

All Ears with Abigail Disney
Season 1 Episode 10: Stacey Abrams
Make Way For (Civically Engaged) Ducklings
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Abigail Disney: I'm Abby Disney and you're listening to All Ears. When we started this podcast in April, we were focusing on economic inequality. But inequality is not always just about economics. We all watched a public lynching, and it seemed important to focus directly on race and racial injustice.

For the remainder of the season, I'm using my platform to talk with some amazing thinkers and movement leaders about how we got here and how we should move forward.

Stacey, I'm going to read an intro for you since we have a tight window, then I'll go straight into it, ok?

Stacey Abrams: Ok.

Abigail Disney: My guest today served in the Georgia House of Representatives for 11 years, seven of those as the minority leader. In 2018, she ran a truly historic campaign for Georgia governor in the swampiest of circumstances, losing to Republican Brian Kemp. In my opinion, I should be sitting here with the duly elected governor of the great state of Georgia.

She has a powerful book called *Our Time Is Now* about voting and voter suppression and how to address this democratic crisis we're in. Stacey Abrams, welcome.

Stacey Abrams: It is my pleasure to be here. Thanks for inviting me.

Abigail Disney: Yeah, it's always great fun to talk to you. You know where I want to start? I want to start with romance novels, please.

Stacey Abrams: Okay.

Abigail Disney: Okay. So wait, what?! Tell me about this.

Stacey Abrams: So I grew up reading romance novels. I've always loved them. I also grew up watching General Hospital, especially during their Luke and Laura, uh, Robert and Anna, the WSB. All of that.

Abigail Disney: Yes. Yes. Yes.

Stacey Abrams: Yeah. So by the time I was in high school I actually wrote my first attempt at a romance novel in high school. It did not go too far cause I was actually, it was in middle school. So, I didn't know enough to write a full novel.

Abigail Disney: Yeah. The heaving chest or whatever don't really make much sense yet.

Stacey Abrams: Exactly. And then when I was in law school, my last year of law school, I wanted to write a spy novel. It was going to be based on my ex-boyfriend's dissertation on micro zeolites.

He was a chemical physicist. There was a time I thought I wanted to be a physicist. But when I pitched it to a couple of friends who've been in publishing, they both said, this is an amazing story, but publishers do not publish spy novels by or about women. This was in 1999 and I've, you know, I looked around and indeed there were no espionage novels by women. And there were none about women.

And I'm like, I know I've read about women's spies. And I was like, wait, those were romance novels. And so, I killed all the people I meant to kill. I just made my spies fall in love. And that was my first romance novel.

Abigail Disney: That's brilliant. That's brilliant. And have your novels sold well?

Stacey Abrams: They have, I like to tell folks the advances I got in the sales were enough to pay car notes, not to buy a whole car. Because the other impediment for me was that I was writing not only a romantic suspense, which is a very specific field within romance.

But I was also writing with African American and characters of color. I was very intentional about that and romance, especially in the late nineties, early two thousands, there was no space. There were very few romantic suspense writers who were Black. And so, I was only ever sold as a Black writer, which of course constrained access to the market. But my books have sold more than a hundred thousand copies.

Abigail Disney: Wow. That's amazing. So, you and I were on this really interesting episode of this podcast that I think comes from New York Magazine. And I was so struck by your story. You're running for office and you have one of those standard Republican monkey wrenches thrown at you.

Look at her, she has debt, she's carrying debt, and how can she possibly hold an office when she can't manage her own finances and the way you reacted to that was beautiful.

Stacey Abrams: I knew that my debt would be an issue and much like the story about my brother who has been in and out of prison, we are trained in politics to not talk about the frailties.

We, you don't talk about the things that could be used against you and my campaign for governor was about how people could trust me, how communities that typically have deep distrust and deep dissatisfaction, why I was different, why this time could be different and it couldn't be different if I tried to hide some of the most honest parts of my life.

So I got my brother's permission to talk about his incarceration, talked about his mental illness, his drug addiction. And I got my parents' permission to talk about why I was in debt. My mom and dad are Methodist ministers and in 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit my mom's church. My dad ran the outreach ministry there.

