LONGING AND BELONGING: THE WEST AS TERRITORY OF NATIONNESS IN ALBANIAN COSMOLOGIES

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On Tuesday, Fools' Day 1997, *The New York Times* reported that Italy was seeking the eighty-three people missing from the Albanian refugee boat that sunk just before reaching the Italian shore, after colliding with a craft of the Italian coast patrol. This news hit the international press not so much because of the number of those who died, but because of the political saturation of the incident. Indeed, the *New York Times*' headline blazons Italy's benevolent engagement, the search for the missing. That those missing were trying to escape Albania is not given much explicit importance. The boat was deliberately hit by the Italian navy, maintained the Albanian government, doomed to fall within the next few weeks as it was. It accused Italy of massacring, in effect, the unfortunates on board, a pregnant woman among them, who were fleeing the social implosion in Albania, that had by that time become a full-fledged armed conflict. Italy meant to presage, the accusation went on, that an exodus like that of 1991 would not be allowed to happen again. This massacre was intended as symbolic cautioning, the most brutal way of telling the Albanians to stay home: you might think you are caught up in ill-fate, but let us show you how ill your fate can get. The veracities – or fallacies – on which such accusations were based fall beyond the scope of this paper. I discuss instead the larger contexts under which such accusations could be made. What was there to justify thinking that nothing short of mass murder was needed to forewarn Albanians to stay in Albania? Is Albania no longer the place where Albanians naturally want to stay, where they naturally belong?

Ironically, even the omen of the alleged massacre itself proved not ominous enough. By 1997, when this vessel of would-be refugees (was) sunk, Albanians had come to know only too well how ill ill-fate could become. The bloodcurdling series of adversities that one could trigger by attempting to exit the territory of belonging were by then accepted as just another fact of life – tragic indeed, but oftentimes inescapable. News of individual cases of death in Albania's borders had become so unexceptional that they rarely reached the headlines of even the Albanian papers. To the Albanians of the late 1990s, death was perhaps as much an expectable outcome of the effort to land in Italy or Greece, as it must have been in the 1910s, 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, the outcome of heroically defending Albania from becoming Italy or Greece. But while Albanian schoolbooks (Pajo 2000), as well as innumerable other products of official nationalism, justify death in defense of the territory of nationness as the apogee of heroism, how do Albanians in the 1990s justify to themselves death for the cause of leaving Albania? "Dying for one's country, which usually one does not choose, assumes a moral grandeur which dying for the Labour Party, the American Medical Association, or perhaps even Amnesty International can not rival," writes Benedict Anderson in his seminal study of nationalism (1991:144). Hence, the ultimate self-sacrifice to defend the territory of the Albanian nationness during the world wars of the last century can be understood in terms of what Anderson calls 'moral grandeur'. But how can we explain the ultimate self-sacrifice for exiting Albania fifty years later? Does not exiting the territory where one ought to belong provide even less moral justification for death, than the advancement of the causes of Amnesty International?

Territory of Nationness as Socially Constructed Space

The last decade has shown that astonishing numbers of Albanians have risked their lives to exit their territory of belonging. The very collapse of what was known as the dictatorship of the proletariat in Albania was initiated, and perhaps remains best symbolized, in the explosion of the massive exodus to the West in 1991. Thousands of Albanians, in 1991 still the most isolated people of eastern Europe's harshest regime, burst into the country's central harbor of Durrës, hijacked all crafts that seemed seaworthy, and pushed off for Italy. Even more crossed the mountainous Greek border on foot. In the decade that followed, despite the fact that Albania transformed – technically at least – into a politically democratic free-market economy, approximately 20% of its population permanently emigrated to the West – the highest

emigration rate in post-Cold War eastern Europe. In addition, as many as 80% of those who remain in the country are thought to want to emigrate if they had the opportunity to do so (AHDR 1998; Misja 1998; Dervishi 1999; Barjaba 1999). Such wide popularity of the desire to leave Albania calls for a conceptualization of the Albanian emigration to the West as a national phenomenon. This paper suggests that Albania's continuous emigration should be theorized as profoundly national not only in terms of its massiveness, but most importantly in terms of its nature.

