Naturally Not! Childhood, the Urban and Romanticism

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the idea that in the UK 'the urban' can be constructed as an intrinsically unsuitable space for childhood. My suggestion is that romantic constructions of 'nature', 'childhood', the 'rural' and the 'urban' remain active symbolic legacies within contemporary culture and these can make the presence of the 'natural child' in the 'unnatural urban' problematic. The rural and the urban are markedly differentiated spaces both materially and symbolically, and account must be taken of that, but these spaces are also constructed as single symbolic spaces in broad but nonetheless powerful ways. This does have implications for childhood in both urban and rural areas, particularly through the ways adults see, judge and direct children. Childhood also has to be seen as a differentiated category, but again there are deeply imbedded assumptions about 'what a child is' that will have effects across that differentiation. Dimensions of class, gender and ethnicity are considered because these appear to bring differing trajectories to the central narrative attempted here. I end with some thoughts on reconfiguring childhood-urban symbolic relations into a more positive form.

Keywords: childhood, urban, nature, romanticism

Introduction

In Britain, the late modern private child [is] predominantly the city child

(James, Jenks and Prout 1998, 51)

These are times of great anxiety about the fate of childhood (Higonnet 1998; Gittens 1998; Wallace 1995). From certain perspectives it seems that childhood is under pressure, being eroded (Humphries et al. 1988), or even coming to an end (Postman 1982). Poverty and exploitation have always "threatened" the status of childhood and these persist, often in new contexts, not least as stark contrasts to the emphasis put on the specialness and vulnerability of childhood in late modernity. Other concerns have grown over the latter decades of the twentieth century about the fate and very possibility of childhood in modern society. Fear for the safety of children

has driven them from the street into their bedrooms (Summers 1995) — from public to private space, where they are now "not so much free-range as battery-reared" (The Times, 5 Aug. 1995, cited by McNeish and Roberts 1995, 3). Children are subjected to all kinds of pressures and knowledges transmitted by broadcast and print media, information communication technologies, and (re)distributed through peer group networks.

All this, hand in hand with the commodification of childhood — see McKendrick et al. (1998a, 2000) on the expansion of commercial playspaces, and Aitken (2001) on childhood and globalisation — seems to threaten the *innocence* and separateness of childhood, the very conditions that are so essential to our late modern vision of what childhood is. The lives of children who have grown up in the last three decades or so seem different, even from the childhoods of their parents, and certainly of their grandparents. Their lives seem more confined, pressurised and commodified in many ways, and yet maybe they are liberated in other ways too — through access to information, technology and related distinctive lifestyles and identities.

In the UK, concerns for the conditions of modern childhood are particularly articulated through *visions of the child in the urban environment*. This perhaps is inevitable, given that in the UK the majority of children now live in urban rather than rural areas, and that the urban is clearly the site of issues of considerable concern in relation to childhood, such as children and traffic (Green 1995), rises in levels of asthma (Barr 1994), and so forth. Although there has been much discussion of the problematic relationship between childhood and urban space in such practical terms, my contention is that this is related to and deepened by symbolic disjunctures between notions of childhood and notions of the urban which are powerful but largely unacknowledged and unexamined. These disjunctures are to do with romantic inheritances that see childhood as a state of naturalness and innocence, and the urban as a cultural (often corrupted) edifice which has moved away from nature.

My interest then is in symbolic notions deeply rooted in our culture, and particularly in the possibility that "childhood" and the "urban" are, at best, uneasy companions, and, at worst, symbolically incompatible. This symbolism may underpin particular concerns about children in urban space,

but also the more general concerns for childhood already hinted at, as we have become an increasingly urban society. How we represent and are represented is at the heart of culture. If we want to readjust relationships within society (as in human — nature relationships, see Peterson 2001), we have to excavate and critically examine the understandings and assumptions (representations) with which we articulate the world. As Midgley states (1996, 2)

> *when things go badly [w]e must then somehow readjust our underlying concepts, we must shift the set of assumptions that we were brought up with. We must restate those existing assumptions — which are normally muddled and inarticulate — so as to find the source of the trouble. And this new statement must somehow be put in a usable form, a form which makes the necessary changes look possible.*

In the sections below I begin with some illustrations of the urban being constructed as a problematic space for childhood in adult discourse, particularly when it is held in contrast to the rural. I then explore some of the roots of this in romantic thinking which was influential in the development of modern views of childhood, nature, the rural and the urban. Thirdly, I consider the crisis of childhood as articulated through urban space. Fourthly, I briefly attempt to trace out some of the consequences of these constructions of childhood and the urban for children's lives. I then consider some qualifications of the main argument in terms of differentiated urban space, and issues of childhood class, gender and ethnicity. Finally, as a form of conclusion, I consider how understandings of childhood and the urban need to be symbolically liberated to form new urban space(s) for children.

But before embarking on the above, some further introductory explanations are required. These are on the significance of adult views of childhood; the way that the paper weaves together different elements of adult discourse; and on views of modern childhood which in some senses challenge the whole rural-urban dichotomy being used. This paper does not contain children's views or voices on their presence in urban space. It is about *adult expectations and assumptions* about children in urban (and rural) spaces. These are important because children are, more or less, under the control of adults, or have to live their lives under adult surveillance which may be either critical or approving. Unpacking these adult assumptions *is a critical part of understanding the forces which shape children's lives*. It is essential that "the Western ideological construction of childhood as a private domain of innocence, spontaneity, play, freedom and emotion" (Aitken 2001, 7) is critically explored in conjunction with its spatial implications.

The term "childhood," as in the quote above, is intended to indicate *collective cultural understanding of this condition of being*. When the terms "child/children" are used, these indicate more the lived lives of individual children within that institution. I acknowledge that both "child" and "childhood" are very broad terms. Although I will refer to differences in age, gender and ethnicity to some extent, here I am using "childhood" in the ways that it is used as a catch-all collective shorthand packed with particular, powerful meanings. I should add that this discussion, and much of the literature considered in it, addresses what have been called "the middle years of childhood," so, to some extent, this discounts the particular needs and circumstances of very young children and older teenagers.

