

Sexual Desire as an Experience of Alterity¹

Olaya Fernández Guerrero²

Abstract: This paper analyzes the field of sexual desire within the frame of phenomenological philosophy. That approach enables an understanding of sexuality as a peculiar modality of relation with alterity. This is due to the fact that, in sexual desire, there are three dimensions of otherness: first, the other's body/corporeality that provokes desire; second, the imaginative level that constitutes a space for transcendence with/towards/by means of the other; and last, the sociocultural level, where the rules are established for controlling sexual desire and fixing its admitted and forbidden versions.

Keywords: Alterity, Body, Desire, Phenomenology, Sexuality.

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² *Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Calle Juan del Rosal, 14, 28040 Madrid, Spain, olayafg@yahoo.es*

1 Alterity and Sexual Desire

Contemporary philosophy has initiated a movement towards otherness that has adopted several forms. From Levinas' notion of alterity to Derrida's insistence on 'difference' as the starting point for thoughts and experiences of any kind, there have been many attempts to surpass the classic radical Cartesian distinction between subject and object, showing the bonds which connect both categories and pointing at the fact that the so called 'subjectivity' is not an isolated core content, but rather emerges as a result of an intentional structure by means of which the subject is always imbricated in the world and spontaneously interacts with it. Intentionality of consciousness can be identified just by assuming a theoretical, artificial *epoché*, that is, casting the world aside in order to realize that consciousness is consciousness of something without exception, that subjectivity and objectivity are intrinsically related to one another, and that existence without being-in-the-world is unconceivable³. These discourses have placed alterity at the very center of philosophical reflection, providing the ground for claims about the impossibility to express the being outside difference⁴, because the being only exists and can be understood in relation with the other⁵.

Consequently, identity of the self is no longer explained in terms of solitude and closure, in as much as the self is open to alterity and "his being consists of identifying, recovering his identity through all which happens to him"⁶. Subjectivity is not a pre-existing entity prior to any relation with the factual world, -existence precedes essence, like Sartre said-, but "the ego comes into being on the condition of the 'trace' of the other, who is, at that moment of emergence, already at a distance"⁷. The primal relationship with the other takes the form of alterity, of which I become aware when my ego perceives this otherness which is not me, which is away from me but in whose presence I willingly or forcedly am, and with which I am compelled to deal since alterity is an unavoidable part of my own world. Whereas "depriving of the other is enclosing oneself in solitude (solitude sick of solidity and identity with the self) and repressing ethical transcendence"⁸, relation with the other is mandatory, as the individual is intrinsically engaged with a world of others and related to it, till the extent that even the own identity emerges, although always provisional, as the result of these permanent exchanges with the surrounding context.

³ *The core texts for phenomenological and existentialist contemporary approaches are those by Husserl and Heidegger. For recent editions in English, see: Heidegger, Martin: Being and Time, University of New York, Albany, 1996; and Husserl, Edmund: Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology, Routledge, London and New York, 2012.*

⁴ *Derrida, Jacques: L'écriture et la différence, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1967, p. 111.*

⁵ *Levinas, Emmanuel: Totalidad e infinito. Ensayo sobre la exterioridad, Sígueme, Salamanca, 1999, p. 49.*

⁶ *Levinas, op. cit., p. 60.*

⁷ *Butler, Judith, The psychic life of power. Theories in subjection, Stanford University Press, California, 1997, p. 196.*

⁸ *Derrida, op. cit., p. 136.*

Confronted with alterity, the self can opt for different modalities of relationship. Violence is one of them, and it arises when the individual rejects the presence of alterity, or interprets it as a menace, and so tries to annihilate the other. The other's individuality can also be perceived as an obstacle for my own freedom, as it is for Sartre. Moreover, there is a possibility of an ethical response which has to do with the acceptance of the other in its particularized transcendence; this attitude implies that the subject refuses to any attempt to dominate or subjugate the other, and then admits that the other as such, in its difference and uniqueness, is an alterity whose existence must be preserved⁹.

