

Associative thinking: A Deleuzian perspective on social dreaming

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Introduction

Social dreaming is a way of thinking. As soon as we accept this from the beginning we can work towards creating a theory of the phenomena of social dreaming which takes us away from the distraction of the idea of the dream as being in some sense a mystifying and/or mystical abstract representation of something which is so ineffable and confusing that it might as well be nothing. The purpose of this chapter is to reassess the nature and validity of the thoughts emerging in dreams that are shared in the context or container of a social dreaming matrix, and in doing so create a theory of social dreaming, or at least to make a start in this direction. Long (in this volume) and Long and Harney (2013), focus on a semiotic approach that takes as its basis the philosophy of Charles Peirce applied to social dreaming, including his theories of abductive reasoning, and sign-vehicles. However, in this chapter I want to concentrate on the use and meaning of the term “association” in the context of social dreaming. Long and Harney (ibid) have also noted the importance of associative thinking to social dreaming and have coined the useful term “associative unconscious” to describe a key feature of the thinking process in psychosocial thinking or socioanalysis. The theory of social dreaming that I wish to pursue in this chapter concentrates on this aspect of social dreaming, not so much on the dreams themselves within the matrix as individual objects or signs to be shared by the participants in social dreaming, but the gaps in between, the links, connections and relationships that are developed through associative thinking that lead to the transformation of the dreams from single objects into living processes that constitute thinking: moving fragments of thought in constant flows of never-ending incompleteness.

Thought as process

One of the difficulties of understanding and using social dreaming lies in our attitude towards what constitutes a valid or “objective” thought. The reductionism associated with many traditional forms of scientific enquiry, with their roots in Cartesian approaches to thinking renders the thought processes of social dreaming unusable due to the impossibility of paring away the meaning from the multiple possibilities that dreams contain both within themselves as individual dreams and, even more so, as a complex collage of inter-connected and multi-faceted dream images. The meaning of a dream is notoriously difficult to be certain about. The very nature of dreams, through what Freud dubbed “condensation” (Freud, 1953 pp. 279-305) is opposed to the thought process that would wish to slice away superfluous material and eliminate ambiguity to reach for clarity of meaning: to be able to say “this means that” in a manner of thinking that closely resembles Cartesian patterns of cause and effect. A contrary process governs the meaning of the collected dreams in a social dreaming matrix. Understanding is embedded within the accumulated contents of the dreams and associations as they are shared in the matrix. Its sense reveals itself periodically in spontaneous moments of affective intensity and in conjunction with other meanings within the same matrix by the ways each participant in a matrix perceives or rather

intuits the developing collage of associations that form as the matrix proceeds. And once formed, such meanings may dissolve in order to create further or other meanings, which may then dissolve or remain or mutate into further thoughts and feelings as the process of accumulation of dreams continues in the matrix. As a process, the meanings are therefore never static but always on the move.

When the matrix is over, the multitude of meanings are still in flux, even if they are stilled temporarily by a different process, that of the “Dream Reflection Dialogue”, or another more cognitive reflection that might take place after the matrix. In the Dream Reflection Dialogue, the “reverie” (Bion 1970) of the matrix is replaced with a more conscious state of reflection that brings us back into a mode of thinking that we are more used to in our day-to-day activities. In this second stage process, the matrix becomes a group that begins an interpretative process by sharing and contrasting personal sense-making with other people’s experiences of the dreams in the matrix. In this stage of thinking, the multifarious thoughts, images and feelings of the matrix are, to a certain extent at least, distilled, channelled and categorised into thoughts that can be taken away and used. In Bion’s language (ibid), the Beta elements of unprocessed thoughts of the matrix are being transformed into Alpha elements which can then become part of the stuff of daily life. Due to the inherent complexity of the dreams, associations and the way these are weaved together in the matrix, some Beta elements will remain, and yet more will be in limbo as thoughts that are both emerging and yet to emerge. There is never a completely rounded and definitive solution to the problems raised in the matrix. There are only ways forward and new insights that can be taken away and applied to each individual’s relationship with and understanding of her social environment.

