



Producing Indigenous Media

Protocols, Circulation, and the Politics of Accountability

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ABSTRACT

The following dialogue—with Indigenous filmmakers and anthropologists Dr. Angelo Baca (Diné/Hopi), Teresa Martinez-Chavez (Zapotec), Dr. Teresa Montoya (Diné), and Dr. Ikaika Ramones (Kanakaná 'Ōiwi)—charts the ethical protocols and decisions undertaken in the production of documentary films with and within Indigenous communities. These films underscore the significance of prioritizing culturally specific protocols about knowledge production and its attendant impacts on media circulation. Each filmmaker considers the broader colonial legacies that have shaped various representations of Indigenous life and what refusing certain media conventions, such as digital distribution, might mean for theorizing Indigenous media practices in broader anticolonial frameworks.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous media, production, representation, ethics, circulation

Image of filmmakers Teresa Montoya and Angelo Baca shooting on location at Bears Ears National Monument. *Source:* Photo by John Hosteen, 2021.

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Teresa Montoya (Diné) is an assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago. Her research and media production focuses on legacies of resource extraction across the Indigenous Southwest. She earned a PhD in anthropology and holds a graduate certificate in culture and media from NYU.

ANGELO BACA

Angelo Baca (Diné/Hopi) is an assistant professor at the Rhode Island School of Design. He received his PhD from the Department of Anthropology at NYU and earned a graduate certificate in culture and media. His research centers on the protection of culturally significant ancestral lands around Bears Ears National Monument.

TERESA MARTINEZ-CHAVEZ

Teresa Martinez-Chavez (Zapotec) is a PhD candidate in anthropology at NYU and holds a graduate certificate in culture and media. Her doctoral research explores the intersection between Indigeneity, women, health, and the state. Her film is dedicated to her grandmother and elders who continue to inhabit our world and memories.

In March 2021, the British Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) Film Festival and Conference hosted an online program of 80 films from 38 countries, 43 panel sessions and 165 conference presentations with filmmakers and anthropologists tuning in from around the world. One panel titled, *Doing the Sheep Good and Other Stories: Indigenous Directors from NYU's Culture & Media Program* featured four Indigenous doctoral students and recent alumni who screened and discussed their films.

The following dialogue—with Indigenous filmmakers and anthropologists Dr. Angelo Baca (Diné/Hopi), Teresa Martinez-Chavez (Zapotec), Dr. Teresa Montoya (Diné), and Dr. Ikaika Ramones (Kanaka 'Ōiwi)—charts the various ethical protocols and decisions undertaken in the production of documentary films with and within Indigenous communities. These films underscore the significance of prioritizing culturally specific protocols about knowledge production and its attendant impacts on media circulation (Ginsburg, 1994). These aspects of Indigenous representational politics are an essential part of grounding our media practice within our respective Indigenous epistemologies, establishing what some call sovereign screens (Dowell, 2013) or visual sovereignty (Raheja, 2007; Rickard, 2011; Adese, 2015). Each filmmaker considers the broader colonial legacies that have shaped various representations of Indigenous life (Rony, 1996, Santos 2001) and what refusing certain media conventions, such as digital distribution, might mean for theorizing Indigenous media practices in broader anticolonial frameworks. This approach considers a politics of accountability that prioritizes ethical concerns central to Indigenous filmmakers and our communities that are represented on screen.

Ikaika Ramones

To start us off, I just want to say thank you for your films and ask each of you a question about circulation. It's noteworthy that instead of our films being available throughout the entire RAI festival, our films were only available for limited screening during this specific session. In light of this request, circulation is an important point that concerns all of us theoretically and practically. I begin by asking: What are some prominent issues you have each faced regarding the circulation, ownership, and viewing of your media work?

Teresa Montoya

Thank you, Ikaika. When I completed my film, *Doing the Sheep Good* (2013a), in 2013 I ultimately made the decision not

to distribute it for several reasons (Figure 1). First, the original films that inspired my documentary were made by seven young Diné filmmakers in 1966 and were associated with the *Through Navajo Eyes* project. These productions circulated around the world for many years without any direct benefits to the community. While the original researchers, [anthropologist] John Adair and [visual communication scholar] Sol Worth brought back a few 16mm copies of the films, their broader circulation did not translate into royalties for the filmmakers or their descendants. This was a concern shared with me by community members. In contrast to the limited circulation within the community and the Navajo Nation more broadly, dozens or perhaps hundreds of copies of the films were distributed worldwide without the community's knowledge.

