

The Rifle as an Extension of the Self: The Shooting Body in *A Shot at History***Kashyap Parmar Narendra¹**Research Scholar, Department of English, Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, Surat,
Gujarat, India**Sanjaykumar Lalani²**Principal, Shri Surat Jilla Sahakari Bank Commerce College & Shri Sayan Sahakari Khand
Udhyog Arts College, Olpad, Dist. Surat, Gujarat, India**Article Received:** 15/09/2026**Article Accepted:** 16/10/2026**Published Online:** 17/10/2026**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.10.274**Abstract:**

Abhinav Bindra's *A Shot at History: My Obsessive Journey to Olympic Gold* recounts the experiences that culminated in India's first individual Olympic gold medal at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. This paper argues that the autobiography constructs the self as inseparable from the rifle, presenting the weapon not merely as a sporting instrument but as an extension of the shooter's embodied identity. Through close textual reading of this single text, the study draws upon Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's distinction between the narrating self and the narrated self, Paul John Eakin's relational self, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's body schema, which explains how tools may become integrated into bodily experience. It shows how Bindra fashions his identity through disciplined bodily practices, including the coordination of rifle, breath, stillness, and concentration, and how this embodied fusion carries a psychological cost, since the identity shaped through elite performance becomes destabilised once Olympic success has been attained. By foregrounding embodiment, the study addresses a gap in existing scholarship, which has paid little attention to the relationship between the sporting body, equipment, and autobiographical selfhood.

Keywords: Life writing, sports autobiography, embodiment, body schema, autobiographical self, Abhinav Bindra.

Introduction

On the evening of 11 August 2008 at the Beijing Olympic Games, Abhinav Bindra fired the final shot in the men's 10-metre air rifle event. Scoring 10.8, he won India's first individual Olympic gold medal. *A Shot at History: My Obsessive Journey to Olympic Gold* (2011), co-authored with sports journalist Rohit Brijnath, recounts the years of rigorous training, psychological discipline, and personal sacrifice that culminated in this historic achievement. While the autobiography is commonly read as a narrative of perseverance,

excellence, and national pride, it also offers a profound meditation on the relationship between the body, technology, and the making of the self.

This paper argues that Bindra's autobiography constructs the self as inseparable from the rifle. Rather than functioning merely as a sporting instrument, the rifle emerges as an extension of the shooter's embodied identity. The narrative presents elite shooting not simply as a technical skill but as a disciplined mode of being in which bodily control, mental concentration, and equipment become inseparable. The autobiography thus invites a reading that foregrounds embodiment rather than achievement alone.

Target shooting occupies a distinctive position among competitive sports. Unlike sports that celebrate speed, strength, or physical endurance, rifle shooting demands extraordinary stillness, precision, and control. Success depends upon regulating breathing, maintaining muscular stability, controlling heartbeat, and sustaining unwavering concentration. The athlete gradually develops a body conditioned for precision rather than movement. It is this disciplined sporting body---and its intimate relationship with the rifle--that forms the central concern of this study.

The autobiography is not merely the story of a man who shoots; rather, it is the story of a self fashioned through shooting. Throughout the narrative, the rifle functions as more than an external object. Bindra repeatedly describes it as an integral part of himself. Reflecting on his relationship with the weapon, he writes that the rifle feels "like an extra limb" (25). Elsewhere he expresses this identification even more explicitly: "My gun makes me feel secure; without it, I am not myself" (126). These statements suggest that the rifle becomes incorporated into the athlete's sense of bodily and personal identity.

Such a reading has two broader implications. First, it demonstrates how an athletic identity may be constructed around a single object through years of disciplined practice. Second, it reveals the fragility of such an identity. When the self becomes inseparable from the instrument through which it achieves excellence, fulfilment may also produce a profound sense of emptiness once the defining goal has been attained. *A Shot at History* records both the formation of this embodied identity and the psychological disorientation that follows Olympic victory.

The analysis is grounded primarily in life-writing studies. Philippe Lejeune's concept of the autobiographical pact provides a framework for understanding the relationship between autobiographer and reader. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's distinction between the narrating self and the narrated self illuminates the ways in which Bindra retrospectively constructs his sporting identity. Paul John Eakin's work on relational identity further demonstrates that autobiographical selves emerge through relationships with people, institutions, and cultural practices rather than through isolated individuality.