Understanding meaning as process rather than an end is, therefore, an essential element of this theory. This is not necessarily an easy way of considering thought, since it challenges a scientific way of thinking that prizes logic and rationality above all other thought. However, neither is this attitude completely new. Wittgenstein famously concluded that words were limited in their expression and sometimes became “language games” when they reached the limits of the rational. In discussing “language games”, Wittgenstein emphasised the special “game” of dreaming; how dreams bring us to the limits of language and reasoning through language by presenting impossibilities or absurdities together in images:

What this language primarily describes is a picture. What is to be done with the picture, how it is to be used is still obscure. Quite clearly, however, it must be explained if we want to understand the sense of what we are saying. But the picture seems to spare us this work: it already points to a particular use. This is how it takes us in.
(Wittgenstein 1953, p. 157)

Susan Langer’s seminal work, *Philosophy in a New Key* (1948), also pointed to the special “meanings” that could only be transmitted through the arts:

Really new ideas have their own modes of appearance in the unpredictable creative mind. (p. 164)

These “really new ideas”, do not, according to Langer, emerge from the use of language, which is the instrument of reason:

Language, in its literal capacity, is a stiff and conventional medium, unadapted to the expression of genuinely new ideas, which usually have to break in upon the mind through some great and bewildering metaphor. (p.164)

The clue that links this to social dreaming is the idea of new ideas emerging from metaphor. There is no sense to much of the social dreaming matrix except through a poetic sensitivity to metaphor or figurative language in general, for the dream is better understood in this way. For Langer, it is not language but music, in its non-representational expression that brings the individual closer to emotion. Indeed, there is a certain musicality to the expression of dreams in the matrix. Just as music is understood through the interconnectivities between the notes, so too do the dreams make sense through the way the social dreaming matrix allows for interconnectivity between them. In music, we may not be able to give meaning to the notes (with some exceptions, as for example programme music, there is no clear meaning to music) but we nevertheless react and respond and gain an affective understanding of sorts; so too in social dreaming. We have therefore alternative ways of approaching knowledge, as long as we understand that the use of language in the matrix is figurative in nature and affective in quality. In other words, although we inhabit a world of knowledge-making in social dreaming, it is a form of cognition that is not subject to the rules of language in its “literal capacity”.

This alternative way to knowledge has been the subject of other thinkers’ preoccupations in recent years, not related to social dreaming but nevertheless relevant. Some have sought to demonstrate how cognition needs to be understood as more than what emerges from the rational brain (LeDoux 1998; Damasio 2000); that cognition should include information that is harnessed through its embodiment in the being, including the nervous system (Varela et al 1993; Nuñez & Freeman 1999); through sensitivity to understanding through affect (Damasio 2003); and even through a sense of our inter-relatedness with our environment. (Roszak, Gomes & Kanner 1995) Even some branches of post-modern continental philosophy, especially in the work of Gilles Deleuze, question the primacy of logic and elevate the value of creativity. For Deleuze, a primary function of the philosopher is the creation of new concepts, which is why his philosophical works often seem to border on the metaphorical or creative (Deleuze & Guattari 1994). Similarly, Deleuze’s world of created concepts consists largely of a panorama – or in his words a “rhizome” on a “plateau” - of affect that moves thinking away from cognition and towards intensities of affectivity in a Spinozian sense of the word (Deleuze & Guattari 1988; Deleuze 1988). It is these kinds of processes that make up the collage of multi-layered meanings that are embedded in the images of the social dreaming process, meanings that are communicated through what I have previously dubbed “image-affects” (Manley 2009).

If, then, the language of social dreaming - its dreams and associations - is indeed that of created thoughts and figurative language, embodiment and affect, our approach and attitude towards the knowledge within the social dreaming experience cannot be that of the habitual and rational. It is at this point, therefore, that I return to an approach based on the understanding that associative thinking can bring to social dreaming.

Associative thinking

The use of free association in dream work comes, of course, from Freud's dictum to his patients that:

We therefore tell him that the success of the psychoanalysis depends on his noticing and reporting whatever comes into his head and not be misled, for instance, into suppressing an idea because it strikes him as unimportant or irrelevant or because it seems to him meaningless
(Freud 1953 p. 100).