Given the ever-increasing imperative around distribution and publication within anthropology and other disciplines, I frame my choice not to distribute as a politics of refusal, as theorized by Kahnawá:ke Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson (2007, 2014). This is both a mode of critique—of refusing further circulation—and a political stance that approaches something other scholars refer to as visual sovereignty (Raheja, 2007). If my critique of the original ethnographic project was the decades-long circulation of Diné films without their knowledge, what would it then mean if I created this documentary depicting the return of films back to the community only to put it back into distribution? Would I be reproducing that same logic of production and global circulation that I initially critiqued?

I think there's also something to be said about focusing on the process and not so much the product. To whom are we accountable and who are the communities that we're representing? I think that for many of us who are Indigenous and working in communities that are also our own families or broader kin networks, the first ethic of accountability should be to that community. And if that means that our own work doesn't go into circulation, I believe that is something that we should be upholding. I think all of our work speaks to that, right? There are probably things that I decided not to show or not to include in the final edit precisely because these are intimate personal things for myself and community members. For that very reason, I decided not to distribute the film.

However, in venues like this conference and film festival or in the classroom, when we can have a conversation, I think there's pedagogical value in showing the work. So, perhaps that is the line that I drew. As long as we can have a dialogue together in an appropriate context and with appropriate framing knowledge, then I think that we can somewhat control who views the film and how it's being interpreted.

IKAIKA RAMONES

Ikaika Ramones (Kanaka Ōiwi) is from Kalihi, O'ahu. At the time of this dialogue, Ikaika was a PhD candidate in anthropology at NYU. His primary research concerns the political economy of Indigenous Hawaiian movements, examining the relationships among broad-based social movements and elite institutions.



FIG. 1

Teresa Martinez-Chavez

It is only the second time I have shown this film in public. When I produced the film in 2019, I presented it at the Margaret Mead Film Festival because I was going to be there (Figure 2). Of course, I had a conversation with the community because my film is about elders and dementia, which is a very sensitive topic to talk about in my community. My plan was to first present it to my community when I was going back to town that summer, but that ended up not being possible because I first needed to get the municipal leaders' permission, which usually takes a while. Then, when I was ready to present it, the pandemic hit.

When I was producing and creating this film, it was for the community; I needed to get feedback and response from them first before I could present it anywhere else. So, I haven't been publicly showing this film. I am showing it today with their permission and that of others who gave me feedback and their perspectives on my film. Many in our communities feel they are commodified, and that's the last thing that I wanted to do with the film.

Ikaika Ramones

We all know this about the ways that our communities are seen and the need to be very sensitive about how our work might exacerbate that.

FIG. 1 Still from *Doing the Sheep Good*. Diné families in the Pine Springs community watch films made by their elders who participated in the Navajo Film Themselves series. This marks the first local screening held since the series' debut 47 years earlier. *Source:* Photo by Teresa Montoya, 2013.

**FIG. 2**

Angelo Baca

I'm honored to be on a panel with such great Indigenous filmmakers who have powerful messages and work on behalf of their communities—who also have accountability and responsibility to more than just ourselves or the academy. That's a high honor, and I'm glad to be part of this conversation and show how my film, *Shásh Jaa'*, is connected to the communities that I'm from (Figure 4).

There are a few factors that play into this decision not to circulate our works on a major platform. For instance, it's good to show the film now because Bears Ears is a hot topic currently as the American political landscape has changed since [President Joe] Biden was elected in 2020. We have a new Secretary of the Interior, Deb Haaland, who is from the Pueblo of Laguna. She's doing some great promotion of Indigenous voices to ensure our participation in the conversation for protecting sacred lands. I think that's crucial because it is obviously very good to have education and background about **Bears Ears** and beyond.

