

Strange Fruit

They put him to death by hanging him on a tree.

—Acts 10:39

*The South is crucifying Christ again
By all the laws of ancient rote and rule;
The ribald cries of 'Save Yourself' and 'Fool'
Din in his ears, the thorns grope for his brain,
And where they bite, swift springing rivers stain
His gaudy, purple robe of ridicule
With sullen red; and acid wine to cool
His thirst is thrust at him, with lurking pain.
Christ's awful wrong is that he's dark of hue,
The sin for which no blamelessness atones;
But lest the sameness of the cross should tire
They kill him now with famished tongues of fire,
And while he burns, good men, and women, too
Shout, battling for his black and brittle bones.¹*

—“Christ Recrucified,” by Countee Cullen

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black body swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.²*

—“Strange Fruit,” as sung by Billie Holiday

The cross and the lynching tree.

BY JAMES H. CONE

APOSTLE PETER'S POWERFUL DESCRIPTION OF JESUS' death as a “hanging on a tree,” the black poet Countee Cullen's gripping 1922 poem “Christ Recrucified,” and the great jazz singer Billie Holiday's haunting song “Strange Fruit” are poignant reminders that the cross and the lynching tree, separated by nearly 2,000 years, are not usually thought of as being symbolically connected, except by black poets, novelists, dramatists, and other reality-seeing artists. Lynching was such an unspeakable crime that blacks and whites seldom talk about it, especially not in mixed racial settings. The lynching of black

Illustration by R. Gregory Christie

Americans is an atrocity that white Americans would rather forget, but they cannot. The memory of disfigured black bodies “swinging in the southern breeze” is so painful to African Americans that they also try to keep these horrors buried deep down in the pit of their consciousness: but, like a dormant volcano, they erupt uncontrollably, like a nightmare causing profound ontological agony and excruciating, psychic pain. But, as with all the atrocities surrounding Middle Passage, chattel slavery, and Jim Crow segregation, blacks and whites and other Americans who want to understand the true meaning of the American experience need to remember lynching. To forget this unspeakable crime leaves people with a fraudulent perspective of this society and of their understanding of the meaning of the Christian gospel for this nation.³

In contrast to the lynching tree, the cross is one of the most visible symbols of America’s Christian origin. America is a “nation of believers,” a “beacon on the hill,” called to be “a righteous empire,” “the people of God,” like Israel in the Hebrew Bible. Many orthodox and evangelical Christians believe that Jesus died on the cross to redeem humankind from sin. They say Jesus took our place and suffered on the cross for us so that we will not burn forever in hell. He was our substitute, the Son of God, who, according to Mark’s gospel, gave “his life a ransom for many” (10:45). We are “now,” Paul said, “justified by [God’s] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith” (Rom. 3:24–25). Without Jesus’ death on the cross, many Christians believe, we would not be acceptable before God. The cross, therefore, is the great symbol of salvation for Christians.

Unfortunately, during the course of 2,000 years of Christian history, this orthodox understanding of the cross has become a fixed doctrine that many believe *must* be accepted as the definition of what it means to be a Christian. It has become a form of “cheap grace,” as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, an easy way to salvation, completely without cost. The cross has been transformed into a harmless, non-offensive religious object that Christians wear around their necks as a sacred fashion piece and place on church steeples and altars to decorate their sanctuaries with a symbol of holiness. The classic Christian view of the cross claims to know too much about *how* salvation is accomplished and thus removes the element of mystery in our understanding of salvation. The cross, therefore, needs to be rescued—that is, liberated—from the superficial pieties of Christians, because their transformed cross blinds them from seeing the true meaning of the one who was crucified on Calvary’s hill. Unless the cross and the lynching tree are seen together, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America and no healing of the racial divide in churches and seminaries as well as in the society as a whole.