Regardless on the more positive or negative envisioning of the other, what becomes clear is that the other's presence is perceived by me, firstly, as corporeality: "this object which the Other is for me and this object which I am for him are manifested each as a body"¹⁰, Sartre remarked. Thus the other, following Sartre, Levinas and other philosophers, is not an abstract entity but a particular being, available to me by means of its face -in Levinas' writings- but, in a wider sense, by means of its body as well. And here again, there are different ways of relation between alterities, that is, between bodies. The other's body can inspire us admiration or disgust, curiosity or indifference, like or dislike, and even all of that at once. It can provoke sexual desire as well. Our working hypothesis is that eroticism is a specific modality of approaching alterity, for it entails some particularities that will be analyzed here. We shall agree with Judith Butler's claim that sexuality and gender are "modes of being dispossessed, ways of being for another or, indeed, by virtue of another"¹¹ and, consequently, they constitute a field of experience which can be interpreted in terms of alterity.

In these pages we will examine some dimensions of sexual desire that might be useful to enhance the understanding of the classic, philosophical notion of alterity. That is because in eroticism the individual is open to the other within a complex frame where corporeality and imagination are always entangled with social and cultural norms. Taking into account these previous considerations, bodies, fantasies and rules will be the three levels of our reflection on sexual desire as an experience of alterity.

2 Bodies

Desire seeks for multiplicity beyond unity and identity, this means that the subject is not confined within its actual limits but starts instead a search for something else which is outside and away from him. That dynamism entails the de-centering of subjectivity, in so far as the self is continuously longing for the things that are in the world, trying to appropriate them and possess them¹². This is particularly true in the case of erotic desire, as in this pattern of relation "sexual object substitutes the self as center"¹³, and attention and attraction are oriented towards the other whose body becomes the object of desire for the subject.

⁹ Levinas, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

¹⁰ Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness, The Philosophical Library*, New York, 1956, p. 302.

¹¹ Butler, Judith, *Undoing gender*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004, p. 19.

¹² *The productive and creative dimensions of desire have been largely analyzed by Deleuze and Guattari in their core works. See: Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix, Capitalisme et schizophrénie 1 : L'Anti-Œdipe, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1972 ; Deleuze and Guattari, Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2 : Mille plateaux, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1980.*

¹³ Salamon, Gayle, *Assuming a body. Transgender and Rethorics of Materiality*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2010, p. 53.

Sexuality makes of my body an internal and external entity at once, due to the fact that the own corporeality is experienced as intentionally oriented towards the other in a relation of attachment in which all the senses and physical and psychic dimensions play a complementary role. Judith Butler has affirmed that “desire is an interrogative mode of being, a corporeal questioning of identity and place”¹⁴, in as much as eroticism always implies an approach to otherness, this is, to the embodied alterity of a particular individual whose corporeality seems attractive to me. It is the presence of the other’s body that activates the mechanisms of desire, and it is not a random body but always a particular one, in a particular context, that incites the emergence of eroticism. For this process to start there is no need for an actual presence of the other, because imagination also plays its part in sexuality as it will be examined later, but anyway, inspired by gaze or by fantasy, sexual desire expresses itself as the longing for the closest intimacy and proximity with the desired object.

The body is indeed the absolute protagonist in sexual life, and we like to make love because “in love, the body is there”¹⁵, as Foucault so cleverly declares¹⁶. Sexual desire is an experience grounded in corporeality, where many sensorial phenomena take place. On the first hand, eroticism is related to visibility, thus the sight is one of the main senses engaged in sexual pleasure. According with Levinas, the relation with alterity is a relation with the others whose faces I recognize¹⁷, but the ‘epiphany of the face’ acts here as a metonymic expression of the whole being that the other represents to me and, consequently, “the face clearly cannot be reduced to a person’s facial expression”¹⁸ because it is already depicting something more. We might add that whenever there is sexual attraction for someone else recognition of the other’s face transcends the mere identification of his/her particular identity, in as much as each glance on the longed object/subject always carries an implicit load of desire projected over the other’s face and body. Consequently, eroticism could be understood as constitutive of a particular regime of visibility where the eyes are caught and captivated by the presence of the desired body, the desired ‘you’ to which the ‘I’ longs to approach. In love, “the self and the Other do not observe each other [...], they desire one another”¹⁹, so in this context gaze does not simply constitute a modality of knowledge and identification, and rather is, or can be, the start of heterogeneous experiences of connection and exchange. Besides, sexual desire always entails a search for reciprocal visibility, this means, a wish to see the other and be seen by the other under the same schema. Watching other gives pleasure, but mostly or only if the other also looks at me in exactly the same manner, as an object of desire to him/her. This symmetrical,

¹⁴ Butler, Judith, *Subjects of desire. Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1999, p. 9.