The focus of this paper moves back and forth between (adult) imagination about the nature of childhood (what it is to be a child); concerns for the fate of childhood in today's society (the pressures childhood faces); and the reality of the "lived childhoods" of children. I am concerned with how these real and imagined childhoods intersect with real and imagined urban spaces, as this reflects how the "real" and "imagined" are dialectically bound together in the ongoing (re)construction of lived childhoods in urban areas. Consequently, this paper moves between various elements of discourse about childhood, such as ethnographic material, media, literary and academic texts, because that is how discourses construct and conduct the meanings and representations at work within society (see Mills 1997).

Finally in this opening section I pay heed to discussions on the changing positions of childhood in society and how it is defined. Key issues here are the roles of technology and the "globalisation of childhood" (Aitken 2001). These can weave new childhood practices from information, money, commodity, and lifestyle flows, and radically disrupt settled ideas of childhood identity and childhood space. Over the last decades of the twentieth century broadcast media have increasingly catered for children, beaming into urban and rural homes alike and further breaking down the dichotomy between them. More recently, internet technology, mobile communication technologies and cultures of computer games have continued this trend. The home space and even the school space can be reconfigured by children forming new assemblages with these technologies (Lee 2001), and access to public outdoor space(s) maybe be reconfigured. Rural-based children (Valentine et al. 2000) and urban-based children may have access to such resources and this again blurs the distinction between these spaces and thus challenges ideas of their appropriateness for childhood. These are powerful developments which *are* changing the nature of childhood and childhood space. But, as the following material will show, adult ideas about childhood and the spaces it is lived out in still ring with ideas of innocence, nature, fear and

threat, and these are still often articulated in the symbolic frameworks of urban and rural, and it is this which sustains their influence in the shaping of children's lives.

Constructing Urban Space as Unsuitable for Childhood

Colin Ward (1990), in the opening to *The Child in the Country*, said that part of the motivation for writing that book was that he kept encountering negative views of urban childhood and the associated deprivations which *may* accompany it, which were based on an often unstated, but implicitly negative, comparison with some ideal country environment for childhood.

Others have made sure that this negative comparison of the city with the countryside has not remained implicit. For example, Marion Shoard in her famous book, *The Theft of the Countryside* (1980, 192), states "the countryside is of course a boundless treasure-house of opportunities for creative play, *and one for which no real substitute has ever been found.*" For Shoard the traditional countryside provided space, freedom to access space, and all the props and pageants of nature for children to engage with in innocent, healthy, collective and safe play (Jones 1997). The need of children to somehow engage with nature and wild places (Moore 1997, 1989; Nabhan and Trimble 1992), and to be able to find and make their own space(s) (Sobel 1990), intuitively seems more likely to be satisfied in the countryside. The urban, in its unnaturalness, cannot seemingly offer these key ingredients of romantic childhood. Worse still, the urban offers greater threat and risk to children. As Scott et al. (1998, 700) point out

> one crucial aspect of the spatial distribution of risk anxiety [of parents about children] is the difference between urban and rural locations. There are both material and imaginary differences between the city and the country [.] For example, the idea of the city as dangerous spaces haunted by the spectres of crime and violence versus the romanticised and nostalgic views of the countryside.

Such ideas are deeply embedded in popular culture in the UK and it is easy to find media accounts of parents-to-be, or parents with young children, moving from the urban to the rural to give their kids a country upbringing and a "proper childhood." For example, here is the journalist Nicci Gerrard (who covers childhood issues for one of the main broadsheet papers) writing about deciding to move out of London once she and her partner had children. "I worry about schools, lorries, asthma, and syringes in the sandpit [ ] *The desire to remove children to green spaces is primitive, huge, sharply irrational*" (Gerrard 1999, 1, my emphasis).

Here is another journalist, Ronald White, commenting sarcastically on such moves. He suggests that childless middle class couples are happy in the city but

> *The children of the inner-city middle classes have barely made it out of the maternity ward before their parents have decided to move to the country. The city is so polluted, you see, and there's the traffic and the schools to consider and children these days just can't play in the streets any more, and they've just got no room to grow, and no daughter of mine is growing up without seeing a cow. For a time, everything goes well. Young children love the countryside, the fresh air fills their lungs, the beauty of the wild flowers delights their innocent eyes* (White 1995, 10).

Now we hear from one such couple who made this kind of move, relocating from London to the Yorkshire countryside:

> *Why did we do it? The biggest reason was the kids. We lived in Stratford, east London, and there was nowhere for them to ride a bike, kick a ball, or play outside on their own. [ ] There was the big fire at King's Cross. Susan suggested it, living in the country for the kids' sake. [ ] The contrast with London is giant sized, open spaces, hills, and trees. The kids can walk to school. It's been so good for them. They are calmer, softer, more polite* (Mackenzie Thorpe cited in Tredre 1996, 19).

This is another mother whose family moved from London:

> *what we wanted for our children was a proper childhood [,] so we moved to a small village in Cornwall. [ ]Within a few months, Jessica, now six, had turned from the 'nervous' child she had been in London into a happy, carefree girl. Both she and her sister, Louella, three, have a confidence and an innocence that is often missing in children raised in an urban environment* (Claire Roberts cited in Gordon 1996).

Finally, Lauren Young (1995) when recounting her family's move from London to rural Dorset, also put consideration of the benefits for her two children (aged three and nine), at the heart of her narrative. She concluded (two years after the move), *there's an innocence and sweetness about country children that our eldest had almost lost* [in the city] *now he's quite transformed* (my emphasis).

I run these examples together to show how the themes of *nature* and *innocence* repeat through them and how the urban is seen to deny these essential ingredients of childhood. They do raise practical and real concerns about parenting and about risks and problems for children's lives, but they also play on

the idea that the city does not offer the chance of a "proper childhood."

Jonathan Miller's (1997, 8) assertion that "a new generation is fleeing the city in quest of rural bliss and most of those streaming from London will tell you that they are doing it for the children ... *As part of our national mythology, we hold the country to be a good thing for children*" (my emphasis) is a good summary of the discourses illustrated above. They clearly reflect the belief that the countryside is a more appropriate environment for children to grow, learn and play in than the urban. The depth of these associations is demonstrated by the construction of the countryside as a place of refuge and healing from the pressures and mental and physical ailments of city life for children. This notion has manifested itself in numerous ways. It has been vividly and categorically portrayed in books, famously, for example, in Burnett's classic children's book, *The Secret Garden*, and it has also inspired organisations dedicated to taking deprived urban children on rural visits and holidays (Jones 1997).