However, life-writing theory alone cannot fully explain the paper's central concept of the rifle as an "extension" of the self. To address this dimension, the study draws selectively upon Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body schema from *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty argues that through habitual practice, tools may cease to be experienced as external objects and instead become incorporated into the body's perceptual and motor capacities. This concept provides an effective means of understanding how Bindra experiences the rifle not simply as equipment but as part of his embodied existence.

This paper also responds to a significant gap in existing scholarship. Although *A Shot at History* has received attention as a narrative of sporting achievement and national pride, little critical work has examined its representation of embodiment or the relationship between athletic identity and sporting technology.

The discussion first examines the relationship between Bindra and the rifle, then the disciplined body, the relational and collaborative construction of the self, and finally the emptiness that follows Olympic victory.

Situating A Shot at History: Text, Context, and Research Gap

Published by HarperCollins India in 2011, *A Shot at History: My Obsessive Journey to Olympic Gold* chronicles Abhinav Bindra's remarkable journey from an aspiring young shooter to India's first individual Olympic gold medallist. Co-authored with the distinguished sports journalist Rohit Brijnath, whose extensive experience in sports writing spans more than three decades, the autobiography combines personal reflection with professional narrative craftsmanship. Structured through a prologue, a series of concise chapters, and an epilogue, the text traces Bindra's development from his early fascination with shooting in his childhood home in Chandigarh to the historic victory at the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the psychological aftermath that followed. Rather than presenting success as an isolated moment of triumph, the autobiography documents the prolonged process of discipline, failure, perseverance, and self-transformation that underpins elite sporting achievement.

The narrative distinguishes itself from conventional autobiographies through its unusual opening. Instead of introducing the protagonist through his own voice, the text begins with a section titled "Fellow Shooters on Abhinav Bindra", in which fellow athletes offer their perspectives on Bindra's personality and achievements. Only after these external testimonies does Bindra's first-person narrative commence. This structural choice is significant because it establishes the athlete's identity through the recognition of others before allowing him to narrate his own life.

The autobiography was widely appreciated upon publication for its candour, psychological honesty, and literary quality. Critics acknowledged Rohit Brijnath's contribution in shaping the narrative into an engaging literary work while preserving Bindra's distinctive voice. Such responses generally assume that the collaboration between athlete and journalist successfully conveys an authentic autobiographical self. Rather than accepting this assumption uncritically, however, the present study examines how autobiographical identity

is constructed within the collaborative framework of the text and how authorial voice operates in relation to life-writing theory.

Despite the book's popularity, scholarly engagement with *A Shot at History* remains limited. Within Indian literary and cultural studies, research on sports life writing has only recently begun to attract sustained academic attention. Existing scholarship has predominantly focused on issues of gender, social mobility, and class, particularly in autobiographies of Indian sportswomen such as Mary Kom and Saina Nehwal. Chandran et al., for instance, examine these narratives through Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and social capital, demonstrating how sporting success negotiates broader structures of class and opportunity. While such studies have significantly expanded the scope of Indian sports life writing, they seldom investigate the embodied dimensions of athletic identity or the relationship between the sporting body and its equipment.

International scholarship on sports autobiographies offers a broader theoretical foundation but similarly reveals an important gap. Scholars such as Andrew C. Sparkes and Carly Stewart argue that sporting autobiographies deserve serious critical attention because they illuminate the complex relationships between identity, memory, embodiment, and performance. Rather than treating autobiographies merely as inspirational accounts of achievement, they advocate reading them as literary texts that reveal how athletes narrate and negotiate their bodily experiences (113--30). Their work raises an important question that directly informs the present study: how does the body become visible within autobiographical narratives of sport?

Although this question has generated valuable scholarship, existing research has concentrated primarily on illness, injury, disability, and bodily recovery. Arthur Frank's influential work on illness narratives, for example, has shaped much of the critical understanding of embodiment by examining how individuals reconstruct identity through experiences of physical suffering. While this perspective is indispensable for analysing narratives of illness and trauma, it offers only limited insight into autobiographies centred on highly disciplined, healthy, and technologically mediated athletic bodies. Bindra's autobiography presents a fundamentally different form of embodiment---one defined not by bodily breakdown but by extraordinary bodily precision, habitual discipline, and intimate interaction with specialised sporting equipment.

