Reimagining Metaphor in Rhetorical Criticism

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This paper seeks to open a discussion about language use in rhetorical criticism. Analyzing the 2011 final round of rhetorical criticism at the NFA national tournament, the essay argues that competitors should reimagine the social scientific metaphors in contest rhetorical criticism that invite outdated, instrumental models of rhetorical criticism. Instead, an alternative vocabulary that constructs contest rhetorical criticism as a student-centered interpretive performance focused on discursive dynamics is proposed.

Since its inception as a competitive speech event, "rhetorical criticism" has provoked the ire of rhetorical critics. These concerns have focused on larger paradigmatic issues related to its transition from a scholarly enterprise into a competitive speaking event (Rosenthal, 1985; Murphy, 1988; Ott, 1998), but have also focused on specific practices like article misrepresentation (White, 2009; Willoughby, 2010) and the use of research questions (Paine, 2009). Building upon one another, these critiques provide an opportunity to question not only how one teaches or practices rhetorical criticism, but also the way knowledge is talked about. Contest rhetorical criticism fails deeper at the linguistic level than at the structural or procedural level. If, as Burke (1966) notes, language "reflects, selects, and deflects" culture, then the language choices in contest rhetorical criticism also make arguments about the way the event itself is conceptualized. Lakoff (1980) contends that this language is best understood through metaphor, or the understanding of one thing in terms of another. Considering that metaphor is a critical route to identifying core values within speech performance (Osborn, 1967), to better understand contest rhetorical criticism is to identify the metaphor used to describe it.

Thus, competitors' linguistic choices in contest rhetorical criticism metaphorically construct the event as a social science within an outdated, instrumental model of rhetoric. The communication discipline moved beyond these neo-Aristotelian models because they kept leading to conclusions that were predictable and formulaic in nature. Furthermore, they failed to highlight rhetoric's more important ethical or ideological dimensions. When student speakers use language that implies they are doing an effect-based social science rather than a discourse-centered social criticism, audiences are invited to imagine and affirm problematic and antiquated assumptions about communicative artifacts and rhetorical analysis. Worse, as educators, students' critical thinking opportunities are limited. If educators want to change how they think about rhetorical criticism to enhance pedagogy, then there is a need to change how students are taught to talk *within* it. This paper will analyze the final round of rhetorical criticism at the 2011 NFA national tournament, examining closely the metaphors students use that bill rhetoric as a social science. In doing so, an alternative language and practice to promote the teaching of

rhetoric as a vocabulary for interrogating the complexities of discursive dynamics will be proposed. Instead of relying on rhetorical criticism as a science, it will be reimagined through the metaphor of interpretation.

The Science of Metaphors

Metaphors are a useful way to examine both the language and ideology at work in contest rhetorical criticism because such analysis necessarily requires one to investigate what the content presents openly and also what the content obscures. Lakoff (1980) argues that this process occurs in the very "systematicity" of metaphors (p. 7). While metaphors facilitate a connection to language in unique and often clever ways, they necessarily work to obstruct other features of a multi-faceted concept inconsistent with the metaphor. For instance, as Lakoff has noted, if one is using war metaphors to talk about argumentation, then one is necessarily hiding the ways that argument can be thought of as something else such as dance. To demonstrate this difference, one might say that an argument was "right on target" or "indefensible" versus "elegant" or "in rhythm" with the discussion. In the case of contest rhetorical criticism, many of the competitors' language choices, which are then reinforced by the judges, work to highlight social scientific paradigms of rhetorical analysis while obscuring more contemporary, critical views of rhetorical criticism.

The first metaphor addressed is the research question. Research questions by themselves are not counterproductive to the overall research process. In scientific research, for example, the research question (either in lieu of a hypothesis or in conjunction with it) quite literally guides the research. Once the researcher has decided what he or she wants answered about a particular phenomenon, then he or she will choose a method that best answers the question (or tests the hypothesis). Even though rhetorical criticism does not necessarily require a research question like scientific inquiry does, the presentation of a question is not the issue. Asking questions is a natural part of inquiry. The issue resides more firmly in the implementation of the research question as it is currently practiced and rewarded in forensic competition.

