

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abolitionist memory work in *The Real Cost of Prisons Comix*

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Abstract

In this article, we identify the comics of the Real Cost of Prisons Project as graphic memory work that denaturalises ‘penal common sense’ and engages in graphic witnessing. To show how the United States’ ‘crime problem’ established a seemingly natural link between crime and incarceration, we first review the criminological aspects of American comics memory. Then, we demonstrate how *The Real Cost of Prisons Comix* reworks the historical and social dynamics of the American carceral regime through its abolitionist framework. We discuss the importance of the image–text form for abolitionist pedagogy by reflecting on the position of comics in carceral textual cultures and the use of these comics in activist education. Finally, we emphasise that the comics created by the Real Cost of Prisons Project should be understood as pedagogical tools in a broader abolitionist movement whereby the historical and social education initiated by memory work aims to ignite collaborative praxis. In this sense, we show that their activist memory work is a means to demystify the historical processes of carceral expansion, enabling its audience to develop historical consciousness.

Keywords: abolitionist movement; activist pedagogy; comics; memory work; United States

Introduction

The George Floyd protests and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 revitalised activist efforts to abolish prisons and defund the police in the United States. However, *The New York Times* was quick to conclude in 2023 that the slogan ‘defund the police’ had failed in the face of ‘surging crime’:

The movement faltered in Minneapolis after activists failed to build broad support for a goal that lacked a clear definition and an actionable plan. As crime surged during the early years of the coronavirus pandemic and officers left the police force in droves, Republicans seized on the debate to paint Democrats as being recklessly soft on crime. (Londoño, 2023).

This obituary for the movement obscured the origins and substance of the defunding and abolition movements, which did not, of course, begin in 2020 nor end in 2023. Nor, as the above passage implies, was the movement led or even supported by the Democratic Party. In

fact, as Dan Berger and Touissant Losier point out, ‘prisons and prisoner activism predates the founding of the United States’ (Berger and Losier, 2018, 6). The myriad forms of captivity that defined slavery and the processes that confined indigenous populations to reservations produced ‘the *racial criminalization* that has structured the American prison system’ (Berger and Losier, 2018, 6 italics in original).¹ Resistance to this process of criminalisation has been intrinsic to prison activism.

Imprinted in the counter-memory of ‘the Long Attica Revolt’ (Burton, 2023), the modern abolition movement in the United States traces its roots to 1970s Black radicalism. Long before the murder of George Floyd, George Jackson’s prison letters, published as the bestseller *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* in 1970, turned ‘prison abolition’ into a rallying cry for the New Left (Duran and Simon, 2019). The 1970s also saw the rise of critical and radical criminology (Serassis, 2001, 63), which sought to challenge how the study of crime helped reproduce capitalism through the production of repressive criminal justice ideologies. Today, abolitionist approaches to criminology are gaining momentum (Saleh-Hanna et al., 2023), and at the time of writing, calls are being made for abolitionist social research (Vitale, 2024). The immediate origins of these contemporary abolitionist discourses go back to the 1970s, and they have persisted beyond 2023 in various struggles, for instance, against the construction of ‘cop cities’ across the United States.²

The NYT article belongs to a series of discourses that re/produce the ideological mystification of policing, prisons, and crime in the service of defending and expanding the US carceral regime (see also Phillips and Chagnon, 2024). Drawing on the language of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, Loïc Wacquant has described a new ‘penal common sense’, a ‘neoliberal doxa’, that emerged in the United States in the early 1980s and was later internationalised (Wacquant, 2009, 319). Political and journalistic discourses redefined the meaning of ‘criminality’ and translated and complemented neoliberal economic ideology ‘in the realm of “justice”’ (319). In the NYT article, Ernesto Londoño acknowledges the legitimacy of the abolition movement’s concerns but ultimately concludes that the apparent failure of the movement is due to ‘public safety concerns’ and rising crime rates.³ In this way, the article is an unremarkable example of the mass media’s ongoing reproduction of a penal common sense in the United States, which asserts a seemingly natural and inevitable relation between crime and punishment and undermines the possibility of carceral reform, let alone prison abolition. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes in her seminal *The Golden Gulag*: ‘The media, government officials, and policy advisors endlessly refer to “the public’s concern” over crime and connect prison growth to public desire for social order’ (Gilmore, 2007, 17). Decades of media representations that mark the shift towards the ‘anti-state state’ (Gilmore, 2022, 2007, 245) have functioned to sediment a penal common sense.

¹ Berger and Losier go on to argue that ‘Plantations, penitentiaries, and reservations have distinct histories but share themes of state control backed by threat of force that define the modern prison’ (2018, 7). Many prison scholars emphasise the link between prisons and slavery based on critical interpretations of US legal history, in particular the exception clause in the 13th amendment and the 1871 ruling in the Virginia Supreme Court which designated incarcerated people ‘slaves of the state’ (Burton, 2023, 10). Nevertheless, Orisanmi Burton cautions against excessively juridical interpretations that may suggest that ‘slavery exists because the law allows it to’ (2023, 11).