A Shot at History, therefore, occupies a distinctive position within sports life writing. Although the autobiography is frequently celebrated as a narrative of national achievement and Olympic success, comparatively little attention has been paid to its sustained representation of the sporting body or to the relationship between the athlete and the rifle. The narrative records breathing rhythms, muscular adjustments, balance, posture, heartbeat, equipment calibration, and the precise weight of the rifle with remarkable detail. Consequently, the text offers an exceptionally rich opportunity for examining how bodily

discipline and technological extension participate in the construction of autobiographical identity.

Accordingly, this study adopts the method of close textual reading to investigate the relationship between the athlete, the rifle, and the autobiographical self. Rather than attempting a broad survey of sports autobiographies, the analysis remains deliberately focused on a single text, tracing the recurring representations of embodiment, discipline, and equipment throughout Bindra's narrative.

A Framework for the Shooting Self

This study falls under the interdisciplinary domain of life-writing studies that views autobiography as a representation of the self rather than a record of lived experience. Thus, *A Shot at History* is analysed as a literary narrative that helps Abhinav Bindra build his sporting identity.

The main source of the analysis is the concept of the autobiographical pact that Philippe Lejeune proposes, which is an implicit contract between the author and the reader that the author, narrator and protagonist are the same person (5). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's distinction between the narrating self and the narrated self helps to understand how the older Bindra is reconstructing his younger athletic self, and their concept of the coxer helps to understand Rohit Brijnath's part in the construction of the narrative (50--54). Paul John Eakin's concept of the relational self also illustrates how autobiographical identity is formed through relationships with others, especially those of Bindra's family, coaches and mentors (43).

The study also relies on the concept of the body schema, introduced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which describes how the familiar use of a tool makes it part of the athlete's body (143).

The Rifle as an Extension of the Self

Bindra himself comes out with the central argument of this study when he states that his rifle is "like an extra limb" (25). This simple metaphor turns the rifle into an extension of the self. A limb serves not only as a tool but also as an integral part of the body. Bindra equates the rifle with an "extra limb", implying that over the years, the rifle has become an extension of his physical, psychological and autobiographical selves.\

A Shot at History maintains this close bond throughout. Bindra constantly reiterates that the rifle is specifically designed for him -- its grip is designed to fit his hand, the sights are set to his vision, and the balance of the gun is set to his body. He thinks about this connection and writes, "It's a rifle just for me; it's a physical feeling, and it's a psychological comfort" (126). The rifle then becomes more than a tool; it becomes a source of emotional security. Bindra's comment, "My gun makes me safe. Without it I'm not myself" (126), further emphasises this sense of dependence. These expressions convey the idea that the rifle is no longer a possession but an integral part of his identity. The autobiographical nature of the narrative is the relationship between the athlete and the rifle, not just ownership.\

The concept of body schema, as proposed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, provides a valuable framework for understanding this relationship. For Merleau-Ponty, with regular use, tools can be integrated into one's body experience instead of being objects in front of it. The blind man's cane is his famous example of the use of a cane as an extension of tactile perception (143). This is also true of Bindra's story. After many repetitions of training, the athlete's perceptual-motor system absorbs the rifle, allowing him to feel the target rather than merely grasp it. Importantly, Bindra uses a similar metaphor when he asks his readers to visualise putting a walking stick on their shoulder to experience the feeling of holding a rifle (186). The paper does not imply a direct influence of philosophy, but Bindra's description is very similar to Merleau-Ponty's description of embodied extension.\

The autobiography also illustrates how this process is a physical incorporation that involves constant training of the body. When learning to hold the rifle against his shoulder and not disrupt his balance, Bindra says, "New muscles begin to work" (67). To shoot the rifle well, the body needs to be constantly worked on and reorganised around it. Posture, muscular coordination, and balance are gradually developed until using the rifle becomes a habitual action. Before competition, "man and gun just sit side by side" (67), Bindra says, symbolising the unity between the athlete and the equipment. After years of training, there is a visible imprint left on the body itself. In recalling his career, Bindra mentions the "indentation" on his shoulder made by the rifle (236), indicating that the body and the equipment leave a physical imprint as well as a mental one.\