A version of this process is in play in the social dreaming matrix. Instead of interpreting the meaning of a dream, a participant in the matrix will either offer another dream that seems somehow (inexplicably perhaps) related, or offer a spontaneous association to another's dream, where the connection might be as implicit as explicit. This is done without attention to rational or logical thought, and with no desire for overt meaning making. The connection between this mode of proceeding - which, in Freud's case, was about unearthing the repressions that prevent a patient from leading a healthy life - and the creation of new thoughts first emerged in André Breton's artistic circle of surrealists in the early twentieth century. Instead of focussing on the dyadic relationship between analyst and analysand and the clinical repression of the latter, Breton's group would use associative techniques such as "automatic writing" and the "automatic message" in an attempt to avoid what they understood as being strictures of standard thought and to allow creativity to freely emerge into new patterns of expression. The "automatic messages" included illustrations, while "automatic writing" concentrated on words, and the combination shows the emphasis this technique placed on the visual (Breton 1933 [1997]; Breton and Soupault 1920 [1997]), just as dreams may begin as a narrative but often end up being remembered for their visual impact. The results of automatic writing can often sound like dreams:

I leave the halls of Dolo with grandfather very early in the morning. The kid would like a surprise. Those halfpenny cornets have not failed to have a great influence on my life. The innkeeper's name is Tyrant. I often find myself in this beautiful room with the volume measurements. The coloured reproduction on the wall is a reverie that always makes a reappearance...
(Opening to "Seasons" in Breton and Soupault *ibid.*, p. 67)

A similar process of associative thinking in the social dreaming matrix is what creates new thoughts, these being one of the stated objectives of the matrix. There is a link, therefore between associations and creative thinking. Because these associations exist in the context of *social* dreaming, there is also a link between the social and associative thinking. For some social scientists, this link is what brings them to question the very nature of the social. In the case of Bruno Latour, for example, the word 'social' needs to be reconfigured as "association". In trying to redefine sociology, Latour struggles with terms such as "sociology of associations" and wishes he could use the term "associology" (Latour 2005, p. 9). What Latour is attempting is a new, contemporary and more valid understanding of the word "social" as being equivalent to or better expressed as a network of associations that, like the associations in social dreaming, are in a constant state of flux. For Latour, the word "social" has outlived its usefulness. It has been transformed into a restricted object that is used to define a thing that does not really exist:

What is called “social explanation” has become a counter-productive way to interrupt the movement of associations instead of resuming it.’
(*ibid* p. 8)

In a way that reminds me of social dreaming, Latour suggests that the rigidity of “explanation” actually removes the flowing, multi-faceted layers of meaning that come with the “movement of associations”. In social dreaming, this would be the way that interpretation would interrupt the movement of images, thoughts and feelings of the dreams and associations by giving meaning or explanation which would foreclose further meaning-making by reducing its sense to a particular moment in the matrix. By doing so, the potential for the dream or association to influence the development of meaning after the foreclosure of interpretation is stymied and the very nature of this process of knowledge creation is curtailed. This is why an experienced host (the word for “facilitator” in social dreaming) in a social dreaming matrix will do everything in her power to provide working hypotheses, (as opposed to hypotheses to be tested and proved), instead of interpretations. As has been explained elsewhere - see Lawrence (2005 pp. 35-37) for an initial definition; Long and Harney (2013) for a discussion informed by Peirce - the working hypothesis opens out a sense of fluid meaning-making that constitutes the very essence of the social dreaming process. Another way of understanding the function of the working hypothesis is through associative thinking. That is to say, the reason the hypothesis is a working one that has no intention of being proved is because it recognises that a particular collage of associations of a given moment – the one of the hypothesis - is only the prevalent sense of the matrix at a particular time that also recognises the shifting nature of these associations in a future time of the matrix process.

It should be pointed out that Latour’s ideas in this regard are not completely new. He supports his “associology” with thoughts from the work of semi-forgotten philosopher Gabriel Tarde, pointing out the vital importance of inter-relationality and movement in Tarde’s work. For Tarde, the social “*was not a special domain of reality but a principle of connections... sociology was in effect a kind of inter-psychology*” and was even described as “circulating fluid” (Latour 2005, p. 13). In social dreaming, the dreams and associations can also usefully be described as a circulating fluid, and their associative strength is partly based on the maintenance of this fluidity. A working hypothesis that might be offered by a host in the social dreaming matrix facilitates fluidity by emphasising the links and connections of the flow of associations rather than stemming them through a series of interpretations. To offer interpretations would be like constructing a series of dams or weirs in a flowing stream.

