

**Living on Girlboy Time: Queer Childhood Temporality and Kinship in Ma Vie en Rose by Cynthia C. Degnan**

In "Infantile Sexuality," Freud lays out the processes of "the organization of sexuality" (65). The word "organization" points to the beginning of the dominant twentieth century view of childhood formation, which values development that falls into a recognized relationality of time and space and pathologizes that which fails to conform to set guidelines. This concept of gender formation depends on a linear and progressive temporal development. What, then, happens to a child who adopts a nonlinear, static, or regressive temporal development or who rejects the seeming inevitability of resolution? Can we imagine an alternate, queer temporality for children that is productive rather than pathological or disruptive?

This paper examines the film Ma Vie en Rose (1997), directed by Alain Berliner, in order to explore a queer imagining of childhood temporality. The protagonist of the film is a child named Ludovic Fabre (Georges Du Fresne) who struggles against family and community to assert a different gender identity than that assumed for male-assigned bodies; Ludo terms this a "girlboy" identity. Other characters claim that it is not Ludo's behavior alone that troubles them but its timing; they claim that Ludo is too old to act this way. Other characters in the film find Ludo's inability to resolve gender identity in the expected time frame problematic. My paper asserts that maintaining a hetero-normative temporality is essential to maintaining a hetero-normative kinship system. Throughout the film, Ludo's gender presentation strains relationships between Ludo, Ludo's parents, and their community. The film ultimately leads Ludo's family into an understanding of a queer temporality, which directly affects a family and community structure by opening up other possible forms of kinship. Thus, Ma Vie En Rose posits that rejecting a hetero-normative childhood temporality may allow its characters to form relationships and networks that expand the possibilities included in a hetero-normative kinship model.

In "Homosexual Boyhood: Notes on Girlyboys," Ken Corbett examines the connections between feminine boyhood and homosexuality. His essay does not attempt to develop a causal relationship between the two. Instead, he uses this essay to explore specific instances in which patients have identified a connection between gender identity as a child and homosexuality as an adult. His essay challenges the fact that "[h]omosexual boyhood as a conceptual category does not exist. The existence of homosexual boys has until now either been silenced or stigmatized . . . The fate of these boys is contemplated with the kind of hushed charity that obscures antipathy" (Corbett 108). Michael R. Schiavi's careful and astute essay on Ma Vie En Rose reads this section of Corbett's essay as "critiquing the cultural mandate that presumes children to be asexual or, at most specific, latently heterosexual" (3).

Interestingly, Ma Vie en Rose does not present the central crisis of the plot to be a problematic object choice. Ludo is not struggling with being a male-assigned person who desires other boys. Rather, Ludo's own crisis revolves around a desire to participate in a heterosexual relationship model but being denied access to that chosen role because of assigned sex. Ludo tries to emulate the relationships modeled by Pam (a doll whose aesthetic is very similar to Barbie) and Ben, which is nothing if not conventional. Ludo's confusion at the way that other people respond to a desire to be a girl arises from the family and community around Ludo reading that desire as a

homosexual one. Ludo, however, is just trying to follow the available heterosexual models. Ludo makes this clear when Hanna (Michèle Laroque), Ludo's mother, asks about a statement Ludo made about wanting to marry a friend: Jérôme. She is cutting Ludo's hair and the camera focuses on Ludo as Hanna circles, positioning the scene as a kind of covert interrogation. The conversation, however, happens before Ludo has begun to suffer any real transphobic retaliation and therefore only foreshadows the more traumatic inquisitions to come. When Hanna asks about the marriage, Ludo answers "Like Pam and Ben." Hanna replies that boys do not marry other boys and Ludo responds exasperatedly, "I know that!" Hanna mimics Ludo's indication that the answer is obvious, looks relieved, and kisses Ludo's head. Ludo also looks pleased that Hanna has accepted the explanation. The viewer is painfully aware that their mutual relief comes from very different sources; Hanna believes that the question is closed whereas Ludo thinks it is obvious to her that Ludo will not always be a boy.

