

A Phenomenological Exploration of Tattooing: A Personal and Meaning-filled Experience

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Abstract

This paper explores the personal and meaning-filled experience of what one woman's tattoos subjectively mean to her in the context of her life. Merging a dialogical-relational Gestalt theoretical base with a relational-hermeneutic phenomenological approach, I collected data by interviewing my participant in a 45 minute open-ended depth interview exploring her life experience. Analysis based on iterative readings of the transcript drew on narrative, reflexive and creative metaphorical forms. Findings reveal that my participant's experience of her tattoos seems to link - in simple but profound ways - with grief. Having been confronted by the ending of two of the biggest relationships with males (her father and ex-husband), she made the somewhat unconscious choice to mark the transitioning between the roles of daughter and ex-wife and reclaim her own sense of skin. Her tattoos of two lizards seem to symbolise and represent her African home, sexuality, resourcefulness, survival and ultimately a reclaiming of her own self.

Introduction

My topic of interest for this research project is tattooing, in particular the whole phenomenological experience of tattooing described by my co-researcher and myself during a recent taped interview. Being a devotee of this, at times intensely creative and personal, form of body art - and indeed having eighteen tattoos' of my own - I have often found myself being moved and impacted, and equally at times, feeling offended and repulsed by the images I have seen on skin.

My own choices of tattoos over the years have had a myriad of meanings to me: They speak of my freedom of expression and my creativity, my personal history of empowerment and oppression, and my search for identity and meaning in life. They are a coded message for my own guidance and indeed for anybody who I trust enough, and equally who cares enough, to know my truth. In short, tattoos for me are meaning-filled. So I was intrigued to find out the possible conscious and unconscious meanings my research participant may have attributed to her tattoos. I sought to flesh out and amplify her experiencing, her truth.

Methodology

In choosing a methodology I had much to consider. I needed to find the methodology that best fitted my beliefs and values, a methodology that played to my strengths and enabled me to do both myself, and my participant's sharing justice. As a trainee Gestalt psychotherapist, I have chosen to merge my dialogical-relational Gestalt theoretical base with a relational-hermeneutic phenomenological approach of methodology (Finlay and Evans, 2009). With such a merging, I hope to generate and enhance the

discovery of the experience and meanings of tattooing for my co-researcher.

The dialogic approach is well described by the Gestalt therapist Yontef (1993, p. 218) : “the dialogic approach requires that the therapist approach the patient with warmth, directness, openness and caring”. Phenomenology, he describes as: “a search for understanding based on what is obvious or revealed by the situation rather than the interpretation of the observer” (1993, p. 182). I believe that Gestalt and the phenomenological research approach are both congruent and compatible with each other as I find that both approaches aim for a rich description of the individual’s lived experience. The specific purpose of phenomenological research is to formulate and develop the structure of a particular phenomenon from the descriptions of an individual who experiences that phenomenon. This method of research utilises the full sensitivity, knowledge, and powers of comprehension of the researcher, which again I find compatible with the practice of self and other awareness of gestalt therapy.

My choice of data collection was to conduct and record a research interview, by asking only one previously prepared singular open question: “What is your experience with tattoos and possible links with grief?” I left the interview open in the interest of following the ripples and letting the data flow in an attempt to fully explore my co-researcher’s life experience. I was also acutely aware that by preparing, and then asking, my singular question I had indeed configured the field and in doing so, to a large degree I had shaped and guided the form and direction of the resulting ‘ripples’. Mackewn (1997, p. 50) describes the field as “the client and counsellor jointly creating a relational field, which consists of all of the interconnected aspects of themselves and their environment”.

I conducted the interview in my office at home by prior mutual agreement, which was certainly more comfortable for me allowing me to prepare the ground and conduct the interview in a more relaxed manner. The interview lasted for an agreed forty-five minutes. As for recording the interview material, I used a digital recorder which I tested and sound checked diligently before getting started. The initial recording of the interview definitely impacted negatively on how our early relationship developed, and I believe my participant experienced heightened anxiety as a direct result of being recorded. I experienced my own mild anxiety as a fledgling researcher coupled with my co-researcher’s more sizeable anxiety by way of counter-transference, Clarkson (1995, p. 89) describes countertransference as “the therapists feelings towards the client”. By tuning into this shared anxiety I paid close attention to grading both my pacing, presence and rhythm. I chose to start slowly and to ease myself into the interview process in the interest of supporting both myself and my participant reciprocally. In terms of data protection, my participant and I had agreed to erase the research recording, which was in digital format, as soon as my transcript was completed.