¹⁵ Foucault, Michel, *Le corps utopique. Les hétérotopies*, Lignes, Clamecy, 2009, p. 20.

¹⁶ We will be using here a phenomenological notion of body, that introduces a distinction between the actual body in its materiality, and the body as a for-itself that holds and contains a wide range of possible levels of experiences beyond immediacy.

¹⁷ Levinas, Emmanuel, “El yo y la totalidad”, in Levinas, *Entre nosotros. Ensayos para pensar en otro*, Pre-textos, Valencia, 2001, pp. 25-51, p. 31.

¹⁸ Hofmeyr, Benda, “Is Facebook Effacing the Face? Reassessing Levinas’s Ethics in the Age of Social Connectivity”, *Filozofia*, 69, 2014, n. 2, pp. 119-130, p. 123.

¹⁹ Butler, *Subjects of desire*, op. cit., p. 86.

reciprocal exchange of gaze is, thus, one of the levels of sensorial experience implicit in sexual desire²⁰.

However, sight is not the only sense involved in sexual desire, as in many occasions just looking does not suffice to satisfy it. There is also a will to get in touch with the other's body, to kiss it, embrace it, or caress it, and a wish to be touched by the sexual partner in return. Sexual desire seeks to reduce the physical distance between the two bodies to its minimal form, and from this point of view is an attempt to overcome the space and to bridge, at least momentarily –while passion is still alive–, the original gap that separates the lover's bodies. Sartre argues that “to touch and to be touched, to feel that one is touching and to feel that one is touched–these, are two species of phenomena which it is useless to try to reunite by the term ‘double sensation’. In fact they are radically distinct, and they exist on two incommunicable levels”²¹. We could disagree with that and affirm, on the contrary, that both levels of sensitivity are tightly connected in the case of erotic relations when two people, who share a reciprocal sexual desire, are simultaneously touching and being touched and enjoying the experience as a whole, something that would not happen if one of the two levels – to touch, or to be touched– was missing. The subject of desire wants to touch as much as he or she wants to be touched, and this exchange of tactile sensations is often crucial for sexuality to be pleasant at its highest intensity.

Judith Butler criticizes that many theories on sexuality have a strong focus on certain parts of the body: penis, vagina, breasts, identified as the organs where sexual pleasure is located²². This provides a fragmented vision of corporeality which does not match well with the complex reality of sexual desire, for it is not just a single part of the other's body that provokes attraction, nor a singular and lonely spot of the own body where pleasure resides, but the bodies playing and interacting, what makes possible the sexual desire to arouse and be satisfied.

Together with sight and touch, hearing also intervenes in sexual desire, due to the fact that language has a strong power to awake the desire, and the exchange of words expressing attachment or excitement are intentionally uttered in the context of sexuality with the purpose of explicitly showing the own desire and let the other know about it, thus increasing the other's desire as well. We find here an example of performativity in discourse, in as much as the utterance of words denoting sexual attraction and erotic feelings have, or are intended to have, an immediate effect on the other's behavior, because those words are an invitation to come closer and let reciprocal sexual desire be fulfilled.

We have already sketched some dimensions of corporeality located at the core of sexual desire: glimpses, caresses, words, that are almost always present in eroticism²³. Namely, senses provide

²⁰ Although French philosopher Luce Irigaray considers that the gaze is the dominant sense in masculine eroticism, while feminine desire is more related to touch. See Irigaray, Luce, *This sex which is not one*, Cornell University Press, New York, 1985, p. 26.

²¹ Sartre, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

²² Butler, Judith, *Gender trouble. Feminism and the subversion of identity*, Routledge, New York, 1990, p. 70.

