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The View from Philadelphia

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The *Atlas of the New West* is a memorable achievement. Beautifully written, organized, and illustrated, brilliantly conceived and constructed, it will join a small group of landmark works on the West published in the last decade and a half.[1] The *Atlas* is particularly valuable to discussions of regional identity in the West. The New West's "rapid postindustrial evolution" is exemplified in the volume's superb maps of airports, paved roads, public lands, wilderness areas, ethnic composition, interregional migration, Internet lines and fiber-optic cables, aridity, dams, sovereign Indian nations, endangered species, polluted rivers and nuclear dumps, as well as regional writers, ski resorts, brew pubs, gay newspapers, and New Age and cowboy/pseudo-cowboy culture. Such innovative and imaginative mapping is itself likely to open up a wealth of possibilities for scholars willing to depart from traditional categories and frameworks.

Geographically, the area from the Rockies to the Cascades and Sierra Nevada, and from the Canadian to the Mexican bor-

1. Included among these works are the five most notable standard bearers of the New Western History: Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York, 1985); Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York, 1987); Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (Norman, Okla., 1991); William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991); and Patricia Nelson Limerick, Charles E. Rankin, and Clyde A. Milner II, *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence, Kans., 1991). Also especially noteworthy is Clyde A. Milner II, Carol A. O'Connor, and Martha A. Sandweiss, eds., *The Oxford History of the American West* (New York, 1994).

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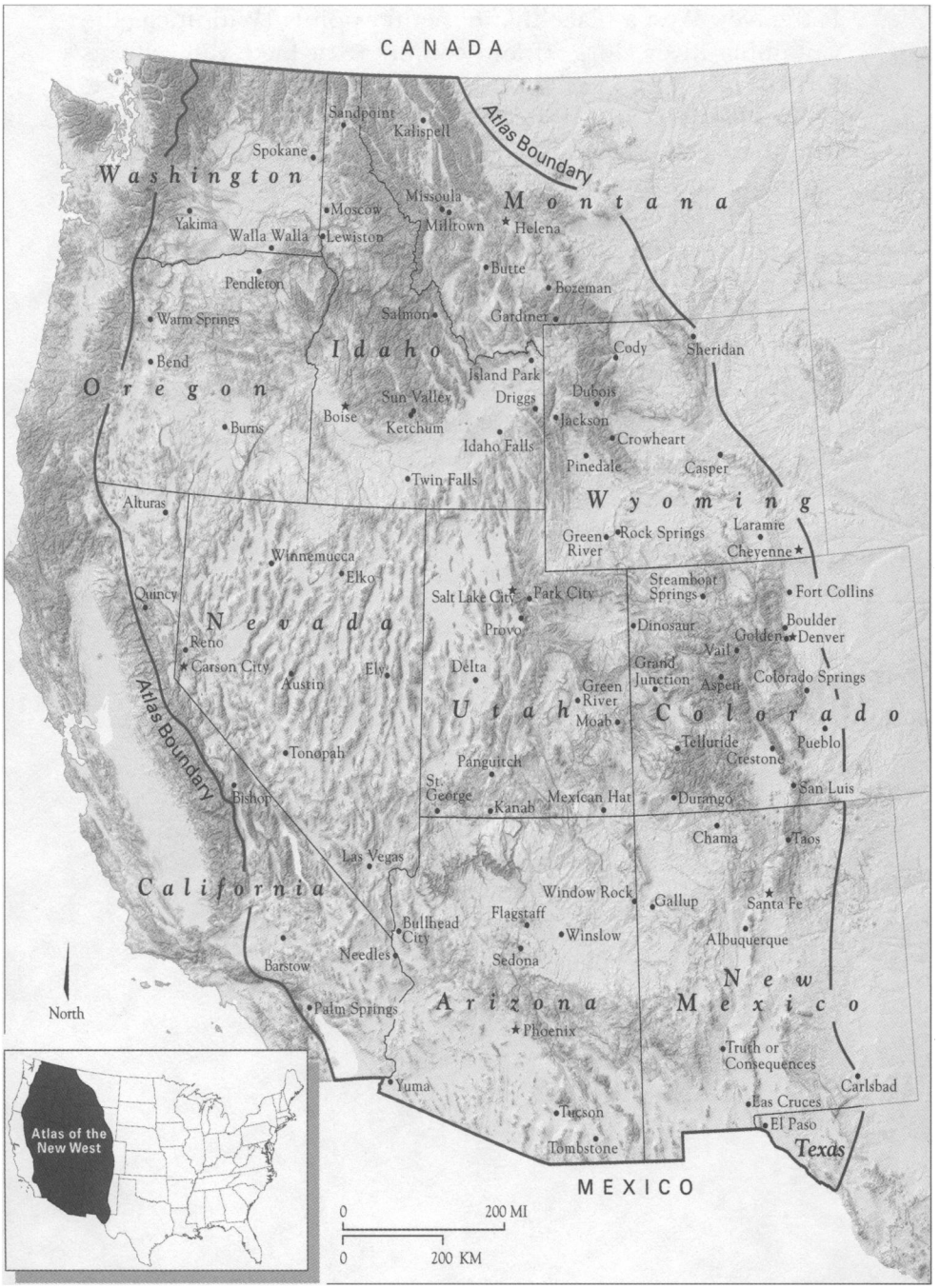

