

1974

Sports, Sexism, and the Media Specialist

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Abstract

The media specialist who is aware of social change is undoubtedly aware that today sexism pervades most institutions of American society. The discriminatory practices accorded women and men in jobs, in the churches, in the homes, and in the schools have been well-documented. Living one's life on the basis of one's sex, once traditional, is no longer accepted as the way living must be. American legislative bodies have resultingly passed federal and state laws and have proposed the Equal Rights Amendment--all of which would ban discrimination on the basis of sex in specific and general circumstances.

SPORTS, SEXISM, AND THE MEDIA SPECIALIST

by

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A paper

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in the Department of Library Science

University of Northern Iowa

July, 1974

Readers: C. Adams & E. Martin;
accepted 7/12/74 - Elizabeth
Martin

The media specialist who is aware of social change is undoubtedly aware that today sexism pervades most institutions of American society. The discriminatory practices accorded women and men in jobs, in the churches, in the homes, and in the schools have been well-documented. Living one's life on the basis of one's sex, once traditional, is no longer accepted as the way living must be. American legislative bodies have resultingly passed federal and state laws and have proposed the Equal Rights Amendment---all of which would ban discrimination on the basis of sex in specific and general circumstances.

The media specialist is also aware that, to this point in time, there has been little effort by the American public to examine sexist practices in our schools. The American schools, an institution of which the media specialist is a member, have for years promoted situations that channel children into an educational experience on the basis of one's sex. The administrators of the American school system were not evil. They can not be accused of doing anything more or less than reflecting the current thought of the time. Certain experiences were for men; others for women. American schools merely echoed a tradition of proper action for men and women.

How American society in terms of its institutions has arrived at the conclusion that being a woman meant being less is not important for the purposes of this paper. What is important is that society has initiated the legal machinery necessary to define women's rights as well as to enforce these rights in the education sector of American society.

For a time, American schools were free to deal at their leisure

with accusations of sexist practices. It has become increasingly apparent, however, that schools will no longer be granted the privilege of leisure. Title IX of the Education Act of 1972 has been passed as an attempt to force schools with sexist practices to abolish these practices.¹ The bill, unfortunately, has been without legal enforcement dependent upon the development of specific regulations by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

The Department has finally arrived at a set of proposals to regulate implementation of Title IX. The areas most affected by Title IX are sex segregation, admissions, employment, and athletics. Schools will no longer have the right to organize classes on the basis of sex. This could signify an end to traditional men's or women's physical education classes. Admissions policies at federally funded colleges and universities must be identical for men and women. Salary inequities structured on the basis of sex rather than job responsibilities must be eliminated. This bill would also mean changes in athletics. Schools are directed to provide competitive opportunities for females as well as males. But access to male teams is not required for females and vice versa. Nor must funds and facilities for women equal those given to men. These proposals are not intended to be final. Further suggestions can be made until early 1975 when a final version of the proposals will be sent to the President for his signature. Until then Title IX will still be without force.

Whether the authors of these proposals mean for them to succeed is questionable. They have refused to deal with the issue of sex role stereotyping in textbooks as well as other issues. The success of the bill in forcing compliance and effecting social change will not come from the moral

rightness or wrongness of sex discrimination. Rather, schools will more likely implement change because they stand to lose federal funds and to face prosecution.

The teaching staff of schools have not been directly involved in these proposals as they now read except in the proposal dealing with athletics. What is taught or made available to students, how it is taught (available), and to whom it is taught (available) now become important in the curricular and extra-curricular sports program. Because the American educational system has been so convinced of the value of athletics for its students on a "men only" basis, this last proposal becomes quite controversial because it will force fierce traditionalists to accept women in sports.

Throughout Title IX and in the new proposals, the media specialist is not directly named as being among those responsible for the promotion of sexist practices at any level of school activity let alone sports. But the media specialist, because of her position in the school program—that of providing materials of interest to student and teacher, plays an indirect role in developing student attitude towards acceptable sex roles. Her attitude can reinforce sexism or offer alternatives to traditional sex roles. For the media specialist, then, it is the spirit of Title IX which affects her role in combatting sexism rather than its letter.