This comes in a couple of forms. The first issue is with the resolute expectation of the research question. All six speakers in the round analyzed presented a research question in their speech, indicative of forensic competition as a whole. Omission of a research question in rhetorical criticism is an extremely rare occurrence. This question, as often emphasized, was prompted by some sort of significant information concerning the artifact. "Considering [this piece of socially significant context], we [will, must, can] ask the following [research] question." For instance, the sixth-place speaker Marsh argued:

> Given that this park exploits the deaths of nearly two million people, and has been denounced by members of both the local and international communities as being morbid and insensitive, we must ask the following research question: How do the attempts by the Cambodian government to profit from the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge alter the public memory of the genocide?

Again, not all questions are bad questions, (Marsh's question included), but when students are automatically expected to have a research question, or worse penalized if they do not, the forensic community encourages students to contrive questions into criticisms that may not actually need them. Instead of offering a strong thesis for the speech, the student presents a question answerable without the analysis, or they just copy

the research question offered in their scholarly article. By merely switching the text, but leaving the question intact, the student fails to embrace his or her role as the critic and invent new observations. Paine (2009) argues, "Students who seek to answer their artificially-duplicated research questions can only replicate the same answer discovered by the original author" (p. 100). When research questions become a necessity rather than an option, we are imagining and operating rhetorical criticism as a kind of scientific inquiry and limiting its unique capabilities for the student to practice the rhetorical art of invention through argument.

The way research questions are worded also frame contest rhetorical criticism as a social science, especially when keywords invite yes/no or cause-effect answers. Martin, the third-place speaker, exemplifies this issue with his question: "In light of Dow's long delayed shift to responsibility, should the Yes Men's communicative efforts be labeled a success?" This question does both. On one hand, Martin is asking a question that requires a yes or no response, which operates in an absolutist paradigm and assumes that the communicative act's meaning is fixed, black or white. Rather than having the potential to operate in many different ways rhetorically, the communicative efforts are either successful or they are not. His answer as predicted is a "resounding yes." This approach works to obscure the complexity of rhetorical dynamics that make communicative acts rich texts because they necessitate the clear-cut categories of science.

Also, the speaker's question is problematic because it is really asking the question "Was the act successful?" Since the ideological turn in rhetorical criticism, scholars have moved away from this kind of inquiry for a couple of reasons. First, questions of ideology and ethics have become more important than questions of effectiveness. Certainly, it might be argued that the speech produced certain desired results, but is that really more important than how it potentially utilized unethical means to do so? As Rosenthal (1985) argues, "In making a rhetorical evaluation, the critic should not be limited by the classical perspective, with its emphasis upon ascertaining the effect of the rhetoric" (p. 135).

The second reason actually works to negate the first because it questions if rhetorical methods are even capable of measuring effectiveness or intent. How can critics know what someone truly intended and if the perceived effects were a result of the criticism? These kinds of questions are not relevant to contemporary modes of criticism, but instead are rather classical, instrumental models that construct rhetoric as strategic rhetoric. Modern-day rhetorical scholars have left such work on effects to survey or experimental research. As a result, when students ask these types of yes/no or cause-effect research questions starting with "does" and uses terms like "success" within the speech, the criticism is read as scientific, as the preferred method for answering such a question. This type of research question sets a tone for scientific inquiry in the speech.

Advancing through the body of the orations, the next place contest rhetorical criticism becomes metaphorically constructed as social science is within what has commonly been called the "method" section of the speech. There are multiple issues/metaphors here. First, the label "method" is itself a metaphor of social science. To use the term suggests that the process of criticism is methodical, or that it should be performed step-by-step and without deviation. Both Paine (2009) and Ott (1998) agree that we misuse "method" in rhetorical criticism, but the issue here is with the implementation of the term at all. The term "method" misdirects because it calls us to

imagine the speech as a distinctly scientific project, where the preceding section was "literature review" and the proceeding one is called "results." A "discussion" will be surely to follow. A method section feels like an absent orphan, missing its scientific brothers and sisters as it attempts to cohabitate with unlikely friends like "critical implications."