Freud's theories of sexual development give us a way to imagine sexuality in children. He works against the "popular view of the sexual instinct" which dictates, "that it is absent in childhood and only awakens in the period of life described as puberty" (Freud 39). Freud claims that sexual development occurs throughout childhood in a series of impulses and resolution of their meaning. Personal development, for Freud, depends on the individual's ability to move between stages at a fairly predictable rate. Those who do not succeed in resolving one fixation in order to move on to the next are in danger of retaining these issues into adulthood and manifesting related symptomatic behavior. In the instance of the oral fixation, which is represented in a focus on sucking in childhood, Freud claims that some children will display a "constitutional intensification of the erotogenic significance of the labial region" (Freud 48). He furthermore states that "[i]f that significance persists, these same children when they are grown up will become epicures in kissing, will be inclined to perverse kissing, or, if males, will have a powerful motive for drinking and smoking" (48). In Freud's framework of development, non-resolution produces behavior that is symptomatic of this failure.

Ludo's family exhibits similar concerns that Ludo is not developing at the expected rate. Ludo first appears in the film by arriving in a dress to Hanna and Pierre's (Ludo's father played by Jean-Philippe Ecoffey) party for their new neighbors. Hanna and Pierre pass this off to their new friends as a joke that Ludo likes to play. As Hanna washes the lipstick off Ludo's face she says, "You're seven, Ludo. Too old to dress up as a girl." She explains to her husband and mother that it is normal behavior. She read in *Marie-Claire* that children explore their identity until they are seven. The camera looks over Ludo's shoulder and up at the other three characters in the scene. The frame of the scene is cramped with bodies and movement as the three adults prepare to go back to the party. Each character, however, manages to steal knowing or inquisitive looks at Ludo when others' backs' are turned. The too-close, barely-functional *mise-en-scène* here reflects an uncertainty or discomfort with Hanna's explanation for Ludo's behavior. Hanna and Pierre's bustling about indicate both that they are too busy to notice the obvious hole in Hanna's logic and their inability to do anything at this point but dance around the source of their discomfort. Only Elizabeth (Hélène Vincent), Ludo's grandmother, stands still for a moment to examine her grandchild. Later in the film, she becomes the character with whom Ludo's relationship is least fraught. Whether or not they realize it, Ludo's parents have interpreted behavior that explores gender identification as representing insufficient developed for a seven-year-old. Ludo should be

done with exploration at this point. The issue is not that their child may wish to explore gender or possibly sexuality, but that it is not appropriate for Ludo to do so at this age.

Other aspects of the film suggest that Ludo's temporal discretion embodies the central crisis of the film. Elisabeth, for example, is cast as the impossibly hip grandma. She seems much more able to relate to the children than Hanna, Pierre, or any other parents in the community, and this fact does not go without comment. Pierre and Hanna comment on her style when Pierre displays dissatisfaction with her youthful presentation. Hanna replies with, "She stays young," to which Pierre counters, "She pretends to be young." His statement implies that "staying" young is a factual impossibility. She could only ever pretend to be young since, biologically, she is older than she acts. They have this exchange as Elisabeth glides past after smoking a joint and changing the music from a slow ballad, to which everyone was dancing sleepily, to dance-beat. Other characters first moan in complaint at the change but slowly begin to dance awkwardly, as if self-consciously participating in something wild and transgressive. Only Elisabeth, Ludo, and, eventually, Hanna become completely absorbed and unselfconscious in their dancing. At the end of the scene when the three dance in a tight embrace with Ludo suspended between the two women, the film suggests that flirting with the confines of normative temporality is an inherited activity, even if Hanna seems the most constrained of the three.

Even Elisabeth, however, displays some concern with age-appropriate behavior. She has Ludo over to her house after school one day and brings out a music box with a blond figure spinning circles. She tells Ludo that she wishes she were still in as good shape as that doll but tempers the wish with "In that dress at my age, I'd look ridiculous." She uses this statement to open up a conversation with Ludo about avoiding behavior that other people would find ridiculous. She essentially says that even though she can smoke pot and dance to a techno-beat, her body and the age that it reflects make some things impossible and that she must accept that fact. In reality, Elisabeth's clothes and style are fresh and youthful but not young. She carefully maintains a look that refers to youth in an age-appropriate way. At no time in the film does she cross the line from a woman who "stays young" to one who actually adopts an alternate temporality. For her, therefore, a transgressive temporality is tempered by the body's ability to perform it.