For my analysis, I have chosen to combine and blend narrative and reflexive analysis with a hint of creative analysis (Finlay and Evans, 2009). Having decided my general path as a researcher, I set about telling my participant’s story about particular life events and experiences, by following my participant’s chronology. In keeping with narrative and reflexive analysis, I have identified and explored what I believed to be the most relevant themes and scripts. And in keeping with narrative-creative analysis, I have identified and explored the more dramatic and visual aspects of analysis through the use of metaphor. With a relational focus, I reached to find a way into my participant’s life story tracking through narrative analysis, whilst endeavouring to honour my participant’s reflections and experiences with vitality in all of its richness. Through creative analysis I allowed myself space to connect with our shared content, space to imagine, intuit and dance whilst keeping one foot firmly anchored in the ground of the narrative bay.

Participant

I chose an experienced registered psychotherapist as my research participant to assist me in exploring and explicating the subjective experience of tattooing. My participant had previously shown a keen interest and curiosity in my tattoos. In particular she politely questioned the meaning, if any, that I associated with them. I remember challenging her at the time after satiating her query, if she would be as generous in disclosing the meaning of her own tattoos? She replied that she would, and that she had

never associated any conscious meaning to them other than possibly grief. So I took a chance and asked my participant if she would be interested in becoming my co-researcher on my first research project and she happily agreed. I feel that choosing a participant with many years professional experience of being a therapist (as well as her having benefitted from extensive personal therapy) would enable us to gain a richness and depth of experience: meaning which I feel radiated throughout the core of our interview, bolstering and illuminating the research project.

Ethical considerations

After choosing the topic for my research project I set about gaining formal approval to go ahead with the research. I did so by first consulting with my participant and gaining her informed consent before we completed the research project proposal form given to me by my course tutor. After gaining consent to go ahead with my research proposal I was aware that I also had a duty to continue to be as transparent as possible in terms of data protection. We agreed by mutual consent that the data was to be stored at my home office in a lockable filing cabinet until I had completed the written transcription, at which time the recording would be permanently erased. Whilst the recording was not encoded, I made my participant fully aware that no-one else had access to the one key I kept safely stored. I informed my participant about the purpose and the process of my project prior to beginning, whilst being careful to not start the interview early, or close the stable door after the horse had bolted, so to speak. In the tradition of gestalt I wanted to balance and allow both transparency in my project process, whilst not endangering the here and now organic spontaneity and integrity of the theme being researched. I informed my participant of the possibility of unexpected revelation as we explored her, and indeed by way of reciprocal influence, my own personal experience. Included here was a discussion about my participant's rights, to grade and appropriately select the levels of her disclosure.

I was also very careful to also check out, and then 'bracket off' my own assumptions here around the considerable professional respect I have for my participant's hard-earned knowledge of self, and significant professional experience. What could the dangers here be I wondered? Well I could project, aspects of myself (and thereby disown them) and ascribe them to the environment (Polster and Polster, 1973). For instance, I was aware I could project a veneer of superiority and invulnerability onto my participant and quite possibly miss-attune to her distress and possible regression. I was also aware that I could equally become 'smaller' in professional comparison and become confluent. Yontef (1993, p. 36) describes confluence as being "the inability to maintain a sense of self as a separate person". With possible defensive manoeuvres which may also be co-created, I could also risk missing the 'meat on the bones'. So after gaining my participant's written consent and gaining permission for her identity to be known to the research co-ordinator, I gave my participant the choice of reading the completed research project, an option which she has taken. We had previously set aside time to de-brief, aside of the interview room, time to 'wind down,' consolidate and process out any residual energy if required. We used this time and space to process and dialogue through the experiential impact of our interview, utilising what felt like the withdrawal phase of our contact cyclic interview. I was also fully aware of the time/subject limited boundary of our research contract as well as the fact that my participant was gaining external support by way of regular therapy with a very experienced qualified psychotherapist. This supported my ethical considerations of wanting to challenge us both to deeper levels of dialogue whilst endeavouring to do no harm. I was also mindful of the duty of care that I am obligated and committed to offering at all times to both my therapeutic clients (and co-researcher in this instance).