The method metaphor goes beyond its label, however, and also extends into its function and development within the speech. Students commonly break down their method into three digestible parts called "criteria" or "tenets." According to the student, the author of their article argues that these tenets must be fulfilled by the artifact in order for it to possess whatever rhetorical quality is at play. For instance, Suhr, the fifth-place speaker, explains that "one can escape symbolic entrapment yet maintain their social identity by using three vocabularies of motive: normative, transforming, and neutralizing motives." If the agent utilizes these three strategies, then, Suhr argues, they will avoid symbolic entrapment. This process is reminiscent of genre-based criticism, where artifacts are measured by prescriptive generic elements to determine if something is, for example, a good or bad comedy, apology, or Stanley Kubrick film. Artifacts are not allowed to expand or grow the genre as potentially members of it but instead are only measured against existing categories as successes or failures.

This approach raises a few important concerns and manifests in a variety of ways. First, it puts the theoretical framework in charge of the analysis, not the speaker. Instead of the critic making insights about an artifact using a toolbox of theory, the speaker argues that this theoretical framework will generate, or worse prove, particular insights. Ott (1998) argues that this approach is often preferred because contest rhetorical criticism "is still caught in the 1960s model of methodological pluralism. Although student criticisms are characterized by a wide variety of theories, the overall approach to [rhetorical criticism] continues to entail a narrow and reductionist conception of method and to be animated by method" (p. 65). When the speakers put the onus of responsibility on the theory to drive the analysis, they rely on scientific logics to make sense of such an approach. Paine (2009) asserts:

> The writer-critic must be free, based on their analysis of the rhetorical text at hand, to make choices about which specific rhetorical constructs will and will not be essential in order to unlock certain aspects of the text (not all aspects) from this particular critical angle, with no presumption being made that this is the "only" viable angle, or even necessarily the "best" angle. In fact, the words "only" and "best" are invalid and intellectually stunting descriptors of the task being attempted (p. 99).

Terms like "criteria" and "tenets" are germane to genre-driven or broader social scientific perspectives where something must be tested against these criteria to meet particular results. If they pass the test, they fit. All the critic need do is "run the data" and see what is produced as a result.

Second, it is not just that students use these scientific terms to label their theoretical dynamics, but the way they assert those dynamics that also duplicates the scientific absolutism of their supposed methodological approach. This happens in two ways. First, it occurs throughout the speech in what is often called on ballots the "must language" of contest rhetorical criticism. Speakers will often claim that in order for their artifact to be [this rhetorical quality], it "must meet the following three tenets." While no

student in the round used this phrasing exactly, the "must language" emerges in other forms as part and parcel of the same metaphor. For example, Marsh claims on behalf of her primary scholar Bost that "a memorial *ought* to commemorate individuals in a manner that uses the original killing grounds" and "*ought* to offer commentary on the events it commemorates." Both examples invoke criterion-based criticism and instrumental models of intent because particular criteria are offered that a text should or must meet. Also, in her implication section, Miller, the first-place speaker, feels she must revisit the notion of experience as a point of contention because "the first tenet of the model *demands* that you live the experience."

However, it is not just that the theoretical perspective alone requires such things of us as the audience. This language extends into other parts of the speech as well. For example, Cochran, the fourth-place speaker, argues, "Since one group has come to dominate Christian dialogue in our country, we *must* ask ourselves: How does Tea Party Jesus begin the renegotiation of the conservative Christian cultural identity?" Also, Seboldt, the second-place speaker, claims:

> The Saudi fatwa is different than most culture jams, considering that this traditionally Western technique is operating in the Middle East and has been far more successful than its Western counterparts. Therefore, we *must* ask the research question: How does the rhetorical use of culture jamming change within the unique authoritarian environment of Saudi Arabia?

Furthermore, Suhr argues in her implications, "The rhetoric surrounding the Ark Encounter *forces* future scholars to consider how many people need to be impacted before symbolic entrapment can be escaped at the community level?" Also, she claims before her conclusion, "This reaction *forces* us to consider how we address symbols that entrap." By empowering the theory to direct the analysis and using language that reasserts this power, the students are then driven to let this logic trickle into other parts of the speech.