I know the cross and the lynching tree are not comfortable subjects to talk about together. Who wants to think about lynched black bodies in church worship, or when doing a theological reflection on Bonhoeffer’s question, “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?” This is exactly what I contend the gospel requires Christians to do, especially preachers and theologians. I claim that no American Christian—white, black, or any other color—can understand correctly the full theological meaning of the American

1. Cited in Anne P. Rice, *Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond* (Rutgers University Press, 2003), 221–222.

2. “Strange Fruit” was written by Abel Meeropol and became Billie Holiday’s signature song. For a history of “Strange Fruit,” see David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights* (Running Press, 2000).

3. On lynching, see Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (Modern Library, 2003); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (University of Illinois Press, 1993); and *Under the Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

Christ without identifying his image with a "recrucified" black body hanging from a lynching tree. Black poets and other artists, like Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and W.E.B. Du Bois, realized the religious meaning and symbolic connection of the cross and the lynching tree; but this connection failed to ring a theological bell in the imagination of white theologians and their churches. Not many black theologians and preachers have made an explicit connection between the cross and the lynching tree either. I want to start a conversation about the cross and the lynching tree and thereby break our silence on race and Christianity in American history.

I BEGIN THIS REFLECTION IN THE ONLY PLACE I FEEL confident to speak as a theologian: the black religious experience. I was born into this reality and have wrestled with its paradoxes and incongruities since childhood. If I have anything to say to the Christian community in America and around the world, it will happen as I stand as a theologian on the reality that sustains and empowers black people to resist the forces that seem designed to destroy every ounce of dignity in their souls and bodies.

The black church community was my place of resistance, the place where I took my stand to declare theological war on white supremacy. That was why I entered the ministry, went to seminary, and, to my surprise and that of many others, earned a PhD degree in systematic theology. I wanted to get as much of the intellectual resources as I could, because white theologians were well armed with a weighty theological tradition and would fight back fiercely when challenged. Though my seminary education prepared me to do theology, introducing me to the great thinkers in the Western theological tradition, I knew that I would never be able to engage the intellectual giants like Barth, Tillich, Niebuhr, and Bonhoeffer on the territory of their white Euro-American theology. I had to engage the Christian gospel and white theology's interpretation of it on my territory: the black religious experience and the struggle for justice that emerged out of it.

While whites may have produced the most influential theologians in the Christian tradition, the black church community has produced some of the greatest preachers of the gospel of Jesus the modern world has ever known. From untutored nineteenth-century evangelists like Black Harry, Jarena Lee, and John Jasper to learned twentieth-century orators like Howard Thurman, Martin Luther King, Jr., Prathia Hall Wynn, James Forbes, and Gardiner C. Taylor, black preachers have been word-warriors for the Lord. They make the gospel plain and real to ordinary people, so that the Bible becomes a liberating message coming directly from God. I marvel at the exegetical and homiletical skills of the black preacher—his or her ability to speak the truth to power with the wisdom of a sage and the passion and courage of a prophet. The black preacher is a "genius of the spontaneous word" and a master of biblical truths and stories about God's work of salvation. Black preachers took a white gospel designed to enslave them and transformed it into a black liberating gospel of Jesus.

I first heard black preachers in rural Arkansas at Methodist, Baptist, and Sanctified churches. Each denominational minister

had his or her distinctive preaching style. While the way they preached was different, the subject of their message often focused on the suffering Jesus and the salvation accomplished in his death on the cross. I noticed how the passion and energy of the preacher increased whenever he talked about the cross, and the congregation responded with outbursts of "Amen" and "Hallelujahs," that equaled the intensity of the sermon oration. People shouted, groaned, and moaned, clapped their hands, and stomped their feet, as if a powerful, living reality of God's Spirit had touched them and lifted them out of the "muck and miry clay" of white supremacy and thus transformed them from nobodies in white society to somebodies in the black church. Nothing, absolutely nothing, dominates black church worship like talk about Calvary and the one who died on the cross for the sins of the world. Most black sermons take their climax on Calvary and the people often wait patiently for the preacher to take them there. When preachers think they may be losing their audience, they retell the story of Jesus' crucifixion, emphasizing how he died to make people free so we might live with God eternally. Paradoxically, the cross can resurrect dead sermons and enable ill-prepared preachers to enliven bored congregations.