As a media specialist, it has been relatively easy for me to deal with the charges of sexism leveled at American education. I could ignore the charges of sexism that are directed at media specialists and media centers. As yet, few people are accusing media specialists of promoting negative sexist materials unless one reads Library Journal. In an attempt to

substantiate their charges, I examined some of the materials in our collection. I found that encyclopedias are very often guilty of writing a history that is more often history than "herstory."² Now when the opportunity arises to talk with encyclopedia salespeople about their materials, I utilize that meeting to point out some of the ways in which their materials contribute to sexism. The usual reaction from these people is a defense of their materials combined with a sincere promise to relay my observations to the editors. The results, however, will be visible only in terms of a reduction of sexism in future materials.

At the moment, I am also attempting to balance a biography collection practically devoid of titles about women. When I first took over this collection, less than seven per cent of the titles were about women. To solve this inequity, I am adopting a rather radical approach. Almost every dollar I allot to biography materials is used strictly to purchase titles about women. I would not recommend this practice for every media center. I already have a quality, heavily used biography collection read by both sexes. But as it has existed in the past, there has been no sense of female history to it.

I do, however, feel intimidated and threatened by proposals in Title IX that were created to eradicate sexism at the sports level in our schools. I find that I am less than desirous of correcting inequities that exist in our sports materials. We have little that appeals to female readers as most of the materials are directed at males only. That situation of less for women in sports has always seemed acceptable to me until now. I have had uncomfortable feelings for years about my relationship as media specialist to sports materials; but I made no attempt to analyze my feel-

ings about sports until Title IX decreed an end to some sexist policies in school sports.

I was first able to identify my discomfort over sports when I took a library science course called "High School Materials." The only topic I had trouble relating to as a media specialist was sports materials. We were asked to read a fiction title in which some kind of sport played a major role in the lives of the book's characters. My response was unenthusiastic. I considered not doing the assignment. I had convinced myself that I did not want to read about swaggering, insensitive males; where a preoccupation for tromping all over someone else was called "sport." That was my stereotype of sports and men in sports. I did decide to accept the assignment, but I was determined not to like the assignment. After reading a book, I wrote up a resume that dealt with story, quality, and audience reaction to the book. Similar presentations from a dominantly female class (there was only one male class member) were given for the books they had read. Comment after comment emphasized the lack of character development, weak plots, stereotyped male and female roles, and over all poor quality of writing. We felt that sports materials were generally aimed at an unsophisticated audience—a group that was getting neither a good story nor the stimulating action that might carry a poor story along.

I don't think any of us were aware that all the books we were reading were about males and/or male-dominated sports. And I am sure that few if any of us were dealing with the boredom and contempt which characterized our similar reactions to sports materials. Perhaps someone realized we had a problem, that this problem would confront us as

practicing media specialists. But we were never challenged. Nothing was said. We would put up with sports materials. We would endure them. But we would never enjoy them.

A great deal of money has been spent on athletic programs in American schools from the elementary through the college levels. As often happens with a program that has been successful, there has been subsequent demand for materials. As a media specialist, my response should have been to meet those demands. Instead, I had refused to deal with the role of sports materials in the collection. My personal dislike for sports lead me to purchase as few sports materials as possible even though male demand indicated a need for more and diverse kinds of sports materials.

And I had a very narrow view of who should be interested in sports. Certainly not girls. I was convinced that our female students cared little for sports-oriented materials. They rarely checked out sports books or read sports magazines. Never mind that on a percentage basis there were more girls than boys out for basketball in our school. I refused to see that their lack of interest in sports materials was comparable to the level of interest they had shown in our biography collection prior to adding titles directed at the female reader. Once we began adding these titles, female readership of the biography collection significantly increased.

We are presently adding sports titles aimed at the female reader through a joint effort by the language arts, physical education, and media center staff. We are also adding titles that could be read by both sexes. This method appears to be working. These books are checked out by girls, not ignored by them. And now that our female students are reading more about women and sports, they also seem to be more interested in read-

ing materials aimed directly at the male reader. I am hoping that our boys will feel more free to select materials primarily directed at the female reader. But the sanctions of our society are strong against male interest in female-designated activities.