A heterotopian collage of image-affects

The image of the flowing stream is not, however, complete as a description of the flow of association in the social dreaming matrix. Returning to Tarde, we are reminded that the fluidity is circulating. This in turn reminds us of another feature of the associative thinking in the matrix, that of the tendency of the associations to become linked through randomly created connections between the dreams and associations. The associations are not inter-connected solely through a sense of a linear passing of time, and the result is not merely a straightforward sequence of ideas. It is *unlike* a flowing stream. Instead, such associations are often created spontaneously as a result of the many multilayers of imagery that exist within each dream. Associations then begin to emerge and become relevant in unexpected ways in

the course of the matrix as a whole. An image from a dream may be more relevant to another dream or association that might occur at any point in the matrix including a point that is far removed from its immediate sequentiality. The following example, taken from Karolia and Manley (forthcoming 2018) illustrates this. In this social dreaming matrix, hosted in the context of the Muslim community in England, my colleague and I were seeking to understand how British Muslims felt about their Muslim and British identities in the wake of terrorist attacks in Europe. Each intervention is signalled by a dash. The line numbers of the transcript indicate the sequences and the jumps:

9 - *I had another dream, we were at the train station, and then I got lost and*
10 *then some old lady came and she goes are you alright and then and then I was*
11 *ducking away from the cops and I found my sister.*
12 - *I had a dream that I bought a really expensive pair of shoes and they got*
13 *stolen, before I could even wear them.*
14 - *I had a dream, that I was in jail, and then I smashed the wall and I escaped.*
I
15 *passed out and then they put me back in jail.*

38 - *I had a dream, my father's a cop. He was in the police car, and he was*
39 *driving around shooting people. I was watching a movie before I went to*
 sleep.
40 *And then the people turned into zombies.*
41 - *That reminds me of when people who are terrorists they think they're*
42 *going to be in heaven, they're like zombies*
42 - *I had a dream that Donald Trump became president, scared the hell out of*
 me.

A working hypothesis from these two extracts might be that for British Muslims the police embody fear, persecution and lack of certainty about the fairness of authority, as indicated by “ducking from the cops” and the impossibility of escaping from jail. Later in the matrix this is picked up again in the dream of the father as a cop, which adds a twist to the first dreams of persecution and authority, since in the latter example the cop is the dreamer’s father. When the figure of authority is both a murderous cop and a father, the fear and persecution become embodied in the figure of Donald Trump, the fearful authority of the “free” world. This dream was offered before Trump’s election to the Presidency.

There may be other elements that could be suggested and deduced from the dreams to add to this working hypothesis, but the point I want to emphasise is that the hypothesis has been created by a collage of associations that is not immediately sequential. In order to get there, we have had to go from a sequential block of lines 9-15 to lines 38-42. In our minds, then, these blocks are extracted from the logic of the time sequence of their expression (which at its most rational proceeds from line to line) and respond instead to another pattern of thought. Such a pattern then resembles more a collage of associations that is the fruit of associative thinking that emerges from the associative unconscious than to a rational, linear train of thought. It is up to

the participants in the matrix to create these patterns since they are not explicit or given; they are not the result of language in its literal capacity.

The ensuing patterns resemble a collage of associations that has been created from the space of the social dreaming matrix. The creation of this collage of associations between the image-affects of the matrix is like a Foucauldian heterotopia, where disparate elements find form and meaning through the links and connections made by the participants of the matrix. It is a space of knowledge that Foucault would describe as an “archaeology”, that is to say an epistemology that does not rely on sequences of logic. Instead of this, ‘archaeology’ addresses itself “*to the general space of knowledge, to its configurations, and to the mode of being of the things that appear in it* (Foucault 2002, p. xxv). This is what Foucault called “*the pure experience of order and its modes of being*” (ibid, p. xxiii), where disparate elements are given sense by the creative will of the mind. In the social dreaming matrix this is the creative and shared mindset of the participants, an example of heterotopias which

secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy ‘syntax’ in advance and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences, but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite to one another) to ‘hold together’
(ibid p. xix)

Foucault indicates the link between such heterotopias and a surrealist way of thinking by using as an example a painting by the surrealist, Salvador Dalí, which is in line with the example mentioned above of Breton’s efforts at automatic writing. The painting in question, (Sewing Machine with Umbrellas in a Surrealist Landscape’, (1941)), depicts an unlikely combination of a sewing machine and an umbrella where, “*for an instant, perhaps forever, the umbrella encounters the sewing machine.*” (ibid p. xix) Such unlikely combinations resonate with the way the dreams and associations in social dreaming weave, interconnect and make sense within the created space of the social dreaming matrix.