"Migration has always had the potential to challenge established spatial images," generalizes Roger Rouse from the context of the Mexican migration to the United States (1991:11). Migration "highlights the social nature of space as something created and reproduced through collective human agency and, in so doing, reminds us that, within the limits imposed by power, existing spatial arrangements are always susceptible to change" (ibid.). The fact that virtually every Albanian is a potential emigrant calls for an inquiry into the processes through which the territory of nationness is 'created' and 'reproduced.' The extension of such an inquiry to the very conception of nationness, and the legitimacy of the nation-state in contemporary Albania, problematize, at a broader level, the analytical tools and the theoretical frameworks we have available for understanding the current conditions of globalization. How is the meaning of the nation transformed, and what about the legitimacy of the sovereign nation-state, when practically every Albanian desires to leave Albania for the West? Why is the politically democratic market economy of Albania not, for the average Albanian, the same kind of West as Greece or Italy, both as they are first imagined and then experienced to be?

The paradoxical and perhaps uniquely massive emigration from Albania may be understood by looking into the social-constructedness of our 'established spatial images.' In other words, given that our most widely accepted spatial images are socially constructed, the questions posed above should be rephrased. It is these spatial images that provide legitimacy for the primacy of the sovereignty of the nation-states over individual rights in international law. It is our well-established spatial images that have Albanians belonging to the territory of the Albanian nation-state, and

have, accordingly, peoples of all nationalities to be imagined to belong to the territories of 'their' respective nation-states. When the latter do not exist, they are brought into existence through the establishment in actual territory of popular spatial envisioning. History, including what goes under the heading of history 'of' Albania, is only replete with the cruelty of conflicts over such territorial arrangements.

But how are these longed for territories of nationness and belonging *socially constructed*? In the case of the Albanian migrations, how is the longed-for territory constructed as distinct from the territory of belonging? Anderson's study of nationalism provides the key insights that inform the present inquiry into such questions. "Nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love," Anderson writes (1991:141); "the nature of this political love can be deciphered from the ways in which languages describe its object: either in the vocabulary of kinship [...] or that of home. Both idioms denote something to which one is naturally tied [...] in everything 'natural' there is always something unchosen" (ibid.:143). Should then the Albanian emigration to the West, complete as it comes with the willingness for even the most ultimate of sacrifices, be conceptualized as nationalism whose object of love, instead of the land of Albania, is the territory of the West?

As much as this view can be developed within the limits of the present paper, I stress that the conceptualization of the Albanian emigration, and the longing for the West as national belonging to a territory that is not Albania, preserves the essence of an understanding of humanity as comprised of numerous communities, be those imagined, that belong, or are imagined as belonging, in certain bounded territories. Such a view does problematize, however, the constitution of the territory of belonging as 'unchosen.' In Anderson's sense, to be experienced as 'natural,' belonging in a given territory has to be experienced as 'unchosen.' Extensive apparatuses of ideological enforcement and comparably brutal physical enforcements that range from Albanian schoolbooks to the warships of the Italian coast patrol have impressed upon them – and upon everyone else – that Albanians belong in the territory of Albania. Accordingly, as far as language is concerned, Albania, and not the West, is referred to in terms of 'fatherland', 'motherland', and 'home' in

Albanian discourses. The decision to emigrate to the West may appear thus as action against the 'natural', 'normal', and 'unchosen' belonging. As a community, Albanians cannot even imagine themselves to belong in the West, since belonging as such is conflicted by the willful choice – or what may appear to be the willful choice – of emigration.

An inquiry into the processes through which the territory of nationness is socially constructed should not be limited to just the referential functions of language at large, however. Applying the concept of the anthropological field to the domain of language, Harding (2000) has illuminated how language produces realities of religious belief and of worldly action – and how such realities are researchable. Furthering Thrift's (1996) concept of "structures of feeling," Leonard (2001) has recently suggested that boundaries actually occur, historically as well as in the present – and 'regions' should therefore be defined – on the basis of used language. Such work points to the direction of expanding the focus on language to include not simply what language refers to, but the complex and interrelated sets of views of the world and feelings about them that are both given rise through, and expressed in language – as well as in social actions. Hence, the concept of 'cosmology' (Tambiah 1985; cf. Malkki 1995), instead of simply language, is employed here. Anderson's focus on linguistic reference is not interpreted as methodological in a strict sense, but as illustrative, and perhaps as hinting to the researchability of the issue. That focus on language is preserved, but widened to encompass implicit understandings of and feelings about the world that ultimately give rise to peoples' sense of belonging. Instead of looking only at how language refers to territories, we can question whether the sense of belonging that appears to inspire sacrifices of grandeur, has any deeper cosmological roots – out of which springs the unchosen and longed for territory of proper belonging. Cosmologically constructed, such space may well be perceived as 'natural' and 'unchosen,' although not necessarily talked about in terms of kinship or home. It may find expression in cosmological longings for universal righteousness that can, just as well as kinship or home, provide the motivation for those self-sacrifices that for many run to ultimate self-denial.