The whole idea about the film is that it's not only political but, more importantly, that this is a culturally significant place—as it always has been. If you notice at the end [of the film], I have the concluding statements that we've always been here and we're still here. We're always *going* to be here. We're not going anywhere. This is home. So, you can challenge all you want. You may want to lay down some arbitrary borders

FIG. 2 Still from *Refusing to Let Go*. Doña Raquel and daughter Soledad weaving in the Zapotec community of Teotitlan del Valle. Despite Doña Raquel's slow memory loss, her body remembers what her brain tends to forget. *Source:* Photo by Teresa Martinez-Chavez, 2019.



FIG. 3

FIG. 3 Still from *'A'ohē Hope e Ho'i Mai Ai: No Retreat*. Community members dry-stack rocks to rebuild a Hawaiian fishpond on Lāna'i. Despite the trauma they experience, depicted in the film, Native Hawaiians persevere in their own efforts to heal and rebuild. *Source:* Photo by Ikaika Ramones, 2020.

and lines. It's still not going to matter to us because this is our home. We have our Original Instructions and a connection that's deeper and longer than [those of] anyone else who's been here, more than America itself. So, that responsibility predates everything.

I also didn't want anybody to appropriate my grandmother's image or her words, misconstrue them, invert them, or let them be circulated in a disrespectful way. Folks don't know how difficult it is to get elders on camera in a respectful way. It took more than a decade to get her comfortable knowing that I would be the filmmaker telling these stories. That it wasn't just on behalf of me but our entire community. Our families and our tribal communities had stories that were really important to share, and it wasn't just about us. So, those are important considerations to take into account because I don't own these stories. These are everyone's stories. For me to slap a label on my film and say, "I own this, I'm distributing it now," it's offensive. There are a lot of reasons why we don't want to do it. During the [Donald] Trump era, [the administration] was very much open to racism and you could be targeted. Times are changing, things are moving in different directions. As Teresa was saying, a setting like this is important because we can give some context, we can give some background, we can educate, we can tell people about what's happening now. That's important for the other side of the conversation because these things don't stop after you make the film. They continue to grow and evolve, changing direction. The stories continue.

**FIG. 4**

Ikaika Ramones

I wonder if each of you could talk briefly about the relationship of your films to your research practice?

Teresa Montoya

My original dissertation project was going to take place in Pine Springs, Arizona, in the Navajo Nation where the *Navajo Film Themselves* project took place—and which led to the subsequent *Through Navajo Eyes* publication (Worth and Adair, 1972). Initially, I was interested in questions of intellectual property and cultural heritage, as well as visual repatriation and how these concerns interfaced with local understandings of Diné sovereignty (Peterson, 2013). My reading in this literature provided the context for my original interest in helping trace the return of these films (Montoya, 2013b).

However, when I returned home to begin my research in 2015, there were two major environmental disasters unfolding during my first month of fieldwork. Attending to these emergencies took precedence. I do think our research commitments should be guided by what actually unfolds on the ground. I had family members who knew of my research experience and asked me to get involved with some local groups to respond to the water contamination crisis. So, a lot of my concerns around sovereignty that were already guiding my research at the time were reframed through environmental contamination. My

FIG. 4 View of central Bears Ears looking east toward Ute Mountain. Nearby is the Bears Ears Summer Gathering, a site of intercultural sharing and a filming location shown in *Shásh Jaa/Bears Ears* film. Source: Photo by Angelo Baca, 2016.

current and ongoing research focuses on these legacies of resource extraction.

A common thread that has been maintained through all my projects is some form of media work or curation. As someone who's also currently curating an exhibition right now, I'm not alone in saying that both museum exhibitions and films are mediums that have been historically dominated by outdated discourses of ethnography and anthropology. This is especially the case for natural history museums. The exhibition I'm working on at the Field Museum, *Native Truths: Our Voices, Our Stories*, is a total reimagining of their Native North America gallery. This project has also given me the opportunity to collaborate on media content with Angelo Baca, an extension of our work together at Bears Ears (see anchor image). The dialogues during this exhibition process highlight some of the ongoing tensions for Indigenous communities. Concerns around the sharing of Indigenous knowledge or the display of potentially sensitive cultural objects came up several times throughout the curation process. This is due, in part, to the colonial legacy of the museum, whose collections were made in the context of the 1893 World's Fair, which was the epitome of a salvage paradigm of collecting "rapidly disappearing" Indigenous cultures. Of course, we know this is not true. We are all here right now. We are documenting and trying to respond to pressing issues in real-time.

