

THE REPRESENTATION OF WAR TRAUMA IN GRAPHIC NOVELS

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(Submitted April 2019; Reviewed June 2019; Accepted September 2019)

ABSTRACT

In recent decades, comic sections in bookstores have moved beyond the usual selection of superhero and children's narratives. The plethora of fictional and non-fictional graphic novels on the market engages with deeply unsettling issues. This research aims to uncover how sequences of text/image combinations are effective in generating a distinct understanding of the complex and difficult subject of war trauma. Access to this topic is obstructed because war impacts whole communities; it is re-experienced by multiple generations, and disrupts the memory and self-narratives of its victims. These three axes of fragmentation can be addressed particularly well by the medium of comics: comics are themselves fragmented into pictures and written language, as well as into separate panels. This article gives exemplary close-readings of graphic novels relating to individual trauma, communal trauma and intergenerational trauma in order to illustrate the connection between form and content. The analysis focusses on works by Carol Tyler, Art Spiegelman, Joe Sacco, Keiji Nakazawa, Igort and Ari Folman. This study demonstrates the insight to be gained if we accept that unconventional narrative forms, such as comics, can give us a relevant perspective on contemporary problems that news, science and history may not be able to show.

INTRODUCTION

The representation of war as a traumatic experience is a prominent topic in contemporary culture. Among films, novels, poetry, paintings and various other art forms, comics have emerged as a popular medium to narrate stories of war and trauma. The multitude of available graphic novels depicting these issues raises the question of how comics as a form relate to this specific theme. A dominant feature of comics is the duality of language and images (Romero-Jódar, 2013, p. 123). These two separate strands of representation allow comics to convey their narrative from multiple angles at once. Furthermore, comics are split into individual panels, which are read in sequence, one at a time. Comics are therefore a form that is characterised by fragmentation.

This investigation outlines how trauma splits individual self-images, communal memories, as well as generational perspectives on historic events. Fragmentation is, therefore, a shared feature of both graphic novels and the experience of trauma. I aim to show how the form of the comic is able to reconstruct images of traumatic experiences particularly well by providing examples from a variety of works on the topic. For the purpose of this study, the terms comic, comic book, and graphic novel will be used synonymously.

The initial sections of this article introduce the topic of trauma and its relation to the writing of the past and provide a short history of the genre of war comics itself, using examples from *I SAW IT!* by Keiji Nakazawa and *The Ukrainian and Russian Notebooks* by Igort. The following three sections deal with the distinct ways in which trauma causes fragmentation. Through examples, I analyse how formal features of graphic novels help to portray the respective aspect of the traumatic experience. The first section, **individual trauma**, describes how the disruption of individual memory and the fracturing of self-narratives are

shown in Carol Tyler's *Soldier's Heart* and Ari Folman's *Waltz With Bashir*. The second section, **collective trauma**, focusses on how a communal history derives from a multitude of separate individual accounts. Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza* is an example of a comic book that uses the tools provided by drawn narration to powerfully render the experience of a collective. The exemplary analyses in the third section, **intergenerational trauma**, centre on Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Carol Tyler's *Soldier's Heart*. It outlines how the suffering that is perpetuated across generations can be highlighted by comics.

Trauma, Violence and the Past

A traumatic experience is a disruptive event that cannot be assimilated into the memory of its victim as it occurs (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). In consequence, a split of the victim's self-image takes place. Besides the usual set of memories that make up the person's narrative of self, trauma creates an outside memory that does not belong and cannot be incorporated into that narrative. This friction results in pathologies and symptoms such as nightmares and flashbacks, which force the victim to undergo the traumatic experience over and over again. At the same time, behavioural patterns such as amnesia emerge, aimed at avoiding the surfacing of key memories. Hence, trauma obstructs access to the event that causes it, and, in consequence, the event becomes unknowable (Caruth, 1996, p. 4).

One of the catalysts for trauma is violence. This might be physical, emotional or institutional violence directed against the victim. However, traumatisation can also occur if remote violence disrupts one's life circumstances, as well as through acts of both witnessing and even committing violence (Caruth, 1996, p.3). The historic event of war amplifies trauma in various ways. War results in an unfathomable scale of violence, and, therefore, also increases the scale of trauma. Forceful conflict is no longer the singular experience of individual participants, but of whole nations, combatting armies, and

numerous communities that are directly or indirectly affected (McLoughlin, 2011, pp.10-11).