Essentially the church was incapable of supporting them anymore, but it was still necessary. And my parents continue to serve, continue to be the hub for Hurricane Katrina recovery in Stone County for years. And I became their primary source of income. The following year in

2006, they adopted my niece who had just been born to my, my brother and his girlfriend who were in between rehab and that added another layer of expense.

I was able to manage it for a time, but it was always precarious because I had built my life for me. I had not expected to have you know, an additional family and I'd run for office, which meant I was also self-employed for most of that time. And then fast forward, every time I almost dug out something else happened, including my dad getting diagnosed with prostate cancer.

You can delay tax payments, but you can't delay cancer treatment payments. You can't delay cancer treatment at all. And so, I made the very intentional decision to support my family. And I know that I wasn't the only one and that so many Americans are forced to make these choices.

I thank God that I have the ability to shift my resources to meet their needs. And I know so many people who don't have that option.

Abigail Disney: Right. And the fact that the Republicans just assume they could hang your debt around your neck like a badge of shame was so tone deaf about the nature of debt in most people's lives nowadays.

And I do feel like you must have constantly run across people who didn't really know how the real world works or what, what real people needed. I mean, do you--?

Stacey Abrams: Oh, absolutely. To be in the state legislature by and large, in Georgia is a part time job, which means you have to have the resources to permit you to only work part time and to take off from January to April every year.

And that tends to mean that people come from resources or if they don't have those resources, sometimes their willingness to have hard conversations, it's outmatched by their need. And I don't, I don't fault them. But part of the reason I ran for office was because I actually lived a life of complication.

And I think those complications need not be permanent. I think those challenges are solvable. My mom and dad always taught us you don't just talk about problems, you fix them.

Abigail Disney: I kind of want to go back to talk about your dad for a second.

Stacey Abrams: Sure.

Abigail Disney: Because Hattiesburg, Mississippi mid 1960s, I think, uh, 14 years old.

Stacey Abrams: Uh my parents were born in 49, so yeah.

Abigail Disney: So 14, 15 years old can't even vote yet. And he was arrested for registering voters.

Stacey Abrams: Yes.

Abigail Disney: That's a kind of extraordinary thing to do. So, what, what does that tell us about you and how you were formed?

Stacey Abrams: Well, both of my parents were very active in The Civil Rights Movement as teenagers.

My dad was more proactive in his activism I think in some ways than my mom in part because he still thinks he's impervious to harm. But for both of them, no matter what the situation presented in terms of possible harm, their belief in right is so strong.

My mom was a librarian. My dad was a shipyard worker and they became United Methodist ministers who requested that they be posted back in the state of Mississippi when they finished grad school in Atlanta, because they wanted to serve. My parents do not countenance injustice. And even as teenagers, they understood it in a fundamental way.

My grandfather served in two tours. He'd served in both World War II and the Korean War, and still couldn't vote in our country. My grandmother, you know, she was a cook. Both my grandparents were cooks for years in a college my parents; my dad couldn't attend. Their children couldn't attend.

My mom's family was from even more dire circumstances. Her parents had divorced when she was young. She and her siblings essentially raised themselves to no small extent after their father passed away. And she too understood that part of the destitution they faced was not because of a lack in them. It was because of a deficiency in a system that did not value them and did not see them as worthy.

And so, she came from a line of domestic workers and, you know, my grandfather picked up trash. That's how they could make ends meet because they weren't seen as part of either the civil society or certainly part of a civic society.

Abigail Disney: Right. Right. It sounds like you're romanticizing things when you ask a question like this, but I do think that the barriers and the obstacles have a way of refining character.

Stacey Abrams: I would say that both of my parents are gifted with an innate sense of good. They are people who faced challenges that were both, you know, environmental, some were legal, some were conditional. Like my father is dyslexic and he grew up a young Black dyslexic boy in Mississippi and segregated schools where they had no diagnosis.

They just thought he was stupid. And so, he grappled with that most of his life, and I think about how his navigation of his space has always been then tempered by under expectation, by legal barriers. And by his just innate sense of drive. My dad does not believe in obstacles. My mom, she dropped out of elementary school because her family couldn't afford for her to go to school.

They couldn't pay for the bus. She didn't have the right clothes. But when she finally was courageous enough to go back, there was a teacher who had left a note in her file saying if

Carolyn Hall ever comes back, move her on to the next grade. And that really galvanized my mom to stay in school and become the only one of her seven siblings to finish high school.