Figure 2. **"Places on the Land," William E. Riebsame, ed., *Atlas of the New West* (New York, 1997), 50.**

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der comprises the New West of the *Atlas*, which actually makes it a rather small West when compared with the definitions of many contemporary scholars.[2] Banning, California, the birthplace of *Atlas* contributor Patricia Nelson Limerick, conveniently sits on the western boundary of the New West; her place of work, Boulder, Colorado, sits near the eastern edge. The geographic center of the New West, according to my rough measurements, is Salt Lake City. Seattle, Portland (the new home of this journal), San Francisco, Los Angeles (the *PHR*'s former home), and San Diego lie outside of the New West. Walter Prescott Webb's conveniently drawn eastern boundary of the West, running from Sherman to San Antonio, Texas (roughly paralleling Interstate 35 and including Webb's boyhood home of Ranger, Texas, and his workplace, the University of Texas at Austin), is also outside. Eastern Montana, site of Jonathan Raban's *Bad Land,* a brilliant account of western homesteading dreams turned sour, is gone, and with it the entrepreneurially renamed town of Joe, Montana (formerly Ismay).[3] Gone, too, are the northeast corner of Wyoming, eastern Colorado, and eastern New Mexico, the Northern Plains, the Southern Plains, and all but the tiny westernmost corner of Texas. The noncontiguous Wests, Alaska and Hawaii, are, of course, way outside of the New West.

The *Atlas* editors want their "West" to be comparatively small, and they want to help create and shape the region they present in the volume. They do not draw the boundaries of their New West arbitrarily. General Editor William E. Riebsame recently remarked, "We're in the business of region-making.... We want to help people in the West think of themselves as citizens of a region."[4] For this reason, the *Atlas* reminds me of Webb's *Divided We Stand: The Crisis of a Frontierless Democracy* (1937), which sought to stir the South and the West into collective action against the colonizing, monopolizing North.[5] The

2. Walter Nugent, "Where is the American West?: Report on a Survey," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History,* 42 (1992), 2–23. The majority of respondents to the survey stretched the eastern boundary of the West into the Plains. Some respondents included the Pacific Coast, and a smaller number included Alaska and Hawaii.

3. Jonathan Raban, *Bad Land: An American Romance* (New York, 1996).

4. William E. Riebsame, quoted in Karen J. Winkler, "An Atlas of the American West Maps the Region's Boundaries and Attempts to Find Its Heart," *Chronicle of Higher Education,* Dec. 5, 1997, A20–21, A20.

5. Walter Prescott Webb, *Divided We Stand: The Crisis of a Frontierless Democracy* (New York, 1937).

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Atlas seeks to promote cooperation among the New West's multifarious residential and visiting interest groups (not conflict with the "power elite" of another region), but its authors are, like Webb, also trying to nurture regional consciousness, not just write about it. Consequently, readers seeking the peaks of scholarly detachment and the high plains of objectivity had better look elsewhere than the *Atlas.*

Not being a resident of the American West (however liberally one chooses to draw its parameters), I may have less invested in the outcome of this scholarly effort to forge a New Western region. As an Englishman living near Philadelphia and writing about the West, I suppose my situation is anomalous enough to provide something of an outsider's perspective. From that vantage I am struck by what's not in the New West. On the matter of maps, I would like to have seen the location of militia groups and white supremacist organizations (a lamentable yet not insignificant part of the New West). Major and minor league sports franchises (a notable element of any American region's culture—Colorado's relatively new "Rockies" and "Avalanche" franchises spring to mind) could have been included. So, too, could legalized gambling centers (including Laughlin, Nevada, which has experienced meteoric growth in the last decade, and various reservation sites, in addition to the better known Las Vegas and Reno).