These persistent media and literary discourses not only reflect the presence of such ideas in society but also contribute to their ongoing propagation. They interact with and support lay discourses (Jones 1995) of everyday rural lives where constructions of the rural as a better, *more appropriate*, environment for children can also be found. This has emerged strongly in a number of qualitative research initiatives in the UK which have addressed adult constructions of bringing up children in the countryside. The essence of such attitudes is captured in Bell's account of the village of Childerley where,

> many Childerleyans also talked about the countryside as a better place for the family. The phrases 'better for the children' and 'good for the family' are conversational cowslips for the village. [One villager told Bell] 'It's been really great bringing up kids in a natural environment. **They're sort of natural kids, and I think that's better. I wouldn't want to have brought them up inside (a city),** and they're real happy kids. They love it' (Bell 1994, 93, my emphasis).

Valentine's (1997a) research, which focused on adult constructions of child safety in rural areas, produced a number of interview extracts in which parents talked in very similar terms to those set out above. Similar sentiments can be found in research reported in Jones (2000) and Little and Austin (1996). In the research that I conducted the striking notion emerged that parents felt that children living in the countryside could remain children for longer than they would if living in an urban area. One mother told me how she had been waiting for her teenage children to cease being children through what amounts to a loss of innocence, but how living in the village has postponed this growing up:

> *"I just feel that Robert and Liz — who are now fifteen and a half — for the last two or three years I have been thinking, well, this is the last time they are going to have a good old fashioned summer where they could climb trees and have picnics in the field — well its gone on a lot longer than I expected it would, and on the one hand they are growing up, and Liz is quite sophisticated and quite trendy, and when she is in school [in nearby town], I think she is indistinguishable from her friends who are town kids, most of them. But when she comes home she kind of puts that off and goes back to being a tomboy."*

Another mother similarly claimed, "they do end up growing up rather quicker in the city... ours were quite happy to grow up quite slowly."

In Valentine's (1997a, 6) research, such notions of the prolonged innocence and hence childhood of children in rural areas also emerged, with one of her interview subjects saying "I think they can be kids longer can't they" [in the countryside]. Valentine was also told how children would change their behaviour, and the age of their behaviour, according to whether were in the town or the country. One woman had noticed that her nieces, when in the village, would "play games, silly games, and laugh and have fun, whereas they never act like that in Chesterfield [local town] ... It's nice because they come here and go back a stage, and have a bit of fun and play childish games, which they should be playing at twelve you know" (Valentine 1997a, 6).

In these cases there are indications that parents regard their children as, in effect, oscillating from being still child-like when in the country to being grown up when in the town. It is as though the innocence of childhood is more at home, and can survive longer, in rural settings where children have contact with "nature" and are away from the problems and unnatural sophistications of the urban. As innocence and naturalness are at the heart of our view of children (see Gittens 1998, 7), anything that challenges or compromises these are likely to be seen to be in a problematic relationship with childhood itself, and that, essentially, is the tension that exists between childhood and urban space.

Romantic Legacies:
Childhood, Nature and the Urban

Having shown that tensions between ideas of childhood and urban space can be found in lay and popular discourses, I now turn to the legacies of romantic thinking that remain critical in our views of nature, the rural, the urban, and childhood; for here may lie some of the sources of the disjunctures I am concerned with.

The Natural, Innocent Child

There are a number of commentaries on the nature and histories of modern childhood which stress the key role romantic constructions have played in its creation (see Higonnet 1998). Jenks (1996, 98) suggests "it was Rousseau who promulgated the manifesto of the child in modernity." This new view of childhood as a state of innocence was strongly developed in the work of Blake, Wordsworth and Dickens (Coveney 1982), and had far-reaching effects on educational theories (Brown 1993), and the subsequent portrayals of children in literature (Drabble and Stringer 1987). James et al. (1998, 13) find that it is this model of childhood that has fed into cultures of policy provision for childhood:

> "The innocent child [] is set against the model of the evil child, encapsulating far more of what we have come to imagine as modern, Western childhood ... In the romantic images of Blake and Wordsworth can be found the source of public standards for our demeanour towards children and for our expectations of policy and provision in relation to them."

The romantics invested so heavily in symbolisms of childhood because they saw it as a natural state. Nature, far from being a realm of fear and desolation, was a repository of attributes that the romantics turned to as objects of desire in the face of Enlightenment development of rationality, industrialism and urbanism (Macnaghten and Urry 1998). Childhood, like nature, under the romantic gaze, became a state of innocence, naturalness, purity, spontaneity, goodness, naive creativeness and wisdom, and closeness to the sublime and the godhead. It carried the heavy freight of representing the best of, and hopes for, the human condition. To grow up was to grow away from this vaunted state. As Day (1996, 57) observes, "Wordsworth regrets the passing of a childhood state when the immortal origins of the soul seemed everywhere apparent."

In accordance with this new vision of the naturalness of childhood, children began to be moved into the symbolic spaces of nature (Higonnet 1998). In art, children were increasingly depicted "outdoors, often close to animals and the larger natural world" (Regents of the University of California 1995). Blake's *Songs of Innocence* (first published 1789), key proto-expressions of romantic sensibility, are a synthesis of nature and childhood set in the pastoral spaces of the rural. Rousseau's pivotal work *Emile* is about a boy being raised in "rural seclusion" where his naturalness can flourish (Day 1996) — an alternative to then established models of raising and educating children through discipline and confinement. Children's literature, which burgeoned along with the development of romantic modern childhood, was dominated by rural and natural themes and spaces (Hunt 1995), for these were the symbolic spaces where childhood imaginations and children themselves were seen to be most at home. Given that nature and the countryside also became romantic (or related transcendental) constructions (Cronon 1996; Macnaghten and Urry 1998), it is hardly surprising that romantic notions of the innocence of childhood came to be at home in these spaces.

The Innocent Child in the City

The corollary of romantic views of innocent nature/countryside was romantic antithesis to modernity, particularly as materialised through the growth of industrial urbanism (Macnaghten and Urry 1998). Blake contrasted his *Songs of Innocence* with *Songs of Experience* (first published 1795) and in one of these, the poem "London" he portrays his vision of the city and the child in the city.

> I wandered thro' each charter'd street,
> Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
> And mark in every face I meet
> Marks of weakness, marks of woe.
>
> In every cry of every Man,
> In every Infant's cry of fear,
> In every voice, in every ban,
> The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.
>
> How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
> Every black'ning Church appalls;...
>   (Blake 1990, 38).