I think you're right, that there is, you know, there's a refining pressure that comes with obstacles, but there is something internal in I think both of my parents that allow them to use these challenges to make them stronger as opposed to weakening them or crushing them.

Abigail Disney: You know the fact that the primary conflict when your father started his life as an activist was around voting. Do you think that affects why you work so hard around the voting question?

Stacey Abrams: Absolutely. My, my parents told us about their time in The Civil Rights Movement. They made certain we understood not just the images that we would see, but that we understood the deep historical underpinnings of racism of desegregation and why voting mattered. My parents would take us with them to volunteer, which was always surprising to us because we were like, you know, we're poor too.

And that was never an issue for them. They believed that service is what you do. It's not about what your status is. My dad's way of saying it is having nothing is not an excuse for doing nothing. And my mom would say, no matter how little we have, there's someone with less, your job is to serve that person.

And we, yes, we may not have running water, our lights might be cut off, but we had shelter and our job was to go and work in homeless shelters. Our job was to work in soup kitchens. We had Liberty. And so, they would take us to juvenile justice facilities. So, they were always intentional about situating not just us in the space of doing right, but us in the space of understanding the content, that even the least of these sometimes have more than the next.

You know, we tease my parents, you know, we're all infected. They have six kids and none of us have figured out how to do anything other than serve. Some of us have done a little bit better economically, but you know, my oldest sister is an anthropologist who is now the Chief Diversity Officer at her college.

My sister Leslie is a judge. My brother Richard is a social worker. My brother, Walter, even when we teased him, he's been in and out of the partial system, but my mom would tease him that Walter became sort of the jail house social worker. So we were, yeah, I paid bail for folks that Walter met in jail.

We couldn't get him out, but we got out the young man who was unfairly arrested for something minor and whose parents could come up with \$500. And then my little sister Jeanine worked for the CDC and now runs Fair Count, the work we're doing on the census.

Abigail Disney: Wow.

Stacey Abrams: And then when it comes to voting my, my parents, they also made sure we not only went to volunteer, they took us to vote. Every election that would take us with

them. And there's six of us. So, we looked like make way for ducklings as we followed them into the voting booth and we trailed out.

Because they not only talked about voting. They wanted us to see them in the act of casting a ballot. And even if our lives didn't improve with every election, even if the things that they would talk about never changed, they wanted us to know that their responsibility was to never give up. And for me that's, that has always been the driving force. It's why I started registering students when I got to Spelman, when I was 17. My inability to vote was not an excuse for not making sure that other people could.

Abigail Disney: You published an opinion piece in the New York Times, really making the case for why voting matters. You make this really important point about how we, especially Democrats, really overemphasize presidential elections. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Stacey Abrams: I understand the focus that has been placed particularly by Democrats, especially by Black Democrats on the presidency, on congressional races, because for a lot of our communities, our salvation did not come from the States.

It came from the federal government. But what that presupposes and has to, it has to invoke, is the fact that the problems were created at the state level, that the challenges are embedded at the state level. That most of the solutions are not federally imposed. They are state led and therefore, rather than waiting for this savior of a president, we need to build institutional capacity and political power in our school boards, in our county commissions and the secretary of state's office.

We need to have mayors who hire police chiefs, who actually believe in reforming the tactics and the behaviors of officers. We have to have DAs that actually enforce the laws when a man is murdered in the streets. We have to have direct action. And we have to know that action is not going to come from Mount Olympus or Washington DC.

It's going to come from our state capitals and our cities, and from those folks that we can see in the grocery store. Those are the people who govern our choices and our changes. And those are the folks that we have to pay attention to.

Abigail Disney: And, and as you really make a great point that like there was no federal law that allowed for Jim Crow to happen. Those were all state and local laws and forced by state, state, and local officials. You mentioned murders in the streets and, and accounting ability for police officers. I mean, where are you on the question of, if you know--is reform enough or are we going to have to go deeper than that and to really think differently about public safety in order for things to change?