Retirement meccas could also be mapped within the New West, since a significant portion of that area's population increase comes from an older crowd seeking mild climates, lower crime rates, and plenty of sunshine. And, on the matter of old and new, the *Atlas* includes an intriguing map of New Age sites but no mapping of more traditional religious sects and denominations. Religion, even in a more secular age, is still an important component of culture, and culture is vital to sense of place. Three feet of fresh powder may constitute a near religious experience in the lives of some New Westerners and New West visitors, but one suspects that pre-New Age religion and spirituality still loom large in the lives of many others.[6]

6. For an excellent overview of religion in the West, including the half-century since World War II, see Ferenc M. Szasz and Margaret Connell Szasz, "Religion and Spirituality," in Milner, O'Connor, and Sandweiss, eds., *The Oxford History of the American West,* 359–391.

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To an East Coast resident, it seems a little strange that the New West excludes the West Coast altogether, since the linkages between the coast and the Interior West are so vital. Residents of the Los Angeles Basin who own homes in Flagstaff, Arizona, or residents of San Francisco who own homes around Lake Tahoe may not be so very different from residents of suburban Philadelphia who own properties in the Poconos, or residents of New York City who go on hunting trips to the Catskills and Adirondacks. Las Vegas is to Angelenos what Atlantic City is to Philadelphians—you cross the Mohave to get to one and the Pine Barrens to get to the other, but neither desert nor rural New Jersey is much of a barrier anymore. As early as 1965 Earl Pomeroy called Las Vegas a "recreational suburb of Los Angeles"; while it has grown into more than that in the last three decades or so, there is still something to the label.[7] Such places are less divided by terrain than they are connected by transportation networks.

A West without a coast seems no less unusual than an East without a coast. Portland and San Diego and Seattle seem no less western to an outsider than Phoenix or Denver or Albuquerque. Imagining the New West, a landlocked region, is difficult for me, despite the superb array of maps in the *Atlas* that constantly remind the reader of the geographic "boundaries" of the place. The popularity of the current cowboy chic of the Interior West, for example, is built in part on a foundation of Hollywood productions and West Coast advertising agencies. Those searching for the mythic heart of the Old West (which has helped forge the character of the New West) are as likely to find it in Disneyland's Frontierland as they are anywhere between the Cascades/Sierra Nevada and the Rockies.[8]

7. Earl Pomeroy, *The Pacific Slope: A History of California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Utah, and Nevada* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1991), v.

8. For more on Frontierland, see Michael Steiner, "Frontierland as Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Architectural Packaging of the Mythic West," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, 48 (1998), 2–17, and John Findlay, *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture after 1940* (Berkeley, 1992), 53–64. It is worth noting that important centers of Western art, history, and culture, such as the Autry Museum of Western Heritage in Los Angeles, the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, Nebraska, and the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma, all fall outside of the boundaries of the New West.

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Searching for a regional parallel with the New West, I keep returning to the Sunbelt, a region and a concept that seemed to be on the rise into the 1980s but has apparently gone into decline in the present decade. The notion of a Sunbelt region has waned, I would venture, because it has less to do with the sense of place of the people who happen to reside within those imposed geographic parameters, and more to do with the efforts of forces outside of the Sunbelt to shape that concept into a region.[9] The Sunbelt label is largely imposed on a diverse set of regional entities from the outside and does not reflect any latent regional consciousness among its residents, who do not think of themselves as "Sunbelters."

The New West may have more going for it as a regional entity than the Sunbelt, and Riebsame, Limerick, Charles Wilkinson, and the *Atlas*'s other contributors are certainly more committed to the promotion of a New West region than "Sunbelters" have been to theirs. But for the New West to emerge fully and develop as a region, the residents of the area will have to think of themselves as part of a place that stretches across and beyond state lines and across the boundaries of more established physical and cultural regions, such as the Pacific Northwest, the Southwest, the Great Basin, and the Rockies.

The "New West boosters" do have some literary and historiographic precedents on their side. In 1927 Bernard De Voto pointed to a combination of environmental factors—landscape and climate—and the powerful memory of the frontier as the forces nurturing Inter-Mountain regional consciousness. He vigorously distinguished the Interior West from the Southwest, Middle West, and especially California. "If Californians are Westerners," De Voto proclaimed, "then be assured, we [Inter-Mountaineers] live in the State of Maine."[10] Carey McWilliams noted in his insightful 1931 account of the deleterious effects of frontier mythology on the development of western regional consciousness, that "writers on the West have excluded Califor-

9. See Raymond A. Mohl, ed., *Searching for the Sunbelt: Historical Perspectives on a Region* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1990).