One word of caution is in order here, lest we get too carried away by the charisma of black preachers. Because black preaching in particular, and black worship generally, creates a great deal of emotionalism, there is always the danger that unscrupulous, self-seeking preachers will corrupt the gospel of the cross for personal financial gain. The black church, therefore, needs to find ways to bring charismatic preachers under the control of critical theological reason and the prophetic judgment of God. The black church needs seminary-trained, university-educated prophetic theologians, who are as committed to their intellectual vocation as pastors are to their call to preach. The preacher proclaims the gospel and the theologian explains it so the preacher will not get too carried away with his or her eschatological rhetoric. The preacher inspires people to make a commitment to the gospel and the theologian analyzes the preached word and subjects it to the justice and mercy of the God revealed in Jesus Christ. To be a profound preacher, therefore, one must be a critical and prophetic theological thinker. As preacher, one proclaims God's love for the poor, and as theologian, one reflects on the meaning of divine love for the poor when their poverty seems to deny that claim.

HOW CAN ONE BELIEVE THAT GOD LOVES BLACK people in a world defined by 400 years of white supremacy? These contradictions and incongruities challenge theologians and preachers to a deeper understanding of the knowledge of God. Some preachers, as Paul said, have "a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge" (Rom. 10:2 KJV). Theology probes the mysteries of God, what the German scholar Rudolph Otto called the "Mysterium Tremendum" and what the black preacher called "the truth that passes all understanding." The theologian teaches preachers about the ontological and existential significance of divine mysteries of the cross so that they can proclaim the true gospel and not a counterfeit version of it.

For a minister to become a prophetic preacher like Martin Luther King, Jr., he or she has to become a committed theologian, a pastor who reads and thinks as well as prays. But a minister must be more than a preacher-theologian. It is not enough just to teach and preach the gospel. It is necessary also to *live* the gospel that one preaches and teaches. King was an *activist* preacher-theologian. He deeply believed that the truth of the gospel could only be taught and preached in a world that is being actively transformed.

What is this gospel that must be taught, preached, and lived in the world? There are so many ministers who claim to speak for God. Many white evangelical ministers frequently say they have a direct word from God, as if God speaks to them as one talks to a human being. President George W. Bush spoke about his "heavenly Father" as if God commanded his declaration of the "war on terror" in Afghanistan and Iraq. I have even heard black preachers speak about God with the same certainty, especially when they express their opposition to women in the ministry, abortion, and same-sex marriage, and on other controversial issues.

The reality of God, however, is not something we possess, as if God were an object under our control. We don't possess God; God possesses us and transforms our lives. The gospel is not derived from this world because it is not a human word, not a pious feeling or a sophisticated idea that comes from intellectuals in seminaries or universities, no matter how smart they may be. Faith, and not the intellect, is the primary way to gain knowledge of the gospel.

The gospel is God's message of liberation in an unredeemed and tortured world. On the one hand, the gospel is a transcendent reality that lifts our spirits to a world far removed from the hurts and pains of this one, where "we will walk in the New Jerusalem just like John." On the other, it is an immanent reality, that is, a powerful liberating presence among the poor right *now*, "building them up where we are torn down and propping them up on every leaning side," empowering them to fight for freedom here on earth. The gospel is in the world but not of the world. That is what makes God's Word *paradoxical* or, as the old untutored black preacher used to say, "inscrutable." It is here and not here, revealed and hidden at the same time.

The Word of God is also *offensive*. It is not a word that we want to hear, even though we say we do. God's Word is not a popular word, not a successful word, and not an entertaining word. The gospel is the suffering word of the cross, a lynched word hanging from a tree. The gospel is a tortured word, a black word in the world of white supremacy.

