Queer and Trans Martyrdom

Dominic Janes

In 1886, Mwanga II, King of the Bantu kingdom of Buganda, located in Uganda, executed 45 male pages of the royal court. They were recent converts to Christianity who, according to many accounts, were condemned to death because they refused his sexual demands. Speaking in the central region of Namugongo on 3 June 2010, the feast day of those martyrs who were canonized in 1964, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni said:

> …the African Church is the only one that is still standing against homosexuality. The Europeans are finished. If we follow them, we shall end up in Sodom and Gomorrah…I hear there was homosexuality in Mwanga's palace. This was not part of our culture. I hear he learnt it from the Arabs. But the martyrs refused these falsehoods.[1]

These opinions must be understood in relation to both the spread of homophobic prejudice during the British Empire and the recent Western embrace of LGBTQ+ rights—the imposition of which on other regions of the world has been labelled as homonationalistic.[2] The global impact of the West means that its history of contested interrelations between religion, same-sex desire, and gender complexity remains an important international issue.

Organized religion continues to be unenthusiastic about diversity in gender and sexuality. For this reason, many LGBTQ+ activists have rejected not only theological worldviews but also the suggestion that modern forms of victimhood have anything to do with religious modes of heroism such as martyrdom.

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However, a closer look at the intersections of spirituality and queer and trans lives suggests that some important issues link these aspects of the human experience. The word "martyr" in English derives from the ancient Greek *marturos*—a linguistic inheritance from the early Christian Church which originated in the eastern, Greek-speaking part of the Roman Empire. It is only relatively recently that Western countries with majority Christian heritages have started to become familiar with martyrdom traditions in other world religions, such as Islam where *shahadat* is "bearing witness" to faith and God. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* explains, a Christian martyr is "a person who chooses to suffer death rather than renounce faith in Christ or obedience to his teachings, a Christian way of life, or adherence to a law or tenet of the Church; (also) a person who chooses to suffer death rather than renounce the beliefs or tenets of a particular Christian denomination, sect, etc."[3] Christian martyrdom could involve acts of self-sacrifice, reaching the extent of death at times but also achievable by leading an exemplary life. Today, the diverse forms of religious witness are often forgotten, although they were once considered vital, as execution was not necessary to achieve heroic status for those who lived exemplary lives.

In the Middle Ages, different kinds of martyrdom were even color-coded: white (withdrawal from the world), blue or green (ascetic penance), or red (death).[4] In European history, the first "red" martyrs of the early Christian Church were those who were executed for their beliefs under the polytheistic "pagan" Roman Empire. They became cherished saints of the Roman Catholic Church but, as a result, were subject to revisionist questioning during the Reformation.

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For Protestants, the "saints" could refer to all righteous people, as per the song, "When the Saints Go Marching In," implying large numbers of saints rather than a select few. Those Protestants who lost their lives in persecutions were held up as exemplars in books such as John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563) but they did not become saints who were the subject of cults on the old Roman Catholic model.[5] In both early modern and modern English, therefore, the word martyr came to be used in various more or less respectful ways to refer to all manners of suffering, as when prominent actress and writer Fanny Kemble wrote that "she

is a martyr to dyspepsia and bad cooking."[6] The term could also be employed with cynicism, with reference to anyone who made "a real or pretended sacrifice of one's inclinations in order to gain credit."[7]

The varieties of anti-Catholicism that flourished in countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and France encouraged a relativistic stance towards martyrs. The result was a tendency to see martyrdom as a culturally contestable state that could be acclaimed by a range of groups and individuals, both religious and secular. An example of the latter was Emily Davison, who died after running in front of the King's horse at the Epsom Derby race on 4 June 1913. She was swiftly hailed as a martyr by fellow campaigners for women's right to vote in Britain, many of whom had been suffering force-feedings after going on hunger strike in prison. Suicide was a criminal act under English law until 1961, a derivation of the Christian belief that "self-murder" was a sin. In alignment with their condemnation of suicide, Catholic narratives of martyrdom stressed that saints never sought their own deaths, although this does not appear to have always been the case.[8] Anti-suffrage campaigners in early twentieth-century Great Britain held that Davison must have been either a criminal or so mentally unbalanced as to have committed suicide while deliberately endangering the lives of others.