10. Bernard De Voto, "Footnote on the West," *Harper's Monthly Magazine,* 155 (1927), 712–721, quote on 714.

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nia by instinct and popular demand" since 1849.[11] (Perhaps De Voto, McWilliams, and others meant only to exclude the California coast and immediate interior areas from the West, and would have found Banning to be sufficiently "western.") Also, plenty of observers concur with the *Atlas*'s editors in viewing the Rockies as the eastern boundary of the West.

While the notion of an Inter-Mountain West has had its supporters for a long time, the forces likely to impede the full regional integration, development, and survival of the New West are powerful. Chief among these is the lack of similarity among the area's constituent parts. The New Western History began a decade or so ago to promote vigorously the notion of the whole trans-Mississippi West as a geographically definable place (not a process), and it encountered criticism centering on the differences that exist among the various parts of the West, such as their varying degrees of aridity and racial diversity. The diminished geographic parameters of the New West give the place more regional integrity, but objections are still likely to be raised. While the Great Basin, Rockies, and parts of the Pacific Northwest and the Southwest all fall within the contours of the New West, those places may be more different than similar. Residents of Las Vegas, Nevada, I suspect, feel little connection to Bozeman, Montana, or Boise, Idaho. Santa Feans probably have few common ties with Spokaneans. Such a lack of connectedness may also help explain the failure of the Sunbelt concept to develop into a full-fledged Sunbelt region.

Now, the *Atlas*'s contributors are quick to point out that "the West keeps moving around in time and space," and their focus is on the contemporary West's "geographic core," the Interior West.[12] The *Atlas* does not view the New West as an entirely separate regional entity, completely disconnected from the West Coast, or from the Plains, Midwest, South, or East Coast, for that matter. The *Atlas* highlights the unique role that

11. Carey McWilliams, "Myths of the West," *North American Review,* 232 (1931), 425. On this issue, the late Wallace Stegner remarked: "I don't think the rest of the West looks upon California as a part of the West.... It's part of the East; it's just the other end of the dumbbell, and the West's in-between on the handle"; Wallace Stegner and Richard W. Etulain, *Conversations with Wallace Stegner on Western History and Literature* (Salt Lake City, 1990), 188.

12. William E. Riebsame, General Editor, *Atlas of the New West: Portrait of a Changing Region* (New York, 1997), 46.

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outsiders—including sightseers and sports enthusiasts—play in the Interior West. It also emphasizes that the New West, much like upper Manhattan, or Malibu, or Monterey, is "home" to second, third, even fourth residences—a reality that may actually tell us less about the New West and more about a select group of people in America who can afford to live everywhere they like.

This theme of the New West as home or playground to outsiders illuminates some of the difficulties the New West will face in forging a regional identity. More than any other area of the country, the "West" is the nation's region, a place the public owns a large chunk of and travels to in huge numbers, along with sightseers and sports recreationists from all over the world. For all its ugliness and pollution, the West manages to draw masses of visitors and a more limited but still significant number who not only want to visit but also to own vacation homes amidst the magnificent scenery. And then there are those brave souls who actually leave the comparative congestion of the Los Angeles Basin to settle "permanently" in the "wide-open spaces" of Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Arizona, or New Mexico, and face a verbal backlash from "real westerners" bemoaning the supposed "Californication" of their last frontiers.

Ironically, a part of the country that vigorously markets its elevated sense of westernness, the majesty of its scenery and wildlife, and the healthfulness of its climate, is, in the opinion of some of its more long-term residents, becoming home to the "great unwashed" of California and other places. Viewed from this rather narrow angle, the purity of the West is being diluted by less worthy cultural currents and the charm of the last frontier is fading in direct proportion to the numbers arriving.[13] To their credit, the *Atlas* writers do not legitimize this nativistic western sentiment. However, if they are in "the business of region making" and if their goal is to promote a healthy, mature, stable region, then they could do more to discourage such thinking. If, as Limerick suggests for the New West, and as Mary Murphy so wryly notes for Montana in a recent essay, "the Last Best Place, for too many, means the ultimate destination on the

13. One is reminded of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fears that the receding frontier would no longer be able to assimilate the nation's new immigrants.

