



Hip Hop as Cultural Capital: Remixing Bourdieu's Theory to Affirm Cultural Wealth

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Hierarchical societies reproduce themselves through cultural resources that generate social value. The values attached to these social and cultural resources are determined from the top social strata and then disseminated throughout society via mediums like education. Pitched as a supplement to mainstream pedagogy, hip-hop based education (HHBE) uses rap songs and lyrics as curricular resources to teach a variety of disciplines. HHBE has been inserted into teaching practice since the 1990s to enhance English language arts analyses (Hall 343; Morrell and Duncan-Andrade 89) in addition to providing context and relevancy for humanities and social science curricula (Stovall 587). However, the pedagogical potential of HHBE has thus far used hip hop lyrics as an accessory to reinforce the transmission of dominant social values through education instead of utilizing the inherent value of hip hop as its own form of social and cultural capital. Applying Yosso's conceptualization of community cultural wealth to rap music provides evidence of the social value of hip hop for education and broader society even after decades of negative characterizations of the genre.

Despite its popularity in the United States of America, hip hop culture is misunderstood by many. The popular discourse on rap music is unjustly negative. Throughout history black popular music has been blamed for the propagation of a number of social ills including the deterioration of families, urban decline, and juvenile delinquency. In the contemporary scenario, it is hip hop or rap music that bears the brunt of the same allegations. It quite possibly has been criticized and censored more than any other genre of music. The controversy surrounding this chart-topping musical art form can be traced to popular discourse on the subject which has shared an inverse relationship with record sales for over three decades; the more popular hip hop becomes, the more mainstream America's image of it plummets. The discourse on hip hop music characterizes it in many negative ways, calling it violent, sexist, menacing, misogynistic, ignorant, vulgar, unintelligible, debauched, or venomous to name a few; it is even said to reinforce stereotypes and promote racist images of African Americans. This same discourse has been used to judge and censor rap, outlaw the sale of some artists' records, and even arrest rappers who violate main-

stream standards of decency.¹ However, hip hop does indeed have a rich history and comprises some of the most talented musicians, word-smiths, dancers, and other artists. Its ascent is credited with transforming the fashion industry as well as reviving African American cinema.

Hip hop has as many definitions as it does varieties, but a few are better at describing the uniqueness and expansiveness of its culture than Keyes's who defines it as "...a youth arts mass movement...[which] encompasses what its adherents describe as an attitude rendered in the form of stylized dress, language, and gestures associated with urban street culture" (1). Westbrook further builds upon it by claiming that hip hop is "the artistic response to oppression" and is the culture that includes rap music; hip hop "...as a musical art form...is stories of inner-city life, often with a message, spoken over beats of music" (113). Therefore, the term 'hip hop' is used to denote a culture and is also a genre of music. The term 'rap' is a large musical component of hip hop and "...can be defined as a musical form that makes use of rhyme, rhythmic speech, and street vernacular, which is recited or loosely chanted over a musical soundtrack" (Keyes 1) or even as "a verbal sport" (Westbrook 113). Both terms, 'rap' and 'hip hop,' are used interchangeably throughout this text with distinctions made while referring particularly to the culture or the music.

The criticism directed at hip hop necessitates a review of long-standing debates within anthropology regarding authority and identity when researching culture. The issues of perspective and reflexivity have been debated in social science for many years. Some believe that only an emic or insider's account of a culture is valid while others argue that a researcher must take an etic approach and remain outside a culture to objectively study it. In the case of music, the field of ethnomusicology recognizes a tendency in etically-oriented researchers to treat ethnic music in a condescending way, encourage the retention of old material, or even cause artists to become artificially elite through association with the researcher (Nettl 151). One cannot fully understand the power of music as a cultural vehicle while standing outside

¹See Hudson for a review of court cases attempting to censor rap lyrics or charge rap artists with obscenity. Potts further gives insightful reflections on attempts to censor rap music artists such as N.W.A, the Geto Boys, and 2 Live Crew throughout the 1990s that details the following incidents and several similar occurrences: (1) N.W.A concerts were canceled or disrupted across the nation due to beliefs that their music was disrespectful toward law enforcement officers and incited violence against police; (2) The Geto Boys' record label refused to distribute their 1990 album citing concerns that it endorsed violence; (3) After a U.S. District Court declared that the lyrics of 2 Live Crew's album *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* to be obscene, members of the group were detained and charged with obscenity after performing at an adults-only club.

the culture in which it originated. It may lead to an uninformed view by the etic researcher.