Throughout the nineteenth century, as the notion of childhood as a state of innocence and naturalness was growing to be a dominant cultural currency, children were increasingly seen living apart from nature in the expanding urban centres, and their presence there was becoming problematic. The "sustained popularity of Dickensian imagery" (James et al. 1998, 48) of childhood in the city testifies to the unease that this engendered. Dickens, of course, was an acute social observer and campaigner on the great ills that were apparent in urban areas at this time. Child poverty and deprivation was at a startling level. Ackroyd (2000) charts a brief history of childhood poverty in London, showing the massive and problematic presence of "children on the street." They were sometimes confined "because, in their natural and liberated state, they were considered to be wild [] 'ill natured cattel' " (650), but they were also described and depicted in their poverty. Such depictions prompted, eventually, some welfare initiatives and a slow creep of legislative reform (James et al. 1998). But it must be noted that child poverty and deprivation was not purely an urban problem at time (Horn 1985). The evidence of these particular problems of urban childhood served to confirm and deepen the problematic relationship

between childhood and urban space which formed under romantic sensibilities. Ackroyd (2000), summarising the relationship between childhood and London, states "the death of children is a constant thread in the history of London ... *In more than one sense, youth is a stuff which will not endure in the confines of the city*" (639, my emphasis).

It is also important to note that the urban was not only constructed as a problematic space for childhood, but also, because of its "denial" of nature, as an intrinsically inferior space in comparison to the rural. In the nineteenth century, Ruskin, who took up romanticism's focus on nature, lamented the continuing rise of *the industrial city* (Macnaghten and Urry 1998, 13) which ensured that cherished nature "was increasingly taken to exist on [the] margins, away from the centre of industrial society" (ibid). Under romantic discourses (and earlier pastoral discourses, see Williams 1985), literary and artistic expression persistently valorised the rural over the urban and rendered the former in some sort of idyllic form which became bound up with notions of English national identity (Jones 1995; Cloke 1994; Bunce 1994). Scruton (1998) and Barnett (1998) explore this urban-rural dialectic in some detail, and both show how a bias towards the rural and away from the urban was a dominant theme in English culture. Barnett (1998) states that under a past "malevolent pastoralism," "the towns and cities where most of us live were declared a no man's land" (331). He goes on that, "the influence of this attitude has lasted to our own time. Its effects have been pernicious. It casts the towns into an abyss" (332). Or, as Stana Nedanic has it, "in the popular psyche, England is still a rural place; our towns and cities *are intrusions in the Garden of Eden*" (cited by Muir 2000, 99, my emphasis). The symbolic flows of this "anti-urbanism" (Lowe et al. 1995), where "seven out of ten Britons dream of living in the country" (Chesshyre 1995, 29) are clearly implicated within processes of counterurbanisation (Halfacree 1994).

As most children now grow up in urban settings I am trying to tease out the idea of a tension that may stem from this innocent, most cherished condition of childhood, being confined to an apparently culturally inferior space, which may also subvert the very nature of childhood itself. Berg (1972, 64) baldly states "London hates children," because of what she sees as the lack of contact with nature, because of the fear which confines them, and because of the control placed on their naturalness. One consequence of all this, as James et al. (1998) point out, was the shift of children's place in the city from the public to the private domain. Children were increasingly interned from the street for their protection, and the public spaces of the city became adult spaces, spaces of experience and even corruption, which were unsuitable for the innocence of children. But the urban, as Ward (1978) and

Moore (1986) have depicted in vivid detail, can offer a rich environment of possibilities for childhood (including contact with nature), and to this I will return, but somehow such richness can be tainted in adult constructions and this affects the ways in which children can engage with urban environments.

The Crisis of Childhood and Contemporary Urban Space

In his seminal work *The Child in the City*, Ward cites Paul Goodman's declaration that "the city under modern conditions, can no longer be dealt with practically by children" (Ward 1978, vii), and he dedicates his book to studying and retrieving that situation. But in the decades since then the problematics of this relationship have only deepened and have expanded into the more general idea of a "crisis of modern childhood."

In response there has been a flurry of recent research which aims to study the relationship between childhood and contemporary urban space. The "Childhood, Urban Space and Citizenship: Child Sensitive Urban Regeneration" research which has been conducted as part of the ESRC Research Programme, "Children 5-16: Growing into the 21st Century" (1997 to 1999), begins with the premise, *Environmental planners have become increasingly aware of the 'impossibility' of urban space for children* (ESRC 1999). This "impossibility" seems chiefly ascribed to parental fears for children's safety. Yet this research is mainly child-centred, focusing on the views and attitudes of children (see Valentine 1999), and also focuses on the material nature of the urban environment and how children engage with it, with the intention of feeding suggestions on urban design into the policy process. The findings from this research programme are now being published, notably in respect of this paper, O'Brien et al. (2000); and Matthews et al. (2000). Both these projects show complex pictures of differing children's interactions with differing urban contexts. Matthews et al. (2000) report that their research *did* find children using "street space" in ways that challenge the notion of "the progressive retreat from the 'street' by urban children" (63), but also how this is a increasingly contested and problematic relationship. They also conclude that fears about the shrinking of children's access to public urban space may have been overstated, but paint a very differentiated picture where access is by no mean straightforward (O'Brien et al., 2000). They talk of parental anxiety and how "parents worry about most aspects of their children's lives" (in urban areas) (14). They conclude "parental anxieties should not be dismissed no matter how irrational they might appear to be" (16). These anxieties that O'Brien et al. consider are not merely "irrational," or indeed, "rational" risk assessment, but stem, in part, from the symbolic tensions I am exploring here.

The UNESCO-MOST Programme "Growing Up in Cities" is research which is also child centred. Percy-Smith (1999) in his research from this programme asks what are the consequences of adults' "alienating and hostile attitudes to children's presence in urban public space." He explores the negotiations, subversions and conflicts surrounding children's access to urban space. The research reveals how "the myths and stereotypes of childhood [ ] impact upon young people's local geographies" and calls for community development initiatives to transform these adult constructions of children's use of urban neighbourhoods. My concern here is with these hostile attitudes, the *symbolic unease* that may contribute to it, and the spatial consequences which are reflected in Connolly and Ennew's (1996, 133) observation that "to be a child outside adult supervision, visible on city centre streets, is to be out of place."

