador, Desai calls for a ‘located’ consideration of the significance of indigeneity and uses the category of subalternity as a lever for revealing power relations that cluster around different experiences of tradition, place and movement. Desai recognizes the problem of the premature ‘post’ and suggests that indigeneity pushes postcolonial scholars ‘to appreciate the temporality of the colonial and postcolonial on a continuum rather than as something universally achieved’. But he also expresses concern about the potential for a discourse of indigeneity to mutate into forms of nativism that can turn violent and even genocidal, as the examples of Hindutva in India and Hutu Power in Rwanda exemplify. Drawing on the words of the late poet and anticolonial thinker Aimé Césaire, Desai calls for a future-oriented articulation of indigenous and (post)colonial forces in the name of a new society that would leave behind both backward-looking ‘exoticism’ and entrapment in the ‘putrid carrion’ of still powerful imperial forces.

Along with the general problematic of the ‘post’ in postcolonial, both Desai’s emphasis on the future and Povinelli’s remarks on how settler colonies have negotiated the problem of ‘the prior’ reinforce the centrality of questions of time to the indigenous/subaltern articulation (although not at the expense of questions of space, of course). In her contribution, Saldaña-Portillo draws on Dipesh Chakrabarty’s conception of ‘heterotemporality’, of a temporal plurality of coterminous cultures. Bringing together new perspectives in the historiography of (what is now) the US Southwest with archival findings and consideration of contemporary popular culture, Saldaña-Portillo paints a heterotemporal ‘picture in which [multiple] positionalities – indigenous and settler, imperialist and subjugated, dominant and subaltern – are in constant motion’. The point is not to relativize the emphasis on distinctions of power that subaltern studies and indigenous studies share, but rather – in the spirit of Desai’s call for a located critique – to

trace the shifting meanings that indigeneity has had and continues to have in colonial and neocolonial imaginaries. Recognizing the historicity of indigeneity, however, can also mean questioning the temporality of anticolonial narratives such as the one articulated by Césaire. In the eighteenth-century Spanish colonial archive, Saldaña-Portillo finds the Indian represented not as marginalized subaltern but as ‘as ally, enemy, cook, spy, thief, wife, profligate, apostate, translator and traitor’. Against this surprising array of ‘subject positions’, Saldaña-Portillo argues, following theoretical work by David Scott, that ‘the discourse of anticolonial “resistance” provides too paltry a vocabulary for capturing the relationships that transpired at these metropolitan crossroads of empires (including the Comanche [empire]) between indigenous subjects and colonial representatives’. Yet, in turning her attention to a ‘postcolonial’ text, the Coen brothers’ 2007 film *No Country for Old Men*, the critic finds the very same southwestern territory depicted as empty, depopulated of the ‘multitudes’ of indigenous people who crowd the colonial archive. Instead of simply reading this absence as a displaced sign of genocidal violence (which it also might be), Saldaña-Portillo reads the film against the grain to show how Indians become a haunting, spectral presence in one key scene at the end of the film: ‘this vanishing act inevitably re-centres the indigenous presence’ and reveals ‘how that centrality haunts the US national imagination.’ Thus, despite the violence and bad faith that underlie *No Country*’s allegory of American neocolonialism, Saldaña-Portillo’s reading of the film helps to uncover the same ‘fragility’ of the settler state that Povinelli’s indigenous critical theory and Simpson’s indigenous traders and traffickers reveal.

Saldaña-Portillo’s essay reveals both the heterotemporal co-presence of indigenous and non-indigenous actors in the colonial archive and the disruptive, haunting spectrality of Indians in the contemporary neocolonial imaginary. In doing so, it illustrates one of the most important tenets of the subaltern approach. As Gyan Prakash has argued, subalternity ‘signifies that which the dominant discourse cannot appropriate completely, an otherness that resists containment. But precisely because dominance fails to appropriate the radical incommensurability of the subaltern, it registers only the recalcitrant presence of subalternity, records impressions of that which it cannot contain.’ For subalternists, these impressions are disruptive not because they come from a radically exterior space, however, but because they are situated inside power and discourse. In a phrase that evokes *No Country*’s anxiety about bandits ‘speaking Indian’, Prakash argues that subaltern traces force dominant discourse ‘into contradictions, by making it speak in tongues’ (2000: 293).

Indigenous critical theory also seeks the disruptive, counter-hegemonic possibilities of native incommensurability, but it does so from a very different angle, as Byrd’s distinct approach to the question of the internal

indicates. Here the potential limits for indigenous studies of the particular Gramscian model adapted by the South Asian collective come into focus. At stake are the very different positions of intellectuals in these two critical traditions. While not all subaltern scholars would subscribe to Spivak’s radical critique of the possibilities of receiving subaltern voices and histories, it is certain, as the citations from Prakash also demonstrate, that no subaltern scholar sees her role as speaking *for* or *from the place of* the subaltern. As Warrior puts it in his contribution to this issue, Spivak’s writings on the subaltern not only map out the structural exclusion of the other, but also reflexively involve ‘understanding her own subject position as an intellectual’. Despite its clear political inspiration to craft a history from below, subaltern studies discourse situates itself necessarily in greater proximity to elite institutions, which it seeks to dismantle from within, than to subaltern communities. The institutionalization of indigenous studies in the academy no doubt raises similarly important questions about the relation between intellectuals and ‘the people’ – questions that Dale Turner (2006), for instance, addresses through his concept of a mediating group of ‘word warriors’ versed in both ‘western’ thought and indigenous thought. Nonetheless, as Turner’s concept is meant to suggest, many indigenous scholars situate themselves in binding relation to – and indeed are *part of* – native communities in ways completely absent from the subaltern studies project. To borrow another Gramscian concept, indigenous studies is involved in a project of fostering the creation of ‘organic intellectuals’ capable of articulating and defending native sovereignty and autonomy; that intellectual project cannot simply be a matter of tracing disruptions ‘inside’ the dominant.

Warrior’s concluding essay treats this question of organic intellectuals and demonstrates both why the subaltern studies approach can be productive in indigenous studies and where that approach meets its limit. There is, in Warrior’s estimation, more than enough subaltern experience within native communities – including abject poverty and continued political disenfranchisement – but there are also already spaces within those communities where alternative formations persist that cannot simply be termed subaltern. Warrior cautions against romanticizing the yearly Osage in-losh-ka dance he discusses as a purely utopian space – since, like all cultural practices, it is marked by its own exclusions, hierarchies and ambivalences – but he nevertheless convincingly depicts it as a place where a different kind of translation out of subalternity might emerge or might already be emerging. The proximity of subaltern, intellectual and other bodies in the Osage dance does not betoken a translation into the incommensurable terms of the dominant, but into an indigenous cultural and intellectual space of possibility. Displacing the question of whether the subaltern can speak into a scene in which subalterns and indigenous intellectuals dance together,

Warrior's closing reflections suggest the need to imagine new projects in theory and practice that acknowledge the coexistence of ongoing colonial legacies, entrenched material inequities, and already existing forms of cultural and political resistance.

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