In the study of hip hop, one taking an etic approach is anyone who is not *inside* hip hop culture. Re-visiting the aforementioned definition of hip hop culture as expressions of an attitude associated with the urban streets illustrates that it is not a label limited to artists and those who work in the music industry. Instead, it is also inclusive of those who create, listen to, support, and value hip hop music and culture. Furthermore, this culture encompasses particular ethnic, social, and age groups who share, experience, and exhibit its features—mostly African American or Latino/a, urban, and youth (usually aged thirty or younger). For an insider taking an emic approach, the value of hip hop is intuitive. This viewpoint is possible as emically-oriented researchers have been able to create objective and unbiased studies of their own cultures while viewing phenomena from the perspective of their subjects.

The criteria for taking an emic approach has been defined in order to highlight the fact that most scholars who write about hip hop, whether for or against it, are not actually a part of the hip hop culture. This does not mean etically-oriented researchers cannot appreciate other cultures, because they can and do. It does, however, mean that their contributions are different as they link cultural practices to external factors in the absence of native understanding of phenomena. Furthermore, those who believe the “golden age” of rap to be from the mid-1980s until the early 1990s,² keep old cultural material in the forefront of study. They then endorse the popular discourse which purports that contemporary hip hop promotes antisocial values (Dyson; Miranda and Claes 113). Others focus their studies and attention on a small segment of artists they believe to be the artistic elite, discounting the brilliance of the majority who comprise the genre. For example, they write only about what they call “conscious rap,” “conscientious rap,” “political hip hop” or “message rap”—songs with lyrics that focus on social issues or politics and contain what the mainstream considers to be positive or uplifting messages. Likewise, rap that is not message rap is characterized as diluted, sterile, and inauthentic (Dyson 64). Etically-oriented researchers do not realize that the general mes-

²The “golden age” of rap music is said to have commenced with the release of Run DMC’s album *King of Rock* in 1985 when all elements of hip hop culture became mainstream and the genre was revered for its progressiveness; this period ended in the early 1990s after the rise of the subgenre known as gangsta rap which included lyrics that were misogynistic and glorified drugs, violence, and crime (Lavin). See Alridge and Stewart for a chronology of hip hop history as well as reviews of texts about hip hop.

sages in commercial rap can be just as positive and uplifting to the community as conscious rap. Furthermore, some who love rap music (both emically-oriented researchers and etically-oriented researchers) have demonstrated its value and beauty by evaluating it as poetry or comparing it to other art forms when, in reality, hip hop has a value of its own.

Hip hop culture provides the basis for cultural capital within the community. Cultural capital is the concept created by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to explain resources capable of generating social profit that are transmitted through culture.³ Cultural capital can be defined as “[...]a set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are typically passed from one generation to the next” (Rodriquez 22). It functions as symbolic capital and is natural to those who possess it. The original formulation of Bourdieu’s theory privileged the white middle-class because their culture dominates, leaving all other cultures in a deficit for not possessing the same knowledge base. It follows that people of color and the working class would be deficient because they lack the social and cultural capital to be upwardly mobile in society. Additionally, the culture they do possess is incompatible with that of mainstream society—especially in educational settings (Lin and Man 201). However, Bourdieu’s work has been re-interpreted by Yosso using Critical Race Theory (CRT), and herein extended to apply to hip hop culture.