The contestation over the status of Emily Davison highlights that martyrs are co-created by those who memorialize them. In the early Christian Church, this co-creation was carried out by local communities who tended the tombs of saints and wrote "martyr acts"— narratives of their deaths.[9] These stories typically depicted the martyr as the victor in a competition to live a moral life. As the historian of the classical world Carlin Barton commented, "Romans rarely identified with or wanted to be seen as victims, even in the direst circumstances. And so their stories of the vindication of honor are designed not to elicit pity, nor to reveal a victim, but to reveal an unconquered will."[10] Christians asserted that the death of the body could be faced with equanimity because it meant that the soul was going to heaven.[11] Moreover, such acts were not deemed self-centered because they were viewed as being for the good of their communities. Ultimately, such heroism was seen by writers as an imitation of Christ. Yet, such reliance on subsequent propagandists could make martyrs pawns in the struggle for worldly power.[12]

For those opposed to the martyrs' worldviews, their actions appeared peculiar or queer, in the sense of being strange. But could martyrdom also be queer with respect to issues of gender and sexuality? Transformations from male to female bodies are an element of a subset of pre-modern saints' lives. One

fourteenth-century example is Saint Wilgefortis, whose narratives state that after she prayed to God to save her from an arranged marriage to a Muslim ruler, she was rewarded with the growth of a luxuriant beard. Her father, enraged, had her crucified.[13] The question of whether such texts should be interpreted as precursors of modern trans experiences is hotly debated, as is the question of whether using contemporary understandings of gender to analyze such narratives can shed new light on past cultures, even if they were distinct from our own times.[14] If a shift in gender is central to trans identity, then it is surely notable that the Christian God, on occasion, was miraculously able to bring about such phenomena.[15]

If thinking from a trans perspective involves troubling the boundaries of binary gender, then questioning through a queer lens involves problematizing related sexual norms. The current lack of clarity over acronyms used to refer to the LBGTQ+ community indicates that these terms and categories are very much in flux. Many of them are also of recent origin. It is anachronistic to discuss gay saints in the Middle Ages since that term was not widely understood as being a category of sexual preference until the mid-to-late twentieth century.[16] The same could be said of the term queer, although it is often used in a broader sense to refer to that which is anti-normative concerning aspects of sexuality.[17] It can be apt in situations where unusual events take place on the boundaries of individuals' personal and spiritual lives, or in describing unconventional understandings of desire.[18] An example of this word's use is provided by Christian traditions of celibacy. Denying oneself sex does not align with the norms of secular society. Catholic priests are required by their Church to renounce the admiration of a worldly bride in order to perfectly adore the body of Christ. To die for such beliefs could, therefore, be figured as a queer death.

It is significant to note that "sodomite" developed from medieval theological writings considering extra-marital sex as a sin.[19] The term originally meant "almost any sexual act or impulse which did not focus on sex exclusively in terms of procreative potential."[20] Celibacy developed extraordinary spiritual significance and sodomy became its immoral opposite.[21] For historian and theologian Mark Jordan, the result was the policing of sodomy which became an essential element in the constitution of priestly superiority:

> Sodomy was and homosexuality is important in Catholic moral theology because it has been intimately connected to the exercise of power in the construction of priestly lives. It was one of the sites where moral regulation could be exercised purely, with a minimum of resistance. In this inner realm of churchly power, regulation could be exercised for regulation's sake.[22]

In England, this process was turned against the ecclesiastical authorities whose

self-regulation could be denounced as inadequate. In 1533, King Henry VIII made sodomy a capital offense under royal law, removing it from the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical law courts.[23] Allegations of sodomy were then available to be used by agents of the English crown against Roman Catholic priests and monks who refused to accept Henry's self-declared supremacy over the English Church. The result was the development of a "strong association between Christian zeal and anti-homosexual sentiment…[which] remained part of mainstream [Protestant] English religiosity."[24]

The queer oddity of those who lived in defiance of conventional imperatives to work, war, and reproduce helps to explain the ongoing rejection of clerical celibacy by Protestants.