Urban Images and Urban Narratives

One major factor which exacerbates the tensions between ideas of childhood and contemporary urban space is the persistent use of urban images to illustrate concerns about the "crisis in contemporary childhood." For example, in the various campaigns run by Barnardos raising awareness of such issues as childhood poverty, neglect and abuse, bleak urban backdrops are often deployed. Similarly, in a recent anti-child-abuse television campaign run by the NSPCC, a young girl is shown being bullied by her father at home, then she is shown walking to school, lonely and sad, through a *bleak, natureless, uncomforting urban wilderness*. In one way this use of urban imagery is hardly surprising given that the majority of children now live in urban areas, that some problems are particularly prominent in urban settings, and that this is the kind of imagery most likely to mobilise public concern. However, a whole range of studies has been conducted into childhood problems in rural areas, e.g., on poverty (Davis and Ridge 1997), isolation (Hargrave 1991), and the loss of spaces in which to play (National Children's Play and Recreation Unit 1992; Ward 1990; Shoard 1980; National Playing Fields Association 1984; Santianiello 1978), often couching their arguments in terms of "needing to look at the reality behind the idyll," for example (Marshall 1993).

Although the urban clearly presents challenges to lived childhoods, many of the pressures modern childhood faces, be it poverty, neglect, access to knowledges which challenge ideas of innocence, are not intrinsically urban or rural. My concern is that the persistent use of urban iconography to illustrate society-wide problems of childhood is bound up with, and further reinforces, the notion that the urban is imagined as an unsuitable environment for childhood. Another example is a special report entitled "Childhood: An Inno-
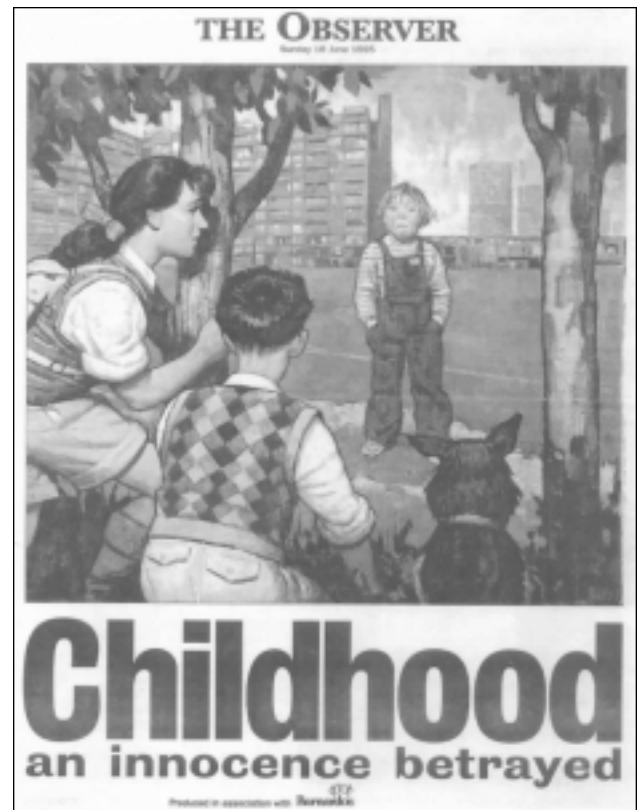

Figure 1 Childhood: An Innocence Betrayed. Courtesy of Guardian Newspaper Group and Barnardos. Illustration by Paul Slater.

cence Betrayed," published by The Observer in conjunction with Barnardos. The front cover of this publication, in a large, powerfully drawn depiction, shows healthy, happy, wholesome children gazing from the past and from some leafy space into the uncertain, unhappy world (tower blocks in the background) of a modern urban child (see Figure 1). The implication being that to place children in such an urban space is in itself a "betrayal of innocence."

Rayner (1999, 7) writes that "it is fashionable to declare that today's generation of young children have been robbed of their innocence; that in the *urban* cracks and shadows lie terrible threats of which they must be made aware" (my emphasis). The argument he develops is that the fear generated in parents by well-meaning campaigns on the dangers facing children can be more damaging to childhood than the threats themselves. But it is significant that he too sees these portrayals of childhood concern as specifically urban-based. Through the 1990s in the UK some of the stream of discourse depicting childhood in certain urban areas has portrayed it in plainly nightmarish terms where innocence is irrevocably compromised. This calls into question the urban as a space for romantic childhood and can also give rise to other, darker, constructions of childhood.

The End of Innocence

The nature of childhood can be transformed by the nature of the space it is set in. Children in "rural," "natural" settings can be "wild" and yet retain their innocent status, while "wild" children in urban areas can be transformed into something else, something at odds with the notion of innocent romantic childhood. In my research one mother who had moved from an inner-city area to a rural village said

> *well, you see, he [Jack] couldn't be a wild thing in Crompton Road [their old address] without people telling him off and whatever, whereas out here he can, can't he. They can't do wild things in the city can they without, without sort of damaging things. Jack running around with a huge stick [here] sort of, it looks funny rather than menacing doesn't it?*

Given that childhood has become more urbanised, both because most children now live in urban areas, and because certain technology-borne cultures of childhood emanate from urban culture, it is perhaps inevitable that our romantic views of natural, innocent childhoods has come under pressure. The question then arises as to what happens to the children who do remain in urban areas, and to those who do retain a presence in public urban space. Is the idea of "the end of childhood" a consequence of the urbanisation of childhood?

Constructions of childhood in the city may abandon the idea of innocence and reengage with the notion of the Dionysian (evil) child (see Jenks 1996). In cities there is not only fear of what might happen to children who are at large, but also fear of what children might "get up to" or become. In the mix of the city, control of the experiences and knowledges that children might engage with is uncertain and difficult. Conversely, the notion of the rural childhood idyll (from a parental point of view) may be as much about controlling children's experiences as it is about allowing them freedom (Jones 2000).

"Little Devils" Playing Strange Games

In urban space, children who are at large may become the "little devils" that Jill Valentine (1996) and Marina Warner (1994) have discussed. This is the construction of children that flares when the idea of "little angel" is somehow kicked away and the adult emotional symbolic investment in childhood collapses sourly. Contemporary reworkings of the Dionysian child — which according to Jenks (1996) predated and has since shadowed Apollonian childhood — reform with a vengeance.