Elisabeth's somewhat flexible approach to temporality sharply contrasts the obsession with rigid normativity that surrounds Ludo's family. The Fabres have just moved to a new neighborhood for Pierre's job. The neighborhood itself is suburban, white and solidly middle-class; its aesthetic has been compared by numerous critics to that of the suburbs in Edward Scissorhands. Elisabeth even comments when she first arrives that Pierre should be careful not to "try the wrong door," implying that he could easily mistake another house for his own. The film clearly articulates a connection between space and temporality. It opens with a number of scenes in which couples prepare to host or to go to the party. In houses that look the same, couples perform essentially the same dance of getting ready for a social gathering: putting on makeup, zipping up dresses, and flirting. The camera then follows one family out of their house and as they cross the street, it pans out to show what must be every other family in the Fabre's neighborhood arriving at the same time. In another scene just after the party, it is a Monday morning and everyone is preparing to leave for work. Each father comes out with his briefcase and greets his fellow providers while mothers wave goodbye to their children on their way to school. In this scene,

Jérôme and Albert, Jérôme's father, walk in front of a speeding yellow sports car that stops short to avoid hitting them. This event is repeated later in the film when Ludo and the other Fabres walk in front of the same car, which must again stop short. The repetition here emphasizes the precise timing of the neighborhood's morning routine.

It is in two these scenes that the film begins to pull apart the assumption of productivity that characters attach to their lives and choices. The film shows the neighborhood as operating strictly on family time, which "refers to the normative scheduling of daily life (early to bed, early to rise) that accompanies the practice of child rearing. This timetable is governed by an imagined set of children's needs, and it relates to beliefs about children's health and healthful environments for child rearing" (Halberstam 5). Family time seeks to generate an environment in which children will grow and develop successfully (whatever that means). Families organize their time in order to best achieve linearity and inheritance – that children will continue the family structure and ideally do even better in life than those who have come before them. These two scenes, however, question the productivity of a time that ultimately seeks to engender progress through repetition. Not only are patterns strikingly clear and rigid, but neither the adult driver of the car nor the pedestrians crossing the street are able essentially to develop out of a potentially destructive pattern. In this context, family time, which stresses constancy, generates the kind of non-development that Ludo's family and community project onto and fear about Ludo's queer development.

Later in the film, as the family structure begins to crumble, Ludo is expelled from school for clandestinely taking over the role of Snow White in the school play in an effort to kiss Jérôme. As a result, Ludo is forced to transfer to another school. On the first day at this school, Ludo and Hanna wait at the bus stop in order to commute the hour it takes to get there (as opposed to the five minutes it used to take to get to school). The bus stop is distinctly urban compared to the Leave-it-to-Beaver suburban-ness of the Fabre's usual setting. There is graffiti on the walls around the bench and people cross frequently between the camera and the conversation taking place between Hanna and Ludo. The color palate of the shot is based in gray, contrasting to the colorful sunny settings that appears earlier in the film. Hanna complains about the extended commute and is almost too mad at Ludo to look at her child. Not only has Ludo's own temporal development been complicated, but the Fabre's carefully timed morning routine has been eradicated.

It is in moments like these that the movie conveys the fact that hetero-normative kinship models depend on each member of the system following their own plot of developmental temporality. The Fabre's family life becomes more chaotic as Ludo continues to explore gender and as it becomes increasingly apparent that this is not a "phase" that will pass any time soon. Before it gets to this point, however, the film provides an example of the destruction that a disrupted, halted, or reversed temporality can cause.

From their introduction in the film, Jérôme's parents are obviously uncomfortable with each other. They first appear as they are preparing for the party. The film has just left a scene in which another neighborhood couple spends the time flirting and kissing as they get dressed. Jérôme's parents, however, seem tense in each other's company. They kiss tentatively, but when Jérôme's

mother sees their son in the doorway, the two break apart as if caught. Later, the film reveals that Jérôme's sister is dead when Jérôme shows Ludo her room, which is preserved as if she still lives there. A child's death of course disrupts one of the most fundamental modern understandings of normative temporality – that parents should die before their children. Jérôme's parents' behavior indicates that a fissure in the family's trajectory makes the family itself unworkable. Ludo represents a similar threat to Jérôme's parents.