The final way that the "method" section asserts dominance over the criticism is how its structure creeps in the analysis, or what conventions encourage students to call the "application" section of the speech. All six speakers used the term "apply" in their preview when discussing what they were going to do with their method in relation to the text. As used in this way, the term "application" no doubt remains consistent with the metaphor of "method." To analyze the artifact using theory would imply something different at play than an application of that theory. To critique a text might invite original, emergent insights from using theory to help dissect its parts, to help the critic to see what he or she will see. An application on the other hand merely asks, or perhaps demands, that students must lay the method over its components and list what they see, much like tracing pencil sketches on an illustrator's light table. With the light shining from underneath the table, the illustrator need only to lay a fresh piece of paper on top of the sketch and trace over the lines in ink. Like the illustrator, the students bring nothing new "because [they] merely apply the tenets of the methodology to the artifact in a 'cookie-cutter' fashion that limits originality and thought" (Willoughby, 2010, p. 18).

In order to feed the method/application metaphor, students employ the language of "fulfillment" to the analysis. If the text meets certain qualities as previously outlined by the theory, then the text will "fulfill the tenet." For instance, both Seboldt and Marsh reiterate, "Thus fulfilling the first tenet" and "Thus, it fulfills the first tenet" respectively.

Additionally, because students are essentially enslaved to their theoretical perspectives, they will sterilize their artifacts to remain true to point one, where the "method" is constructed. So the artifacts function as evidence to the method and are also subject to abuse for the sake of clean parallelism. Furthermore, by having the aligned parallelism, students do not have to usually question the genre or its supposed tenets.

Yielding to the theory for critical judgment is scientific and strange in context on its own merit, but when criteria are not met the situation grows peculiar. For instance, Cochran argues that his text does not meet his final tenet. Marsh even claims that her text "fulfills the core of all of Bost's tenets, but what it fails to fulfill is the spirit of this model…Bost's model should be refined to include a greater focus on the memorialization of victims, the creation of dialogue, and education over entertainment." A common response from a judging paradigm would be to question why one would choose a method that does not fit. A critical rhetorician might question how texts can fulfill or not fulfill theory. Instead, an alternate function for this kind of response can be offered.

This is a moment where the cracks and fissures in the ideology of the scientific metaphor become apparent, but the student fails to recognize their opportunity to operate outside of it. The faulty logic of science in rhetorical criticism doubles back on itself to create a fallacious loop. Consider it, in light of the popular and poignant 1999 film, a "blip in the Matrix." In the case of Marsh, her statement may be interpreted to loosely mean, "Even though my memorial fulfilled all the generic tenets of what a memorial ought to have according to my method, it is not an ethical memorial and is laden with harmful ideology. As a result, we need to change this theory to account for that." So when the artifact offers deeper insight than her limiting theory allows, she says the theory needs changing. What she has failed to realize is that she has just become a critic doing criticism. She looks at the text, and using theoretical tools, makes interesting arguments about its rhetorical function. Marsh is so blinded by the scientific metaphor, however, that she questions the validity of her method, not the potency of her text. Murphy (1988) notes, "The difficulties that distress many educators can be understood and alleviated if students, coaches, and judges make the text of the artifact, not the methodology, the focus of the critical process" (p. 1).

This breakdown is an intersection for many issues with the social scientific metaphor of contest rhetorical criticism. In this statement, which she attempts to describe within the scientific metaphor, Marsh calls attention to how her theory-driven analysis positions her text as successful because it met all the criteria of the theory, but was still not worth celebrating because it was harmfully ideological. Unintentionally she critiques her own genre, effects-driven approach more than she does her artifact. This alternative explanation can be offered because Marsh's statement that a text does not "fulfill a tenet" or "fit the spirit" of the theory does not really make sense within the metaphor of social science *or* social criticism. As a result, it becomes a perfect critical moment to recognize the disruption in the social science metaphor and its questionable fit in contest rhetorical criticism.

A Critical Choice

Research questions, methods, "must language," and applications are all metaphors that—at best—function together to describe instrumental, neo-Aristotelian, genre-driven,

effects-based methods of rhetorical criticism. At worst, they outright construct contest rhetorical criticism as a social science. When students repeat this language over and over in competition and coaches and judges reward students for this description, the community learns that the structural limitations of the event, which scholars work very hard to combat, make perfect sense. Changing the way of doing rhetorical criticism in forensic competition to a more textual-centered process will never seem like a viable option if the way everyone talks about the event invites social scientific logic and rationality. A perspective that embraces bias, the very ontology of textual-centered criticism, will never be embraced if the language used perpetually tells us that bias is wrong. Seeing the gray in the lived world has little room in criticism if all speak in the scientific world of black and white. And, as made clear in looking at the 2011 final round of rhetorical criticism at the NFA national tournament, students will continue to demonstrate these self-created woes in contest rhetorical criticism if the metaphors invite them to do so.