The gospel and the cross cannot be separated. The cross stands at the center of the gospel. Take the cross away and the gospel is no longer the gospel of the God of Jesus. I know that such a theological claim would be fiercely rejected by many womanist and feminist theologians.⁴ Indeed, much of what I say in this lecture represents my acceptance of and challenge to the devastating critiques of feminists and womanists on atonement theories in Western theology. When I read Rita Brock, Rebecca Parker, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and especially my colleague Delores Williams, I had to go back and rethink the theological meaning of the cross. When one considers how corrupt and misguided Christian preachers and theologians have used the cross of Jesus

4. I intend to address fully the dangers of preaching the cross to women, children, and the oppressed generally in a chapter of the book that I am writing, "Strange Fruit: The Cross and the Lynching Tree." For womanist and feminist perspectives on the cross, see especially, Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Orbis, 1993); and *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne C. Brown and Carole R. Bohn (Pilgrim Press, 1989).

to oppress marginal people, especially women and children, urging them to accept passively their suffering in the home, church, and the society, who can blame womanists and feminists for saying, "no more crosses for me."

Although I agree with feminists and womanists that the orthodox theories of the atonement are an outrage to the moral decency of humanity, I cannot stop at their critique and turn away from the cross. We must remember that every good theological insight or ethical deed is always corrupted by sin, that is, our self-interest, and thus theologians and preachers should always speak carefully and with humility and self-criticism and never with dogmatism. A theologian's responsibility is to show how self-glorification corrupts the Christian ministry and theological reflection. Before God we are all guilty. As Paul confessed: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . I can will what is right but I cannot do it. For if I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells in me" (Rom. 7:15, 18-20). That is a powerful self-critique that Paul derived from the cross. All Christians need to internalize this cross-critique daily. Therefore, we should not turn away from the cross because people use it for evil. The cross is the most empowering symbol of God's loving solidarity with the "least of these," the unwanted in society who suffer daily from great injustices. We must face this cross as the terrible tragedy it was and discover in it, through faith and repentance, God's suffering solidarity with today's crucified people, which bestows on them the power to resist the daily crosses of injustice in their lives.

The cross of Jesus is not good news to the powerful, or to anyone whose understanding of the world is defined by established religion. That was why Jesus' disciples did not understand the idea of a suffering messiah and thus slept through his agony in the garden and ran away from his crucifixion. According to the Christian scriptures, one disciple betrayed him and another denied him, because the crucified Messiah was not the one they expected. Greatly disappointed with Jesus' death on the cross, two of Jesus' followers said: "We had hope that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). We today don't want any part of Jesus' cross either, not the real cross that looked more like a first-century lynching than the images we display in our churches. The cross is a "stumbling block" to the religious and the pious, and "foolishness" to the wise, the secular scholars in the universities. But "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor. 1:25). For "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing the things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of the Lord" (1 Cor. 1:27-28).

Today as yesterday, the cross reveals God's loving "solidarity with "the unspeakable suffering of those who were tortured and put to death by human cruelty. . . . In the person and the fate of the one man Jesus of Nazareth this saving 'solidarity' of God with [the oppressed] is given its historical and physical form. ["The Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14)]. In [Jesus

cross],... God himself took up the 'existence of a slave' and died the 'slaves' death' on the tree of martyrdom (Philippians 2:8)."⁵

Great preachers preach the cross as the heart of the Christian message. Apostle Paul preached the cross and transformed a little Jewish sect into a faith for the world. Martin Luther preached the cross and started the Protestant Reformation. Karl Barth preached the cross and created a Copernican revolution in European theology. Martin Luther King, Jr., preached the cross and transformed social and political life in America.