This is the alternative view of the roots of the Albanian devotion to the West and of the drive for self-sacrifice that I discuss below. I briefly outline how a few selected notions, such as 'the West,' 'the East,' 'righteousness,' and 'opportunity' are conceptualized and reveal themselves through *how* people say what they say. I conclude by briefly discussing the possible centrality in the context of Albanian emigration of a cosmological 'desire for representation,' and by pointing to possible orientations of future research.

Imagining 'the West' in Albania

In the most common facets, understandings of international migration as rational decision are based on after-the-fact comparisons of income, or 'advantage' conceptualized more broadly. Overlooking for a moment the various and important differences among the numerous theories of international migration (see Massey *et al.* 1993, 1994), it can be said that many of them share some general common assumptions about the land of immigration that, in the present context would make it 'chosen' territory and not one of 'natural' belonging. The choice of a specific country for immigration occurs due to unhappiness with the present in the territory where people find themselves, and where they are usually thought to belong, and/or in combination with the working of family/kinship ties as well as other so-called 'micro' factors. It would thus be that most typically, those Albanians who are unhappy with the present condition in Albania compare Albania with x country, say Italy, and start thinking about emigrating there. It would be possible under such a framework, albeit perhaps not very probable, that eventually all the citizenry of a country, say all Albanians, begin to intensely desire to emigrate, say to Italy, and seek ways to fulfill their desire.

If migration occurred on the basis of such choice and comparison of 'advantage', however, Albanians should have found out by now that many Eastern European countries, or Turkey, to which historical ties ought to be in place, may indeed provide such 'comparative advantage' over their present situation. They should therefore have already migrated to these countries where they can go without visas, or for which visas are liberally issued. But in Albanian cosmologies, 'abroad' in relation to emigration is not just about any place abroad – it is only what is considered to be 'the West'. I asked my interviewees why do people not go to 'the East'

as well. In the Albanian definition, 'the East' is Eastern Europe, generally including Russia as the quintessence of 'the East', but specified as *not* Europe. 'The East' does not include the Middle East, or the Far East, or anything further East – the concept appears thus to have developed not so much on geographical considerations as on political ones from the framework of the Cold War.

> I: *Why do people not migrate to East European countries? It would be easier. Say, Macedonia, for instance. One is issued a visa at the border.*
>
> Harta K.: Perhaps because the West is more developed than the East. The West offers more possibilities, [one] is better paid, in the West.
>
> I: Why is [one] less paid in the East?
>
> Harta K.: I have not seen [it] myself, how they are paid, how [things] are done. But from what I have heard... [Pause.] In the West, they appreciate work in the West...
>
> I: *You said people migrate because abroad they get paid better [than in Albania]. Why is it so? Why is it not better paid here?*
>
> Harta K.: We are lazy. Where we go, we do ordinary work, but we consider it as kneeling to do the same kind of work here. What others say kills us. We do not know how to put things to good use. Even what we have, what nature has given us, we do not exploit for our own selves. Our qualities are exploited by others. We could reap the benefits. Why should others take them?
>
> *Harta K., 20 years old, female, born in Vlorë, living in Tirana. Transcripts of January 1999.*