Jérôme's parents' fear of Ludo's possible influence on their son points to the way that Ludo's temporality can disrupt the temporality of other children and families. Schiavi lays out the particular panic that comes to parents of children who question their gender or sexual identity. He states that, "Unlike a self-naming teenager, a younger child such as Ludo presents both mortifying present and uncertain, frightening future" (8). Certainly much of Hanna and Pierre's concern stems from the possibility that Ludo will not settle on a gender identity and more specifically that this resolution will not place Ludo firmly in the categories of male and heterosexual. Ludo, however, also represents the possibility that undesirable events from or versions of the past will resurface in the present or future. Jérôme's father expresses this concern when he tells Pierre that God has already take one of his children and he will not lose another. To Albert, a homosexual child equals a dead one. Ludo and Jérôme's relationship, therefore, threatens to reenact the horrific events that he and his wife have tried to put behind them and therefore disrupts both the temporality that they have invested in and the family structure that is based on it.

Ludo's version of childhood temporality, according to the Fabres, adopts a kind of stasis in that they see Ludo as unwilling to leave behind a phase in which it is acceptable to question one's gender and move onto a phase that develops in accordance with the gender that has been assigned. Ludo is reminiscent of Jérôme's sister in that Ludo is the figure in the family that cannot grow or contribute that family's ultimate goals in the way that children are expected to. Judith Halberstam's study of queer subcultures asserts that the "stretched-out adolescence" embraced by producers of queer subculture "challenges the conventional binary formulation of a life narrative divided by a clear break between youth and adulthood; this life narrative charts an obvious transition out of childish dependency through marriage . . ." (153). Hanna and Pierre believe that Ludo is resisting the ultimate hetero-normative resolution to childhood, that Ludo will identify as a boy, become interested in girls, and eventually get married.

The issue of marriage, however, complicates a reading of Ludo's development as completely static or resisting resolution. The first time that Ludo's mother thinks that she faces a serious problem comes when Ludo dresses in Jérôme's sister's dress and stages a wedding with Jérôme as the groom and a teddy bear as the vicar. Schiavi reads this scene as a reenactment of Pam and Ben's wedding, which exists "outside plotting" (15). Ben's proposal to Pam, which consists of Ben approaching with flowers, proposing and ends with Pam flinging her arms around him, does not "dramatize the heterosexuality or actual marital life that would exclude Ludo" (15). Ludo and Jérôme's wedding enacts an event with no real consequence, no plot development, but to their mothers foreshadows a horrifying future and a displacement of that future into the present. The ceremony represents a kinship that they, reading Ludo as a boy, do not accept in that it rejects the directive that marriage must lead to procreation and a reproduction of hetero-normativity.

Contrastingly, Ludo and Jérôme, like Pam and Ben, seek nothing beyond the actual ceremony, as presented by the fact that Ludo and Jérôme fly out the window with Pam in a fantasy sequence while their mothers struggle to make them realize the consequences of their play.

Pam's world, in fact, is constructed precisely by a kind of frozen temporality. The set of her world is bright, colorful, and distinctly plastic. The grass and trees do not smoothly shift levels but instead break as if a child has constructed the set with a Lego-like toy. The sunny setting suggests that it will never change, that Pam's world is fixed by a material that resists all signs of decay. Similarly, the actress who plays Pam has a body that is Barbie personified. Her tiny waist and prominent cleavage reflect youth and femininity in the most conventional sense. The actress is maybe older than one would expect (she is not twenty-two, in other words) but this fact emphasizes Pam's fixed image. No matter how old Pam herself gets, she will always have luxuriously long blonde hair and a sculpted body; she will always embody the feminine ideal.