Attempts to align secular and religious obligations fostered the development of just war theory, which allowed the moral validation not only of being killed but also of killing. The Christian origins of just war are often attributed to St. Augustine, who helped to formulate the guidelines by which the later Roman Empire could legitimately defend itself through arms.[25] As historian Paul Middleton wrote, "once killing in battle was theologically justified as participation in Christian Holy War, it was only a small step before the dead in such conflicts were viewed as martyrs."[26] Such thinking was instrumental to the Crusades, precursors of Christian imperialist expansion in Latin America and the later colonization of much of the world by European powers. Just war theory, in its modern form, underpins current international law relating to armed conflict, including the Geneva Conventions and the articles on war in the UN Charter.[27] Those who died by means outside of the rules for justified conflict were not soldier martyrs by these standards, but criminals or terrorists.

The phenomenon of Islamist "suicide bombing" resulted in a wave of interest in reconsidering religious terrorism and martyrdom.[28] In the case of Shia Islam, this tradition dates back to the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD, when Shi'ite leader Hussein Ibn Ali and his followers died fighting Sunni forces. Their example inspired the Ishmaelite sect of "Assassins" who often expected to die during their audacious attacks on Sunni leaders and crusader lords. Al Qaeda's recent self-sacrificial martyrs have typically been inspired by radical Sunni teachings.[29] A range of medieval texts established the foundations of Muslim

equivalents to Christian just war theory, particularly *hadiths*—reports on the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad and his followers. These texts explored the relationships between martyrdom and *jihad*, the struggle for what is right.[30] The *hadiths*, however, do include a distinctive duty of *jihad* for the Muslim individual, though dependent on a call to arms by a Caliph, or legitimate Islamic leader.[31] The result of this call to duty is that militant martyrdom, in both its Christian and Islamic forms, has become enmeshed in secular politics, such as when French colonizers faced jihadist uprisings in Algeria, as did the British in Egypt.

It is crucial to note that suicide bombing is not intrinsically Islamist. Its first recorded example is alleged to be that of a Russian anarchist, Nisan Farber, who was killed by his own bomb in a police station in 1904. Yet, in the West, it has come to be understood as part of what theorist Jasbir Puar has termed the "terrorist assemblages" of recent wars waged by the United States and its Western allies in the Middle East.[32] An assemblage in art is a kind of three-dimensional collage; as a cultural construction, it refers to situations where a range of social, cultural, and representational formations interact. Crucial to Puar's thesis is "homonationalism," a term which she understands to be the way in which the United States and other Western countries present themselves as bearers of a superior appreciation of LGBTQ+ rights. This neo-colonial and Orientalizing framework enables the West to view Middle Eastern cultures as being queerly strange and strangely queer. It is as a "White Christian secular norm" that:

> homonationalism is the concomitant rise in the legal, consumer, and representative recognition of LGBTQ subjects and the curtailing of welfare provisions, immigrant rights, and the expansion of state power to surveil, detain and deport. This process relies on the shoring up of the respectability of homosexual sexual subjects in relation to the performative iteration of the pathologized perverse (homo- and hetero-) sexuality of racial others, in specific, Muslim others upon whom Orientalist and neo-Orientalist projections are cast.[33]

Puar presents the West's interpretation of the female Islamist suicide bomber's exploding body as the queerly terrifying "other"—in contradistinction to the disciplined white, homosexual male who copies heteronormative expectations of work, marriage, and property. Such "Oriental" bodies are both despised and queerly eroticized.[34]

This assemblage is based on conservative, Protestant Christian viewpoints that cast Islamic martyrdom as queer. By contrast, in France, it was a range of writers of "overtly secular literature" after the Revolution who rewrote Roman

Catholic martyr narratives in order to "queer" (destabilize) that spiritual tradition.[35] In this context, the authors, as well as the martyrs they engaged with, were overwhelmingly male. The cross-dressing saint, Joan of Arc, was not the subject of such re-presentation, perhaps because she was understood more as a heroine of France than of religion.[36] Feminist Joan did, however, start to appear in the late nineteenth century.[37] Furthermore, she was not read as an icon of, to use a twenty-first-century term, "transmasculinity" until the interwar period, and even then only by private individuals since this was never part of the French state's official ideology.[38] Joan was a white, cross-dressing, virginal, and "fanatical medieval warrior," who was burnt by the English as a heretic. As such, she was arguably a disruptively queer figure who did not neatly fit into either a homonationalist project of queering the "other," or community projects of LGBTQ+ liberatory memorialization—in other words, Joan was not commonly hailed as a role model by and for queer people.[39]