CRT, relevant to the study of both law and sociology, emerged from the Critical Legal Studies movement.⁴ While Critical Legal Studies examined how the legal system functioned to legitimize oppressive social structures, it did not incorporate race into the analysis; CRT was developed as a framework that centralized racism and white supremacy when describing social structures and practices (Sablan 180; Yosso 71). CRT expanded from legal studies into the discipline of

³Bourdieu conceptualized cultural capital as existing in three forms with the most applicable one being “the embodied state” which is the integral part of a person that includes culture. It is accumulated over time (even unconsciously) and must be invested personally by the investor to yield profit (18). While Bourdieu recognized that there is an unequal distribution of capital in class-divided societies, he considered the lag in accumulating this symbolic capital to be a “handicap” that must be made up before one could achieve success (19). As all people in such a society do not have equal means to acquire and utilize embodied cultural capital, this theoretical approach characterizes them as operating from a deficit which seems to attribute their lack of capital to personal shortcomings or inadequate cultural values.

⁴Critical Legal Studies (CLS) is a movement in legal theory and scholarship that challenges accepted norms and assumptions that American law is fundamentally just and has resulted from years of historical progress. Instead, proponents of CLS believe that law is intertwined with social issues and is inherently biased (“Critical Legal Theory”).

education, and is now further extended and applied to popular music which can be considered a type of informal education which permeates the lives of listeners.

There are five central tenets of CRT that Yosso put forth: first, “[...]race and racism are central, endemic, permanent and a fundamental part of defining and explaining how US society functions”; second, it challenges White privilege and refutes the claims institutions make toward objectivity; third, the field “[...]is committed to social justice and offers a liberatory or transformative response to racial, gender and class oppression”; fourth, it “[...]recognizes that the experiential knowledge of People of Color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing and teaching about racial subordination”; and fifth, it takes a transdisciplinary perspective and draws on scholarship from a number of other fields (Yosso 73–74). These five principles outline how CRT can function as both a theory and a methodology to guide the transformation of Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital into one that is no longer limited by the omission of voices of color.

Therefore, hip hop operating as cultural capital commands respect for the knowledge and products generated by the culture instead of dismissing them as reasons for African Americans’ apparent marginality Clay states:

The use of hip-hop culture, that is, fashion, gestures, language, and performance as cultural capital, establishes the boundaries of who is and who isn’t popular, who gets the most support and encouragement, and who is and isn’t Black in settings... (1356)

Extending Bourdieu’s theory applies to hip hop culture “by privileging and legitimizing the knowledge bases of historically marginalized people” including youth (Rodriquez 22).

This is important because cultural capital is the basis for both social inclusion and exclusion as “[...]cultural capital is used to position people in a particular status hierarchy among their peers” and sets boundaries and criteria to determine legitimacy and authenticity in a particular setting (Clay 1349). Knowing the language, codes, and messages of hip hop culture is a proof of emic status. It is what carries currency in these circles. Utilizing cultural capital can demonstrate solidarity or status. For example, “[...]knowing about the roots or connections between and among various hip hop artists communicates to others that you are part of the culture and these knowledge bases can serve as a vehicle to facilitate solidarity among different groups of people” (Rodriquez 27). Furthermore, scholars have identified six forms of cultural wealth that communities of color use to survive and

resist oppression: aspirational, linguistic, familial, resistant, social, and navigational. They are neither mutually exclusive nor static, as demonstrated in the findings of this pilot study.

Whether scholars, journalists, or other writers support or criticize hip hop, they can always find lyrical evidence to support their claims. In an effort to avoid such subjectivity and control personal bias, this study uses a probability sample design—stratified random sampling, using Billboard, as primary source for music information and popular trends. Music charts have been used to gather data on music trends by compiling the most popular rap songs for six years (2006–2011), i.e., a total of 215 songs. The songs on each year-end chart are ranked by sales, radio airplay, and audience impressions. Therefore, they represent the most prominent and widespread songs for each year—both important features when considering overall cultural impact.