Children can become "vermin" on inner-city estates, as in the story of "Ratboy" (press reports about a child criminal found hiding in central heating ducting) (Independent Newspaper 1993), and revert to "Lord of the Flies Savagery"

according to Prince Charles (Kay 1993, 7). They play strange, dangerous (fatal) games like "lift surfing" (Wainright 1997, 7); throwing junk off tower block roofs (with lethal consequences) (Wainright 1995, 4); vandalism and arson (Davis 1995, 4). The Bulger murder case, often held up as an icon of this new schizophrenic, uneasy view of childhood, and as an icon of urban childhood turned evil (see Franklin and Petley 1996 on UK press reporting of the case), was depicted through the quintessentially urban medium of a grainy CCTV tape of a shopping precinct. City children can also become "too knowing," too sophisticated and clued up (Freely 1993). The urban environment is seen, not only for its problems, but also for its sophistication and its complexity, as a hostile environment for the innocence of childhood, and therefore for childhood itself.

As the *intensities* of many urban spaces increases they may become even more at odds with the presences of childhood in symbolic and practical terms. Such intensities are articulated by the increasing speed of life and the density of capital. This is manifested most obviously in increased road traffic and also in the increased "purity" of consumption spaces — an idea which revolves around spaces becoming much more tightly defined and controlled, with unwanted elements (people, material, activities) being excluded. (See Sibley 1995, who discusses this idea specifically in relation to the exclusion of children and other "others.") Thus the residential streets and the commercial centres — never natural places, but maybe places of defacto play and childhood access in times past — have become more intensely monomorphic (Jones 2000); in other words, devoted to a singular primary use to the exclusion of other, secondary, unofficial uses, such as playspaces for children.

This sense of childhood being excluded from urban public space by these two symbolic force fields (as angels or devils), is articulated in detail by Matthews et al. (2000, 63), who state "when 'read' together, these negative discourses account for a supposedly profound feature of contemporary life," (63) — the withdrawal of children from public urban space. However they also add that "although there is evidence for a general exodus of this kind [ ] the experience is not universal" (63-64). The idea of differentiating this general analysis is taken up later, but first I conclude the overall theme of children in urban space by considering some consequences of the problematics I have explored.

Some Consequences for Urban Childhoods

There are real consequences for the lives of urban (and rural) children that stem from these imaginative symbolic edifices, and for the practices of the spaces (rural and urban) as well. Cultures of fear and of curfew (in urban areas) are the

most pressing, but other issues follow in their wake; particularly the commodification of play, the flight from the city for some, and the ongoing negotiation of the urban as a childhood space for others. Thus I am revisiting themes already explored, but trying to extend them towards considering their more practical outcomes in everyday life.

Fear of/for Children in Urban Space

The fears held by adults, parents and guardians for the safety of children in their charge seem particularly articulated in urban contexts. There my be very practical reasons for such fear and a heightened (over)sensitivity to risk (Furedi, 2001) but this is reinforced by the unease about the appropriateness of urban space for natural, innocent childhood. Reports such as Summers (1995) indicate that fear for children's safety or status in all environments is growing. But it is in urban contexts in particular that this generates cultures of control, curfew and surveillance (see below) which are seen as restricting the freedom of childhood to play and to live outside parental/guardian supervision. In the rural village where I conducted research (Jones 2000), some children (even as young as 5) still have quite a degree of spatial freedom, and parents were specific in comparing this to an expectation and experience of more constrained urban childhoods.

The constraint of childhood due to fear leads to concerns about children's physical and mental health, their development, their isolation from other children, and about "family health" (as parental fear results in constant rounds of anxious parent — child negotiations and conflicts about children's independence). There is also concern how this opens up the potential for the commodification of play and playspaces (see below) and childhood more generally. Those children who *are* at large in urban space can become objects of fear and suspicion themselves; their image shifting from "little angel" to "little devil" in a setting where the innocence of the former is hard to sustain. This leads on to very real effects of control and confinement of children which is at odds with their rights and their well-being.

Cultures of Curfew, Exclusion and Surveillance

The consequences of the above are the growing official and unofficial cultures of curfew, exclusion and surveillance, where childhood is spatially and temporally over-ordered, restricted and monitored, and children are "minded out of their minds" and "trapped inside" (Hugill 1998). The state can now openly question whether (urban) parents are good parents if they don't know where their children are and what they are doing at all times. Certain sections of the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act can impose Parenting Orders on parents to "encourage them to exercise a greater degree of control over [their] child" (Lee 2001, 67). Admittedly this is often in rela-

tion to controlling juvenile crime and truancy, but Lee adds that other related sections of the Act dealing with Child Curfews "effectively turns children's unsupervised presence on the streets into an instance of antisocial behaviour" (68). Aitken (1994, 58-59), considering more private regimes in the US remarks, "caregivers are increasingly keeping children as old as twelve indoors unless their play outdoors is supervised." As indicated above, this confinement may have implications for children's physical and even psychological well-being. For example, concerns over children's mental health were raised in reports stemming from the "Bright Futures" initiative of the Mental Health Foundation (Brindle 1999); this joins a long list of reports that focus on the health implications of unprecedented levels of control and confinement of children (see Brindle 1997).

Commodification of Childhood Space and Play

Dissatisfaction with play provision in urban areas is well documented (see McNeish and Roberts 1995). There are concerns that this, coupled with the restriction of children's opportunities to use urban public space, opens up markets for the private provision of play. This is an area which is now attracting research attention (see McKendrick et al. 1998a, 1998b, 2000). The nature of these spaces, how children and adults see and use them, and how play — one of the basic rights of childhood (National Voluntary Council for Children's Play 1994) — becomes subject to issues of affordability and accessibility are subjects of deep concern. In the climate of general concern for the spatial and temporal overordering of childhood and the erosion of its spontaneity and otherness, this form of private play provision adds yet further dimensions to these questions.

Flight from the City

As the earlier quotes from Miller, Gerrard and others show, processes of counter-urbanisation are in part driven by the desire to take children away from the urban and to apparently more appropriate settings. But what are the implications of these movements away from the city to the countryside? What does this do to both types of space socially, economically and culturally? These are significant questions which need close consideration. Certain rural areas are being gentrified and house prices remorselessly driven up by middle class in-migration driven partly by the quest for the ideal family/childhood setting, isolating poorer families and fragmenting services. In urban areas it will add to what I am calling "environmental negativity" (see below). But there are also other ways of fleeing the city, by retreating into policed and protected private spaces — houses, private streets (see Sibley 1995), the car, exclusive schools and services, which begin to ghettoise both the exclusive and excluded spaces.