Of course, it is only recently that Western countries have been, to varying degrees, eager to assert homonationalist perspectives. One example is Roger Casement, a diplomat turned revolutionary who was executed by the British for treason in 1916. The status of his so-called "Black Diaries" has remained controversial since his death. Based on differing interpretations, these records, if they are genuine, detail Casement's lively pursuit of casual homosexual relationships, or, if forged by the British, are testimony to the lengths that the authorities were willing to go to discredit him. Either way, as a scholar of Irish literature and culture Kathryn Conrad argues, for "Irish nationalists to accept that Casement was an 'Irish patriot'—and, particularly, to claim him as a martyr, required that his homosexuality be pushed back into the closet or denied."[40] This logic existed despite a notable trend in Great Britain at this time to flirt with homoeroticized imaginings of soldier lads who were giving their lives for their country.[41] Casement has subsequently been acclaimed, particularly since the rise of lesbian and gay liberation in the 1970s, as one in a very long line of queer martyrs who lost their lives through state persecution because of their sexuality.

Such persecution was, above all, seen in the case of those who died in Nazi concentration camps forced to wear the pink triangle (indicating that they were gay) on their prison uniforms. Those who wore the symbol were not perceived as queer martyrs by the post-war West German state, but instead as criminals because Paragraph 175 of the German Criminal code, introduced in 1871, that made sexual relations between males a crime, was not revised until 1969 before finally being repealed in 1994.[42] Before the late-twentieth century, queer martyrdom was typically a personal rather than a national cultural construction,

and was appreciated only by a select few social groups. For instance, forms of queer martyrdom that did not result in execution but did involve lives of endurance and self-sacrifice were embraced by many queer men and women in the nineteenth century. Some of those people embraced Catholic revivalism within the Church of England or converted to Roman Catholicism, seeking a life of religious service in which their experience of queer shame could be converted into the noble pursuit of sexual renunciation.[43] Idealizing the body and person of Jesus Christ as an equally unmarried queer martyr gave priests a model and a substitute for a same-sex partner. Networks of priests, monks, and nuns could develop into communities that provided understanding, empathy, and support.

This movement was given a new impetus by the development of modern notions of same-sex desire from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. In Protestant Britain, the clergy were expected to be married. As a result, lives of clerical celibacy appeared queerly peculiar and unmanly to much of the populace. By the mid-twentieth century, this thought evolved into wider suspicions of homosexuality.[44] Male homosexuality was widely understood as morally repugnant and a medical disorder even in those few countries, such as France, in which it was not heavily criminalized. Queer men were often (mis)read as sexual predators. Lives of closeted service within the Church have recently come under further suspicion due to popular confusion between pedophilia and same-sex desire in the context of numerous revelations of child abuse by clergy that have rocked the Roman Catholic Church.[45] Yet, the unmarried closeted life of queer religious service can still be given an empathetic reading which understands it as being an example of the "queer art of failure," as hailed by the gender theorist Jack Halberstam, referencing the queer British writer and raconteur Quentin Crisp's comment that "if at first you don't succeed, failure may be your style."[46]

This sentiment also spoke to aspects of lesbian and trans experiences, as when Stephen, the sexually inverted hero(ine) of Radclyffe Hall's pioneering 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*, was told that "you were made for a martyr" because s/he finds joy in Christ-like suffering.[47] Inversion was held by doctors to be a situation in which a man's personality inhabited a woman's body (or vice versa), but Hall had used the inspiration of Christ's Passion in a way that, for Ed Maddon, "substitutes a lesbian writer as the martyred messiah of her people."[48] Hall, and the character Stephen, have more recently been read as trans men rather than masculine lesbians. Queer tears, be they—in twenty-first-century terms—gay, lesbian, or trans, defied heteronormative expectations of respectable self-control, both in the nineteenth century and today.