A rhizome of associative thinking

By moving away from a linear concept of expression towards the heterotopian space of the social dreaming matrix, we are able to replace linearity with what Deleuze called a “rhizome”. That is to say a randomly self-selecting set of interconnected image-affects that pulse in intensity at a given moment of perception. Instead of lines of thought, Deleuze and Guattari posited the concept of the rhizome to describe a “circulation of states” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 21) that have no predestined direction, no centre, no hierarchy or guidance from any authority. This well describes both the structure of the collage of associations of the social dreaming matrix and the way it is created, i.e., through the unfettered, unguided expression of dreams and associations of the participants in the matrix, a space devoid of the authority of a leader (the host for example), who deliberately plays down any leadership role that might be expected of her in another configuration, for example that of a group. Instead, the dreams and associations are self-organising and create their own collages of potential meaning, a meaning that is constantly shifting, nevertheless, through connections that are intuitively made through a sense of their relative intensities of affect. That is to say, the language of social dreaming is predominantly visual and embedded in the images of the dreams is a condensation of affect that becomes significant to the speakers and listeners of the matrix according to how intensely they

are felt. In the example quoted above, therefore, the first dream is clearly not primarily a story about escaping the police, but rather an expression of complex affect: the fear that is felt in a situation that should be designed for its opposite, the reduction and control or containment of fear, (what cops should do). The intensity of this fear is increased due to the sensation of the joining of opposites through the image in the dream: the cop produces fear. For Deleuze, these moments of intensity of affect are both rhizomatic in the way they are connected, and also, they are in a state of constant flux.

Following Spinoza, Deleuze conceived of affect as being an experience of moving emotions, shifting from greater to lesser according to the different configurations in the rhizome. Therefore, although the dream images and associations exist in the open once they have been expressed, they are never static expressions that are completed through that expression. Instead, they fluctuate or pulsate in intensity. In the example above, the most intense moment of affect comes in the dream of Donald Trump. Here, the image is not only intense in its own right; its intensity is maximised through the connections to deviant authority expressed in the dreams and images that resonate with it. It is as if the dreams of the cops, the father cop, the jail and Donald Trump all pulsate together in a moment of intensity that connects them as a single pattern despite not being connected sequentially.

The role of the host in social dreaming is to support this associative thinking, contain the associative unconscious, and create a space of absolute freedom of movement of thoughts and feelings through minimum intervention in the process. This freedom of thought that allows for the self-organisation of affect is the same as the space Deleuze called “smooth space”. Deleuze distinguished this smooth space from what he called “striated space”, with the former allowing a complete freedom of thought, feeling and expression, while the latter denotes a channelled and restricted, linear mode of thought (Deleuze & Guattari 1988). Finally, this movement of affect through the smooth space of the matrix becomes what Deleuze termed “nomadic”. That is to say, the dreams and association of the matrix can be compared to the movement of the nomad: spontaneous, guided by the way and environment, living with uncertainty, embracing chance encounters. The dreams and associations of the matrix are thus expressed according to the feeling of when the moment is right. There is no turn taking, no guidance, no obligation to speak: things happen.