The incorporation of the rifle is not limited to the body but is also a process of consciousness. Bindra recalls that as a shooter, "the gun and I were all that mattered; the rest of my life stalled" (42). He also states that before the Athens Olympics, his "vocabulary boiled down to gun, sight, aim, breathe, target, and fire" (23), and his thinking world became limited to the language of shooting. He also says that he is "a talented boy with a gun, defined by my ability" (23). These reflections show how the rifle form is not only a physical practice but also a way of thinking, speaking, and being. The autobiography thus represents the sporting self as a self that is physically, psychologically and emotionally structured around a sporting discipline.\

The degree of this melding is most evident when the athlete/rifle connection is broken. The rifle is visible only when body parts are retracted, in line with Merleau-Ponty's description of embodied tools. When Bindra suspects that "someone fiddled with my gun" before the competition, so his sights seem wrongly set, he vividly captures this experience (203). His answer is more than a matter of faulty equipment. Rather, when something is at risk of failure, it makes him feel uneasy, insecure, and uncertain about himself. The malfunction of the rifle is thus not only the failure of an object but also the failure of a body--an embodied identity that has been carefully developed over years of training.\

These episodes reveal a recurring pattern throughout *A Shot at History*. The rifle is not an external instrument but an extension of the athlete's self. It influences Bindra's physical routines, sensory experience, psychological comfort, and self-narratives. The autobiography complements Merleau-Ponty's notions of the body schema, as he has shown how the best in sports performance is a gradual integration of technology with lived experience. The shooting self is not just a self that is told in the autobiography but rather a self that is formed in the intimate bond between body, gun and self.

Stillness and the Embodied Self

If the rifle becomes an extension of the self, the body that wields it must undergo an equally rigorous process of transformation. Throughout *A Shot at History*, Bindra presents the body not as a naturally gifted instrument but as something that must be consciously disciplined. Reflecting on his training, he remarks that both his rifle and his body must be worked upon "to the extremities of [his] being" and that neither is "left alone" (20). Athletic identity, therefore, emerges not through innate talent but through sustained bodily discipline. Central to this discipline is the cultivation of stillness. Unlike sports that celebrate speed and explosive movement, elite shooting demands complete bodily control. Bindra therefore observes, "My art is about stillness" (155) and later affirms that "Stillness is an art" (181). These statements redefine athletic excellence by locating achievement not in movement but in restraint. His humorous comparison with Lionel Messi---"Lionel Messi has great balance, but he should try what we do. Not move. He'll shake" (140)---reinforces the extraordinary bodily control required in shooting, where remaining motionless becomes a specialised athletic skill.

This discipline is achieved through the careful regulation of posture, breathing, and muscular control. Bindra describes himself as "a statue that breathes" (67), capturing the paradox of elite shooting, where the athlete must remain almost perfectly still while sustaining the physiological processes necessary for performance. Preparing for the Beijing Olympics, he reduced his breathing from sixteen or seventeen breaths per minute to only four or five (186) and even described himself as "a yogi with a gun" (186), linking shooting with meditative practices that emphasise concentration, controlled breathing, and inner calm. Yet this mastery is never effortless. Bindra candidly admits, "My body is disobedient" (67), acknowledging that bodily discipline requires constant training rather than natural ability. The importance of this discipline becomes most evident in the act of shooting itself. Bindra describes firing the rifle as "as soft as a butterfly's breath" (49), suggesting that success depends upon the smallest and most controlled bodily movement. Equally significant is his willingness to abandon an imperfect shot, lower the rifle, regain composure, and begin again (86). Each shot, which he calls "a separate masterpiece" (86), demands that the body and mind return to complete equilibrium. Athletic excellence, therefore, is presented not as a permanent achievement but as a state that must be continually recreated.