²³ The two remaining senses, smell and taste, are also related to sexual desire but maybe in a more indirect way. For instance, the scent of a perfume or a particular smell can evoke or remind the presence of the desired person, and there is also believed that certain foods with aphrodisiac flavors can help to increase sexual desire.

us with the means for actualizing desire in so far as they contribute to make visible the invisible, because desire as such is inapprehensible and it is only through its manifestation and expression under the form of language, gaze, touching, that we can perform it and interpret it. But we would be unfair if we reduced the phenomenon to this physical level, as desire is not just a desire for the other's body in its raw materiality but also for the individual who possesses that body and who 'is' that body. From this perspective sexual desire is metonymic, in that it longs for the other's body but, together with that, longs for the absolute alterity that the particular other represents.

3 Fantasies

Beyond immediacy of physical bodies, there is a wide field of experience where psychic facts like memory and imagination are present as well. This happens because corporeality somehow transcends the physical realm and, inasmuch as it is committed to the world, is subjected to variation, exchange, and difference. World is given to us under the form of alterity and there are many ways in which we can interact with it, enroll in it, adapt to it or try to predict it. This creativity refers to the dimension of fantasy, or the imagined body, and the mental sketches and self-perception of the own body and the modalities in which it can affect or be affected by other bodies. In general terms, imagination enables the arising of thoughts on future possibilities emerging from actual contexts, and this somehow constitutes an attempt to surpass the given limits and frames and reaching other dimensions of reality/alterity that are not yet available²⁴.

Eroticism is a possible option of affecting and being affected by other bodies, as it relies upon a set of phenomenological bodily experiences where dimensions such as mental schemas, temporality, sexual history, search for freedom, are included. Since body is only accessible through complex psychic and mental representation, as Merleau-Ponty claimed²⁵, the imaginary dimension is always enmeshed in all and each of our individual acts, and this includes the performing of sexuality. Desire transcends the perceptual realm and connects us with inner worlds of private fantasies and feelings, because "the object of desire is unreal to the extent that it is not perceptual"²⁶, but is rather constituted as desired by a particular subject who, in a given context, sees that object among others and focuses on it, and feels the need to possess it, hold it, approach it, etcetera, and all these emotions take place in an invisible space whose access is complicated even for the subject.

Sexual desire shall not be interpreted as a single and synchronic fact, considering that every particular desire entails and contains a thickness, a link with the historicity of phenomenological body that drags within it a set of memories about past feelings, sensations, attachments, that constitute what Gayle Salamon calls a 'sexual history'. The actual desire mixes with this previous background of past experiences, and thus creates a sexual self²⁷. Sexual pleasure is engulfed in the body of the Other²⁸, says Irigaray, so the other stands there as a promise of

²⁴ Kant already highlighted in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* the power of imaginary dimension, as he considered that only the 'free play' of the faculties of imagination and understanding were able to produce pleasure. Although he made this reflection in the context of aesthetic pleasure, this idea could apply for sexual pleasure as well.

²⁵ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1962.

²⁶ Butler, *Subjects of desire*, op. cit., p. 118.

²⁷ Salamon, op. cit., p. 45.

²⁸ Irigaray, *This sex which is not one*, op. cit., p. 97.

future fulfillment of sexual desire. The other's body is perceived and fancied as an alterity that can bring satisfaction under the form of corporeal exchange and sexual intercourse, but the physical union and its expected results are already foreseen and anticipated at the fantasy level. This means that sex is not merely a carnal act but includes an imaginary universe as well, as far as "we project desire, and we have it projected onto us"²⁹. Experiencing eroticism implies that the own body becomes a body-for-the-other whereas the other's body becomes a body-for-me, until the extent that sexual desire turns into "a mode of being disposed towards others, including the mode of fantasy"³⁰. Providing that my pleasure depends on the other as much as the other's pleasure depends on me, sexual relations could also be seen as a moment of vulnerability in front of the alterity, that is, of being exposed to the other and intimately bonded to it by visible and invisible ties. This link with the other's body starts with sexuality at a physical level but can reach for other spiritual and symbolic dimensions as well, as long as the act of love brings "redemption of the flesh through the transfiguration of desire for the other (as an object) into desire with the other"³¹, when the other is recognized and desired not just in the materiality of its body, but also as a whole being.