² The educator and organiser Renee Johnston has coordinated the ‘Cop City, USA’ project, which maps the construction of ‘cop cities’ across the United States since 2020. The following site provides detailed information and cost breakdowns of each individual project: <https://isyourlifebetter.net/cop-cities-usa/>.

³ This is despite the fact that comprehensive federal and national studies in 2021 from the Department of Justice found that the overall number of violent crimes in the United States decreased by 22 percent during the Covid pandemic (Morgan and Thompson, 2021).

The epistemological problem arising from understandings of carcerality as a common sense response to crime was directly addressed by The Real Cost of Prisons Project, started by social justice activist and organiser Lois Ahrens in 2000. Ahrens brought together activists, artists, policy researchers, and victims of US mass incarceration to create resources for the prison abolition movement. Besides policy reports and research on the political economy of punishment, the project published three comic books in 2005: *Prison Town: Paying the Price* (Pyle and Gilmore 2005), *Prisoners of the War on Drugs* (Jones et al., 2005) and *Prisoners of a Hard Life: Women and Their Children* (Willmarth et al., 2005), later compiled as *The Real Cost of Prisons Comix* (Ahrens, 2008). Each comic book was distributed to prisons through organisations like Books Through Bars, and 135,000 copies were used by social justice organisations to educate activist communities. In this sense, the comics were embedded within an activist publishing landscape: their production, circulation, and reproduction by the radical publisher PM Press rendered them ‘alternative’, ‘radical’, or ‘movement media’ (Downing, 2001; Atton, 2010; Cammaerts et al., 2013; Atton, 2015; Drüeke and Zobl, 2018). As an example of abolitionist movement media, *The Real Cost of Prisons Comix* aims to denaturalise the notion that prisons are for containing criminals and rearticulates US carceral expansion within recent histories of deindustrialisation, the War on Drugs, and the collapse of the welfare state. Graphic memory work employed in these comics weaves together a counter-memory of the US ‘crime problem’ and the American mass incarceration crisis.

In this article, we position *The Real Cost of Prisons Comix* as abolitionist memory work that dismantles penal common sense by illustrating the historical dynamics of the mass incarceration crisis in the United States. Here, we diverge from the psychological conceptualisation of memory work as uncovering repressed memories in trauma recovery. Instead, we join a growing body of memory scholars who adopt the term as ‘activist memory work’, referring to how ‘activists contest and reformulate certain memories’ for the purpose of political change (Merrill et al., 2020, 4; see also Merrill and Rigney, 2024). Our usage of the term is also indebted to feminist scholars who have called attention to ‘memory work’ that ‘aims to document and commemorate daily injustice and slow violence’ (Hirsch, 2019, 12). Therefore, we shift our gaze from spectacular moments in/of civic memory – and related public contestations – to activist memory work that makes impalpable pasts palpable in pursuit of political change and social justice. We thus locate collective memory and activist memory work on the terrain of ideological struggle (see also Kirn, 2022; Palacios González, 2023).

We use the term ‘common sense’ to refer to the gradually sedimented hegemonic conceptions in the social imaginary. In Gramscian scholarship, ‘common sense’ refers to the incoherent, fragmentary, and contradictory sedimentation of historical currents of thought and values that organise the collective or popular consciousness. In Stuart Hall’s words, common sense ‘is the already-formed and “taken-for-granted” terrain on which more coherent ideologies and philosophies must contend for mastery’ (Hall, 2021, 317). In this sense, common sense is the product of collective memory. We suggest that the production of a penal common sense in the United States, which essentially amounts to a constellation of representations of crime and punishment, is the hegemonic form of carceral memory. Hence, its dismantling requires decarceral and abolitionist memory work that contests what we have come to know as criminal justice. *The Real Cost of Prisons Comix* (RCPC) undertakes this task by retelling the history of US carceral expansion and remediating prison and expert testimonies through graphic narrativisation, employing historical and individual memories to counter penal common sense.

The basic question asked by the RCPC is ‘what is the real cost of prisons?’. From the outset, the question implies that prisons appear as a sort of ‘unreality’ – they appear in a fetishised form, the result of an ideological inversion that conceals their ‘real’ structural foundation and function. The problem thus posed is a representational one. How to represent the

history of the prison-industrial complex in its myriad relations, objective and subjective? The answer offered by the comics is an activist pedagogy rooted in a collaborative effort to engage the reader with the material conditions that re/produce the prison-industrial complex in the United States. In this article, we focus on how the past is mobilised through graphic memory work to demystify the common sense *appearance* of the prison. By revealing the prison's 'real' structural conditions and function in American society, the comics seek to advance the project of abolition. In an interview discussing 'how history informs activism', Ahrens (2016) remarks that 'if you don't know anything before 1970, you would think or you could think that this is the way it's always been, but this is not the way it's always been'. The feeling Ahrens refers to is part of the broader process under capitalism that Marx called the 'eternalising effect', whereby a particular structuration of social relations and their meanings are taken as necessary and inevitable (Hall, 2003, 24). Memory work in the *RCPC*, then, deconstructs this seemingly 'natural' criminal justice ideology by historicising its development.