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white-flight highway—the last best hiding place for the rest of America," there may be no sure foundation on which to build a regional future in a multicultural nation.[14] Regional identity is often formed in reaction to outside forces (such as the federal government or unwanted new arrivals), but when reaction becomes the key component of regional consciousness, what develops will be a less positive force, one that is more sectional than regional.[15]

To help build the New West on a sturdy foundation, the *Atlas*'s contributors will also need to explain better a recurring theme of the volume: that westerners have somehow been endowed with a particularly heightened sense of place. We learn that "[w]esterners take psychic sustenance from the lay of the land." We also find that "[s]ense of place, a strong part of Western life, is actively nourished in the new Western literature."[16] The *Atlas* includes a wonderful map of the locations of selected western writers and periodicals. Still, the reader wonders whether the western sense of place is really any more profound than what exists among residents (literary or otherwise) of any other part of the country.[17] The reader is also struck by the possible incongruity of the *Atlas*'s dual emphasis on the urban nature of the West and on westerners' acute attachment to thoroughly nonurban places. Psychic sustenance from the land aside, I would venture that attachment to urban places is also

14. Mary Murphy, "Searching for an Angle of Repose: Women, Work, and Creativity in Early Montana," in David M. Wrobel and Michael C. Steiner, eds., *Many Wests: Place, Culture, and Regional Identity* (Lawrence, Kans., 1997), 172. Limerick suggests as much in her essay, "The Shadows of Heaven Itself," in the *Atlas*, 157.

15. For more on the theme of "region as reaction" see Clyde A. Milner II, "The View from Wisdom: Four Layers of History and Regional Identity," in William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, eds., *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (New York, 1992).

16. *Atlas of the New West*, 49, 65.

17. Take, for example, the late James Dickey's wonderful essay, "The Starry Place Between the Antlers: Why I Live in South Carolina" (retitled offprint), originally published under the title "Why I Live Where I Live," *Esquire*, 95 (April 1981), 62–64. Dickey, a resident of Oregon, California, and then Washington, prior to Columbia, South Carolina, closes the essay by answering the question he poses in simple, yet mystical terms. South Carolina is where he found his "balance . . . the starry place between the antlers: between the bucks of the rhododendron gullies and those of the ocean, the mountain horns and the swimming" (p. 64). Such powerful pronouncements of attachment to place could be found for most places in the country.

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important to the formation of regional identity in a region marked by both mushrooming metropolises and magnificent scenery.[18]

The majority of New Westerners are moving not to the great wide-open spaces, or even to the small and medium-sized towns of the Interior West that receive ample and excellent coverage in the *Atlas*, but to the major metropolitan areas. Those Interior West cities—such as the four largest: Phoenix, Denver, Salt Lake City, and Las Vegas—warrant a little more attention than they get in the *Atlas*.[19] How do New Westerners feel about their cities? Do they compare them favorably with East Coast, West Coast, Southern, and Midwestern cities? How much time do average New West city dwellers get to spend in the great wide-open spaces? How concerned are they about the environmental fragility of the stunning scenery that surrounds their urban oases? How worried are they about the impact of tourism on wilderness areas, of dams on salmon runs, of radioactivity on downwinders? What kinds of crime rates do they experience, and what kinds of urban amenities do they enjoy, indeed demand? Do they find the "handclasps to be a little stronger," and "the smile[s] to dwell a little longer" under urban western skies?[20]

The *Atlas of the New West* covers a great deal of ground (both topically and geographically) and provides a wonderful service to the burgeoning field of western regional studies by offering a wealth of information in a refreshingly innovative and attractive format, by asking a plethora of important questions, by answering some of them, and by prompting other scholars to ask still more. It is a noble and notable effort at region-defining and region-making. In the end, I'm incredibly impressed by and

18. For a concise overview of the urban West, see Carol A. O'Connor, "A Region of Cities," in Milner, O'Connor, and Sandweiss, eds., *The Oxford History of the American West,* 535–563. For more on the link between urbanization and western regionalism, see Carl Abbott, "The American West and the Three Urban Revolutions," in Gene M. Gressley, ed., *Old West/New West: Quo Vadis?* (Worland, Wyo., 1994), 73–99.

19. Abbott points out in "The American West and the Three Urban Revolutions," that "[t]he dozen largest western metropolitan areas (as of 1990) accounted for 28 percent of *all* the population increase in the United States between 1940 and 1990 and for 36 percent for the 1980s" (p. 98).

20. From the poem "Out Where the West Begins," by Arthur Chapman (Copyright 1919).

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grateful for the *Atlas,* but not convinced by its argument. For now, I'm more drawn to Carey McWilliams's statement that there "were many Wests within the West," and Wallace Stegner's that "the West is several different regions . . . all so different in their history and ethnic compositions, that . . . trying to make a unanimous culture out of them would be a hopeless job. It would be like wrapping five watermelons."[21]

21. Carey McWilliams, "Myths of the West," 427; Wallace Stegner, "On Western History and Historians," in Stegner and Etulain, *Conversations with Wallace Stegner,* 156. For more on this theme of the diversity of the regions that comprise the West, see David M. Wrobel and Michael C. Steiner, "Many Wests: Discovering a Dynamic Western Regionalism," in Wrobel and Steiner, eds., *Many Wests,* 1–30.

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