Moreover, sexuality allows for a conceptualization of the other's alterity in terms of freedom. This is because sexual desire expects a satisfaction that finally depends on the other, as he/she has the choice to engage or not in sexual intercourse that will soothe that desire. "What desire wants is the Other [...] What desire also wants is the Other's desire, where the Other is conceived as a subject of desire"³². I desire the other as much as I long for my desire to be corresponded, that is, that the other desires me with the same intensity, and the latter depends on the other's feelings, tastes, preferences, etcetera, that is, on the other's freedom. To desire is, thus, becoming vulnerable to this alterity that the other represents, and submitting to his/her power to fulfill or deny the realization of that particular desire. Following Judith Butler's reflections on Sartre, it can be said that sexual desire "bids the Other to manifest its freedom in the form of flesh"³³. I want the other to share my desire and let it show, then my individual feeling can turn into a reciprocal connection since both bodies voluntarily engage in sexual intercourse. There emerges "the paradox of the body as a determinate freedom played out in the context of reciprocal desire"³⁴. Desire is the frame where two freedoms meet one another and, by means of their shared erotic attraction, they find the way to cooperate and design a common project, freely chosen, to come together and fulfill that desire.

In short, it has been mentioned above that sexual desire constitutes a fertile ground for the different dimensions of fantasy to show off. Erotic gaze wraps and garnishes the other's body in layers of expectations, wills and desires, where imagination plays an important role. The alterity of the other, not only in its corporeality but, furthermore, in its wholeness as a singular free human being, acts as a frame for sexual fantasy and provides the inspiration for imagining a wide range of possibilities for approaching the other seeking for reciprocity and satisfaction of sexual desire.

²⁹ Butler, *Undoing gender*, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

³⁰ Butler, *Undoing gender*, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

³¹ Irigaray, Luce, *I love to you. Sketch for a Felicity within History*, Routledge, New York and London, 1996, p. 139.

³² Butler, *Undoing gender*, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

³³ Butler, *Subjects of desire*, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

³⁴ Butler, *Subjects of desire*, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

4 Rules

In the previous sections we have elaborated on the idea that sexual desire is a singular experience of corporeality where there are different dimensions of alterity at stake. Relations with alterity described above take the particular other in its specificity and uniqueness, and from there constitute him or her as an object/subject of desire. In this third section we will discuss a different level of alterity regarding sexual desire, which has to do with the clash between the individual's sexual impulses and the different cultural and social rules by which sexual desire is institutionalized. This means that eroticism is not only a private experience, and it is also lived through sociocultural frames that shape sexual behavior, condemn certain patterns of desire and publicly approve others. Those external norms can be interpreted as an alterity that is imposed upon the individual and that, in fact, create the preliminary conditions in which sexual desire can be verbalized, visualized, and satisfied.

Foucault considers that sexual practices are always submitted to several discourses coming from different fields: religion, law, medicine, etcetera, and consequently he chooses a genealogical methodology to discover which are the dominant discourses and rules on sexuality at each particular society and historical period. He claims that it was on the XVIII Century when a completely new discourse on sexual perversion aroused, and he denounces that these discourses have ever since functioned as mechanisms of repression that deny and condemn certain types of sexual desire by defining them as erratic, unhealthy, a-normal, etcetera³⁵. Western societies have not invented new pleasures, they only have created and defined the rules by which the games of power and pleasure shall be played, thus establishing the conditions of intelligibility for sexual desire. Foucault identifies the existence of a 'dispositive of sexuality' which can be traced through its effects and whose objective is controlling the bodies in a very intensive and invasive way, as it even determines the acceptable and unacceptable sexual intercourses in which people can engage³⁶. This interpretative frame is omnipresent and extremely powerful, pre-exists beforehand and is internalized by the subject, thus delimiting the modalities in which the person experiences and carries out his or her own sexual desire. "Power is both external to the subject and the very venue of the subject"³⁷, there is an irresolvable dialectic tension between these two dimensions, power both restricts and provides the conditions for the appearing of subjectivity, and this means that sexual desire is nuanced and balanced by the interaction between the inner impulses that the individual spontaneously has, and the cultural and social determinations established by the surrounding world.