Findings: Some core experiences and meanings

In the interview, my participant and I focused on her two tattoos of lizards: one on her breast, the other on her leg. In repeatedly listening back over my interview taped transcript and reflect-

ing in hindsight over my notes now with an interpretive lens, I am still deeply impacted by what I perceived to be my participant's largely isolated, painful and at times intensely lonely journey. This journey was amplified, and lifted off the page so to speak, by our gateway research topic of tattoos. Six key themes seemed to emerge about what these tattoos mean and represent, which I have languaged as: 'Wearing pain on the skin'; 'Walking on glass'; 'Who are you really sleeping with'; 'Wearing hope on the skin'; 'Reclaiming me'; 'Growing edge, growing a new tail'.

Wearing pain on the skin

Through having such a bleak, hard and painful life, it strikes me that my participant felt the need for her inner pain to be seen externally: A coat of arms and a rite of passage not gifted or purchased but earned. Did it matter that the price of being tattooed is to sit through a wall of pain, through a ritual of being punctured over and over? I doubt it. My participant learned how to deal with pain a long time ago. She had often dealt with and overcame tough and painful situations without full awareness as evidenced below;

Participant: So I think what I didn't realise at the time, and both times with the loss of Ian and my father, was that I was hurt and felt really scared that I wouldn't be able to manage, but what I didn't realise at the time was I was the one that was managing anyway.

Her two tattoos seem to signify the ending of two significant formative relationships with male others: her husband and her father. These relationships quite possibly taught my participant the lesson of being able to creatively adjust. Goodman (1951) talks about how the self is formed in contact and he called 'creative adjustment' the 'me' acting (creatively) on 'my environment' acts on, constrains, and informs 'me' (adjustment). So these early key male-female relationships likely informed my participant's creative adjustment (Goodman, 1951) to the desert-like, harsh and barren existence of her youth. If this was the case, what was the price she paid for this creative adjustment? I believe the primary cost for this adjustment was to sacrifice herself for others (at the expense of her own needs), and essentially give away her dreams, hopes and potentiality to meet the needs of firstly her father, and secondly her ex-husband. I came to my belief in hindsight, by carefully listening back to the original recording and reading between the lines, listening to the process as well as content. Both men shared a leech-like skill of sucking the very life blood from my participant's body and soul. One of the primary reasons for the choice of both of my participant's tattoos is best described in her own words of choosing to "wear her pain and hope on her skin". This realisation was initially outside of my participant's conscious awareness, the link between her pain, hope, and her tattoos was amplified and brought to life throughout the duration of the interview.

Walking on glass

The tattoos represent walking on glass in that they chart the arduous, tough and painful journey travelled largely in isolation by my participant. Both of her tattoos are of lizards, solitary reptiles that in their natural habitat of Africa face many forms of danger, both predatory and secondary. I see it as important to note at this point that my participant has a strong developmental connection with the continent Africa, having being raised in Africa and having once shared this continent with the lizard, as well as her husband and now deceased father. The mere task of getting from A to B for a lizard is treacherous, risk of being crushed by foot or car, preyed on by snake on land or hawk from above, walking on glass. I believe a large portion of the pain component of wearing 'pain and hope on the skin' is linked to my participant's very early creative adjustment (Goodman 1951) and family script of having to look after her father at all costs: to be his confidant, therapist, and nurse maid, to be big and potent, but never as big and potent as her father. I suggest this adjustment 'to walk on glass' and do it 'the hard way' was the birth of an intensely powerful introject, premature rule or definition (Jacobs, 1992). The introject could have led my participant to laying the blueprint for initially the taking care of her father, then the choosing of her husband. Ultimately leading to the familiar pattern of being let down by the same men, men with minimal parental and adult capacities who I quickly came to believe would never, and indeed could never, offer any consistent semblance of adult authentic support to the varied configurations of my clients 'there and then' self as evidenced in my participants own experience with her father here.

Participant: Like even when, when she left, and having to look after him in his two o'clock in the morning waking me up and all that crap, and kicking off and battering us, and all of that was about his little boy who couldn't handle what had happened. And trying to look after him was just a nightmare. And again when I went to uni even, although he bragged to people, never to me, and tell people I was at uni, there was two times in my life ever I phoned him and said "I'm really, really stuck and I'm going to have to leave if I don't get this amount of money" and both times it was just "Oh, I'm really sorry. My car's in the garage. I can't help you".