ONE HAS TO HAVE A POWERFUL RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION to see redemption in the cross, to discover life in death and hope in tragedy. "Christianity," Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, "is a faith which takes us through tragedy to beyond tragedy, by way of the cross to victory in the cross."⁶ What kind of salvation is that? To understand what the cross means in America, we need to take a good long look at the lynching tree in this nation's history—"the bulging eyes and twisted mouth," that "strange fruit" that Billie Holiday sang about, "blood on the leaves and blood at the root." The lynched black victim experienced the same fate as the crucified Christ.

The cross and the lynching tree interpret each other. Both were public spectacles, usually reserved for hardened criminals, rebellious slaves, and rebels against the Roman state and falsely accused militant blacks who were often called "black beasts" and "monsters in human form" for their audacity to challenge white supremacy in America. Any genuine theology and any genuine preaching must be measured against the test of the scandal of the cross and the lynching tree. "Jesus did not die a gentle death like Socrates, with his cup of hemlock... Rather, he died like a [lynched black victim] or a common [black] criminal in torment, on the tree of shame."⁷ The crowd's shout, "Crucify him!" (Mark 15:14), anticipated the white mob's shout, "Lynch him!" Jesus' agonizing final cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) was similar to the Georgia lynching victim Sam Hose's awful scream, as he drew his last breath, "Oh, my God! Oh, Jesus."⁸ In each case, it was a cruel, agonizing, and contemptible death.

The cross and the lynching tree need each other: the lynching tree can liberate the cross from the false pieties of well-meaning Christians. The crucifixion was a first-century lynching. The cross can redeem the lynching tree, and thereby bestow upon lynched black bodies an eschatological meaning for their ultimate existence. The cross can also redeem white lynchers, and their descendants too, but not without profound cost, not without the revelation of the wrath and justice of God, which executes divine judgment, with the demand for repentance and reparation, as a presupposition of divine mercy and forgiveness. Most whites want mercy and forgiveness, but not justice and reparations; they want reconciliation without liberation, the resurrection without the cross.

As preachers and theologians, we must demonstrate the truth of our proclamation and theological reflection in the face of the cross and the lynched black victims in America's past and present. When we encounter the crucified Christ today, he is a humiliated

5. Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Fortress, 1977), 88.

6. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), 213.

7. Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 90.

8. Cited in Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (Alfred Knoff, 1998), 281.

black Christ, a lynched black body. Christ is black not because black theology said it. Christ is *made* black through God's loving solidarity with lynched black bodies and divine judgment against the demonic forces of white supremacy. Like a black naked body swinging on a lynching tree, the cross of Christ was "an utterly offensive affair," "obscene in the original sense of the word," "subjecting the victim to the utmost indignity."⁹

A crucified Jesus and lynched black bodies were not pretty objects to look at. That was why Christians transformed the cross into a sacred fashion symbol and seldom show images of lynching. But the trauma of lynching lives on in the blood and bones of black people. We cannot forget the terror of the lynching tree no matter how hard we try. We can go to churches and celebrate our religious heritage, but the tragic memory of the black holocaust in America's history is still waiting to find theological meaning. When black people sing, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" they often think of black lives lost to the lynching tree. "Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble." "Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?" "Were you there when they pierced him in the side?" "Were you there when the blood came twinkling down?" "Were you there when he bowed his head and died?"

The "Were you there?" was a rhetorical question. Black people were there! Through the experience of being lynched by white mobs, blacks transcended their time and place and found themselves existentially and symbolically at the foot of Jesus' cross, experiencing his fate. If blacks could identify with Jesus suffering on his cross, Jesus also could *not only* identify with hanging and burning black bodies on the lynching tree, but also redeem black suffering and make beautiful what white supremacy made ugly. "Black is beautiful, baby!"—a popular phrase in the black community in the 1960s—has far more theological truth than most people know.