Bindra further rejects the notion of innate sporting talent, acknowledging that he was "not a natural shooter" (86). His achievements are instead represented as the outcome of

deliberate self-construction through discipline and perseverance. This philosophy extends beyond competition into everyday life. His participation in a ten-day Vipassana meditation retreat, which he describes as being "wrapped in silence, stillness and suffering" (236), reflects the continuity between sporting discipline and personal life. Similarly, his admission that "making my life difficult" was essential to mastering every aspect of shooting (20) reveals a conscious embrace of hardship as a means of self-transformation.

Taken together, these episodes demonstrate that the body in *A Shot at History* functions not merely as the physical vehicle of performance but as the foundation of the sporting self. Through disciplined stillness, regulated breathing, repetitive practice, and deliberate self-denial, Bindra transforms the body into an instrument of extraordinary precision. The autobiography therefore presents athletic identity not as a fixed or natural quality but as the outcome of continuous embodied discipline, where stillness becomes the essential condition for both sporting excellence and autobiographical selfhood.

A Self Made Through Others

Although the rifle and the disciplined body are central to Bindra's sporting identity, *A Shot at History* also demonstrates that the autobiographical self is constructed through relationships with others. This relational dimension is best understood through Paul John Eakin's concept of the **relational self**, which argues that identity emerges through human relationships rather than in isolation. Bindra's sporting self is therefore presented not as an individual achievement alone but as the product of guidance, mentorship, and retrospective reflection.

The earliest of these relationships is with his father, who introduces him to the world of shooting. Bindra recalls the smell of gun oil, his father's firearms, and watching him "dismantling them, sliding cleaning rods into the barrel" (38). His first shooting experience is equally significant: "He held the gun while I pulled the trigger" (38). The rifle, therefore, enters Bindra's life through paternal guidance, suggesting that the embodied relationship between athlete and equipment is itself founded upon a human relationship.

The influence of others continues through Bindra's coaches, particularly Gaby Buehlmann, whose role extends beyond technical instruction to emotional support. During a moment of anxiety, she calms him by placing a piece of chocolate in his mouth "like a mother feeding a distraught child" before she "metaphorically held my hand" (114). Her guidance shapes not only his technical ability but also the emotional resilience required for elite competition, reinforcing Eakin's argument that identity develops through relationships.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's distinction between the narrating self and the narrated self, further illuminates this process. The mature Bindra retrospectively interprets the experiences of his younger athletic self, transforming autobiography into an act of reflection rather than simple recollection. This relational construction is also reflected in the book's structure, which begins with the section "Fellow Shooters on Abhinav Bindra" before

Bindra's own narrative begins. His identity is therefore introduced and validated through the voices of others before he speaks for himself.

At the same time, the autobiography acknowledges the tension between relational support and individual responsibility. Bindra admits that the "individuality and solitude of shooting" appealed to him because "any success or failure rested entirely with me" (38). Although his father, coaches, and mentors shape his development, the decisive moment of performance remains solitary. Individual achievement, therefore, is made possible through relationships even when it is ultimately realised alone.

Taken together, these relationships demonstrate that the shooting self in *A Shot at History* is neither wholly individual nor entirely embodied. Instead, it emerges through the combined influence of family, mentorship, memory, and lived experience. Read alongside Eakin, Smith, and Watson, the autobiography presents identity as a collaborative construction in which the self is continually formed through its relationships with others.

The Autobiographical Pact and the Borrowed Pen

One important question remains in *A Shot at History*: whose voice speaks through the autobiography? Although the book is authored by Abhinav Bindra and co-written with Rohit Brijnath, it is presented as Bindra's life story. This collaborative authorship complicates Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact, which assumes that the author, narrator, and protagonist share the same identity (Lejeune 5). The presence of a second writer therefore raises questions about autobiographical authority.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's concept of the **coaxer** helps explain this collaboration. As the co-writer, Brijnath shapes Bindra's experiences into a coherent literary narrative, and his influence is evident in the fluency of the prose. Yet the autobiography ultimately remains grounded in Bindra's lived experience. The obsessive pursuit of perfection, the detailed descriptions of breathing, bodily control, and the intimate relationship with the rifle derive from the athlete himself. Brijnath refines the language, but authority over what is remembered and narrated remains with Bindra.