Environmental Negativity of Parents and Children

What are the implications of all this for those who remain in the city? The term "environmental negativity" is meant to capture the idea that some urban-dwelling parents and children live with the notion that in some ways it is an inferior space for childhood. This may put a destructive strain and direction of expectation on their relationship with that environment. For example, Cullingford, Professor of Education at the University of Huddersfield, conducted a series of interviews with children aged 6–9, asking them about their perceptions of the urban environment in which they lived, and found that "Children express deep suspicions of towns — not as an idea but as a reality, as experienced by them directly and vicariously ... *They long for the contrasting idea of the countryside*" (1994, 5, my emphasis).

Differentiated Urban Childhoods

The urban can be simultaneously a single symbolic space and a complex, differentiated set of spaces. As Raymond Williams (1985) points out in his analysis of the "city" and the "country," these are widely differentiated forms, but "in and through these differences, all the same, *certain images and associations persist*" (1-2, my emphasis). Thus far I have focused on the urban as a single space, but now I turn to the idea of the urban as differentiated childhood space for here are other detailed material, social, economic and symbolic fabrics which will effect children's lives. Distinctions need to be made between different types of urban space, and between the differing experiences that children's age, gender, class, culture and family circumstances may bring.

It is clear that urban spaces can vary from highly wealthy enclaves (Sibley 1995) to so-called "sink" estates, and from sprawling leafy suburbs to densely packed terraced streets. All these are woven through with the urban patterns of public space, transport networks, shopping areas, commercial/ industrial areas and so forth. These render the city into differing spaces and micro-spaces which will have their own dynamics as landscapes for childhood. For example, Shoard (2000) stresses the potential of urban fringe land for childhood. O'Brien et al. (2000) consider the "socio-spatial geographies" of areas of inner London, outer London and a lower-density satellite town near London, where differences in street patterns, housing type and density and traffic control influenced the children's geographies of these areas. But, returning to the idea of the urban as a single space, attention needs to be paid to how meanings and practice move complexly between these scales of construction and how these areas might interact with each other.

Parts of urban environments may be leafy, wealthy and privileged spaces. But their possible proximity to and con-nections with other, even dystopian areas of the urban means that perceived "impurity" can seep from one kind of space to another, thus making the creation of "pure space" (Sibley 1995), for childhood in the city problematic. Even if some urban enclaves are protected by security gates and even guards (see Sibley 1995), it remains impossible to hermetically seal spaces, or children's lives. For example, in a recent TV drama *King Girl*, a child living in a middle-class, well-ordered part of town encounters bullying at her school by children from a poor, run-down estate (where "wild children" was a key image). One day her tormentors follow her home to her respectable street and house and urinate through the letterbox much to her and her parents' shock and horror. This dramatic illustration shows how very real concerns about such issues as bullying, drugs, crime, and even traffic danger and air quality, can permeate through the differing spaces of the urban.

When it comes to differentiating childhood itself, significant factors would seem to be class, wealth, ethnicity, gender, age, ableness, and family form. Here I briefly anticipate three of these.

Class. In many of the accounts of parents leaving the urban, it is the voices of middle-class parents which are heard. There are two immediate observations to be made from this. Firstly, it is the middle classes who are likely to have the cultural and economic collateral to be able to make this move. Would other families make the same choice if they also had the resources to do so? There are accounts of how working-class urban families found the British countryside an alien and uninviting place during the evacuation of children in the Second World War (see for example, Fitter 1945, 208-9). Secondly, although middle-class families are likely to come from more favoured urban areas, some still make the choice to move to the countryside for the sake of their children. Those who live in less favoured urban areas, and thus those with perhaps more reason to look to the imagined and real countryside as an alternative, are those least able to make such a choice. For those families who remain in urban settings the resources available to them in terms of location and economic power will offer markedly different opportunities for childhood.

Ethnicity. The English countryside has often been labelled, and more recently analysed, as a "white space" (see Agyeman and Spooner 1997). This has made the notion of "the rural idyll" an extremely sensitive issue in terms of ethnicity. This has been highlighted by the work of Ingrid Pollard, a black British woman who has depicted and analysed her own presence in the English countryside though words and images. "Pollard makes it clear that while others may feel relaxed in such an environment she feels a sense of unease and dread" (Creswell 1996, 167). According to

Agyeman and Spooner (1997, 204, 206), ethnic populations in the UK are mainly based in urban centres and are "infrequent users of the countryside." They are even "overwhelmingly associated with the inner city: their landscape is of Brixton and Toxteth" (Creswell 1996, 167). Questions thus arise about childhood framed in these differing cultural milieus. Are then the urban and rural, and the place of children within them, imagined differently from these perspectives? Does the rural present itself as "impossible space" from the point of view of certain ethnic minority families with children? And how does this affect their constructions of the urban itself?

Gender. Male and female children are constructed as having differing competencies and vulnerabilities that can interact with constructions of differing kinds of spaces (see Jones 1999; Valentine 1997b). This can generate complicated and contested configurations of children and particular sorts of space. In certain settings, somewhat counter-intuitively given their apparent vulnerability, girls may be sanctioned more freedom than boys in that they can be seen by parents as more "sensible" or cautious than boys, and thus less likely to meet or cause problems. Girls, according to Valentine (1997b, 57), are seen as having "greater self-awareness, sexual maturity and a sense of responsibility." They are reputed to "grow up" faster than boys and leave childhood, and become more sophisticated, earlier. This means they might be considered more controlled and controllable in the urban. The threat female children pose to urban space may be construed as less (but there *are* instances of reports of "Girl Gangs" in urban areas). Male children, who are often constructed as wild, as "forces of nature," may be more at home in the nature spaces of the rural (Jones 1999) where they can "let off steam" or "run wild" without the negative implications this may bring in urban space. Matthews et al. (2000, 77) report that "McRobbie notes the continuing 'invisibility' of girls in *debates* about public space" and through their research they emphasise that girls do use street space and in a number of ways which are gender-specific. But Matthews et al. (ibid) end by saying "there is still work to be done in order to render the position of young girls more visible in the urban landscape" (77).