All accounts of Ludo's interactions with temporality point to a focus on futurity. Throughout the movie, Ludo is focused on one day becoming a girl and how the conflict produced by a male-assigned body will be resolved. Hanna and Pierre, however, see Ludo's behavior as a refusal to grow up, as reflected in one of their first questions to Ludo's therapist: "Will it take long?" Ludo also takes refuge in the suspended temporality of Pam's world because it offers a place to escape from expectations and possible difficulties that will eventually arise, and are forming, in response to Ludo's gender presentation. Ludo attempts to actualize a frozen time with horrifying results after being beaten up at soccer practice. In the locker-room scene, Ludo demonstrates a growing awareness of the danger of having a male-assigned body and claiming a female identity. The boys on the team begin to gather around Ludo and, seeing that no one is going to come to help, Ludo tries to run through the crowd, sensing the need to leave quickly. The wall of bodies prevents an exit, however, and the camera cuts to the next scene after it establishing the fear that is legible in Ludo's face. Later at home, Ludo has disappeared and when the oldest brother tells their parents what happened earlier, they begin a frantic search for Ludo around the house and yard. Hanna escapes into the garage for a smoke and notices frozen dinners scattered on the floor. She walks hesitantly to the deep-freezer, opens the door, and finds a blue Ludo inside clutching a crucifix. She screams for Pierre and pulls Ludo out of the freezer, hugging her child to her chest. The shock of Ludo's blue face and incoherently blinking eyes when Hanna opens the freezer reveals to both Hanna and the viewer the terrifying possible consequences to come if the Fabre's continue to address Ludo's femininity the same way. Ludo enacts here not just a suicide attempt, although it certainly should be read as such, but an attempt to stop development and consequently Ludo's own time. For the family, however, Ludo's frozen temporality would mean that their future, like Jérôme's family, would constantly be haunted by the past, by Ludo's absence and the cost of their decisions. Thus, Ludo's suicide attempt epitomizes the extent to which this family depends on and tries to enforce a temporality in which each member maintains their relational position in the family's plot as a whole in order to maintain the established kinship structure.

Judith Butler's essay "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?" studies the debates surrounding gay marriage and, specifically, the question of child rearing that follows it. She claims:

. . .the figure of the child is one eroticized site in the reproduction of culture, one that implicitly raises the question of whether there will be a sure transmission of culture through heterosexual procreation – not only whether heterosexuality will serve the purposes of transmitting culture faithfully, but whether culture will be defined, in part, as the prerogative of heterosexuality itself. (124)

Ludo's "lack" of development, however, questions Hanna and Pierre's ability to raise a child and, in effect, challenges their own claim to heterosexuality. Butler reads French philosopher Sylviane Agacinski's writings on the gay marriage debate as a reflection of the "belief that culture itself requires that a man and a woman produce a child, and that the child have this dual point of reference for its own initiation into the symbolic order" (Butler 118). The fact that Ludo does not enter the symbolic order acceptably reflects, according to characters offering advice to Hanna and Pierre, on their ability as parents to allow this to happen. Ludo's psychologist first asks Hanna and Pierre if they wanted Ludo to be a girl. Hanna reluctantly admits that maybe she had hoped that this would be the case, but that she was thrilled when she had a boy. Later, Albert suggests to Pierre that "Hanna has too much control over [the] boys" and that Pierre should spend more time with the children in order to assert his masculine influence. Both incidents suggest that past feelings or behaviors are erupting into the present through Ludo's choices. Furthermore, both characters suggest that Hanna and Pierre themselves do not follow a perfectly heterosexual model of parent rearing – that they do not privilege boys and that the man does not have ultimate control over the family. Thus, the temporality that Ludo represents threatens to disrupt the heterosexual claim that Hanna and Pierre have to cultural reproduction and furthermore upsets the foundations of heterosexual normativity on which the family is based.

Unlike the temporal disruption in Jérôme's family that, presumably, could not be blamed on any family member, and was inevitable and uncontrollable, the way that Ludo disrupts the temporality of the hetero-normative family becomes a problem rooted in the entire family, according to their neighbors. After Ludo tries to kiss Jérôme at the school play, the Fabres leave the building in a tightly huddled group. When they open the door the camera begins with an angled shot from above the scene and then scans down to establish a wall of bodies between it and the Fabres. The heads of the crowd are turned to look at them. The family pushes its way through the crowd, which turns and follows slowly, as if herding the Fabre's who shuffle nervously out through the gate that encloses the schoolyard. The community exiles not only Ludo, but also the entire family. Shortly after this event, Ludo's father is fired from his job, Ludo is expelled, and Pierre and Hanna's previously carefree marriage is reduced to screaming matches and threats of violence. Both Ludo's own kinship system and larger relationships within the community dissolve quickly from this point onward.