It may be a generalization to state that media specialists taken as a group tend to be uncomfortable when they must deal with sports materials. Nevertheless, I think there are grounds to this generalization. I would suggest that in the past the media specialist has promoted sports materials to boost circulation. She also chose sports materials to reach male readers because they indicated they liked sports materials over other types of reading materials. The female had to be content with the exercise materials that taught her how to stay trim but not how to use her body in competitive activity. I would also suggest, as has been my experience, that a good many media specialists do not enjoy reading sports materials. If one does not enjoy a type of material, it becomes more difficult, though not impossible, to promote that material.

The inability of media specialists to deal with the issue of sports materials and sexism can not be completely explained away by a lack of quality materials. Quality materials on sports do exist. The inability to deal with the sports issue may be a result of one's sex. The stereotyped media specialist of the past was usually a woman. And until recent years, the media specialist, regardless of sex, knew that the sex role of women generally did not permit them to engage in athletic activities let alone receive acclaim for participation and success as athletes. The media specialist knew the place of women and that place was not in sports. Could even a sympathetic media specialist be expected to promote women

sports when the female participant could expect to encounter derision from other people?

There were other arguments against the participation of women in sports. Participation supposedly made women unfeminine and insinuated that this loss of femininity lead to lesbianism. And an injury might deny a woman motherhood which was her primary life function. A man was more of a man if he was an athlete; but a woman athlete lost the right to call herself woman. Did the media specialist wish to promote the loss of femininity when one's femininity was a woman's greatest asset?

Studies have been conducted on the reading preferences of children. The media specialist can rightfully expect some of these studies to corroborate what she suspects: that male readers greatly prefer sports materials over other types of materials; and that female readers rank sports materials at the bottom of their reading preferences. A study conducted by Lian-Hwang Chiu used as its subjects a group of fourth grade boys and girls.³ The purpose of the study was to determine if sex had any bearing on the reading preferences of this group. Ten categories of reading interests were identified: adventure, animal stories, biography, fantasy, humor, mystery, poetry, science, social studies, and sports. Results of the study confirmed that reading interest of the subjects was dependent on the sex of the subject. Boys as a group most preferred sports and least preferred poetry. Girls as a group most preferred mystery and least preferred sports. It would seem from the results of this study that the media specialist could have a difficult time in changing the reading habits of female readers. These statistics indicate that female readers will not read sports materials when others are available.

Today's media specialist may have done research on athletics and its relationship to the personality. With all the pressure on women not to become athletes, are the benefits of the activity enough to promote sports for women? Unfortunately, not all studies agree on the merits of athletic competition. Originally, it was felt that competition built character. Competition encouraged teamwork and development of an independent spirit. A study by Bruce C. Ogilvie and Thomas A. Tutko disputes these assumptions.⁴ These men administered the Athletic Motivation Inventory (AIM), which they developed, to over fifteen-thousand athletes. They found that athletic ^{sp}competition did not build character or provide rewards any greater than intense participation in any other field could provide. The development of character depended rather on what the individual already had in his personality. A well-integrated personality would likely lead a person to success no matter what field was chosen. They also determined that successful women participants in sports were more independent and dedicated than men--perhaps because they had to be in order to survive the pressures working against a successful outcome.⁵ Ogilvie and Tutko also found that individuals involved in ¹team sports, in which schools indulge so heavily, tended to possess less healthy personalities. Individuals in team competition were more affiliative, less aggressive and less creative. These findings apply to both sexes.⁶

The media specialist who tries to make sense of all the brouhaha surrounding women's participation in sports as well as the benefits of sports activity for any sex faces a serious task. The media specialist must reach a conclusion even though the evidence available may be contradictory. The one course of action the media specialist can not afford

to take is a lack of action. Ignoring the issue will not make it disappear, for while the media specialist does nothing, the school as an institution is submerged in controversy. The media specialist must grapple with the issue. Sports and female participation are here to stay.