Who are you really sleeping with?

'Who are you really sleeping with?' was the proposed title of one of my participant's first tutor's ideas for a book. This title and theme revealed a question for my participant that highlighted the gulf between conscious and unconscious choice. She faced and battled the unwelcome awareness of a key script choice that she had made. One that elicited repetition, whistling to the familiar tune that had kept her embattled, chained and ultimately without support yet again. She remembers having a 'big argument' with her tutor after the tutor insinuated that my participant had chose a partner very similar to her 'violent drunk' father, despite seeming to choose one the complete opposite. Years later, in hindsight, my participant came to realise the awful reality that beneath the 'softer' more palatable veneer was that neither ever supported her;

Participant: The symptoms and behaviours were different, what was really true about both of them, the bottom line for me was that when I actually needed anything for me support-wise there was just nothing there.

A second after my participant shared this massive statement that “there was just nothing there” remembrance with me, her eyes glazed over, her jaw dropped a fraction, and I felt an extremely strong pull to respond by rescuing, yet I resisted and I offered instead:

Researcher: What happened there? As you said, there was nothing there?

And then the moment was gone, through phenomenological enquiry I saw what I perceived to be my participant’s well-versed ability to regroup in a split second and come back with:

Participant: I felt sad, but I’m not going to stay with that because I want to finish this

Was she deflecting? Yontef (1993) describes this as the avoidance of contact or awareness by turning aside from her pain by staying with a known narrative. And if she was deflecting, what has the price been to date, and what would the long term price be for deflecting such intense sadness? I felt warned facing a very strong ‘don’t go there’ energy radiating through a keen pair of eyes fixed intently on me. I wondered for a second whose eyes they were. I remember jostling with a choice, my gut implored me to challenge, but my head reminded me of the research guideline notes of suggesting that it is better to talk with your participant than try to ‘therapize’ or ‘interview’ so I made the choice to err on the side of caution and let it go.

With my newly shorn researcher’s hat on, I am okay with that, acknowledging that there are deeper ethical issues at stake here, whilst the emerging gestalt therapist in me is still seething at the missed opportunity, interesting dynamics. In hindsight I believe that there was indeed a muted invitation, as well as a stark warning. And if I had ‘mined’ further at this pivotal point I believe that we could have possibly tapped into a rich vein of contact and awareness which quite possibly would have furthered our relationship dramatically.

Wearing hope on the skin

Throughout the many trials and tribulations of my participant’s relating with both her husband and father, she managed a stubborn and staunch refusal to give up. She displayed a remarkable resistance to being sunk and counted out. Not unlike a prize fighter under heavy fire, she tucked up, kept her chin down and parried her way through a torrent of blows with the hope of seeing it through to the next round.

Participant: So I think I remember saying a while ago that maybe with tattoos people wear their pain on their skin. But I think for me there is some of that in there but it’s also about wearing hope on my skin as well.

Interviewer: Wearing hope?

Participant: Yes that I actually am out from underneath those two big rocks now.

While my participant recognises her ‘hope’ that the tattoos represent, I have a real sense of the battle, the at times triathlon-like quality of my participant’s life to date. On several occasions during our interview I felt bodily heavy and intensely weary. My somatic heaviness was, I believe, a relational response to my participant’s desensitisation. Kepner (2001 p, 98) describes desensitisation as the process by which we numb ourselves to the sensations in our bodies, or to external stimuli’. Tuning in and tracking her phenomenology led me to wonder about her

own sense of embodiment: Was I mirroring her own sense of her heaviness and weariness? I was picking up a strong theme of “life has to be hard” and my gut tells me that my participant’s father plays a figural role in that credo.

In this example again the introjected, message of ‘life has to be hard’ comes back to me, as well as my felt heaviness, I wonder what it would be like to be living underneath two big rocks for so long? I imagine I would feel exhausted, lost, claustrophobic, defeated then sad, heartbroken, angry, furious, murderous. This leads me to think about how tired and heavy I feel when I retroreflect (Perls, *et al.*, 1951) and turn my feelings inward, squashing and pushing down my emotions. And then I recognise how happy, elated, ecstatic, powerful and hopeful I feel when I undo my retroreflection. Was this the source of my participant’s hope?