The autobiography also reinforces Bindra's authorial presence through deliberate acts of self-representation. His inclusion of literary references, such as the quotation from V. S. Naipaul, demonstrates that he actively shapes the intellectual framework through which his life is interpreted.

At the same time, the precise extent of Brijnath's contribution cannot be determined from the published text alone. Nevertheless, collaborative authorship is a well-established convention in sports autobiographies and does not invalidate Lejeune's autobiographical pact. Instead, it suggests that autobiographical authenticity depends less upon solitary authorship than upon the athlete's authority over the experiences being narrated.

Read in this way, *A Shot at History* preserves the integrity of the autobiographical self despite the presence of a co-writer. Brijnath provides the literary craft that shapes the narrative, while Bindra remains the primary source of memory, experience, and self-representation. The autobiography therefore presents an authentic sporting self whose voice is refined through collaboration rather than displaced by it.

When the Rifle Is Put Down

The strongest evidence for the rifle's integration into Bindra's identity appears after his Olympic victory. If the rifle has become an extension of the self, its absence should unsettle that self. *A Shot at History* confirms precisely this. Rather than presenting Olympic gold as the fulfilment of a lifelong dream, Bindra portrays it as the beginning of an unexpected emptiness. The achievement that had defined his life leaves him without direction once it has been realised.

Reflecting on the period after Beijing, Bindra recalls moving from "100 per cent obsession to zero obsession" and finding himself aimless even within the shooting range (232). Most revealing is his admission: "I didn't want my gun" (232). Earlier in the autobiography, the rifle had been described as an "extra limb" and the source of psychological security. After victory, however, the object around which his identity had been organised no longer provides purpose. He captures this paradox in the phrase "fulfilled and empty" (232), revealing that success brings emotional disorientation rather than lasting satisfaction.

Unlike conventional sporting memoirs that conclude with triumphant celebration, *A Shot at History* extends its narrative beyond the Olympic podium to explore the psychological consequences of achievement. This anti-triumphal ending strengthens the central argument of the autobiography. Throughout the narrative, Bindra constructs a self organised around disciplined training, the rifle, and the pursuit of a single goal. Once that goal is achieved, the structure that sustained his identity begins to dissolve. The emptiness that follows is therefore not a contradiction of success but the consequence of an identity so completely invested in a singular purpose.

Read alongside the preceding analysis, this conclusion demonstrates that the shooting self is neither fixed nor permanent. It is constructed through the interaction of body, rifle, discipline, and relationships, yet it must also be continually redefined when the conditions that once sustained it disappear. *A Shot at History* therefore ends not with the completion of identity but with the recognition that autobiographical selfhood remains an ongoing process of reconstruction.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that *A Shot at History* constructs Abhinav Bindra's autobiographical identity through the interconnected relationship between the body, the rifle, and human relationships. Rather than presenting the rifle as a mere sporting instrument, the autobiography consistently represents it as an extension of the embodied self. Through

disciplined training, stillness, and sustained practice, Bindra constructs a sporting identity that is embodied, relational, and continuously shaped through lived experience.

Drawing on life-writing theory, the study has examined this process through Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's concepts of the narrating self and the coxer, and Paul John Eakin's relational self. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body schema further explains how the rifle becomes incorporated into the athlete's bodily experience. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that Bindra's autobiographical self is actively constructed rather than simply recorded.

The study also contributes to scholarship on sports life writing by shifting attention towards embodiment. While Indian sports autobiographies have often been examined through gender, class, and nationalism, *A Shot at History* reveals how athletic identity is equally shaped through the intimate relationship between the body and sporting equipment. The autobiography further shows that this identity remains fragile. The emotional emptiness following Bindra's Olympic victory illustrates that a self organised around a single goal must be continually redefined once that goal has been achieved.

Finally, the approach adopted in this study may be applied to other sports autobiographies in which athletes develop similarly intimate relationships with specialised equipment. As Bindra reflects in the closing lines of the autobiography, he is "still seeking balance as a shooter. And as a man" (268). These words encapsulate the central argument of this study: athletic achievement and personal identity are inseparable, and the autobiographical self remains a continuous process of construction, negotiation, and renewal.

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