When impacted populations return to peace after destruction and warfare, their traumatised condition unsettles the upbringing of the following generation and trauma is perpetuated. The new generation develops its own distinct and more remote experience of the past war. Trauma spreads through groups and continues across generations (Hirsch, 2008, p. 1). The unknowability of the individual traumatic moment becomes the unknowability of a collective past and ultimately of history itself (Caruth, 1996, p. 25). The stories of individual suffering and personal traumata that constitute the communal memory of war deny access to a collective historical account of the event.

The following section describes the emergence of comics as a popular medium for narratives of trauma and provides examples of how historic events are accessed through this form.

Comics as an Access to History

The Beginnings

Regardless of the enigmatic nature of war trauma, many writers and artists have made it the focus of their work and successfully written about it (McLoughlin, 2011, p. 8). An increasing production of comics concerned with this matter was part of the cultural response to WWII (Rifas, 2017, p. 183). Some decades later, an increasing number of graphic novels began to concentrate on the traumatic consequences of armed conflict. An early example of this trend is Keiji Nakazawa's comic *I SAW IT!* (1982). This work shows his childhood experience of the bombing of Hiroshima. He renders the radiation victims zombie-like as they roam the streets while literally melting away (Figure 1). This image would be beyond bearable for the audience if it was photorealistic. The fictionalisation of these scenes into drawn pictures allows the cartoonist to make the incomprehensible horror of war visible, without either losing seriousness and integrity, or slipping into satire.

Biographical Narration and Comics Journalism

A key feature of the genre of war comics is the focus on biographical narration, which is already visible in Nakazawa's work. In the 1990s, comic books incorporated increased elements of different non-fictional genres and the first major works of comics journalism were created. Joe Sacco is a successful graphic journalist, whose works *Palestine* (1993), *Safe Area Gorazde* (2000) and *Footnotes in Gaza* (2008) are all set within war zones contemporary to their writing and share the endeavour to portray these conflicts from a journalistic angle. A wide range of works have since contributed to the field, depicting many conflicts across the globe.

Contemporary Conflicts

Igort's work *The Ukrainian and Russian Notebooks* is an example of a comic responding to contemporary political developments. In the 2nd edition, published in 2014, the artist added an additional chapter that deals with the war that has erupted in eastern Ukraine following the Maidan revolution of 2012/13. The new passage shows the life and death of Evgeny Myazin, a Russian soldier fighting in the war, who was afraid for his life after handing in his resignation and died in a supposed accident (Igort, 2017, pp.362-364). Later it was revealed that Myazin had died before the crash, and Igort uses the pictorial layer of narration to suggest what has actually

taken place as shown in Figure 2. He does not colour the schemes of assaulters beating Myazin and puts the scene against a generic camouflage background to highlight that it is not a precise representation of known events, but something that is hinted at by the collected evidence.



Figure 1: Keiji Nakazawa 'I SAW IT!!!' p. 37



Figure 2: Igort 'The Ukrainian and Russian Notebooks' p. 364

The popularity of comic books in the cultural representation of traumatic events and contemporary conflicts is still on the rise today. This is shown by the recent upsurge in the production of refugee comics. The boom in this genre is sparked by the crisis in Syria, and the works created depict the experiences of the civilian population on their journey to mostly European

destinations and their lives in refugee camps. This development is helped by the technological possibilities offered by the internet and online publishing, as the expensive production and distribution of printed comics is not always accessible to refugee communities (Rifkind, 2018). The following sections examine in detail how different types of trauma are portrayed in comic books, i.e. individual trauma, collective trauma, and intergenerational trauma.

INDIVIDUAL TRAUMA

Carol Tyler: *Soldier's Heart – The Campaign to Understand my WWII Veteran Father*

Soldier's Heart is a work fundamentally concerned with the story of individual suffering due to traumatic memory. The autobiographical narration depicts author Carol Tyler's endeavour to unearth her father Chuck's WWII memories. Chuck Tyler developed a way of life focussed on hard work and devotion to laborious projects. His compulsions are part of an effort to suppress the difficult memories of his war experiences and he consciously attempts to suppress his emotions (Tyler, 2015, p.33).