Crime, punishment, and common sense

In Ahrens's preface for the *RCPC*, she frames the epistemological problem posed by the US prison-industrial complex as follows: 'Neo-liberal policies have been in place for almost thirty years. As a result, many people are not aware that our political and economic life is not the result of a natural course of events but rather of a systemically created ideology that has pervaded every aspect of our daily life' (Ahrens, 2008, 10). She thus highlights how state apparatuses, media institutions, and public intellectuals collaborated in the ideological production of 'moral panics' (Hall et al., 1978; Gilmore, 2007, 90) throughout the 1960s and early 1970s to naturalise carceral expansion as a response to social and political turmoil. Against the social mobilisations of these decades, then, 'law and order' was set to frame activism as crime, mediating the unruly contentious politics of the era into the US 'crime problem' (Gilmore, 1999, 2022). The individualising force of law enforcement reduced activist collectives to individual criminals. The following decade marked the beginning of the era of mass incarceration in the United States.

After 1980, marking the beginning of *RCPC*'s narrative, crime underwent another objective and subjective transformation rooted in the 1977 Uniform Determinate Sentencing Act (Gilmore, 2007, 110). Discussions surrounding inner-city gangs, drug abuse, and street-level criminality created a cohesive discursive constellation, which was then used as a comprehensive explanation for numerous social issues. Gilmore highlights that central to this process was the media's amplification of crime reporting (Gilmore, 2007, 109). This was succeeded by a 'criminal-law production frenzy' (Gilmore, 2007, 110), with hundreds of new crime-related legislations passed each year since 1988. Loïc Wacquant summarises the discursive collaborations among these various institutional frameworks:

Alleged facts and specialised discourses about criminal insecurity are given form and put into wide circulation by hybrid institutions, supposedly neutral, situated at the intersection of the bureaucratic, academic and journalistic fields, which ape research to provide the appearance of a scientific warrant for lowering the police and penal boom on neighbourhoods of regulation. (Wacquant, 2009, 31–32).

Central to this process was the ideological articulation of 'crime' and 'violence', which were made to seem identical in the rhetoric used by politicians and in mainstream media. Gilmore has pointed out the paradox: rhetoric 'concentrated on the need for laws and prisons to control violence', yet nonviolent crimes were quickly becoming the main source of arrests and imprisonment (Gilmore, 2007, 112). An interrelated and more foundational

articulation underpinned this one; that is, the seemingly natural and inevitable connection between ‘crime’ and ‘punishment’.

Despite the common sense understanding of ‘prisons as necessary reformatories and corrective facilities... institutions providing security, justice and an adequate mechanism to turn misconduct into productive behaviour’ (Zoellick, 2018, 1), there is in fact ‘no causal relationship between crime and punishment’ (Manos, 2015, 45). As we shall see, the *RCPC* therefore proceeds by first disarticulating ‘crime’ and ‘violence’ and then ‘crime’ and ‘punishment’. As Ahrens succinctly puts it: ‘A central goal of the comics is to politicise, not pathologize’ (Ahrens, 2008, 10). The so-called ‘state of emergency’ that marked the beginning of mass carceral expansion in the mid-1970s did not correlate with any ‘evolution of crime and delinquency’, which ‘did not abruptly change in scale or physiognomy’ (Wacquant, 2009, 3–4). As Wacquant points out, therefore:

It is not criminality that has changed here so much as the *gaze that society trains on certain street illegalities*, that is, in the final analysis, *on the dispossessed and dishonoured populations* (by status or origin) that are their presumed perpetrators, on the place they occupy within the City, and on the uses to which these populations can be subjected in the political and journalistic fields. (3–4, italics in original)

The *RCPC* thus grapples with this central *representational* problem, of the ‘gaze’ levelled at certain dispossessed populations. It is in this sense that the comics aim to politicise, not pathologise – their abolitionist memory work moves from the individual to the structural, from memory to history.

Comics, crime, and justice

As previously noted, abolitionist media has long engaged in the task of undermining penal common sense and mapping the dynamics of racist domination within the US carceral regime. There exists a collective memory of American prison activism, materialised in cultural media such as vintage photographs of Angela Davis that continue to circulate, or the iconic scene from *Dog Day Afternoon*, where Al Pacino’s character, Sonny Wortzik, shouts ‘Attica, Attica’ during his confrontation with the police. What does the *RCPC* contribute to this (disproportionately understudied) memory of US carceral expansion and prison activism? Ahrens acknowledges that ‘[c]omic books and anti-prison agitation and education may seem like an unlikely match’ (Ahrens, 2008, 9). However, the main advantage of comic books is their aesthetic appeal: ‘The glossy cover would be attractive enough for someone doing laundry in a laundromat to pick one up and start reading’ (9). Their ability to render complex information and ideas more comprehensible through narrative illustration is another characteristic of the form, which makes it the ideal pedagogical tool for Ahrens (9). As comic books increasingly enter school classrooms (Smith and Watson, 2020) and social justice education (Garrison and Gavigan, 2019), incorporating comics into abolitionist pedagogy has proven to be effective. Yet, there remains one aspect of comic books that indeed renders them an unlikely tool in the abolitionists’ arsenal: the history of mainstream comics in the United States is a bottomless well of hegemonic crime and justice fantasies.