The dilemma of the media specialist who wishes to establish a sports collection reflecting the elimination of sexism becomes apparent when she attempts to purchase materials. The media specialist may find her selection of sports biography limited to Billie Jean King, Olga Korbut, and Althea Gibson. And even if the books were available, ready to experience, where are the readers? What does female sports history of five years let alone fifty years ago mean to female and/or male readers? Perhaps this readership will only coalesce now that female participation has become more acceptable for women. We can not really expect readers to care about Babe Diedrickson; but they have shown they care about contemporary history-maker Billie Jean King.

The problems of finding fictional and instructional materials primarily for female readers may not seem difficult. There are numerous titles available on contact and non-contact sports, team and individual sports. Many of the titles already in one's collection can serve both sexes. But it^{is} still necessary to question the portrayal of women in sports books. Do many of these books picture women as competitors? Are rules listed for women when game rules for women's games differ from those for men's games? Are women given a chapter in a book and the men the rest of the space when there is no reason to separate the sexes? Even titles are suspect. I find myself hard put to justify the "Boy's of...." tag that sometimes precedes titles on camping, bicycling, or

fishing. Are the rules and rewards of these activities dependent on one's sex? Titles of this sort are blatant promoters of sexism in sports.

The problem of identifying and selecting non-sexist sports magazines is even more difficult. The woman worthy of appearing in a sports magazine is still regarded as a rare animal. She is worthy of copy because she is either amazon or beauty. There are magazine editors who should know better. Published by Time Inc., Sports Illustrated, one of those who does not know better, has obviously been put together with much thought, talent, and money. The May 28, 1973 issue and two subsequent issues recognized the position of sports for women in the United States and dealt with it. In forty-eight issues since those three, Sports Illustrated has had no issues with women on the cover. Sports Illustrated published only fourteen feature stories on women athletes and/or the struggle for athletic equality for women. With a total of three-hundred-seventy feature and cover stories, the editors allowed women significant coverage in only a bit less than nineteen percent of the stories. Armed with those statistics, it is difficult for anyone to commend Sports Illustrated on the basis that it gives equal coverage to women in athletics.

In fact, Sports Illustrated must have felt obligated to give equal coverage to male chauvinists when they published "The Racerboys and Bubbles Go to Indy" in that same May 28, 1973 issue. It is a cartoon story satirizing the Indianapolis 500. Bubbles, the only female character, is everything a good sex object should be. She leads the pre-race parade and has the big bosom that seem to be the American male fetish. She coos over "a cunning little crash helmet."⁷ When Bubbles enters the race in order to save the day(our hero has been poisoned), she wins and promises that

she'll return next year to race. Then, she'll drive a car equipped with "pink airfoils and false eyelashes."⁸ The Indy, laments the narrator, will never be the same--because, next year, Bubbles will be there as a competitor. The picture the artist leaves us with is that of woman as sex object and as a person more interested in fashion than in racing. Once more, a woman is the object of derision and joking.

For the moment, most sports magazines are what they have always been--about men for men. Women can not yet get equal attention in existing sports magazines. However, one new sports magazine has appeared that promises to provide the opportunity to read about women in sports. The first issue of WomenSports appeared in June, 1974. The magazine is very visibly backed by tennis pro, Billie Jean King--financially and pictorially. Ms. King appears on the cover. She appears in six out of twenty-three ads using sketches or photos. Only one other major female sports star appears in one of those seventeen remaining ads. Some cricitics would like to see a little less of Ms. King and more of other female athletes. To appeal to more people, the magazine will no doubt have to include other female personalities.

Basically, the magazine's purpose is to acquaint the reader with female sports history past and present, and to provide information on sports. There is an overall aura of militancy for women's right in sports combined with some humor. An unthreatened reader should appreciate the humor in the article title, "Ball--Lore and True Facts."⁹ WomenSports is by virtue of its existence a significant achievement for sports writing. As a magazine, media centers need it to provide information on female athletics. Until established sports magazines cease to ignore women in

their coverage, there may be no choice but to have separate sports magazines for the sexes.