In many ways, I think all our films speak to the challenge of trying to balance competing narratives. This is especially the case for Ikaika's film with the intentional splicing of footage depicting dominant Western representations of Native Hawaiians, like the Hula dance. These narratives are very much at odds with how people are actually responding to crises around sacred lands. It's the same with the case of Bears Ears in Angelo's film. Because of this dynamic, I think we have a very powerful tools—both in curation and media practice—to help us articulate these narrative tensions and also, in other contexts, to speak back to the colonial underpinnings of anthropology. In this way, I think it's critically important for us to show how we can be using film as a tool for anticolonial pedagogy. I prefer to say *anticolonial* as opposed to *decolonial* because I think the discourse around decolonization is also fraught. We can't undo colonization, but we can resist the persistence of its damage in many ways.

Teresa Martinez-Chavez

I entered the program at NYU looking at the social activism of Indigenous women and health. My summer fieldwork helped

me narrow my questions: What were these women fighting for, resisting, and demanding from the state? In my community, which is Native land, women were organizing to bring resources for the elderly. In Oaxaca, elders are left behind because a lot of their family members must migrate to the United States, so a lot of attention was increasingly being paid to attending to elders.

When my grandmother was diagnosed with dementia, that moment really opened for me a whole community that was not visible to me until then. The status of elders is a very sensitive topic. Elders are the most respected and honored people. So, when my grandmother developed dementia, a lot of community members that I didn't know also had relatives with dementia that were opening about their experiences. That led me then to think about doing something about dementia, but it also made me think about its impact and consequences, and especially my position as an Indigenous person working in town. Who was I, as a younger person, to bring these topics up in public places? I thought, maybe it was not my place as an academic and as a student studying the United States.

For my film, the first thing I did was ask our municipal leader for permission. For me, it's very important to do research and receive feedback from the community. This led me to think about my positionality, my research, and the impact that these could have. While I was doing my research, I was very surprised to meet a scholar who recently published a book on dementia in my town. What was more shocking was that a lot of the community members who were interviewed did not know about the topic of his research. Surprisingly, this scholar didn't even speak Spanish well. When we're talking about the ethics of our work, for me, language is critical; the film needed to be in Zapotec—and I hope to write my thesis in Zapotec as well. A lot of academic work that gets published in Mexico about Indigenous communities is in Spanish or English, not Zapotec. I know it's more work, but this is why I'm doing what I'm doing.

Things have been a little bit challenging for me because I started fieldwork during the [COVID-19] pandemic. Questions of ethics emerged around how to properly conduct fieldwork with others whom you might put in danger. Community radio has been my main ethnographic tool since last year so I have been taking advantage of this medium. Conducting research during a pandemic has been very challenging for me because, again, the theme of the film is about losing elders. Since this pandemic started, in our town we have had an unprecedented number of elders passing away; over 60 community members have passed away in less than a year. So, it's a sensitive topic for me. As scholars working in our communities, we must negotiate our scholarly work and our personal feelings. I guess this

is something that we, as scholars working in our communities, constantly ask ourselves: What will our research be used for?

I will end with two things: My research is really connected to my film, and I hope to keep editing the film and be able to screen it in my community.

Angelo Baca

I'm going to quickly add to both of your wonderful explanations of that kind of connection and relationship to your films with my experience working with the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition. It hasn't been done before; it's a new social and cultural formation. So, understanding that there are real differences around people with distinctive cultural, linguistic, and historical backgrounds is important. It's super interesting seeing where those boundaries are, where the ethical lines are, where folks are creating new protocols and social norms. Trying to understand the right way is to get feedback on your work has been kind of difficult. But I think the majority of the folks from these tribes feel pretty good about the way that they're represented in the film. I think a lot of that has to do with having Indigenous filmmakers. Dr. Teresa Montoya helped me on that project, along with my friend Shonie De La Rosa, who is also Diné. We've made an effort to have other Diné filmmakers working on projects with us as noted on the [film's website](#). I think that's wonderful because you are showcasing other colleagues' work and you know that they're talented and have something to say. It all really comes together beautifully when you can understand the background and cultural context because that's who you are versus having someone from the outside trying to tell your story. I think it's more difficult for anthropologists, folklorists, press people, and reporters. This concern is something I've been increasingly folding into my research.