Stacey Abrams: I think there's a couple of pieces. Reformation is absolutely necessary because crime happens, and victims deserve to be protected. And so, we need to reform how we even think about the deployment of those who are charged with our safety and charged with accountability in the law. That means everything from ending qualified immunity, to changing the standards for use of lethal force, talking about and enforcing the obligations of de-escalation-- reform is necessary. Because we are going to have child abusers, we're going to have rapists, there are going to be issues where we need someone

to help make certain that we are protected, but that is not enough. And it is problematic to see these things in conflict. They have to be in tandem because reformation is one part transformation is the other part.

Public safety means the public is safe and we know what guarantees the safety of a public more than anything is a well-educated population. Population that has the ability to make a living wage, a population that has affordable, safe and stable housing, a population that doesn't live in a food desert, a population with access to health care.

And so, our investments have to be actually about public safety. And if that means redistribution of the resources that have traditionally all been funneled into law enforcement because we think it's too hard to do the rest of it, then we certainly have to have a conversation about, and not just conversation, we have to have policies that transform our budgetary priorities.

But we should not let ourselves get drawn into this false argument that it's one or the other. This is both/and and as long as they can keep us focused on the bright shiny object that never actually comes to fruition, then they have an excuse not to do the hard work.

Which is the hard work of actually redistributing the resources of government to serve the needs of all. And that's why Black lives matter. That is why these conversations about systemic racism and systemic inequities are so vital in this moment because we should not let ourselves go down that rabbit hole where we're fighting over semantics and they're winning the policy battle yet again.

Abigail Disney: I see people beginning to see that the individual racist is not really the problem is that systems repeatedly come to racist outcomes and therefore systems need to be looked at.

Stacey Abrams: I would, I would tweak what you've said just a little bit. Individual racist acts matter. The Karen's of society, that matters. Because we have to remember that systems are people. That the systems that put these laws in place, the systems that enforce these prerogatives. The systems that maintain the oppression of entire communities and entire races, those systems aren't just these disembodied structures. They're people. They're people who make the choice in the social worker's office, whether someone gets helped or someone gets turned over to the police. There are people who make the choice about whether you get shot in the back when you turn away from a police officer having taken their taser, or whether you just get handcuffed, which is what happened to a white guy in York, Pennsylvania, who did the exact same thing as Rayshard Brooks. It is people who make these choices. And their inurnment to the racist tendencies comes from these individual actions, as well as from the laws that justify these actions as being perfectly legitimate.

And then it's those small micro moments where a woman picks up a phone to call the police because someone asked her a question she didn't like. We can't allow ourselves to think that these are separate. They are parallel. They are intertwined, but I do believe we are having more of a confrontation of these moments and more legitimate dialogue.

Abigail Disney: Yeah. I'm hopeful in a way I haven't been before. Except then I start thinking about the federal government and where we are right now. Um, how are we going to protect this election? And are we watching an authoritarian do a slow-motion takeover of our system?

Stacey Abrams: We are watching that attempt and it is not as slow as we would hope. The, the populous authoritarian playbook is well documented. You begin with the sort of rawkus and disarmingly coarse campaign. You then move into demonizing your enemies, not as opponents, but as actual enemies. You lift up your supporters as the Patriots and everyone else is a trader. You then start to dismantle or to delegitimize institutions like the media.

You try to pack the courts with the people who will support you. And if you cannot delegitimize a democratic institution, you take it over and infect it with people who are not just partisan, but who have completely abandoned any commitment to their job being a job for the people. They become lieutenants of this authoritarian.

So, we've got Barr, we've got Mitch McConnell, we've got the court packing that we've seen them do. We have seen almost every vestige of this, and the last big piece is that you delegitimize the election process either by saying it's rigged if you don't win, and then by doing the rigging yourself to ensure that you do win.

And we know that voter suppression is part of a 20-year effort by Republicans to ensure their longevity because their ideas are losing clout and they see their base waning. The Senate Majority Leader is holding up the funding that we know will be necessary to scale elections, to meet the turnout that we expect, especially in the midst of a pandemic.

We are watching across the country. These long lines are offensive. They are voter suppression. And while they are examples of enthusiasm, they're also examples of a failed system of administering elections that fall squarely at the feet of Republicans. But I am so emboldened by the change in demographics that we saw in 2018, that has been proven in 2020, because we have now outstripped our 2014 general election turnout.

And we did that in a primary. It's the highest number of Democrats on record to vote in a primary.

Abigail Disney: The brazenness of what they're doing is kind of mind-blowing. Is their base simply not reading the news? What's going on with their base?