In Figure 3, Tyler illustrates the fragmentation of her father's personality through multiple metaphors, such as a steady tree trunk and the figure of the fox. She derives the tree image from the notion of her father as a 'decent man', who is 'a little rough around the edges' (Tyler, 2015, p. 54). Besides stability and resilience, the tree also shows the enigmatic nature of Chuck Tyler, who attempts to hide behind a sturdy appearance. The fox, on the other hand, is an inventive and evasive trickster figure. When Chuck later on appears as fox, he creates an atmosphere of panic (Tyler, 2015, p. 101). Chuck Tyler avoids his past by locking it away internally, and also by keeping his mind constantly occupied with compulsive work.

Telling her father's story through a comic allows Carol Tyler to shift between various aspects of his personality. She exhibits how Chuck's traumatic past created a fragmented persona that is perpetually avoiding his own memory, trying to separate his current self from his past. The visual component of the dual narration enables her to transition organically between these symbols and appearances of Chuck as a human.

In another episode that shows the haunting grip of his past on Chuck Tyler, his iconic hat is blown away by the wind. Losing this symbol of his self-understanding hints at the fracturing of his personality. As he chases it, the veteran suddenly faces Hitler himself, who states that 'I wound, to make their children suffer!! ... and their suffering fills me with pride!!' (my translation), as shown in Figure 4 (Tyler, 2015, p. 104). The cartoonist chooses capitalisation and a specific font to emphasise the particular tone, taking advantage of the fact that the writing itself becomes part of the image in comics (Romero-Jódar, 2013, p. 121).

Chuck Tyler wears his hat during many DIY activities depicted in the book. As this symbol removes itself from him and lands at the feet of the Nazi dictator, the origin of Chuck's compulsive distraction through hard work finally gets revealed to the reader. The events of WWII are portrayed by the literal appearance of Hitler himself. This illustrates the ability of comics to create a fluid transition between contemporary scenarios and the metaphorical appearance of historical figures within a few sequential images without impeding a serious focus. This is a particular quality of the graphic novel employed by Tyler to highlight the lasting traumatic effect of war and the constant impact of these painful memories.