This interview excerpt attests to the popular imaginations of 'the West' as the virtual antithesis of Albania - and of 'the East' more generally – in the economic sense. 'The West' offers better pay and it is more developed. In such a commonsense explanation often used by people to account for emigration, the latter occurs because Albania 'is' poor. The West 'is' an advantageous and therefore chosen territory, not one of 'natural' belonging. Such an explanation suffers from the incompatibility of several categories collapsed together, and from a conspicuous lack of dynamism. Territories 'are'

in certain social traits, or rather certain social traits 'are' territories. 'The West' is represented as *one* homogenous space. After all, that Albania 'is' a poor country provides but an unconvincing answer to the question of its national emigration. If a general agreement were to be reached on the commensurability of such notions as 'nation', 'wealth' and 'poverty', however, a similarly general agreement could also be reached that Albania was relatively poor in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s too – and that perhaps it has always been. But people did not want to emigrate to Italy back then – they even resisted Albania becoming a part of Italy in 1939. Fischer (1999) has discussed in detail how, despite all economic realities, the culmination of the administrative takeover of Albania by Italy with the military intervention and the legislative unification in 1939 was generally experienced as 'foreign invasion', and it was resisted as such. Indeed, the situation is by no means unique to the case of Albania. Numerous studies of international migration recognize that "the pull from advanced economies is based not primarily on invidious comparisons of advantage with the outside world" and that "immigrants leave their countries not merely to increase their earning by x amount" (Portes and Bach 1985:7).

In the conceptualization suggested in this paper, the territorial 'object' of the 'nation-inspired love', to use Anderson's wording, instead of Albania is a nationally imagined West. Albanians massively flee Albania not because of comparisons of advantage, and not because they are detached from it, but because they are *attached* (cf. Appadurai 1998) to 'the West', a cosmological construction of theirs. It is true that they justify their 'choice' in terms of comparisons, but such comparisons remain comparisons with *imagined* realities. An even more profoundly peculiar feature of the Albanian collective imagination of community is thus that the territory of belonging, 'the West' itself, is an imagined territory, and more generally an imagined reality – only initially for those who manage to migrate, but continuously for the others:

> Imagine, a prostitute in Italy makes 30 million [Italian lira, the equivalent of $ 15,000] a month. At least from the TV program I saw...
>
> *Genci S., 22 years old, male, born and living in Tirana. Transcripts of January 1999.*

Not all expressions are so ostentatious and remote from the realities they supposedly represent, however. Genci S. constructs 'the West' also in more calculated, albeit still highly poetic, terms of opportunity for personal development:

Had he not been exposed to numbers, even Einstein would be no more than just a good shepherd. A good shepherd at the most, you see? But he was exposed to numbers. That allowed to thrive that part of his which was worthy. [Albanians] have not had the opportunity to thrive... Willing or not, they become good shepherds, you know...

Ibid.

With the exception of the members of the diplomatic corps and those rare official delegations, certain exceptionally trusted people of the secret service, and no more than a handful of government-sponsored students, artists, or athletes – who, by and large, also happened to be kin to each other – virtually no other Albanians had been outside of Albania before the year 1991. Until 1991, therefore, the vast majority of Albania's populace was entirely isolated from any direct contact with the world outside, or with those few Albanians who had traveled there. Only imaginations of their brief and coveted jaunts abroad – or the illegally received images of the Italian or Yugoslav television – fed the Albanian social imaginary about the distinct place of Albania in what Malkki (1994) has called the 'family of nations' – a family of nations that from the official Albanian perspectives at the time was by no means a nice and happy one. Most of the Albanians who have managed to get abroad since 1991 have meanwhile also settled there. To this day then, the vast majority of those who remain within the borders of the Albanian nation-state have never set foot outside. For them 'the West' continues to be an unexplored territory, an imagined, unexperienced reality. No real comparison would thus be possible, and no real 'choice' of the destination for emigration.