Stacey Abrams: Well, one, they were told, and they've been told that this is all about defense of the integrity of the right to vote, which is complete and utter BS.

Voter suppression has never been because there was voter fraud. Voter fraud was created as a cloak to justify voter suppression. If you use their own numbers, The Heritage Foundation can detail-- and I'm rounding up for them-- 1300 examples of punitive voter fraud. Out of more than 625 million votes cast just in federal elections.

And I'm not counting the fact that they include federal and state elections, but the other piece of it is this: they know that the populations they target have the least amount of

resilience and are the most vulnerable to any changes in the environment of voting. When you shut down a polling place in a wealthy enclave where someone can just get an Uber or Lyft, you're fine.

But when you shut down a polling place where everyone relies on public transit and the bus doesn't stop there, voters can't vote. And that's presuming they live in a community with public transit. What I think is happening on the Republican side, they've been inoculated to the insidious nature of voter suppression, because they've been convinced or allowed themselves to be convinced that voter fraud is real, which it is not.

But what we saw happen in Georgia in June was that Republicans lost the ability to vote too. Because when you break the machinery of democracy, you break it for everyone. And so while we had eight hour lines for black and Brown voters, they had to extend the voting time in white, rural enclaves, because the same mistakes were made and whether it's through incompetency or malfeasance, when you break democracy, it's going to eventually take everyone else down with it.

And that's the piece that's just starting to be revealed. I don't know if it'll be revealed in time for this election, but my mission is to make sure no one can say they weren't told.

Abigail Disney: Yeah. And this dovetails with the census in a really important way. Can you talk about the way the census and that vote come together?

Stacey Abrams: Yeah, so, in *Our Time Is Now* I dedicate an entire chapter to the census. It is one of those secret weapons of democracy. The census allocates political power and economic power. Almost every program that we look at to achieve what we were talking about earlier that safety for our public. Whether it's school lunches for children who are starving or Pell Grants or affordable housing or criminal justice reform or environmental action. Many of those programs are funded based on algorithms that use as their chief input the data from the census. And so, if there's an undercount in the census, there is an undercount and there's an under deployment of those resources to the communities that need them. And if you want the most stark example, think about all the Black and Brown folks who are dying from COVID and think about lack of access to healthcare in those communities.

One of the reasons they don't have PPE, one of the reasons they don't have the capitation rates of the hospital to take care of all those patients is that they weren't counted in the last census. Because we undercount communities of color, immigrant communities, poor people, rural communities, we undercount young children.

And so all of the things that then lead to overcrowding in classrooms and challenges with having adequate access to resources begins with a decade worth of undercounting at the exact same time, the system, this, this is how we allocate political power. Two things happen. One is reapportionment. We reshift the 435 members of Congress and The House of Representatives. And we reallocate them based on growth in population and states and the loss of population. You lose population, you lose a congressman, you gain population, you gain a representative. Great. Well, if those populations are growing because of growing

numbers of people, of color in communities where people of color aren't counted, their political power does not shift despite their growing population clout.

Politicians will draw the lines to preserve what they have and what they have right now is too much power. And what we need is to shift that power back to the populace, back to voters, especially voters who are becoming a part of this new majority.

Abigail Disney: What specifically can you do to fight this?

Stacey Abrams: So, we have set up Fair Fight 2020. So, we're operating in 18 States. We're helping to do voter protection and protect voter turnout in this upcoming election. Voter suppression is real, but we win by overwhelming the system with our numbers, which is what we saw in Wisconsin and in Georgia and in Kentucky.

What we're doing through Fair Count is that we are actually helping increase the turnout rate and participation rate of communities of color primarily, but we're working with immigrant groups. We're working with young people. We're working with queer communities in part because the LGBTQ community is not included directly in the census. And we need them to know they have to be counted to get the resources they need. We can win the census if we turn out and if we demystify the census, but we also explain the urgency and that's what those groups do.

Abigail Disney: What are you planning around the effect the virus is going to have on this?

Stacey Abrams: So, one, we believe absolutely that voter depression is going to be a major issue. And so, we're doing our best to make certain that people don't feel defeated by voter suppression. They feel energized by it and angered by it. We want to turn that rage into action.