Nomads of the matrix

Taking her cue in part from Deleuze, Rosi Braidotti (2011) has centred her work on “nomadic theory”. In her writings, she emphasises the positive and affirmative aspects of nomadic theory and contrasts this with the negative feel of dealing with Freudian repression as part of a psychoanalytical approach to knowledge. This echoes Gordon Lawrence’s refusal to interpret dreams in the social dreaming matrix. For Lawrence, like Bion, the unconscious was so much more than a store of potential repressions. Lawrence emphasised positive outcomes that emerged from the matrix that he described as the “infinite”, influenced by Bion and used as an alternative to the unconscious. Very often, then, the feeling of a social dreaming matrix is not one of negativity and angst, but rather a joy in infinite possibility, even when the content of the dreams and associations is dark or gloomy. This is close to Braidotti’s concept of nomadic thinking:

Nomadic thought rejects the psychoanalytic idea of repressions and the negative definition of desire as lack ... It borrows instead from Spinoza a positive notion of desire as an ontological force of becoming. This achieves an important goal: it makes all thinking into an affirmative activity that aims at the production of concepts, precepts, and affects in the relational motion of approaching multiple others.
(Braidotti 2011, p.2)

An aspect of how this is achieved is undoubtedly the shared nature of the matrix, where one is able to approach multiple others. In the case of a social dreaming matrix, these multiple others constitute the whole of the matrix, the space where dreams are offered and once offered no longer belong to the dreamer. Such offerings immediately transfer to the heterotopian space of the matrix. As is well known in social dreaming circles, social dreamers are interested in the dream and not the dreamer and this is due to the shared nature of the matrix, which is unlike the expression of a personal dream in a clinical context. Within the matrix, dreams and associations are offered nomadically; the dreams are given as a response to the landscape created at any particular moment in the matrix.

As part of this nomadic process, the participants in the matrix find themselves in states of what Braidotti, following Deleuze, calls “becoming”. That is to say, the image-affects of the social dreaming matrix are not interpreted cognitively but are approached intuitively and affectively through a sense of empathy and attraction that can become so intense that each participant may feel as if she is becoming a dream or a dream state or embodying the affect that is contained therein. This in part explains the sensation that many participants in social dreaming express of surprise at not only finding other people’s dreams interesting but actually believing that those dreams, or the image-affects within them, actually feel like their own.

I have previously given examples of the process and effects of “becoming” in social dreaming in Manley and Trustram (2016), where in a discussion of social dreaming in the context of a museum exhibition about the abolition of the slave trade, various “becoming animals” – a crocodile, then a whale – created a feeling of empathy and understanding for the participants of what it might have been like to be a slave in the hold of a slave ship. In doing so, the participants in the matrix were able to use the collage of dreams to create combinations that together made meanings through a sense of becoming the dreams that would otherwise – in a literal capacity - have been difficult to comprehend: becoming slave.

Conclusion

In this brief and incomplete theory of social dreaming I have intended to demonstrate how there is a need to begin with the basics of thought, the premises of what can be agreed is appropriate to call thinking. For this reason, I began by locating social dreaming ontologically in the world of embodied cognitive processes that contrast with a prevalent understanding of cognition as a Cartesian brain. If we are agreed that this mode of thinking is acceptable, then the task of understanding the nature and quality of the knowledge imparted in the process of social dreaming becomes clearer and more useful as a means of acquiring a more rounded, holistic view of the thinking process. This could lead to a richer understanding of the complexities of real life situations and consequently more effective decision-making in the context of the social dreaming matrix.

An essential part of what this different perspective of thinking entails, I have introduced the term “associative thinking” to describe how the emergence of thoughts is created in social dreaming through the links and connections between the image-affects of the matrix rather than through interpretations of the meanings of the dreams. Instead of interpretations, I have emphasised the importance of the working hypothesis, that hints and opens out possibilities of meaning without ever foreclosing the potential of a dream or association to contribute to the accumulation of meaning that may come from making further connections with other image-affects that are expressed through further dreams in the matrix.

The process of associative thinking of the social dreaming matrix takes place in what I suggest is a space of creativity that can usefully be described, following Foucault as a heterotopia, that is to say a space where unusual connections can be made between the image-affects of dreams which make sense in the creativity of that space by making connections that would otherwise seem absurd or illogical. The connections are between expressions of affect in a Deleuzian/Spinozian sense rather than between ideas, and they are formed in what Deleuze and Guattari termed a rhizome: a non-hierarchical, self-organising, collage of interconnections between different intensities of affect transmitted through the dream images. The journeys of these image-affects into meaning emerge as a result of a freedom of movement which is facilitated by the nature of the social dreaming matrix as a ‘smooth space’. That is to say a space of unrestricted movement, which is nomad-like in the sense that it guides itself intuitively and according to context and the creativity of the participants in the matrix. Like nomads, we travel.

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