In a penetrating essay, Reinhold Niebuhr wrote about "the terrible beauty of the cross." "Only a tragic and a suffering love can be an adequate symbol of what we believe to be at the heart of reality itself." The cross prevents God's love from sinking into sentimentality and romanticism. "Life is too brutal and the cosmic facts are too indifferent to our moral ventures to make faith in any but a suffering God tenable."¹⁰

The gospel of Jesus is not a beautiful Hollywood story. It is an ugly story, the story of God snatching victory out of defeat, finding life in death, transforming burning black bodies into transcendent windows for seeing the love and beauty of God.

Mark D. Jordan writes: "What makes the ugliness of Jesus' crucified body important is not that it was the greatest physical ugliness, but that we are asked to see through it to the unspeakable beauty of God. The crucifixion inverts our ordinary bodily aesthetic by claiming that the radiant source of all beauty was disclosed to us in a scourged, crucified dead body.... Paradoxical assertions about Jesus' beauty on the cross invite us to learn that bodies can be beautiful in ways we hadn't expected—or were perhaps afraid to think."¹¹ God's loving solidarity can transform ugliness into beauty. Take a look at the atrocity photos of lynched black bodies in James Allen's book *Without Sanctuary: Lynching*

9. Ibid., 40.

10. Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Terrible Beauty of the Cross," *The Christian Century*, March 21, 1929, 386–388.

11. Mark D. Jordan, *Telling Truths in Church: Scandal, Flesh, and Christian Speech* (Beacon Press, 2003).

*Photography in America*¹² and, through the powerful imagination of faith, discover the tragic beauty of those bodies, the “terrible beauty” of the lynching tree.

THE CHURCH'S MOST VEXING PROBLEM TODAY IS HOW to define itself by the gospel of Jesus' cross as revealed through lynched black bodies in American history. Where is the gospel of Jesus' cross revealed today? Where are black bodies being lynched today? The lynching of black America is taking place in the criminal justice system where nearly one-third of black men between the ages of 18 and 28 are in prisons and jails, on parole, or waiting for their day in court. One-half of the two million people in prisons are black. That is one million black people behind bars, more than in colleges. Through private prisons, whites have turned the brutality of their racist legal system into a profit-making venture for dying white towns and cities throughout America. One can lynch a person without a rope or tree.

The civil rights movement did not end lynching. It struck a mighty blow to the most obvious brutalities, like the lynching of Emmett Till and the violence of the Ku Klux Klan. But whenever society treats a people as if they have no rights or dignity or worth, as the government did to blacks during the Katrina storm, they are being lynched covertly. Whenever people are denied jobs, health care, housing, and the basic necessities of life, they are being lynched. There are a lot of ways to lynch a people. Whenever a people cry out to be recognized as human beings and society ignores them, they are being lynched.

When I heard and read about the physical and mental abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, and at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba, I thought about lynching. The Roman Empire that killed Jesus at Calvary was similar to the American empire that lynched blacks in the United States and also created the atrocities in Iraq. Many white Americans seemed surprised and even shocked that such abuse could come from the U.S. military. But most blacks were neither surprised nor shocked. We have been the object of white America's abuse for nearly 400 years.

People who have never been lynched by another group usually find it difficult to understand why blacks want whites to remember lynching atrocities. Why bring that up? That was a long time ago! Is it not best forgotten? Absolutely not! The lynching tree is a metaphor for race in America, a symbol of America's crucifixion of black people. It is the window that best reveals the theological meaning of the cross in this land. In this sense, black people are Christ-figures, not because we want to be but because we had no choice about being lynched, just as Jesus had no choice in his journey to Calvary. Jesus did not want to die on the cross, and blacks did not want to swing from the lynching tree. But the evil forces of the Roman State and white supremacy in America willed it. Yet God took the evil of the cross and the lynching tree upon the divine self and transformed both into the triumphant beauty of the divine. If America has the courage to confront the great sin and ongoing legacy of white supremacy, with repentance and reparation, there is hope beyond the tragedy—hope for whites, blacks, and all humankind—hope beyond the lynching tree. ■

12. James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Twin Palms Publishers, 2003).

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