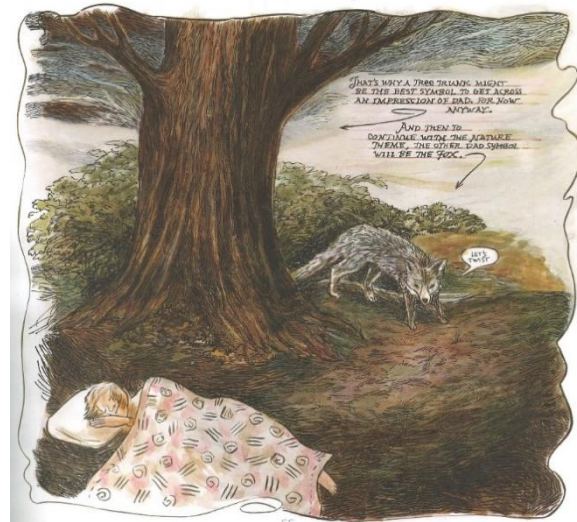


Figure 3: Carol Tyler 'Soldier's Heart' p. 55

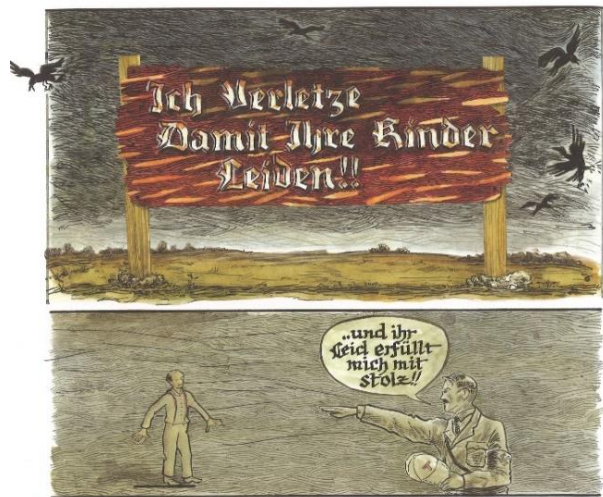


Figure 4: Carol Tyler 'Soldier's Heart' p. 104

Ari Folman: *Waltz With Bashir*

Ari Folman's *Waltz With Bashir*, an adaptation of his award-winning autobiographical animation movie of the same title, contains strong examples of memory that is in itself fractured as a result of traumatisation. Folman describes his own journey to retrieve the lost memory of his contribution to the Israeli attack on Lebanon in 1982. There is an event at the core of the invasion of Beirut that Folman cannot remember, and as he seeks out advice from his former comrades, it becomes clear that he is not the only one to forget the attack on the city (Folman, 2009, p.27). Stylistically, this is emphasised by colouring the gutter, which is the space in between the panels of the graphic novel, black instead of the conventional white as can be seen in Figure 5. Ari Folman's memory is a dark space, containing crucial moments of his past that he eradicated from his self-narrative by suppressing his memory. The events that he tries to uncover are lurking in the background, hidden in the blackened gaps between the panels.



Figure 5: Ari Folman 'Waltz With Bashir' p. 5

The key experience that he tries to exclude from his past is his participation in the Sabra and Shatila massacre, committed by a Lebanese Christian militia against Palestinian refugees that took place between 16 and 18 September 1982 in retaliation against the murder of their presidential candidate Bashir Gemayel. During the raid, Folman and his comrades were continuously shooting flares into the sky that provided light for the militia, helping them to carry out atrocities against civilians. As Folman illuminates his war memory, he discovers that he literally illuminated the war itself. Through his work, he then does the same for the reader, when photographs of murdered refugees and screaming survivors are displayed on the final pages of the book. Thereby, the cruelty of war is rendered visible. As Ari Folman uncovers his personal link to the committed crimes, he also shows that war is part of the world that surrounds us. The achievement of *Waltz With Bashir* is the transition from a personal biographical story to the terrifying reality of war. The focus on drawn narration allows distance from the portrayed historic events. However, those remain the background and origin of the story that is told. Using photographs on the final pages breaks this distance and reminds us, as readers, that the work does represent real suffering of real people.

COLLECTIVE TRAUMA

Joe Sacco: *Footnotes in Gaza*

The scope of traumatic experiences depicted by comic books is not limited to individual narrative. Some graphic novels focus on collective experiences instead. The communal experience of trauma is fragmented in two ways. On the one hand, it is made up of a multitude of individual stories that centre on the same traumatic event; on the other, the individual memory of each community member is distorted by the various symptoms of traumatising (McLoughlin, 2011, pp. 10-11). Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza* is an example of a comic that bridges these gaps and renders visible the traumatic past shared within a community. This work of comics journalism depicts two events in the Gaza region in which many Palestinian men lost their lives. One of these is a raid by the Israeli army on the refugee camp of Rafah on 12 November 1956.



Figure 6: Joe Sacco 'Footnotes in Gaza' p. 238

Sacco collected a plenitude of individual accounts, using testimony to explore an event which has barely been covered by mainstream historiography (Sacco, 2008, pp. xii-xiii). He then visualises the event, conflating a range of single narratives into a collective account.

During the depicted occurrence, all men of the settlement have been gathered on a schoolyard. Two soldiers with heavy bats were positioned at the entrance, trying to beat as many men as they could when they were entering the yard (Figure 6). The main image in the background shows the episode that connects all the individual stories, namely the soldiers beating the men. In the foreground, Sacco added seven separate portraits of old men as they report to him their own experiences of the occurrence. An image of a collective memory emerges, regardless of the factual variation in single accounts. All these men have been exposed to rough beatings when entering the yard. The shared violation of the Palestinian refugee community is shown on a single page as both the suffering of a group and the suffering of individuals.

The majority of victims that Sacco speaks to remember the soldiers at the gate (Sacco, 2008, p. 234). This shows that events that are more violent and devastating are more deeply ingrained into the memories of the victims. Yet, there are multiple inconsistencies between different eyewitness reports which highlight the unreliability of memory. Some of the statements even directly contradict one another, with the reported number of soldiers at the gate varying in particular. Sacco consciously includes these opposing statements on the page. His rendering of the event in the main image then ignores these inconsistencies, as the entire background is not simply filled by a single depiction of the two soldiers, but many overlapping

drawings from various different angles which always emphasise aggressive and angry facial expressions and the protuberant element of the threatening bats. This takes the emphasis away from factual parameters.