Through our Bears Ears advocacy, we've been developing these media [orientation and cultural sensitivity guides](#) for the purpose of training and educating outsiders. Whenever people come to Bears Ears, I believe they should already have an idea about what they're doing and what they hope to achieve along respectful and ethical lines. We developed the ethical category and intended to make it very inclusive. We said that anybody who's telling a story—because anthropologists tell stories, press and media people tell stories, musicians, artists, whoever it is that's coming to tell a story about us—needs to make sure that their information is accurate, is respectful, and is reciprocal. This means that they're figuring out how to talk to our elders and our community members in a good way. We've been really taking the initiative on that. We're advising companies like [Patagonia](#) on how they can connect to Indigenous

communities using better practices. There are going to be folks who are interested in the Bears Ears story, as well as the [Deb Haaland story](#), that want to get educated on regional tribes, landscape, history, as well as correct attribution on names, labels, leaders, clans, etc. It's really important, those small things; it's important to get that story right out of the gate, and that's what we're trying to do. Representation matters, and I feel that the protocols that we developed were able to embody a lot of that collaborative practice. It's gratifying to point to something real and say, "Look, we did it. Why can't you?" That's one of the things I really, really admire about all of these films and the way they link up with these research practices, the way that your films are an intervention into the research process itself and the ethics around it, reframing them according to your own accountabilities.

Ikaika Ramones

In my film, the main premise of it was to put Hawai'i on the map, not as a paradise destination but as a place of intense struggle that bubbles under the surface (Teaiwa 2016). My own research is looking at the political economic foundation of what's happening in Hawai'i. A lot of the conversations occur in the realm of cultural politics. I'm interested in the economic issues that colonialism is built upon and the contradictions that result. That's what I was trying to do. When I consider the splicing of the images present in my film, that's the lived dissonance that people encounter, or at least that I encountered growing up in my family and that other people in the film encountered ([Figure 3](#)).

Teresa Martinez-Chavez

When I was thinking about how to present my film, first, I wanted to have an unexoticized lens when looking at Zapotec women. I cannot control how people view my film, but I can intervene in what is being said (Smith 2012). It was critical to have my film's protagonist consent because one of the first things she asked me was, "What about circulation?" She wanted to know where her image might be circulated and whether her image would be exoticized. A year prior, when making my film, there was a postcard made of somebody from the community in the market. That postcard ended up in the community with people reselling them in town. That was very problematic. Second, I wanted the film to be in Zapotec. A lot of the message gets lost in Spanish and in English. So, our language was critical.

In a very small community of approximately 5000 people or so, everyone knows everybody. And so, for me and for the elder in my film, what really mattered was how she was going to get viewed in the community—more so than outside viewership. I always made sure that the family and all their elders gave me their opinion about how they were represented.

Angelo Baca

I really wanted the film that I was making to be pretty distinctive as a story, a documentary that would be dynamic, contemporary, and inclusive that showed when the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition members were in Washington, DC, flexing their tribal sovereignty power. I wanted to show that they were capable, educated, and exemplary leaders doing work behind the scenes that we're only now getting to see. They never get acknowledgment or attention, and they don't ask for it. What they're doing is trying to do the best they can for their people and for their land as consummate professionals and adept diplomats. They're demonstrating that intertribal solidarity and unity can exist. To me, it's the ultimate role modeling. It was really an amazing story, especially now when we're talking about leadership and politics. But even more, we have a variety of views coming together and showing us how special Bears Ears is, no matter how vastly different our cultural backgrounds might be.

We are in such a critical moment for protecting Bears Ears. I think it's in everyone's mutual interests as anthropologists, linguists, archaeologists, and paleontologists. Even the head of the American Anthropological Association has made a [statement](#) supporting the protection of Bears Ears. This is something that's worth protecting, whatever your particular background and interest is. It's a critical moment in time for people to speak up, be vocal, and express their support.

I prioritized Indigenous narratives of why Bears Ears is important in the film. There's a lot of my own Navajo influence in there. You see me in the morning, at first light, going running, and then in the evening. I get to close the day at sunset with my running because it's all about motion. Navajo language is all about motion, everything's moving. It's never still, everything's alive. How could I show the linguistic, cultural context of our Navajo culture in a visual language and make it dynamic, alive, and moving? That is where I was headed with that.