Comics are a peculiar medium of memory due to their ‘crime-ridden’ past. On the one hand, the form itself has a long history of being criminalised and associated with youth delinquency. On the other hand, the dominant representation of crime and justice in popular comic books, especially the superhero genre, has reinforced the hegemonic criminological ideologies of retributive justice and incapacitation that underline carceral expansion (Phillips and Strobl, 2013). In other words, hegemonic ‘comics memory’ (Ahmed and

Crucifix, 2018)⁴ in the United States is by and large a carceral one, which makes the *RCPC* a particularly interesting case of activist memory work that not only produces historical knowledge about the prison-industrial complex but also creates a rupture in the cultural history of comics and that history's entanglement with hegemonic notions of crime and punishment.

One reason for treating comic books as a distinct medium of memory, besides their formal affordances and constraints, is the hostility they provoked in mid-20th-century United States due to their perceived connection to juvenile delinquency (see Nyberg, 2017). As the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (n.d.) puts it, comic books were 'born banned', which had significant consequences for the production, distribution, and regulation of comics in the United States – and, therefore, for their role in the dynamics of remembrance. While having many antecedents and multiple origin stories (Inge, 2017), the modern American comic book is approximately a century old, and so is its stigmatisation. And the 'specter of delinquency' continues to haunt comics in the 21st century (Pizzino, 2018, 171). Its criminal past, which was managed through the infamous Comics Code, indeed permeates 'comics memory' in multiple ways, making the medium a fascinating case for studying penal common sense and carceral memory.

In *Comic Book Crime: Truth, Justice, and the American Way*, Nickie D. Phillips and Staci Strobl suggest that the comics industry's self-censorship through the Code significantly impacted how the medium portrayed crime and justice. Recognising that its heavy regulation has turned the medium into 'a vehicle for law-and-order messages throughout its history' (Phillips and Strobl, 2013, 21), they show that mainstream and popular comics serve as an observatory for hegemonic conceptions of crime and justice, especially in the form of justice-administering superhero comics, which constitute the most popular genre today. They survey a sample of best-selling comics from a cultural criminology perspective, seeking the hegemonic conceptions of crime and justice in mainstream comic books. The authors demonstrate that 'mainstream comic books follow an apocalyptic formula in presenting themes of crime and justice', where the 'crime problem' is amplified to radical proportions to be solved by 'quasi-messianic' superheroes who implement extra-legal justice in their utopian pursuits (81). Yet, while justice is never administered by the criminal justice apparatus in these comics, superheroes – and their readers – follow its dominant penal ideology in privileging carceral solutions to crime, sidestepping alternatives like rehabilitation and restorative justice (197–198). Furthermore, Phillips and Strobl also show that mainstream superhero comics tend to dismiss the possibility of rehabilitation by reproducing classical criminological beliefs that attribute criminality and recidivism to incurable psychological and personality disorders (198–202). Incarceration, which is the most prevalent form of incapacitation in the real world, continues to mark comic book utopias, embedding penal common sense in comics memory.

The criminal justice ideology promoted by the comic book industry indeed makes the medium an unlikely vehicle for abolitionist pedagogy. One underappreciated aspect of the *RCPC*, then, is its successful intervention in a medium that has reproduced penal common sense and reinforced the American 'crime problem'. Despite the hegemonic comics memory we charted above, comics and law interact in manifold ways (Giddens, 2015, 2016) and the comic form is now recognised for its potential to expand the law's limited ways of knowing (Giddens, 2012, 2019). Comics are also garnering attention as media of activist education,

⁴ Maaheen Ahmed and Benoit Crucifix propose the term 'comics memory' as a holistic framework that emphasises the dialectics of 'comics as a medium for memory' and 'the memory of comics as a medium' (2018, 3). This is a media-specific treatment of mediated or cultural memory that emphasises how a cultural form can cultivate its own historical meaning, which in turn shapes the ways in which we make meaning out of specific media.

mediating radical collective memories (e.g. Belia, 2024; Vlessing, 2025). Sean Carleton (2014) suggests that thanks to their pedagogical potential to engage readers critically, comics can create ‘a potential space to experience closure as conscientization’ (164); that is, in Paulo Freire’s radical pedagogy, the process by which people are offered ‘the opportunity, through critical reflection, to combat harmful myths and contradictions, and ultimately to create new knowledge to solve problems related to their own oppression’ (161). Below, we examine how the RCPC offers this space of critical reflection contra common sense, demystifying the prison and inviting readers to establish solidarities against the carceral regime. For the sake of brevity, our textual analysis focuses primarily on the first comic, *Prison Town*, in order to examine some of the visual and textual strategies that are employed throughout the series more broadly. Nevertheless, we encourage readers to visit the RCPP website and engage with the comics in their entirety: <https://www.realcostofprisons.org/comics.html>.