Maybe, maybe not... I see my participant’s account undoing a huge retroflected pattern by squeezing out, reptilian style, from underneath the ‘rocks’ that were metaphors for her ex-husband, and then father, as being more muted than my description of my own emotions linked to my memories of undoing retroreflection. Looking back I am curious about that. The hope my participant mentions seems tentative, almost as if is she utters hope too loud, the rocks may roll back down and smother her as they once did so well, for so long. I feel sad imagining that to be true and I will own that some of my own history of being squashed and smothered came through in the latter metaphor, as well as empathy for my participant’s past experience.

Reclaiming me

On the road back to claiming an ‘authentic self’ my participant rose from the ashes and wriggled free from the dead weight of the rock that represented her now ex-husband. As part of the healing and regeneration process five or six months after the relationship had ended, she chose her first tattoo. She chose a lizard which had African connotations for her, in that she spent a large part of her formative years in Africa where lizards were common place in and around the home.

Participant: There’s something about lizards with Africa, the African connection, and, erm, there’s something about the ability that a lizard has to lose its tail to get out of situations, and then grow another one, so the regeneration thing.

Researcher: Mm

Participant: Erm, and then I got my second one on my leg, erm, not long after, and I will say my....erm, not long after my dad died. Erm, and again I think there was something about Africa. And again at the time I didn’t actually link the two things in my head. But if I look back at it now, they were both about reclaiming me back at the end of relationships with the two, biggest in terms of living with, men in my life.

I remain very impacted by the ‘reclaiming of self’ back at the end of my participant’s two significant relationships. I feel proud of her resolve and tenacity, while I also recognise both qualities in myself. I also see a lot of energy bound up between the two lizard tattoos, the husband and father as well as the African connection between them all. It feels like I’m sifting through a spider web with my participant at times as her story weaves its way across continents. I have a real sense of how tough and hard her journey has been at times. I can almost smell and taste the gravel rough quality of it.

Growing edge, grow a new tail

Whilst being respectful of, and sharing the admiration my participant has for the lizard as a species, I feel compelled to challenge and highlight some of the more fixed behaviours I witness both the lizard and my participant exhibiting: A tendency towards running away when in proximity of close contact coupled with long periods of isolation being the most obvious similarities to me. In therapist role, I would be keen to challenge this theme and encourage experimentation of raising awareness to the possibility of breaking growing a new tail. During my analysis I couldn't help but also notice my participant's pattern of actively handling challenges herself, seemingly leaving others in the background. I wondered what potential movement there may be toward allowing others to be strong enhancers of her life in both the near and distant future.

My participant is now clearly able to recognise her transitions with her tattoos and make the link between 'being able to put down the roles of wife and daughter.' I also feel that she is now able to do so whilst recognising her pain in role as wife and daughter, thus validating her resilience that followed and leading on to what feels to me to be a tentatively emerging hope in the now. A strong pattern that I believe once drove my participant that 'life is tough and full of duty: so I must be tough and dutiful', can still today serve to empower and oppress. I believe my participant has empowered herself both professionally and as a mother with courage and hard work, and she has done so largely alone.

In hindsight coupled with studying our research transcript I find part of me would like to see her have a different relational experience with perhaps a male other; possibly a male other who actually has something clean to contribute to a relationship, somebody who could match her undoubted will and strength with commitment, patience and compassion. Now who knows what tattoo that fantasised relationship could result in creating?

My participant also used 'juicy language', for instance, dropping in almost casually:

Participant: The trick is I still just need to learn how to give myself as much as they got. Erm, which isn't....I don't do as easily as I did do it for other people...well for them two.

In terms of growing awareness (metaphorically growing a new lizard tail) I saw my participant's statement above as a great opportunity to mobilise and push for an answer to what I believe was a natural, and very good open question from me:

Researcher: So how would you go about doing it?

Here I put responsibility back with my participant, which is more fitting with my therapeutic style when working with clients with whom I have a good solid working alliance. My participant answered my spontaneous question, with a spontaneous answer of:

Participant: I'm not too sure. I think I've started to do it but I haven't thought about it properly.