Stratified random sampling of just over five percent of the population ($N = 215$) generated the subset for this pilot study ($n = 12$). The year-end charts were of varying lengths (seemingly in correspondence with the cross-over growth of hip hop into other genres, sometimes termed ‘hip pop’) and the years served as strata for the sampling procedure. The charts for years 2006 through 2008 each had 25 songs, the 2009 chart had 40 songs, and both 2010 and 2011 charts had 50 songs each. Stratified random sampling ensured that songs from each year were adequately represented in the sample. Furthermore, a proportionate stratified sample was obtained with a uniform sampling fraction ($12/215$). An online random number generator (www.random.org), based on the randomness of atmospheric noise, selected songs from each stratum. This process resulted in the following sample from year-end Billboard music charts of the top rap songs each year from 2006 to 2011:

1. “Ridin” – Chamillionaire featuring Krayzie Bone (2006)
2. “We Fly High” – Jim Jones (2007)
3. “Stronger” – Kanye West (2007)
4. “Whatever You Like” – T.I. (2008)
5. “Put it on ya” – Plies featuring Chris J (2009)
6. “Stanky Legg” – GS Boyz (2009)
7. “Beamer, Benz, or Bentley” – Lloyd Banks (2010)
8. “Toot It and Boot It” – YG (2010)
9. “Not Afraid” – Eminem (2010)
10. “Roll Up” – Wiz Khalifa (2011)
11. “Rocketeer” – Far East Movement (2011)
12. “Aston Martin Music” – Rick Ross (2011)

Lyrics of all songs in the sample were analyzed for various forms of cultural capital (aspirational, linguistic, familial, resistant, social, and navigational) as well as other motifs. The lyrics of each song were evaluated for words and phrases which function in ways that match the description and definition of the various forms of cultural capital: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, resistant, and navigational. The characterizations of each type of capital have been identified in literature by various scholars, but compiled in Yosso's discussion of community cultural wealth, which was used for the analysis of data in this study.

First, aspirational capital is:

...the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers...those who allow themselves and their children to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances, often without the objective means to attain those goals. (Yosso 77–78)

More than half of the sample, seven of the twelve songs, have lyrics that correspond with aspirational capital. Moreover, this form of capital can be further broken down into three main functions—resilience, escapism, and boasting. For example, Kanye West's 2007 hit song "Stronger" has a chorus which chants, "N-now th-that that don't kill me, can only make me stronger." West reminds listeners that he, and by extension they, have the ability to recover from tough challenges. On the other hand, the Far East Movement's "Rocketeer" immerses listeners in imaginary situations and activities; it sings, "here we go, come with me, there's a world out there that we should see, take my hand, close your eyes, with you right here I'm a rocketeer." Similarly, artists who boast about their material possessions and expensive lifestyles serve to ignite the desire in their listeners for the same markers of wealth and status. In "Whatever You Like," T.I. asserts that a girl with him can have all the expensive things she wishes to have. Meanwhile, Lloyd Banks raps that no matter what he drives, "beamer, Benz or Bentley, my jeans are never empty..." ("Beamer, Benz or Bentley").

Linguistic capital was also found to be evident throughout the entire sample. However, this is not simply because each song utilized rhythm and rhyme. According to Yosso, "...linguistic capital includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style" (78). It also includes the ability to recount oral history or stories, use skills such as rhythm

or rhyme, and the usage of literary devices. Furthermore, the language of the lyrics serves as an ethnic marker to indicate who's in the group and to promote group solidarity. This is the principal way emically-oriented researchers of hip hop culture demonstrate their identity. Along with the performance of clever literary devices throughout the sample, there was also the use of vernacular as well as profanity. The last two could even be considered a form of resistance capital as the use of African American Vernacular English is widely debated in many fields for its inappropriateness. They are not only used in rap, but are seemingly glorified.

Hip hop is known for its use of vernacular, jargon, and slang, as well as its tendency to offend. Bradley writes,

To understand hip hop as a cultural movement we must explore the roots and the reasons for its explicit nature. Rap often specifically intends to offend polite sensibilities. After all, it is an art form born on the street corner, speaking a language of the corner as well. It has evolved...from the 'shunned expressions of disposable people.' (86–87)

Likewise, it can be stated of rap that:

...the collection of expressions at its core...were based on inner-city life—a life and lifestyle that contained, in many cases, gangs and violence, narcotics and alcohol, crime and poverty, and hustling and the desire to attain riches. The language of the streets was slang. It was full of graphic imagery and explicit words, phrases, and metaphors that were often unknown to folks from outside the inner-city perimeter. This was the situation from which the expressions of Hip Hop grew, and these were the realities of which Hip Hop spoke. (Price 74)

Thus, rap music is far more intellectual than the aforementioned popular discourse would have one believe. It features intense rhythms, structured patterns of rhymes and complicated wordplay which all give texture to its poetry. All manner of figures of speech are present including similes, metaphors, paronomasia, eponyms, metonymy, and homophones, among others. Hip hop is more than merely a vehicle of cultural expression. Hip hop music transmits hip hop culture and vice versa. It is loved by the community because it serves the community.