Prison town: Paying the price

The first comic book in the series, *Prison Town: Paying the Price* (Pyle and Gilmore, 2005), opens with an image of a high school student named Sam cycling through the outskirts of ‘Anytown, USA’, ‘once a thriving farm community’, which ‘has fallen on hard times’ (Figure 1). Artist Kevin Pyle uses the figure of Sam as a narrative and spatial device over the following panels as he traces the contours of this exemplary rural town – the spatial context unfolds through this aspect-to-aspect transition. The first two panels extend the full length of the page horizontally, depicting open geographical spaces, the vast rural plains of the Midwest haunted by the ruins of abandoned factories and family farms. An accompanying caption locates this agricultural and industrial decline in the 1980s and 1990s. As Sam cycles past the boarded-up facades of shopfronts in the third panel, three local officials conversing in a diner, superimposed over the other panels, introduce the new ‘growth industry’ that will transform the fortunes of Anytown, USA. On the following page (Figure 2), the day has turned to night, and Sam has pulled over on a hill overlooking a valley beside the town. He gazes up at the stars, which form a constellation: ‘PRISON TOWN’. The caption below explains: ‘Due to mandatory sentencing, three-strikes-you’re-out and harsh drug laws, the prison population has grown by more than 370% since 1970. Most of these prisoners are jailed in rural America’. The caption underneath the starry constellation reading ‘PRISON TOWN’ disabuses the reader of any preconceived notion that prison towns or carceral expansion have anything to do with a quantitative increase in crime – it asserts a qualitative development in how criminality is understood, with an evolving judicial system placed at the centre of the increase in captivity and warehousing of human beings. In other words, the panel shows how carceral expansion did not stem from higher crime rates, but from ‘the extension of recourse to confinement of a range of street crimes and misdemeanours that did not previously lead to a custodial sanction’ (Wacquant, 2009, 125–126).

In simple visual design and explanatory captions, these opening pages directly articulate the rise of the prison-industrial complex as a historical response to the social and economic dislocations caused by deindustrialisation in the United States. In Wacquant’s terms, the comic introduces prisons as a ‘reaction to, a diversion from, and a denegation of, the generalisation of the social and mental insecurity produced by the diffusion of desocialised wage labour against the backdrop of increased inequality’ (Wacquant, 2009, xv). Thus far, the reader has been following the progress of Sam throughout the town, but the second panel on the second page switches to a black-and-white negative of the previous panels, so that all shading disappears, and the people incarcerated in the complex are introduced, standing in a row, rendered as simple outlines without individual detail. Below reads: ‘There are more prisons in America than Wal-Marts. There are more prisoners in America today than farmers. These prisoners are now seen as an economic opportunity’. The link is made clear



Figure 1. Opening page of Prison Town. Courtesy of Lois Ahrens. Available at: <https://www.realcostofprisons.org/comics.html>.



Please visit the Real Cost of Prisons website at www.realcostofprisons.org

Figure 2. Second page of Prison Town. Courtesy of Lois Ahrens. Available at: <https://www.realcostofprisons.org/comics.html>.

to the reader through the interaction between the didactic text and the stark black-and-white image – the prison-industrial complex is offered as an economic fix to the social crisis caused by deindustrialisation. It functions as a form of management of surplus population.

Of the three comics by the Real Cost of Prisons Project, *Prison Town* deals most directly with the overall structuration of the prison-industrial complex, a phrase that ‘has come to represent the physical system of prisons, courthouses, police stations, all the people who work in and for them and all the companies who sell goods or services to prisons and jails’ (Gilmore and Gilmore in Ahrens, 2008, 18). As Ruth and Craig Gilmore note in their introduction to the collection, the ‘exact limit’ of this complex is ‘imprecise’ and *Prison Town* thus grapples with the representational problems posed by the complexity and interrelatedness of such a vast structure, and one that is not static but always in process. The scalar shifts in *Prison Town*, the use of allegorical and metonymical narratives and images, and the articulation of imagery and didactic information all work to set up the political-economic structures that the individuals in the latter two comics will be moving within.

The RCPC recognises that the challenge of connecting individual experience and memory to broader socio-political contexts is compounded by the ‘hidden and indirect’ effects of the prison-industrial complex (19); that is, the ‘real cost’ of the structure, which amounts to a kind of poverty tax that pervades American life at the level of social property relations. In other words, they do not begin their visualisation of the prison-industrial complex with, for example, an examination of the micro-physics of discipline within prisons, but rather locate and explain the political-economic forces that underlie the prison-industrial complex. As Søren Mau demonstrates in his insightful discussion of economic power, to grasp this broader structuration, ‘it is necessary to examine property relations and class structures – in other words, to take into account social relations of domination which are not a “web of microscopic, capillary political power”, but rather a set of totalising social structures permeating the entire social field’ (Mau, 2023, 36 italics in original). Having established this foundational structure of carceral expansion in the United States, the subsequent pages of *Prison Town* become increasingly concrete and detailed as its creators, Kevin Pyle and Craig Gilmore, depict the actual processes by which the prison-industrial complex was conceived and implemented, and demonstrate how it is reproduced.