To comprehend a collective traumatic experience in terms of its emotional impact requires an understanding of the commonalities of the individual accounts. At the same time, Sacco proves that inconsistencies are not necessarily obstructing, and the unreliability of memory can be addressed and bridged by comics. This example shows how the duality of pictorial and linguistic representation, as well as a multi-layered structure of the graphic component, can be used to converge multiple accounts into a single narrative. Comics can reconstruct a narrative of a traumatic past that renders a terrifying event visible as a group experience. A multiplicity of testimonial descriptions merges into the narrative of a collective historical experience of war.

INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

Carol Tyler: *Soldier's Heart – The Campaign to Understand my WWII Veteran Father*

Traumatic suffering caused by war trauma is not restricted to the generation that experiences the conflict itself. Growing up in conditions that are heavily shaped by a traumatic past creates new trauma for the future generation (Hirsch, 2008, pp. 1-2). Again, Tyler's *Soldier's Heart* provides fruitful examples of this dynamic, as the work focuses on the cartoonist's problematic relationship with both: her father and her own daughter. She acknowledges that her difficulties to maintain a healthy relationship with her husband derive from the fact that they are both veteran children (Tyler, 2015, p. 159). Her unstable marriage then paves the way for her own daughter's attempted suicide due to her broken family. As can be seen in Figure 7, Tyler explicitly renders this connection.

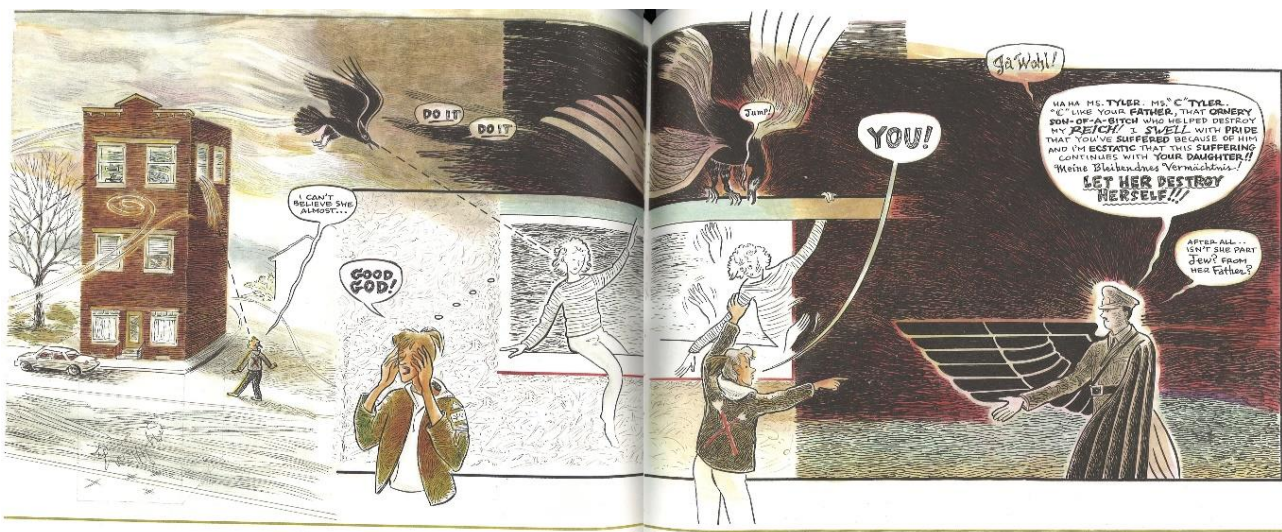


Figure 7: Carol Tyler 'Soldier's Heart' pp. 218-19

The left side of the page shows Carol Tyler looking at her house. A smaller subpanel is positioned in the centre, in which she herself imagines the moment of suicide in the foreground. As her daughter climbs across the windowsill, a black bird arrives, urging her to 'Do it' and end her life. On the increasingly dark right side of the panel, this bird turns out to be again a manifestation of Hitler himself. This bridges the generational gap, as the connection between Tyler's daughter and the German dictator is the participation of Tyler's father Chuck in the defeat of the Third Reich as a soldier in the US Army.