Saint Sebastian was a favorite of the devotees of this form of queer

martyrdom. He is conventionally depicted in art as a youthful figure whose beauty is completed rather than marred by the phallic arrows with which his executioners penetrate him. The result is, arguably, "the very distillation in art of an emotionally and politically fraught homosexual persona."[49] Scholar of nineteenth-century literature and culture Maureen Moran has said in regards to Victorian martyr imagery that the "broken body can be viewed as a means to spiritual triumph or a voyeuristic object appealing, at best, to erotic curiosity and, at worst, to perverse and violent desires."[50] This reading is how the saint was depicted in "Sebastian: A Splendid Readiness for Death," an art exhibition held in 2003 at the Kunsthalle Wein in Vienna, Austria. There, modern and contemporary artists explored Sebastian as the "patron saint of soldiers, of homosexuals, of plague—and AIDS—sufferers. Personified Sebastian: a sadomasochist icon, a death-loving, androgynous dandy, the very embodiment of the exemplary suffering of the artist."[51]

These were acts of radical appropriation; so was the use of the pink triangle symbol in the anti-AIDS message that "silence equals death," and the employment of the word "saint" to refer to prominent gay men who died following infection by HIV in the 1980s and 1990s.[52] Relatedly, the English Princess who visited AIDS wards was acclaimed, notably after her premature death in a car crash in 1997, as "Saint Diana."[53] AIDS has tragically cut short the lives of immense numbers of people of all sexual persuasions and genders, but it first came to media prominence in the West as affecting young, gay men. The result was, initially, a homophobic backlash against those who had allegedly destroyed themselves through their perverse and reckless behavior. Public opinion, however, began to change, led by the advocacy of prominent figures such as Princess Diana in Great Britain and other celebrities in the West, notably Elizabeth Taylor in the United States. Media imagery began to focus not only on the suffering of AIDS "victims," but also on the emotional bonds they had with their lovers and, when they were supportive, their families. This humanization reduced the previous tendency to see the homosexual man as a monstrous or pathetic "Other." Furthermore, the fact that HIV could be passed on heterosexually meant that queer suffering could not be marginalized, since the virus could infect anyone who was sexually active. The advent of anti-retroviral drugs in the late 1990s meant that gay men were no longer feared as vectors of a deadly disease, and those who had died could be viewed as a tragically lost generation. It was in this manner that the queer British filmmaker Derek Jarman, who was to die of AIDS in 1994, made comparisons between the men who died for their country in World War I and the contemporary gay experience. One example is *War Requiem*

(1989)—a filmed version of a 1962 orchestral composition by queer composer Benjamin Britten, which included verse by yet another, Wilfred Owen. In this way, Jarman wrote overtly queer experiences into narratives of national heroism.

Both the queer activist groups of that period in the United Kingdom, and the gay and lesbian liberation movements that preceeded them, drew much of their energy from the methods and imagery of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. U.S. protesters relied on constitutional human rights provisions that were unavailable in Great Britain, but they also faced more entrenched religious opposition. It was in this context that a distinctively difficult relationship between religious conservatism and sexual radicalism developed. In 2003, the inaugural exhibition of San Francisco's GLBT Historical Society Museum featured a sort of cross hung with a blood-soaked suit. This installation was titled "Saint Harvey—The Life and Afterlife of a Modern Gay Martyr."[54] Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man to be elected to public office in California, was shot and killed on 27 November 1978. He has since been commemorated on television, in film, and on a postage stamp. His status in the lesbian and gay rights struggle was quickly compared to that of Martin Luther King Jr. in the context of Black empowerment. It is notable, however, that, as Brett Krutzsch argues, "Milk's status as the gay movement's political martyr grew at a remarkable rate in the years following the AIDS crisis."[55] As his friend, the writer and human rights activist Cleve Jones, said on the annual Harvey Milk Candlelight March in 1985: "Harvey was our first collective martyr, but we have many more martyrs."[56] It was in a pointed comparison to the martyrs of the early Church that Jones flagged the issue of the number of these very special dead and their intimate relationships with the wider communities who wished to remember them.