When the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) decided to regulate musical content, the proposed solutions to avoid penalties were to clean up lyrics, create edited singles for radio and televi-

sion, or release dual versions of albums—all of which would destroy artistic and musical integrity (Fox 511).

The use of profanity invokes similar concerns. The FCC denotes profanity as “[...]language so grossly offensive to members of the public who actually hear it as to amount to a nuisance” (Weiss 578). This disregards the truth that “...harsh words are sometimes required to describe harsh realities;” moreover, rap has an “[...]identity as an outlaw expression, a form that doesn’t mind using the words that people actually say, words that describe the sometimes unseemly reality of our modern life” (Bradley 86–88).

Five songs of the sample showed evidence of familial capital, which is “...cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition...kin also model lessons of caring, coping and providing...which inform our emotional, moral, educational and occupational consciousness” (Yosso). Familial capital broadens the concept of kin, and demonstrates a healthy connection to the community. Also, these messages minimize feelings of isolation and share the message that one is not alone in dealing with problems. A few excerpts from the sample exemplify this feeling of community well. In Rick Ross’ “Aston Martin Music” Drake sings, “Would’ve came back for you, I just needed time, to do what I had to do.” In his 2011 single “Roll Up,” Wiz Khalifa raps, “Whenever you need me, whenever you want me, you know you can call me, I’ll be there shortly....” Both songs broaden the connotation of kin to romantic partners.

Social Capital is a bit similar to familial capital in that it offers support to the community. Five songs in the sample demonstrate social capital. By Yosso’s denotation, social capital “[...]can be understood as networks of people and community resources...[that] can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society’s institutions” (79). Similar to familial capital, it offers the solace that one is not alone when facing challengers or maneuvering through life. For example, in “Roll Up” Khalifa reassures, “No matter where I am, no matter where you are, I’ll be there when it’s over baby, ‘cause I was there from the start.” Similarly, Eminem raps, “I’m not afraid to take a stand. Everybody come take my hand. We’ll walk this road together, through the storm, whatever weather, cold or warm, just letting you know that you’re not alone” in his 2010 hit “Not Afraid.” Social capital is also closely related to navigational capital.

While navigational capital is similar to social capital, it does not appear in the sample as often with only two songs showing evi-

dence of this type. Simply stated, it is "...skills of maneuvering through social institutions...institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind" (Yosso 80). It could also be strategies of avoiding and dealing with institutions; in music, this often takes the form of cautionary tales. In addition, navigational capital acknowledges individual agency within institutional constraints. For example, after Chamillionaire released "Ridin," he appeared on several news programs to discuss racial profiling by police, the subject of his hit song. He raps, "so they get behind me, tryna check my tags, look in my rear-view and they smilin', thinkin they'll catch me in the wrong, they keep tryin', steady denyin' that it's racial profilin'." A large portion of rap music deals with the subject of interacting with police, which is not surprising given the common experience and perception among minorities that the U.S. legal system is unjust.

Because these six types of capital are not mutually exclusive, it is easy to see how navigational capital and resistant capital are linked. Resistant capital includes "...knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality... [and] is grounded in the legacy of resistance to subordination exhibited by Communities of Color" (Yosso 80). Four of the songs in the sample indicate resistant capital. A lot of resistance capital deals with law and police relations. Again, Chamillionaire's "Ridin" establishes this well when he rhymes, "with no regard for the law, we dodge 'em like, 'fuck 'em all,' but I won't get caught up and brought up on charges for none of y'all." Also, resistant capital "...includes cultural knowledge of the structures of racism and motivation to transform such oppressive structures" (Yosso 81).