The contrast between the predominantly white rendering of the daughter and the dark appearance of Hitler emphasises opposite poles in the cartoonist's life. On one side, there is her daughter who symbolises the future and is associated with brightness, while on the other side there is the shady hated past that threatens her family. The connection between the two is further clarified through Hitler's speech. He explains that Carol herself suffered in consequence of Chuck Tyler's war memory and that this is the root of her daughter's troubles. The visual metaphor of the historic personality and the written component feed into the same notion and give visibility to a cross-generational causality of suffering that began with Chuck Tyler's service in the army during WWII.

Art Spiegelman: *Maus*

Akin to Tyler, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* explores the WWII past of the author's father Vladek and their current relationship. Much of Vladek's materialism, greed and sometimes awkward behaviour becomes comprehensible through his endeavours to escape from the Holocaust. Spiegelman does not withhold how he personally has been affected by the war-torn past of both his parents.

The work contains one short intermission, a comic that Spiegelman produced to process the suicide of his mother called 'The Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case Study' (Spiegelman, 2003, pp. 102-105), shown in Figure 8. In contrast to the rest of the book, this little snippet does not continue the metaphoric depiction of Jewish characters as mice and Nazis as cats, but shows humans. This brings Art Spiegelman's experience of pain and anxiety closer to the reader. In these few pages, the text does not focus on the cruelty of a historic event rendered digestibly through distancing animalisation, but on the plain guilt of a young man who feels responsible for his mother's suicide. His account of his own suffering is interrupted by one panel filled with text stating that 'Hitler did it!' (Figure 8). Here, Spiegelman acknowledges that, despite the problematic

relationship with his mother at the heart of that episode, there is a connection to her previous life.



Figure 8: Art Spiegelman 'Maus' p. 107

Furthermore, the motif of Spiegelman himself being imprisoned to compensate for his mother's suicide parallels the imprisonment of his parents in Auschwitz. The striped clothing that he depicts himself in resembles that of concentration camp prisoners. What emerges in the 'Hell Planet' is a continuation of Auschwitz for a new generation. As his mother Anja kills herself, the permanent suffering that has been inflicted on her life by the trauma of the Holocaust is passed on to her son Art,

who blames himself for her death, despite knowing that it was brought about by his mother's past.

These examples show that comics are a fruitful medium to illustrate the continuation of trauma across generations, because they allow for the reiteration of traumatic events in the past juxtaposed with current suffering within the same panels. Both Spiegelman and Tyler blend issues of their personal lives with their parent's war-related past.

CONCLUSION

Trauma is the infliction of a mental wound by a disruptive experience that cannot be fully comprehended when it occurs (Caruth, 1996, pp.3-4). War is manifested through violent conflict and causes trauma on a mass scale. Both war and trauma thus arise as essential factors shaping communal memory and history. The traumatic experience is fragmented into individual, collective and generational perspectives and it shatters the memory of the individual victim. The form of the comic parallels this fragmentation, as it is split into separate panels, as well as simultaneous linguistic and pictorial representation. Therefore, the graphic novel allows for a particularly potent visualisation of trauma and this article has provided multiple examples of the creative ways that comics offer to achieve that. The texts by Nakazawa, Folman, Igort, Sacco, Tyler, and Spiegelman are powerful examples of the insight that comics can provide into our countless individual and collective traumatic histories if we accept that popular mediums such as comic books might reveal to us what the conventional writing of history cannot. As they bridge the gaps created by traumatic memory, as well as generational and community dynamics, they also relate the depicted histories to their readers. Reading about war trauma through comics can show us that we ourselves are produced and impacted by conflicts past and present. This creates a new imperative to be empathetic towards trauma victims, and to resist the perpetuation of war, because only a reduction of violence can lessen the extent of trauma.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

During the exciting and challenging process of writing this article I have been supported and guided by my mentors Anna Sosnowska and Maxinne Connolly. I also want to express my gratitude towards Dr Laurence Grove, for his careful and enthusiastic supervision of this research and Dr Argyro Filippaki for helping this project to grow with her invaluable advice, input, and her own compelling scholarly work.

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