A significant undertone in the excerpts of Harta K.'s interview above is her continuous reference to 'we', 'our' and 'us'. The substantial fraction of Albania's population that has already settled in the West, and the many more who are willing to emigrate, tempt one to think of Albania's imagined community as bounded indeed, but also imagined to comprise some members who have already made it to the West, and many more who wish they were there. All of them, in a general sense, may consider themselves as 'us'. Closer looks, however, problematize the grounds for such oneness. On the other side of the border, differences between Italy and Greece have determined that the Albanian emigration consists in fact of two clearly distinguishable Albanian immigrations. Albanian immigrants are thought to constitute up to 15% of Greece's labor force and over 78% of them are thought to be undocumented (cf. King *et al.* 1998), practically treated as 'illegal' (see Chavez 1998). By contrast, the total number of Albanian immigrants in the whole of Italy is smaller than that in the Greek capital city. Their weight in Italy's labor force is even less significant; most are documented and have settled all over the country. Concerns about the illegal traffic of people, drugs, and arms from Albania, via Italy, to the rest of the European Union, have made the Albanian migration to Italy more visible than that to Greece. In addition, the rampantly increasing control of the 'Albanian mafia' over the international traffic of prostitutes in Europe has also exerted a profound impact on both Italian domestic politics, and in Italy's role internationally (Jamieson and Silj 1998; cf. Perlmutter 1998). While they may remain in the explicit terms of an all-inclusive 'us,' for those Albanians who are in the West, 'the West' must no longer be a general concept, but it must have transformed into a particular place. 'The West' must have become for them Italy or Greece, Rome or Athens, or the small town where one happens to actually live. The fact that immigrants, as well as Harta K. who speaks of 'us' despite all the differences, generally conceptualize their emigration in terms of 'the West', presents a hint that even after emigration has occurred, and after the West has been experienced as a particular locale, 'the West' may still remain fundamentally a construction of the Albanian social imagination, not a reality that is actually experienced.

At the level of direct reference though, 'the West' is not always explicitly *one* homogenous territory – not even for those Albanians who have never been abroad. Anila Q. explained to me her desire for emigration in the following words:

Australia, I like Australia. I would actually like to go [to Australia], even if it was only to see it. I like it as a capital [sic]. It is the most beautiful country of the world, I do not know, it is said so, I have not seen it myself. From the countries of Europe, France is held to be the best country, starting with fashion, up to the other things. So these [would be the countries] I would prefer [to go to], no other countries.

Anila Q., 22 years old, female, born in Kukës, living in Tirana. Transcripts of January 1999.

This response may not be typical in selecting Australia and France as the most desired destinations, but it is typical in that Anila Q. had never set foot outside of Albania when I met her. Her desire to emigrate is formulated in explicitly aesthetic terms, with a wish to see the 'most beautiful country of the world' and then the capital of European fashion. The blurred differences between the categories of 'capital' and 'country' suggest, however, that the West is imagined as 'the West' – one territory even when specific imagined countries are named. Perhaps this is not self-conscious imagination, but a blurry cosmological construction of territory, which may never be pressed to further specifications due to implicit awareness of the dearth of real chances for getting there. Peoples' aesthetic desires are, however, closely related to Albania's social, economic, and political realities, by now all swirled in myriad transformations. This is briefly discussed in the final part of this paper.

Aesthetics, Exigencies and the Desire for Representation

A crucial dynamics of the Albanian emigration may be informed by Spivak's (1988) seminal start towards a theorization of desire. Is the Albanian migration an act of representation, Albanian 'speak'? Implicit in the statement above is Anila Q.'s view, shared by most of my interviewees, and ultimately by most Albanians, that the country they live in is *not* the most beautiful country in the world, nor is Tirana the capital of European fashion. At first sight this may resemble again a 'chosen' territory situation. The statement gains meaning, however, only as Anila Q.'s response implies a sense of a crushed expectation, indeed, the experience of injustice. The desire to see the

most beautiful country of the world is but an appearance that the response to the violation of righteousness has taken: instead of living in Australia or in France, Anila Q. lives – has to live, that is – in Albania. Faced with Albania's reality, her puzzled cosmological belonging to a world of righteousness becomes a longing to actually belong to a territory she has never before experienced. Realizing that as an Albanian she is thought to belong to Albania contradicts her cosmological sense of belonging to a space of righteousness that has to be 'the West'. What is significant here is that Anila Q. implicitly assumes she *ought* to live in the most beautiful capital of European fashion. These desired qualifications of the space she assumes she deserves are then applied to the Australia and France of her imagination.

While stating her desire to emigrate in aesthetic, rather than socio-economic terms and necessarily in terms of imagination rather than of experience (to some extent perhaps even dimly aware of it, as when she has the urge to remark that she has never been to either Australia or France), Anila Q. gives expression to her own experience, and not imagination, of the exigencies of Albania and its social, economic, and aesthetic realities. Her cosmological belonging, and her longing to actually belong in 'the West', may be interpreted as only the flip-side of the coin of, cosmologically, and therefore practically, finding it impossible to belong in Albania – despite all of the schoolbooks and all the threats of the Italian coast patrol. But this is not a choice in the sense of the outcome of a rational comparison of situations of economic advantage in different countries. Anila Q., as most Albanians, has not experienced these other realities.