We discussed this 'giving myself as much as they got' conundrum at greater length as we debriefed after our taped research session, and my participant expressed the will to open it up even further in therapy. I believe this new awareness and meaning making pays testament to the clear relational research alliance we had forged together, underpinned by the dialogic attitude I had endeavoured to offer throughout.

Conclusion and reflection: Towards understanding some personal meanings of having tattoos

My participant's experience of her tattoos seems to link - in simple but profound ways - with grief. Having been confronted by the ending of two of the biggest relationships with males, in terms of men that she shared a home with (i.e. her father initially and latterly her ex-husband), she made the largely unconscious choice to mark the transitioning between the roles of daughter and ex-wife and reclaim her own sense of skin, and ultimately self. My participant drew a line in the sand and hoisted herself back from the cloying clutches of these two similar males; similar in that they were both largely self-serving, conniving, controlling persecutors. My participant draws what I believe to be a clear and pained line saying no more in this excerpt:

Participant: I don't know what's going on. And I feel like my eyes are filling up as well. There's something quite strong about, "will I fuck give them any homage" or that's what it feels like. You know people go up to stone deities and they kiss them and ... It's like "will I fuck give them anymore of me?" No. And I know that's not what you meant, but that's where I've gone to in my head. No. No. [Pause] No, I've had enough. It's ... They've had enough. Maybe I need one of those green full stops tattooing on my skin next. [blows nose]

In drawing her line she chose to underline and mark the transitioning permanently by being tattooed. She chose the form of a lizard within months of both grieving/ending processes. Initially, she chose to have a lizard on her breast, to mark her divorce. It was placed here to signify her sexuality and chosen due to the reptilian African connection inherent with her upbringing in Africa. My participant's reptilian choice was primarily due to the lizard's capacity to be resourceful, to the extent of even losing a tail in the interest of survival allowing the lizard to evade both capture and death. For her second tattoo she chose the now familiar form of a lizard again, this time on her leg, shortly after returning home from Africa with her father's ashes in late 2009. Her separate yet similar roles of being a 'good,' 'selfless' and dutiful wife, and daughter were now over, her marriage was over by choice, and her role as daughter by death and nature's rule.

Being single now, and fatherless, my participant occupies herself fully by continuing to immerse herself into the roles of excelling and duty as a 'good' mother. She is also keeping the hard-working competitive 'walking on glass' family theme rolling over by striving to being the 'best' therapist, supervisor, and manager she can be. My participant's early introjects and script drivers of 'being the best' and the 'brightest in the school', are alive and well and in full awareness the majority of the time.

What my participant states she has learnt from this research experience is that one of the ways of lessening the grip of her - at times brutal - life script, is to attempt to adopt my way of utilising my various tattoos as physical reminders. These physical reminders could act as metaphorical rubber bands, twanging us both from the past back into the now, with her tattoos reminding her that she is now without the two poisonous tails, and that she is healing and growing fresh tails daily. My participant's tattoos chart her moving journey through confluent early relational oppression and resistance to her more recent journeying on the road to finding her 'true' self, in her continuing striving for enhanced authenticity, and autonomy. It has been both my pleasure, and an honour to have hitched a ride along the way.

I believe I have made this research project my own, by immersing myself into my participant's world, whilst reflecting on my own subjective historic influences, engaging in analysis and interpretations, as well as paying attention to, and being curious about the co-created field between us. After immersing myself in this, my first research project, I feel inspired to conduct a heuristic piece of research on my own experience of tattoos, and the meaning they have for me after I have completed my training.

Furthermore, having felt energised and moved by the collaboration with my co-researcher, my possible future research avenues appear vast. Related topic options available to me offer up a variety of societal sub-cultural tattooing 'trends' and patterns that I have had direct contact with and have witnessed over the years in my very colourful life to date. Ranging from 'Jail house' prison tattoo's that talk in code

to other prisoners denoting prisoner hierarchy and status, to local football hooligan tattoo's denoting allegiance to gangs and modern day tribalism. Or possibly interviewing a largely secretive local biker gang I have ties with, where again tattooing is tribal, intensely coded and multi layered. I have recently been reminded on good authority that with any one research study there is always more. This for me has been a small yet intensely flavourful slice of research, I am changed by our sharing and indebted to my co-researcher for the recipe.

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