Those dominant rules are to be found in a domain of alterity arising from the sociocultural conjuncture, and each person deals with them and can accept, deny or internalize them in different levels depending on the intensity of restriction which those norms imply for his or her personal sexual preferences. Intelligible sexual desire emerges out of this interaction; nevertheless this intelligibility does not exhaust all the actual possibilities for eroticism, and in fact reinforces heterosexuality and casts aside any other patterns of sexuality. For instance, as Judith Butler points out, the positions of masculinity and femininity "are established in part through prohibitions which demand the loss of certain sexual attachments"³⁸. As a result, the

³⁵ Foucault, Michel, *Historia de la sexualidad. Vol. I. La voluntad de saber, Siglo Veintiuno, Madrid, 1992, pp. 52-59.*

³⁶ Foucault, *Historia de la sexualidad. Vol. I, op. cit., pp. 129-130.*

³⁷ Butler, *The psychic life of power, op. cit., p. 15.*

³⁸ Butler, *The psychic life of power, op. cit., p. 135.*

words of common use within a given social context to refer to sexual desire are never neutral, since they are loaded with implicit or explicit ideas about what a ‘normal’ sexuality should be. In many societies, this entails that the name ‘homosexual’ is not only a sign of desire like any other but is also related to prejudices, exclusion and misunderstanding about this sexual orientation. Those impositions can be as strong as to cause a lot of suffering and grieving for those who do not fit in the heterosexual frame, thus “homosexual desire becomes a source of guilt”³⁹. This negative feeling has nothing to do with the desire in itself as a primal and spontaneous eroticism oriented towards the other, and rather appears as a result of this heteronomy that is exterior to the individual and paradoxically interferes with his or her sexual desire, and sets the ways by which desire can be expressed, or must be repressed, by the desiring subject. Sexuality is controversial in so far as it is simultaneously interior and exterior. Baudrillard explains that this is because sexuality always has a *valeur d’usage* related to the possibilities of enjoyment and pleasure that sexual life entails for the individual, and on the other hand it features a *valeur d’échange*, which has to do with the possibilities of profiting and bargaining with sexuality within a given sociocultural horizon⁴⁰.

The domain of alterity represented by the rules on sexual desire could be interpreted, consequently, as a space of negativity and denial, for it constitutes an attempt to control and impose from the outside the norms that should rule the individual sexual behavior. Those rules are intrinsically restrictive, as they only recognize some types of desire whereas other modalities are neglected and forbidden, although they exist as well and to the same extent that the ‘normalized’ paradigms of desire.

5 Final remarks: Desires and Alterities

This paper was intended to show that sexual desire always entails an intentional structure oriented towards the other in its alterity. Desiring the other means that the other in his or her singularity appears in front of me as an object of desire, as a being that is not me but with which I want to engage and have a close physical relation. Sexual impulse is longing for satisfaction by means of the other, as it needs the other to take part in the exchange and start a reciprocity that, if successful, will satisfy the sexual desire of both partners. The act of desiring is not exhausted by the physical dimension though, in so far as sexuality is always entangled with inner fantasies, anticipations, memories, and also with rules, prohibitions and patterns of sexuality coming from the outside. Thus, eroticism is a complex field of experience where different layers of personal history, individual preferences, and social norms, interact and produce the individual’s sexuality.

Through sexual desire, the subject initiates a specific relation with the other where the particular other is wanted as a body that can bring pleasure to other body, but not only, because the other is also a screen on where imagination, fancy, and foreseen possibilities of fulfillment are projected. On top of that, eroticism always happens in a given context, thus is intrinsically linked with a whole world of institutionalized practices and norms which seek to control sexuality. It is the combination and entanglement of all these elements what enables and drives sexual desire. Desires are always related to alterities, and alterities become tightly interconnected, bonded and enmeshed by means of desires.

³⁹ Butler, *The psychic life of power*, op. cit., p. 140.

⁴⁰ Baudrillard, Jean, *La société de consommation*, Denoël, Saint-Amand, 1997, p. 237.

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