Thus, an alternative vocabulary is offered as a starting point to shift the talk about contest rhetorical criticism and how students might speak differently within the content of their speeches. This new vocabulary may invite a more critical, textual-focused analysis in the event where students are empowered to make their own informed observations about significant communicative artifacts. A very obvious, but seemingly overlooked, place to begin is with the event's purpose as described in the NFA by-laws (2013). The purpose reads that a rhetorical criticism is "a speech designed to describe, analyze and evaluate the rhetorical dynamics related to a significant rhetorical artifact or event." This part of the description provides terminology that students can work with to replace the existing scientific metaphors. Namely, the word "dynamics" offers an alternative metaphor than the words "tenet" or "criteria." Whereas the latter suggest rigid categories for a student to check off when evaluating a text and puts the theory in control of the criticism, the term "dynamics" calls students to imagine a textual uniqueness that justifies or at least invites a critical examination. It moves away from the generic sorts of criticism where students merely locate if something "fit" the criteria for its own formalized sake. Dynamics are inherently complex, and they provide space for a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations to be made between critics and audiences, which invite more original, critical insight. In short, dynamics embody the spirit of cultural criticism.

Two other advantages of using dynamics as a metaphor for contest rhetorical criticism immediately emerge when considering its use in both competition and education. First, dynamics suggest that these are elements of the artifact that the student has *chosen* to see, even if it was theory that gave the student a lens to identify and refine its peculiar quality. The important part here is that the student noticed the dynamic(s) and then employed theory to accent and shape his or her critical observations without losing what made the artifact interesting to begin with. Also, a cluster of dynamics appears subject to change. Dynamics seem contextually bound, reimagining with the adjacent discourses that help constitute its meaning. Such a perspective can actually offer more social relevance for the student. When a social context of some cultural or political significance is the chosen backdrop for the text at hand, and the text is framed by that context through these rhetorical qualities, then it seems that this relationship of text/context enhances those same dynamics. Playing hand-in-hand with the first characteristic, changing contexts give the student more opportunity to see the dynamics

that speak to them specifically as a critic.

Pragmatically, when a student is able to "analyze and evaluate the rhetorical dynamics" of a text, they no longer simply "apply tenets" to an artifact. Instead, students can explore those dynamics *within* the artifact. This leads to a second alternative metaphor, "analysis" over "application." If students are encouraged to not merely "apply the tenets" of the framework to their artifact, but instead to "analyze rhetorical dynamics" within it, then they may be encouraged to extrapolate new insights regarding their text. Rosenthal (1985) echoes these thoughts when he argues, "The analysis should do more than merely 'pigeon-hole' elements of the persuasive process, since good criticism involves both analysis and synthesis" (p. 137). And coaches should invite students to analyze and synthesize in their criticisms, escaping the entrapment of scientific absolutism, because criticism "is not a science, rather, it is an art" (p. 133).

In moving to the term "analysis" to describe point two of the speech, students also begin to take power away from the theoretical framework of the speech. Instead, the student fully takes on the role of the critic, making individual choices and critical insights about the text. Another alternative metaphor would assist with this shift. Rather than calling point one of the speech the "method" section of the speech, it might be more helpful to just call this section "theory" or "theoretical perspective." Where the term "method" implies a prescribed process, the metaphor "theory" simply suggests a collection of loosely organized concepts to be rearranged and used as needed. The term "perspective" places the focus on the viewpoint of the author. "Theories" and "perspectives" invite building, but "methods" do not. Furthermore, theories are open and subject to change because it is in their very nature. This is why they are called "theories" and not "laws." By changing the first point of the speech to invite more of a theoretical *perspective*, the student might be encouraged to feel more empowered as a critic, taking agency away from the theory. As a result, students may also feel more confident in discarding the practice of using a published rhetorical criticism as a model for criticism. Instead, they might be more likely to employ general perspectives like feminism or colonialism that offer open interpretation.