We're helping these States build the groups they need, because we know the Republican National Committee intends to build an army of 50,000 poll patrols. Basically, people who go up and down the lines who try to intimidate voters. They did it before. They did it 40 years ago. They've been under federal consent order not to, but that consent order has been lifted.

So, we know they're coming back. We are doing our work to make sure that people know they have the right to vote, that they stay in line. Two, we're working to make sure that the Heroes Act passes. So, Heroes Act was the fourth COVID stimulus package. It was passed by the house more than a month ago. It requires that every state offer mail-in balloting to everyone without excuse. It also allocates \$3.6 billion because States are cash strapped.

They have lost so much revenue because of COVID-19, they need that money to run fair elections. And without the resources to scale up vote by mail and to ensure that in-person voting can continue to happen, we're going to see once again, a replay of Wisconsin and Georgia and Kentucky, but on an epic scale. We're not just having a redo of 2016 in this election.

We're having a redo of 2010. If people remember the halcyon glory days of 2009, 2010, we get The Affordable Care Act. We get some really good legislation. We get the Lilly Ledbetter act, and then we sleep on the midterm election. Republicans not only take over Congress, they take over for the next decade because they win state elections and they draw the maps and they use the census to give themselves power for a decade.

If this happens in 2020, it will not be a decade loss. It will be a generation lost.

Abigail Disney: Yeah. So, let's imagine that we do really well in this election, the people who are unhappy with what they perceive to be the Democrat party that has sent everything to hell in a handbasket, basically aren't going anywhere.

They'll still be angry. Donald Trump will still be tweeting in a really damaging way. So how do you see us going forward from this moment? I mean, I'm--I am worried about that.

Stacey Abrams: I believe that the protests we're seeing and the fact that they haven't fully dissipated, that there are still flares of public demonstration is a good sign.

Our responsibility is to recognize that there is no savior coming. I strongly believe in Joe Biden. I believe he will win. I believe that if we win the Senate, we can do so much good, but no good is permanent. And our responsibility is to not wait for our representatives to save us. Our responsibility is to make them do their work.

And so regardless of the level of government, you're right to be worried if we think an election solves the problem. We win when we remember that elections are the beginning of the next cycle of change, they are never the end.

Abigail Disney: This is the problem with liberals and progressives. Again, and again, they have taken their foot off the gas and presumed a victory to be permanent.

I think we need to reteach ourselves about the nature of politics and being civically engaged. There is no, um, ending achievement at which, we all get to raise a toast to ourselves and go back and relax.

Stacey Abrams: I couldn't have said it better myself.

Abigail Disney: I feel like your career and your work and, and everything is sort of like a personification of your parents' passions. You know, you, you are living it.

Stacey Abrams: Absolutely. My parents believe in justice. They believe that civil rights are active, active responsibility.

Abigail Disney: What did they have to say about the protests we're seeing right now? What is, what is their reaction?

Stacey Abrams: It is very much what we would expect. So, a couple of weeks ago, I get this very excited call from my mom and dad. They are about to pile into the car with my niece who is 13, and that they're raising to take her to a protest. Faith has never been taken to a protest before. It's something, every Abrams child has to experience.

My parents are 71. Faith is 13. She's grumbling about COVID and why they were going out there. My parents called me very excitedly because Faith really gets into the spirit and for my parents that was their responsibility. There is a demonstration going on. There's injustice to be challenged. And while they may not be as spry as they used to be, their spirit remains high and they were out there protesting with everyone else.

Abigail Disney: Wow. That's awesome. That's really awesome. I like to picture that. Stacey, you're the best.

Stacey Abrams: Thank you. Thank you. It's been a joy.

Abigail Disney: Thanks, so much for this time. One more question, okay?

Stacey Abrams: Okay.

Abigail Disney: How do we help you? Is there somewhere we call, sign up, give money, tell me that?

Stacey Abrams: Thank you. We would love to have folks go to FairFight.com. We need your help. We need your resources, need your time. We need your talent. And then Fair Count is the work we're doing on the census.

We'd love to have more people signing up to work with us, especially in States where we have high minority populations that are not being counted. So fairfight.com and faircount.org. And if you want to learn more about all the things I talk about, my new book is called Our Time Is Now, where I talk about voter suppression, the census, and how we win back our country.

Abigail Disney: Fabulous. Fabulous.

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