The newspapers, too, need to increase coverage of women sports; and a change here, too, usually has arisen when a reader has complained. Many newspapers are justifiably proud of their liberal stand on the rights of women. But not all of these newspapers have come to realize that this right should extend to increased if not equal coverage of female athletics on the sports page. Iowans are perhaps spoiled by the extensive coverage given girls basketball in this state. Iowa has a tremendous basketball program for women in its public school, although this program has not developed overnight. The press knows that girls basketball makes good copy. But other programs for women--track, gymnastics, tennis--aren't as well developed. Public interest is less. Resultingly, press coverage for these sports tends to be less than that given girls basketball. An examination of sports pages from all over the United States will show the reader that women have not come so far as we might think. The image of successful woman athlete is that once again of a rare animal.

One other media center material often shows bias against women. The film loop format is often chosen to demonstrate physical education skills. The tendency in production of these loops can be to use only males to demonstrate a skill when this skill is learned identically by both sexes.

The media specialist ultimately has to evaluate every part of the media center collection for elements of sexism. Criteria can be arrived at and applied to materials (see Appendix A). Pamphlets and other materials are available to the media specialist suggesting materials essentially

free of sexism (see Appendix B). The great majority of materials will certainly be retained. Those areas that are sexist can be balanced with new materials that provide readers with a choice of image rather than a stereotyped version of male and female roles.

But where to start? I have suggested that it is the responsibility of the media specialist to deal with sexism in sports materials. Few would deny that blatant sexism does exist in media center materials centering on sports for women. It is also important to eliminate sexism in media center materials on sports because of the intense amount of interest centered on the curricular and extra-curricular sports programs in American schools. Sports activities usually involve more students, teachers, and parents for more prolonged periods of time than most other extra-curricular activities. At the end of a school day, students and teachers are still eager to devote the time and energy to perfect skills and to engage in competition. Many media specialists have translated this interest in sports into a demand for sports materials from the media center. But to perpetuate that demand with materials or with a range of materials that excludes women or forces men and women into stereotyped roles offers no choice to children and teachers.

The media specialist can not afford to include the word "sexist" in her vocabulary. She must attempt to deal tangibly with all legal attempts to eliminate sexism at the sports level in our schools. She can show visible support for the development of athletics for women in several ways. She may start with balancing the collection. She may promote women sports through displays and bulletin boards. And she can deal with those people responsible for developing sports programs in the

in the school--the administrators, department chairmen, coaches, and physical education teachers. Perhaps more importantly, she can offer encouragement and support to those students, especially the women, who enjoy athletic competition.

The media specialist who makes no attempt to cope with the confrontation of women and sports will not move with the school. The school population are already intensely concerned with this confrontation. They will soon come to learn, particularly the women, that their concern for change has been rejected by the media center. Resultingly, the media center will come to/^{be} known not as where it is at, but as where it is not.

The media specialist can be a shaper of social change. If she chooses not to deal with sports and sexism, she very likely is in danger of becoming the object of social change. There are few things more sad than that of an individual or an institution who does not change with the times. The media specialist will obviously be both shaper and object of social change. Shaper or object of social change--a choice must be made. The media specialist must adopt one of these as a dominant role in answering the challenge of elimination of sexism in the school.

APPENDIX A

EVALUATION OF MATERIAL FOR SEXISM

1. Title: _____
2. Author: _____
3. Is the materials on a recommended list? _____
4. Is the material on a recommended list for nonsexist materials? _____

5. Content/Illustrative evaluation: check where appropriate.

| Quality | No. of Males | No. of Females | No. of M/F with Quality | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------------------|-------|
| | in the material | | | |
| a. Resourceful/ creative | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| b. Whiney | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| c. Intelligent | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| d. Earns money | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| e. Active in sports | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| f. Solves problems | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| g. Obeys authority figures/rules | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| h. Timid/fearful | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| i. Accept self as is | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| j. Active/aggressive | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| k. Passive/accepting | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |

6. Adult role models: check where appropriate.

| | | | | |
|-------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| a. Supports family | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| b. Cooks, cleans | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| c. Lawn, garden, fix-it | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| d. Carpentry | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| e. Reads | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |

| Quality | No. of Males | No. of Females | No. of M/F with Quality in the material | |
|--|--------------|----------------|--|-------|
| f. Professional/ Career | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| g. Reprimands and punishes children | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| h. Civic minded | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| i. Displays emotion | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 6. Should the material be purchased or retained? | _____ | | | |
| 7. Has anyone objected to the material? | _____ | | | |
| On what basis? | _____ | | | |
| 8. What are the merits of the material? | _____ | | | |
| | _____ | | | |

APPENDIX B

This list is an incomplete attempt to provide the media specialist and/or teacher with addresses of sources claiming to provide non-sexist materials. The list is included as a starting point, not as a recommendation to purchase from these sources. Sources may not have information on sports materials.

- CLEARINGHOUSE ON WOMEN'S STUDIES. Box 334, SUNY/ College at Old Westbury, Old Westbury, N.Y. 11568. Provides resources for highschool teachers. "Most complete collection of women's studies materials in the country." Publishes the Women's Studies Newsletters: \$5 individuals, \$10 institutions.
- DICK AND JANE RECEIVE A LESSON IN SEX DISCRIMINATION. Corrine Perkins, 8150 Oak Crest Ave., Iowa City, Ia. Slide series.
- FEMINISTS ON CHILDREN'S MEDIA. P.O. Box 4315. Grand Central Station, N.Y. 10017. Publisher of Little Miss Muffet Fights Back, an annotated bibliography of recommended non-sexist books about girls (\$.50 and a self-addressed stamped envelope).
- FEMINIST PRESS. SUNY College at Old Westbury, N.Y. 11568. Available: Children's books, biographies for young adults, adults; also reprints. Books and pamphlets useful in teaching and the learning of women's studies. Order books from 10920 Battersea Lane, Columbia, Maryland 21044.
- FEMINIST RESOURCES FOR EQUAL EDUCATION. Box 185, Saxonville Station, Framingham, Mass. 01901. Sets of photos of women in non-traditional roles. \$2 each.
- IMPACT. 144 Bleeker St., New York, N.Y. 10012. Film rental.
- KNOW, Inc. Box 86031, Pittsburg, Pa. 15221. Pamphlets and books.
- LOLLIPOP POWER. P.O. Box 1171, Chapel Hill, N.C. 27514. Non-sexist book for children.
- NEW SEED PRESS. 1001 Karen Way, Mountain View, Cal. Will publish non-sexist children's books.
- SEX ROLE SOCIALIZATION IN PICTUREBOOKS (\$35 rental) and SEX ROLE STEREOTYPING IN TEXTBOOKS (in preparation). Lenore Weitzman, University of California at Davis. Slide series.
- SEX ROLE STEREOTYPING IN CHILDREN'S READERS. Women on Words and Images. P.O. Box 2163, Princeton, N.J. 08540. Slide series.
- TIMES CHANGE PRESS. Penwell Rd., Washington, N.J. 07882. Pamphlets suitable for high school.
- WOMEN'S GRAPHIC COLLECTIVE. Chicago Women's Liberation Union, 852 W. Belmont Ave., Chicago, Ill., 60637. Recommended collection of posters about women. Write for list.

See Library Journal, January 15, 1973, p. 234-235 for complete list.

FOOTNOTES

¹The Sexes, "The Women Gain," Time, July 1, 1974, p. 47.

²Linda Kraft, "Lost Herstory: The Treatment of Women in Children's Encyclopedias," Library Journal, January 15, 1973, p. 218.

³Lian-Hwang Chiu, "Reading Preferences of Fourth Grade Children Related to Sex and Reading Ability," Journal of Educational Research, April, 1973, p. 369-373.

⁴Bruce C. Ogilvie and Thomas A. Tutko, "Sport: If You Want to Build Character, Try Something Else," Psychology Today, October, 1971, p. 61.

⁵Ibid., p. 62.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Bob Peak, "The Racer Boys and Bubbles go to the Indy," Sports Illustrated, June 11, 1973, p. 40.

⁸Ibid., p. 41.

⁹"Balls--Lore and True Facts," WomenSports, June, 1974, p. 55.

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