From the broad allegorical standpoint of ‘Anytown, USA,’ the comic begins to introduce specific concrete details, such as a quote from former New York State Legislator Daniel Feldman: ‘When legislators cry “Lock ‘em up!” they often mean “Lock ‘em up” in my district!’ Crucial to the epistemological and visual strategy in *Prison Town* is the transition from the national level to the state level and back. After the ‘Anytown, USA’ section, where the authors illustrate the fate of rural United States in broad strokes, they begin to divide the country into its constituent political units. First, California and Oregon are set apart in an individual panel against a black backdrop; the pine trees of Oregon are felled by tractors, while incarcerated people labour in the agricultural fields of California. Next to these images are discrete facts about each state; for instance, since 1996, Oregon has exempted prisons from state-level environmental reviews. Following this is Florida, where the state has re-zoned districts to override local governments, facilitating more prison construction, then Mississippi, where private-prison interests compete for ‘the scarce supply of prisoners’. Throughout, the creators explain how disparate, seemingly unconnected issues and phenomena operate together to transform ‘Anytown, USA’ into ‘Prison Town, USA’. The links between environmental issues, labour rights, real estate, and bond markets, among others, are clarified didactically for the reader as the individual puzzle pieces of the United States are visually reassembled over the two-page spread. Structurally, the comic is attentive to the complexity of each causal factor, while showing how they are all bound together to form the prison-industrial complex as a totality.

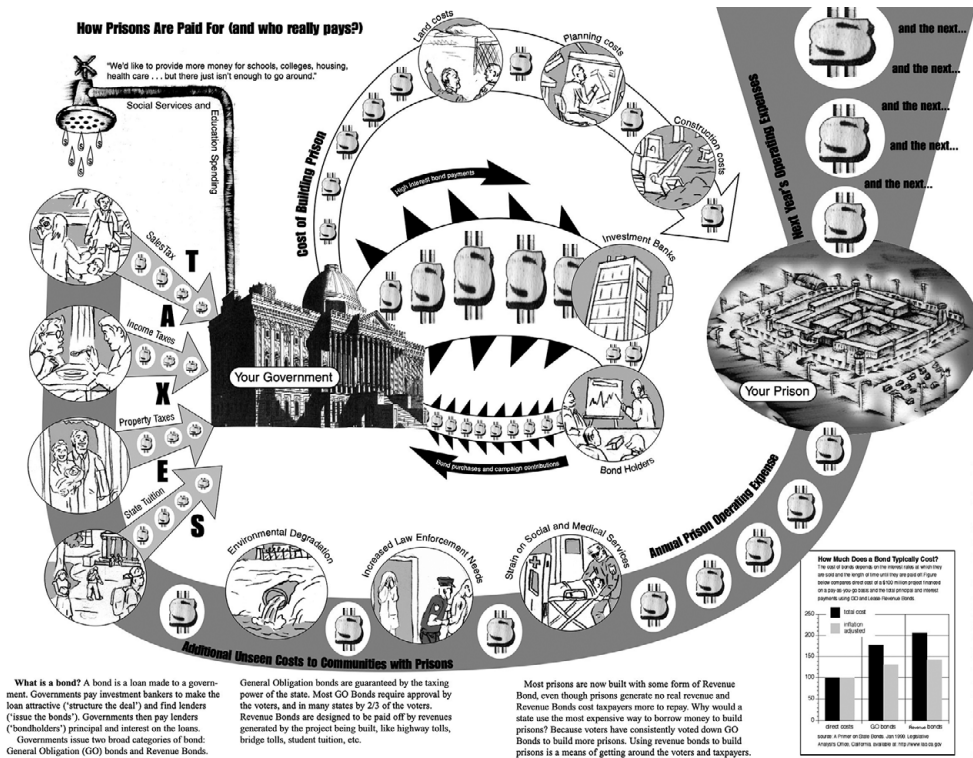


Figure 3. ‘How Prisons Are Paid For (and who really pays?)’, from Prison Town. Courtesy of Lois Ahrens. Available at: <https://www.realcostofprisons.org/comics.html>.

The centrepiece of the comic is the subsequent didactic spread: ‘How Prisons Are Paid For (and who really pays?)’ (Figure 3). This section foregoes narrative entirely, offering instead a flowchart to help the reader understand how public money is funnelled not into social services and education but into a bond market where private investors and banks profit. It is here that the entire complex that has been historicised throughout the rest of the comic is pictured in its totality – frozen for a moment in time and space so that the reader can see how each of the distinct parts that the narrative of ‘Prison Town’ has been tracing fits together. Central to its epistemological and affective power is its revelation of the ‘real cost’ – that is, the hidden and invisible costs – of the complex, which are revealed to sit at the intersection of public and private interests; or more accurately, the myriad activities that were previously under the auspices of public provision, that either now lie neglected (e.g. social services and education) or are administered by private institutions (along with the layered sets of incentives and problems that this causes). This process of privatisations and the ways in which it immiserates the poorer classes in the United States, who are simultaneously those most likely to face incarceration, are laid bare in the diagram. This visualisation of the political-economic dynamics grounds the narrative history provided by the comic’s creators.