There was also evidence of another hidden form of capital in the sample. For now, it will just be referred to as counter-cultural capital, which includes explicit lyrics and is overtly sexual. It challenges what can be said over airways, thereby posing a challenge to censorship and mainstream values. From this study's sample, it includes "Toot it and Boot It" by YG and "Put it on ya" by Plies, both songs that explicitly describe and depict sexual activities.

As CRT sprang from Critical Legal Studies, at its core is the belief that legislature cannot be separated from politics because it serves the interests of those with wealth and power; those with power create and define laws as well as the related language and discourse. The legislation most closely associated with music is the First Amendment to the United States Constitution which grants the freedom of speech. Despite this guarantee, "[...]the political interests of those in power outweighed [musical] artists' First Amendment rights

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to freedom of speech” (Price 77). Under the guise of protecting children from inappropriate broadcasts, those with power in the U.S. have been able to manipulate the text of the Constitution to serve their interests. They have decided what is appropriate to say, hear, write, see, or exhibit, and enforce their standards through laws, regulations, monetary penalties, and even imprisonment.

It is a violation of federal law to air obscene programming at any time. The FCC guideline on obscenity says:

An average person, applying contemporary community standards, must find that the material, as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest; the material must depict or describe, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by applicable law; and the material, taken as a whole, must lack serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value. (Weiss 577)

It is also a violation of federal law to air indecent programming or profane language between 6:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. (Federal Communications Commission). According to the FCC, content considered indecent does not rise to the level of obscenity but is:

...language or material that, in context, depicts or describes, in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium, sexual or excretory organs or activities. (Weiss 578)

Both of these definitions are problematic because they are ambiguous and biased. The FCC does not describe nor qualify these “contemporary community standards,” but they are obviously equated with white, mainstream, middle-class American values and thus it is evident that hip hop culture does not fit.

A few conclusions that may be inferred from this pilot study are: it is possible and necessary to reframe the discourse on hip hop and rap music by demonstrating how the music indeed operates as cultural capital, commanding respect for, and establishing the legitimacy of the knowledge and products generated within hip hop culture. Seventy-five percent of the sample evinced at least three types of capital. Linguistic capital was the primary type, and it was evident in every song of the sample. Also, another category seemed to be apparent in the sample—counter-cultural capital. Not to be confused with resistant capital, counter-cultural capital communicates the forbidden, pushes limits, and challenges mainstream values.

It is possible to further analyze rap music's contribution to the life of the community by examining its various functions within the community aside from its role and use in HHBE. The primary function of rap music is to educate and instruct by disseminating information. Furthermore, this information can: encourage behavior that promotes survival while discouraging behaviors that do not; teach listeners to be aware, alert, and cautious of common pitfalls; empower audiences with knowledge; inspire; and/or establish codes, create and transmit messages, and maintain secrecy and exclusion. Throughout history, all of these functions of rap music have been associated with functions of black music of African Americans and their tradition of orality. Rap is often compared to poetry to show its worth, but this isn't necessary. Rap has value as a musical form on its own. It does not need to be analyzed simply as poetry to garner respect. Though progression to hip hop from African American poetry and various musical forms has been identified by many scholars, few recognize hip hop's function to resist oppression as a phenomenon that began during slavery.

The use of CRT to examine cultural capital shifts power and acknowledges "counterstory" as a method of challenging the primary narratives of white privilege by telling the stories of people and groups of color that are routinely diminished (Sablan 181). As James Baldwin once said, "It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro has been able to tell his story" ("It is only"). There were coded messages in spirituals and work songs before and after manumission, and significance in the many allusions to the Israelites deliverance from Egypt (Krehbiel 21; Work 40). Blacks sang ballads of social and religious justice which emphasized that the rich and powerful would surely be punished for greed, arrogance, and selfishness. Forward in history, black blues, rock, and funk artists featured messages and anecdotes in their music concerning sexuality, violence, politics, and other topics that garnered criticism similar to the popular discourse on rap. Hence, hip hop is on a trajectory no different than the genres that emerged before it and it should be recognized (and perhaps celebrated) for the knowledge generated for and from within the culture.



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