Comparable experiences of the violation of cosmological expectations are revealed in other interviews as well:

For the Albanians, Albania is a Titanic that is sinking, and I am telling you that people in Albania have been thinking of this constantly. Why? Because they see that there are no alternatives. There are no alternatives, there is no light at the end of the tunnel. No polar star in the sky. No star for one to say: "this star will lead me."

Genci S., ibid.

The absence of even a faraway star or a light for when the anthropomorphized Albania metaphorically reaches the end of the tunnel, brings up the important issue of the actual individual and social needs that superposition of world orders upon realities made 'local' through international borders and other means, can potentially fulfill. If for Harta K. righteousness is *located* in 'the West', as when she remarks "they appreciate work in the West" (p.4), righteousness for Genci S. can be reached by something larger and grander than the reality he lives in – and distant. In her incisive analysis of socialism, Verdery (1996) addresses the issue of state-socialism's appeals : "Inequality, hunger, poverty, and exploitation—to these perennial features of the human condition socialism offered a response. It promised laboring people dignity and freedom, women equal pay for equal work, and national minorities equal rights in the state" (Verdery 1996:4). This should point to a direction for investigating how expectations such as those expressed in these interviews – and therefore such cosmological constructions as 'the West' – may have been developed under the specific conditions of state-socialism in Albania. One should not expect, however, many explicit accounts of how this may have happened. In Artan T.'s view, for example, socialism in Albania was experienced by everyone as no more than plain oppression – one dictator versus a large, perhaps indistinct body of 'people'. Artan T. implicitly refers to the history of banishment of religion in Albania under socialism, for stressing the sheer dimensions of the injustice inflicted on the people by a worldly dictatorship, supposedly with pretensions to divinity:

> Socialism was a new religion without a God. The dictator proclaimed himself God in Albania, the sole idol of all the others, with his power eternal and divine. And hereditary. An empire was created...
>
> *Artan T., 19 years old, male, born and living in Tirana. Transcripts of January 1999.*

These notes conclude by harking back to Spivak's (1988) inception of a query into the processes of inter-representation. Spivak asks, rhetorically, whether the subaltern *can* speak. What kinds of representation does this world make possible and what kinds of representations does it preclude? A very important issue to address, however, would also be *why* would the subaltern *want* to speak? 'Speak' stands here, as in Spivak's text, for 'represent' in general, for the reality that follows the desire to be represented in terms and contexts that are available in the world. Why do Albanians want to emigrate to 'the West' and exchange their labor for other forms of capital? In a debated piece (see Malkki 1998), Habermas (1998) has related the future of such notions as 'sovereignty' and 'citizenship' to the contemporary phenomenon of a "sharp increase in the reserves of comparatively cheap labor" (Habermas 1998:412). The reduction of humanity merely to reserves of comparatively cheap labor leads one to reflect, albeit through a different path of associations, on the same question not addressed by Spivak, but raised by the realities of the Albanian emigration in the last decade. Why do Albanians so massively desire to 'speak'? Why do they want to participate in the global processes of representation? Why do they want, that is, to participate in the exchange of labor for other forms of capital – when, ironically, the only tangible coercion is exerted to contain them in Albania?

While the brevity and the tentative nature of these notes rules out any affirmative conclusion, an agenda for further research can be broadly outlined. A query into the world of Albanian emigration has also to be a study of the replacement of the Cold War's world context with the world context of globalization. It has also to be a study both in and outside of the borders of the Albanian nation-state. A theory of the cosmologies that give rise to desires for participation in representation processes is called for. Ultimately, it is due to such cosmologies of desire that the labor of some becomes 'comparatively cheap', and that our globalizing world is experiencing 'a sharp increase' in its reserves. The same cosmologies that have provided for the initiation of the Albanian emigration, and, quite plausibly, for the very collapse of state socialism in Albania, now construct peoples' understandings of the realities brought about by these transformations. They organize multitudes of desires in structures of what Appadurai (1998) has insightfully called 'full attachment' – but then to their territory of nationness, the imagined West.

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