Towards the end of *Prison Town*, the authors shift their focus from the political-economic structuration of the prison-industrial complex to examine the specific demographics most affected by the carceral regime. At this point, they entirely omit individual graphic details, presenting the central figure of the panels as a blank space. This approach has a twofold effect: it encourages the reader to fill that space, prompting personal identification by

envisioning themselves or someone they know in that situation. Additionally, it visually abstracts the individual from the street, emphasising how incarceration erases people at the social level, vividly enacting the disappearance of individuals from their families and communities, thereby perpetuating the ‘cycles of exiles’ we will discuss below.

Lest the vast complex, composed of so many dizzyingly complicated apparatuses, seem unassailable, the comic ends on a more hopeful note. It highlights some positive initiatives in Oregon and Ohio to show how small political-economic changes could radically improve American life: ‘if that money was spent on other things ... instead of removing people, the community seeks to help them stay out of prison. Where they belong’. The final page of the comic presents a stark visual juxtaposition, spatially contrasting the economic ‘cost of a cage’ against the number of seats that could be filled at a community college with the same funding. In a single image, they unite what is lost under the current carceral regime and all that may be gained under the abolition of that regime.

The human cost of prisons

While the first book of *The Real Cost of Prisons Comix* focuses on the political economy of carceral expansion, the remaining two adopt a more familiar approach of depicting the human cost of prisons. *Prisoners of the War on Drugs* and *Prisoners of a Hard Life: Women and Their Children* both explore the lived experience of mass incarceration on the individual and societal levels. Both books introduce fictionalised yet representative characters who have suffered under the carceral regime and each features one real life story alongside exemplary fictional characters who stand for shared experiences of the criminal justice system. In this sense, these two comic books are primarily examples of graphic witnessing that rework prison testimony and social research into accessible narratives. As collections of witness narratives, both books cater to an established human rights audience accustomed to the rise of ‘graphic witnessing’ or ‘crisis witnessing’ in comics (Smith, 2011). And indeed, Sidonie Smith counts the *RCPC* amongst an emergent supply of NGO comics that aim to raise awareness and public consciousness (Smith, 2011, 63). Yet, while they involve the graphic witnessing of human suffering, *Prisoners of the War on Drugs* and *Prisoners of a Hard Life* escape the main pitfall of human rights genres, namely, ‘reproducing the rights agenda of rescuing “victims”’ (71). As abolitionist comics, the stories they present do not agitate for prison reforms to make caging humans more humane. Neither do they cast an otherness upon incarcerated people as exceptional victims whose life stories solicit ‘rescue reading’ (Smith 2014). Rather, the life stories these comics visualise show how entangled their lives are, inside and outside the prison walls, in their suffering, and how the narrative arcs of these people could differ under decarceral circumstances.

All in all, none of the characters introduced in the comics are spectacles of human rights abuses. The comics include no victims of physical violence and torture inside prisons, except for Yvonne, a 22-year-old pregnant woman who is forced to give birth in shackles after being framed by a police informant who asks her to find drugs for 20 dollars (Figure 4). Besides this all-too-common practice of shackling pregnant women during childbirth, which is institutionally recognised as a human rights violation (Sichel, 2008), the graphic witnessing in the comics does not depict the ‘cruel and unusual punishment’ legislated through the US constitution. In the abolitionist framework, the carceral punishment itself is cruel and unusual, without exception. The tragedy of Yvonne is not limited to the shackling but encompasses the police conspiracy that costs her two years of her life and ultimately her child, who ends up in foster care, being fed into the ‘Cycles of Exile’ (Figure 5), where the absence of caregivers due to imprisonment leads their children into further trouble.

Yvonne is one of many American women who have faced higher incarceration rates since the declaration of the War on Drugs in the 1970s. Just before her narrative arc, which follows



Figure 4. Yvonne in Prisoners of the War on Drugs. Courtesy of Lois Ahrens. Available at: <https://www.realcostofprisons.org/comics.html>.

the story of 18-year-old Bobby, who is falsely framed by his 'buddies' as a drug lord, we are introduced to the 'Builders of the Drug Prison Boom': Nelson Rockefeller, Ronald Reagan, Pete Wilson, and Bill Clinton visually laying the bricks of the Drug Prison (Figure 6). This illustrated short history of American drug legislation provides the context in which Yvonne and other characters in the comic book are victimised. Another contextualising splash page, titled 'What's Race Got to Do with It?' takes us back to the post-WWII industrial boom and the initiation of the Civil Rights movement, followed by 1970s deindustrialisation and the consequent racist backlash that helped 'sell the War on Drugs'. In graphic illustrations of decades of social change like these, cartooning helps to visualise complex historical developments on a single page, offering viewers the context in which the social and public health problem of drugs was criminalised. These pages show that the War on Drugs does not remedy the so-called 'drug problem' but only enhances US carceral expansion, perpetuating the social crisis of mass incarceration. Graphic memory work throughout the comics simplifies and clarifies the historical circumstances of the human cost of prisons, contesting the law-and-order narrative of criminal justice history. The fictionalised characters do what many graphic life narratives do, that is, 'enflesh the abstracted human of human rights' (Michael, 2023, 31).