On 14 October 1998, a crowd of some 5,000 people gathered on the steps of the Capitol in Washington D.C. to bear witness, in the heart of their national community, to the murder of Matthew Shepard. A gay, Episcopalian student at the University of Wyoming, he was kidnapped, pistol-whipped, tied to a fence, and left to die. The manner of his death echoed that of Christ's crucifixion. Scott Hoffman argues that this was understood as secular martyrdom for sexuality by some and a religious martyrdom by others:

> When Matthew Shepard died early on the morning of October 12, many Americans proclaimed him a gay martyr. This declaration was not simply political rhetoric but carried with it religious belief. While conservative religious teachings about homosexuality would consign Shepard to hell, many Americans believed that he had entered heaven because he was the victim of a fatal homophobic attack.[57]

While backlash ensued from religious conservatives, this Christ-like comparison was conveyed in mainstream U.S. media such as Vanity Fair.[58] Meanwhile, the location where Shepard was trussed up and left to die became a place of pilgrimage. It has been pointed out, however, that the motivation of this cult, named that of St. Matthew, was spurred by the fact that at five foot, two inches, Shepard's appearance was childlike and innocent. He was also white and blond. Even more importantly, his death took place at a point in time where public opinion was turning away from homophobic rejection of gay men. To be successful as a publicly acclaimed queer martyr, it was important to die at the right time—when such outsiders were "on the verge of becoming insiders. Just such a set of circumstances occurred with the death of Matthew Shepard."[59]

Shepard's was thus the acceptable face of queer death that could be co-opted for homonationalist purposes. The same, however, has yet to happen for trans martyrs. 20 November is known as Transgender Day of Remembrance, which was established by a small group of activists in 1999 to commemorate the murders of two Black trans women, Rita Hester and Chanelle Picket, in Massachusetts, and to draw attention to transphobic violence. One of these activists, Nancy Nangeroni, wrote in response to controversial media reportage that labeled Hester as a male cross-dresser: "At the stoop in front of Rita's building, I found flowers, and two candles burning. There were some candles unlit, so I lit one more, to let all know that another person who cared had passed by."[60] The message was clear: how many deaths would it take before people realized that these murders must stop? Judging by earlier struggles for the safety of gay men, it will take a considerable period of community action. This movement will also involve, as in the early Church, telling and retelling the story of what happened.

Shortly after the New York Pride March in 1992, the body of Marsha P. Johnson was found floating by the Hudson River piers. According to activist Leslie Feinberg, "the police 'investigation' reportedly consisted of two phone calls before they ruled her death a suicide. A people's postering campaign dug up reports that Marsha had been harassed near the piers earlier that evening."[61] She considered herself a drag queen (and today is often thought of as gender-nonconforming), which she did not see as incompatible with being a devout Roman Catholic. She is most famous today for founding and co-leading Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries. Without involvement from the wider community, her life and death would have been forgotten: "The Saint of Christopher Street did not appear out of thin air as a hero of trans movements. Her heroism reached us only thanks to the sweat and tears of activists and storytellers that were ready to brave anti-Blackness and transmisogyny to bring

her legacy to light."[62]

Liberation movements, the early Church among them, often stress their pride in the positive changes that they will bring to the world and the transformative effects they can have on people's lives. Yet, the prospect of happiness is contingent on the memories of the pain and sadness of the past. While this essay primarily explores the Western tradition of martyrdom centered on the legacy of Christ's crucifixion, it is significant to note that everyone has some experience of suffering. This can be harnessed in personal or community projects of queer and trans selfhood, even as such narratives are contested between members of faith groups, activists, and national politicians. Attitudes toward martyrdom inflect the legacy of colonialism in substantial parts of the world and continue to shape how the West views its Others. We carry the dead and dying within us. Saint Sebastian, Joan of Arc, Saint Wilgefortis, Emily Davison, Roger Casement, Harvey Milk, Marsha P. Johnson, Derek Jarman, Mathew Shepherd, Rita Hester, and Chanelle Picket: spanning the ancient, medieval, and modern worlds, theirs are just a handful of the queer and trans martyrdoms across history. Someone with a heritage from a different region of the world might have written a completely different list, but the crucial question is, arguably, not so much precisely who we will remember, but what queer and trans sense we can make of their lives and sacrifices—and of our own.

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Notes

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