Ludo briefly moves in with Elisabeth after Hanna cuts off Ludo's treasured hair and Ludo consequently claims to hate her. Pierre eventually gets a new job, however, and the Fabres have to move. They ask Ludo to decide whether to stay with Elisabeth or move with them to a new town that is not close by. Ludo goes with them, but the reunion is not a happy one. The new house is smaller and dingier, the yard is also smaller, and the neighborhood in general seems to consist more of working class families. When Ludo wants to go outside to escape the noise in the house, Hanna says, "It's not our fault we're here, okay?" reminding everyone that it is Ludo's

behavior alone that has disrupted their lives to this extent. Ludo walks out and sits on a bench across the street from a Pam billboard. Here the film introduces Chris, a butch girl whom Ludo reads as a boy and refuses to play with until her mother calls her "Christine." Shortly after that meeting, Chris invites Ludo to her birthday party. She forces Ludo to trade a pirate costume for her princess dress. When Hanna discovers this Ludo runs, but she catches and slaps Ludo repeatedly yelling, "Give us a fucking break." Chris's mother breaks it up and Ludo runs off.

Hanna goes to search for Ludo and arrives at the bench across from the Pam billboard. When she looks across the street, she sees a ladder leading up to the billboard. The door in the picture is open now. Hanna climbs the ladder in the beginning of this fantasy sequence, to look for Ludo. She arrives at the top of the ladder and looks in to see Pam's fantasy world. We see Ludo inside with Pam. The camera then looks out at Hanna, whose head and shoulders take up the entire doorframe and who is overexposed and garish in contrast with the bright colors of the world inside. Ludo runs away with Pam. As Hanna tries to stop them, she leans in and is literally sucked through the ground and out of the scene.

Hanna wakes up on her couch to Pierre calling her name. Her attitude toward Ludo has completely changed. Both parents express their unconditional love for Ludo, reaffirming that Ludo is their child. By entering Pam's world and literally becoming part of the fabric that composes it, Hanna symbolically adopts the temporality that Ludo seeks, one that does not worry about future consequences but attempts to make his life work in the present. Just as Ludo's parents are finally able to accept a queer temporality, their possibilities for kinships structures expand. When Hanna wakes up, neighbors surround Pierre and look down at her as he does, multiplying the number of people who care about her well being as he does. After Hanna and Pierre talk with Ludo, the three go outside to join the impromptu housewarming taking place in their yard. The children, in play, join hands and begin to snake around the yard, forming a line that encloses the partygoers and suggests the possibility of an accepting and encouraging group that will surround Ludo's family.

While this ending to the film could be read as facile, a too-nicely wrapped ending to a complicated story, Berliner's refusal to project a future for Ludo takes the burden off Ludo to do so. Most of the stress and confusion in the film comes from Hanna and Pierre's concern for Ludo's future and also Ludo's own attempts to figure out how and when to become a girl. Berliner's decision to end the film here leaves the viewer with a sense of possibility and an understanding that a fixation on what Ludo's gender identity will mean for the future is unproductive and often destructive. The last moment of the film, however, does give an indication that this "nice" ending is not in fact the end of Ludo's story. Pam flies over the group of partygoers and blows her golden dust out of her hands. The music that plays is the instrumental part of Pam's theme song, "Rose," that plays frequently in film. Here, however, it plays without the accompanying vocal melody that ties the musical structure together. The resulting sound is sparse and dissonant. Chords lack resolution and layer over each other in a disorienting manner. The film thus complicates the seemingly clean resolution by suggesting that a kind of conflict may in fact arise but that Ludo will be able to find a community at the same time. It embraces the concept of the "now" that Roderick A. Ferguson writes "is a patchwork of other times – times gone past but never gone, and times yet to be but always here" while allowing for the ability to make this complication productive rather than

stifling (58).

The success of Ma Vie en Rose stems from the film's ability to sustain a queer temporality that is never quite defined as following any one trajectory. The temporality that Ludo represents is constantly shifting, necessarily erratic, and layered in that it is read differently by characters who have their own investments in Ludo's decisions. The film depicts the pressures placed on a seven-year-old to resolve an issue that the child cannot yet fully articulate without requiring that the narrative do this resolution for the viewer. The connections between temporality and kinship in this film complicate the extent to which any temporality, normative or not, can be read as "healthy" or correct by reflecting the multiple, inextricable impact of family and community on childhood development. It also, however, resists an approach that relates Ludo to all children; it creates a space for the specific exploration of a specific struggle with gender identity. Ma Vie, therefore, expands both our ability to read children as queer and to imagine what such a childhood might look like.

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