I suggest that these differences in childhood contexts will cross-cut with each other and with other factors and will render specific constructions of differing children in (differing) urban space(s). For example O'Brien et al. (2000, 12) show in their research that it was "older Asian girls" "who were particularly displaced from the public realm." But all childhoods will need to negotiate the tensions that arise between notions of (romantic) childhood and urban space. These relationships need to be unpacked as part of a better understanding of how children can more comfortably fit into urban space.

Conclusions: Re-imagining Childhood and the Urban

There are many accounts of children and the urban in successful relationships (from the children's points of view). Ward (1978) and Moore (1986) chart children's intimate exploitation of urban space in some detail. An autobiographical account of the poet Edward Thomas's (1938) childhood time in London, seems as wild and idyllic as any account of rural childhood. But the notable thing about these accounts is that they are often about spaces of disorder in the city and about children rendering the city "other." Opie and Opie (1969, 15), in their famous survey of children's games and folklore, observed that "the peaks of a child's experience are [ ] occasions when he (sic) escapes into places that are disused and overgrown and silent." This is where the fabric of the strongly striated space of the urban — to use Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) term — is disrupted or rent and otherness can well up in these interstices. Perhaps most graphically, the blitz (the bombing in the Second World War) of London made spaces which became celebrated resources for childhood. Nature can also find a home in these spaces and sometimes children and nature come together. But more importantly, the surveillance of childhood by adults is in abeyance, and the normal symbolic orders of the urban are scrambled. Romanticism has always had a relationship with ruins (Woodward, 2001), for they mark the limits and the hubris of rational, triumphant Enlightenment order and culture and the reassertion of nature, and thus romantic spaces can open up in the urban.

Children are extremely adept at finding and exploiting environmental opportunities for play (Jones 2000; Aitken 1994). Their imagination and their intimate, fine-grained relationship with landscape means that they can find space and play opportunities in all manner of situations. The city, as Ward (1978) in *The Child in the City* and Moore (1986) in *Childhood's Domain* show, offers a "flowing terrain" rich in possibilities for childhood. But this possibility is often closed or restricted by the fears that constrict children's geographies. Part of this fear may be about children's unchaperoned presence in the ordered urban landscape. There is a need to reconceptualise both the nature of childhood and the nature of the urban in order to make children's use of urban space less symbolically suspect.

Higonnet (1998) argues that the romantic construction of childhood is now unsustainable. It has afforded children some freedom (in certain respects) and protection (Jones 2000), but as Higonnet and others point out it has also thrust a whole load of baggage onto childhood which has little to do with what children really are. These opening quotes from a BBC television programme on childhood capture this idea:

We have pinned onto children as individuals, children as persons, a whole enormous philosophical edifice, about something called childhood, which is not at all what the condition of children is.

Childhood is a projection of what adults fear and hope and desperately want, not even really for their children, but for all the things they would like to still be, or to have been.

We've still got a romantic view of childhood deeply embedded in our society, long after its sell-by date. By the end of the twentieth century I think that the ideal is beginning to collapse, it's going to be impossible to sustain any longer the idea that childhood should be like that. (BBC 2, "Late Show" "The End of Childhood?" written and produced by Sarah Dunant, 5 Dec 1994.)

I agree with Higonnet that we need to move away from the more cloying constructions of children as innocent, pure and natural (see also Brown 1993) to positions which acknowledge and cherish their otherness, their rights, their individuality, their needs and their aspirations. These "new children" will not be at home just in the rarefied imagined spaces of (rural) idyll, but in all manner of spaces that can satisfy the requirements set out above. We also need to reassess children's competencies (Valentine 1997a, 1997b), and as parents and guardians (I am a parent) not let our fear of risk to children run out of control to the extent that we utterly confine childhood (Furedi 2001).

This is all particularly relevant to children in urban settings. But these settings too need to be imaginatively reconfigured. We need to shake off the notion of the urban as a somehow inferior (but necessary) space (for childhood) and reconfigure it as a landscape rich in possibilities for the otherness of childhood. In particular, the tired old dualism of pure nature in opposition to pure culture has come under strong critical gaze in recent times, and our countryside is repeatedly shown to be a cultural creation, just as much as the urban is. These ideas, to some extent at least, cut the ground away from under notions of the rural/urban childhood dualism, and their strengths and weaknesses as childhood spaces need to be assessed relationally and contingently.

The urban can offer green spaces and contact with nature, but also a range of environments beyond that available in rural settings. As Ackroyd (2000, 647) puts it, "the texture of the city itself can create opportunities for play." Shoard (2000) points out that "edgelands"— the hybrid spaces on the edge of many cities offer "wild" subversive landscapes which children "often value more than any other groups, seeming to find the edgeland a wonderful place to play [ ] Its dereliction stimulates the imagination" (84). We need to see such hybrid landscapes as symbolically appropri-

ate places for the otherness of childhood, rather than unnatural places unsuitable for the innocence of childhood.

Finally, the ways in which the urban is created, maintained, policed and used must tale into account the needs and possibilities of urban childhood. In the current climate of restrictive access of children to urban space, it becomes easy not to see designing and managing for their presence as a priority. Through word, image and deed we need to celebrate and "naturalise" the presence of children in urban spaces. Ackroyd (2000, 647) says of spaces in London where children have managed to play, "the presence of children will soften them and render them inhabitable," thus throwing up the idea that the presence of children in the urban is a symptom of healthy, liveable space for the wider urban community. As Ward (1978, 48) said, "I want a city where children live in the same world as I do."

This opens up a whole host of issues that range from open space provision and "street" design, to traffic management issues, the policing of these spaces, and the protection of children in them. Adams (1995) tells of one London project which aimed to reengage children with their neighbourhood. The research reported that "bonding with neighbourhood takes place only when play is owned by the children and has its own space" (162). Adams goes on to use "neighbourhood" as a useful form of local identity for children to possess. O'Brien et al. (2000) similarly conclude "a greater trust needs to be engendered at a local level" (16). I would add that this needs to be a *trust between the idea of childhood and idea of the city*. These ideas challenge parents, educators, local authority children's officers, NGOs, planners and society more widely, to appreciate that children are not *out of place in urban spaces* and that society needs to find ways of ensuring appropriate levels and qualities of their presence in them. That is, in the end, the hard specific work that has to be done, but it needs to go hand in hand with efforts to symbolically reorder these presences in spaces as positive rather than negative.

Acknowledgements

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