Flute music is the audio soundtrack of that land, a skill taught by a 100-year-old Ute Mountain Ute elder relative, who didn't speak any English, to a Bear Dance Chief. It's interesting to see how people respond to it, because a lot of times it's stereotypically flute music [in Native documentary films]. But

in this case, this music is coming from a flute made of the very trees that grew here, which were placed there by the Creator.

I was trying to get people immersed as quickly as possible in our lived reality, understanding how dynamic, contemporary, interesting, and incredible this moment is—and to get a little glimpse of it. It's only the beginning. We're just starting to tell that story. I think that really speaks to what all the films are doing and the choices that everyone made about how to go about producing them. The film itself is like a table of contents or an index—formally putting everything together, all these choices are just one little piece of this massive social context that our films are coming from. There are all these questions of accountability, all this protocol that needs to go into producing these films.

Teresa Montoya

In the beginning, I was very hesitant to use voiceover. But with the inclusion of archival footage at the beginning of my film, the eventual addition of my voiceover provided the historical context of the films for those who were unfamiliar with the original *Through Navajo Eyes* project. In terms of the stylistic choices in my film, I was intentionally responding to the aesthetic choices of the original Diné filmmakers' works. For instance, there's one sequence with the moving back-and-forth footage of a caricature figure that was taken by the late Diné filmmaker Al Clah in his film *Intrepid Shadows*. This seemingly abstract footage resonated with a lot of people who saw the original film series. It is probably the most well-known of all seven films. For that reason, I wanted to pay homage to this iconic film with the spliced integration of some of my footage imitating Clah's camera work. I had a lot of fun shooting for hours out on the land to produce that one sequence.

Before the film premiered at the Margaret Mead [Film] Festival at the American Museum of Natural History in 2013, I went back to Pine Springs that summer and helped organize several community screenings. One in particular was during a large family reunion gathering hosted by the grandchildren of some of the original film's participants. I held screenings with each of the families that were depicted in the films to get their initial impressions and to make any edits as necessary. I wanted to make sure they felt comfortable with their onscreen representations. One of the concerns that came up had to do with the very last scene, which depicts a shoe game ceremony called Késhjée. It's practiced only in the winter season, which is traditionally from the time of the first snow until the first thunder. During wintertime, much like in other Indigenous communities, this is when it is appropriate to share oral traditions. So,

for Diné, the shoe game recounts one of our stories around the creation of day and night through a friendly match between different animals. The Késhjée is an occasion for gathering, sharing food, and being in good relation with one another. But because it's only practiced during the wintertime, there was a question raised by one of the families about the appropriateness of having the depiction of this ceremony on film and what it might mean if the film were shown outside the winter months, say during July, which is when I shared the initial rough cuts with community members. After further discussion, what was decided was that because there was the presence of snow on the ground within the film world itself, the subsequent inclusion of footage from the Késhjée was deemed to be culturally appropriate when I shot it. Therefore, the discussion surrounding the inclusion or removal of this scene helped clarify what community members, at least for the purposes of this film, felt was culturally appropriate for broader circulation.

For non-Indigenous viewers, I want to emphasize that there is no one orthodox way of practicing anything despite the outside desire for a homogenous Indigenous worldview. A fallacy or a challenge that I think many people must understand is that there are always competing understandings of what is Indigenous knowledge. In other words, there are multiple ways of understanding and interpreting, say, a particular oral tradition or a decision to include particular footage on film. This point, I think, may be obvious to us here on the panel, but when we look at old ethnographic film, sometimes people really need to understand that this is just one way of understanding and we have to keep in mind who's holding the camera. Furthermore, perspectives or opinions shared from a particular nation, a particular community, or even a particular tribal citizen may not apply to other tribal contexts. I think that's the politics of accountability that all of us are speaking to here today. Each of us, in various ways, have gone back to our respective communities to ask for guidance and the specific and unique appropriateness of what we should be doing before we put our work out into the broader public. This is what the ongoing process of accountability entails, and this is what it means to cultivate good relations in Indigenous media practice.

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