A subtler change that students can make toward embodying the critic is to replace "must" language with "can" language. As I write on many ballots, "Rhetoric never must. It only can." Students should offer room for the multiplicity of rhetoric, and the word "can" facilitates this move because it accepts the polysemic nature of criticism. It allows room for audiences to work with the rhetoric more constitutively. When a student says that rhetoric "must" do this or "forces" us to do that, it once again takes power away from the critic to embody their own perspective, which is the spirit of social criticism. Identifying dynamics at play in a text, students make arguments about what rhetoric *can* do, not what it *must* do. Rather than focusing on the scientific notion of proof, students shift their focus to understanding the artifact's rhetorical potential. As the critic, the student argues that this text can make meaning in particular ways and that this meaning is rhetorically interesting for various reasons. This once again shifts the onus of the analysis away from the theory and on to the speaker.

It may be prudent to offer an alternative to the hotly debated research question that has crept its way into contest rhetorical criticism. If the idea that *expecting* a research question sets the tone for social scientific inquiry, then one should consider what might set a stronger tone for critical interrogation. Instead of students asking already answered

questions in the introduction and baiting the audience through their contrived analyses, why not just present the insights from the beginning? With this approach, students take the focus away from the theory to generate the insights, which firmly places it into their own hands. After providing social significance, the student can admit to the audience what they find rhetorically interesting about the text and how they intend to make arguments about its rhetorical functionality. Naturally, the student will use theory to support this perspective, but the theory becomes secondary to the arguments.

Some may argue that this is what students are essentially doing already with the question, that this suggestion of an argument splits hairs over form. This may be the case. As a judge, one can answer most research questions in contest rhetorical criticism before points one and two are heard. After all, the issue is not with students focusing the analysis around rhetorical concepts. Instead, the presence of the question in its current form sets the tone for scientific, rather than rhetorical, inquiry. The research question when practiced this way allows the rest of the scientific metaphors in the speech to make sense. If the student presents a yes/no or cause/effect research question, then it only seems logical that he or she has a methodical approach to answering it. This method will tell the student what to see in the artifact because all he or she needs to do is apply the method to the text. Metaphors collectively sustain ideology because they work together to maintain the same features of an idea while also joining their forces to obscure others. As metaphors reflect particular logics between one another, it gets more difficult to see outside of them because preferred frames become reinforced and naturalized.

This essay attempts to disrupt these frames and expose the scientific language at play in contest rhetorical criticism so that our students may be taught to find alternative ways of talking about it. As Paine (2009) so astutely argues, "The philosophy we accept dictates the forensics world we build" (p. 94). Perhaps instead of "social science" as the preferred metaphor for contest criticism, the field might find a concept more productive in social knowledge that students and coaches already widely accept in competition: *interpretation*. Admittedly, to do rhetorical criticism is not to compete in prose or poetry, but to understand contest criticism as "interpretation" gives students the creative license to determine original insight and invites them to interact with the artifact in a way that embraces subjectivity and co-creation with the text. A metaphor of "interpretation" would embrace "rhetorical dynamics," "perspective" and "argument." It would ask the judges to reward students who internalized the text to make arguments authentic. "Interpretation" would acknowledge, as Ivie (1995) has argued, that rhetorical criticism itself is a *performance*. While "interpretation" may not completely solve the social science dilemma in contest rhetorical criticism, it at least offers another way to talk and think about it.

To summarize the reimagined metaphor:
1. Use "dynamics" instead of "tenets" or "criteria."
2. "Analyze" dynamics rather than "applying" tenets.
3. Refer to point one as "theoretical perspective" not "method."
4. Employ "can" statements in lieu of "must" statements to talk about rhetoric and criticism.
5. Use an argument to guide the analysis as opposed to a question. At the very least, open a space through coaching and judging practices where questions are not implicitly required.

The goal is for students to learn how to find their own voice in rhetorical criticism because that is precisely what makes the event so special. It should not be a practice of creating the most systematic, reifying analysis of a flashy artifact or "cutting the most precise cookies." Contest rhetorical criticism should be a place where students feel empowered to say really smart things about communicative artifacts that are perhaps not so apparent to others. Students should make their best efforts to offer narrow, subversive meanings of discourse because that is just another way they become conduits of social change through forensics. It is hoped that this alternative vocabulary may serve as the next step in reconceptualizing contest rhetorical criticism as a place where students realize they can find their own scholarly voice with no competitive or educational cost.

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