These ideas are based on the work of Dina R. Rose and Todd R. Clear: "Incarceration, Reentry and Social Capital: Social Networks in the Balance," 12/01

Figure 5. 'Cycles of Exile' in Prisoners of the War on Drugs. Courtesy of Lois Ahrens. Available at: <https://www.realcostofprisons.org/comics.html>.



Figure 6. 'Builders of the Drug Prison Boom' in Prisoners of the War on Drugs. Courtesy of Lois Ahrens. Available at: <https://www.realcostofprisons.org/comics.html>.

Unlike the criminals depicted in hegemonic comics memory, the characters of *The Real Cost of Prisons Comix* are not born – or reborn – criminals whose stories serve as explanations for the unavoidable danger they pose for society. In contrast to the violent spectacle of crime comics, which perpetuate penal common sense and render incapacitation the only solution for public safety, the so-called criminals depicted in these comics are non-violent offenders. The only murder case, which is also the only ‘true story’ in *Prisoners of a Hard Life*, concerns Regina McKnight: a homeless 21-year-old African American woman who was convicted of murdering her foetus. McKnight’s cocaine addiction was deemed responsible for a stillbirth in 1999, even though experts testified in court that there was no definitive evidence linking her cocaine use to the loss of her foetus. Although it seems like an avoidance tactic to exclusively narrate the lives of non-violent offenders in these comics, the characters we meet on their pages are representative of the majority of the American prison population, which, as *Prisoners of the War on Drugs* teaches us, increased disproportionately after the invention of the American ‘drug problem’⁵. The comics do not get bogged down in questions of the proportionality of retribution or the validity of the reasons for retribution. They propose a whole other type of justice based on rehabilitation and prevention, and offer a list of alternatives to the current penal system, such as ‘justice reinvestment’ (see Tucker and Cadora, 2003).

Both *Prisoners of the War on Drugs* and *Prisoners of a Hard Life* focus on the inherent contradictions within hegemonic criminal justice rhetoric, laying bare the falsity of its claim to produce public safety. Lives subjected to policing, rather than those behind bars, take centre stage in these fictionalised life narratives. By focusing on the before and after of punishment, rather than the cruelty of punishment, the comics avoid the pitfall of relying on the shock value of corporeal suffering, which often marks penal activism yet risks alienating spectators (Corcoran, 2019). Mary S. Corcoran points out that activist campaigns that rely on the dramatisation of bodily suffering in prisons assume that witnessing pain naturally fosters solidarity and compassion. However, this humanistic conception of the public sphere understates its conflictual nature, which includes ‘expressive rituals of voyeuristic gratification, banal indifference, hostility, sadism, racism and vicious revenge fantasies’ (Corcoran, 2019, 13). The *RCPC* does not assume a preexisting humanitarian public but creates one. The comics also avoid overreliance on empathy by relocating the violence within a broader range of social relations. Incarcerated people, to whose lived experiences we are invited to bear witness, are not dehumanised others who suffer at the hands of cruel prison guards or other incarcerated people. Rather, they are victims of a class society plagued with racism and patriarchy, who are led down ‘criminal’ paths. The disarticulation of crime and punishment, then, allows the creators of these comics to address the penal common sense outside ‘the stranglehold of sentimental politics in the culture of rescue’ (Smith, 2011, 633). The readers are not there to rescue incarcerated victims but to work together to make prisons obsolete. The comics lay out the tools to make this happen.

Abolitionist pedagogy and forging solidarities

In her preface to the collection, *The Real Cost of Prisons Comix*, Lois Ahrens points out that in the information age of the ‘free world’, most research and resources for prison activism are disseminated online (Ahrens, 2008, 11). Most states in the United States place severe restrictions on Internet access within prisons, so print material remains a critical source

⁵ Today, almost forty-four per cent of prison sentences in the United States are for drug offences (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2025).

of communication and education. One of the material affordances of the project's 20-page comic books is their ease of circulation through and within prison walls, democratising access to information. Graphic memory work that undermines penal common sense not only addresses the outside world, which should support incarcerated people, but also the people in captivity themselves. The comics rework personal experience and individual memory of criminalisation, laying bare the historical and social dynamics behind the individualising force of Law.

Circulating inside and outside the prisons, these comics aim to visualise the obscured slow violence of mass incarceration and make the carceral political economy intelligible to everyone. In this attempt to demystify the history of US carceral expansion and the uneven criminalisation of marginalised lives, graphic memory work appeals to a multimodal literacy that requires readers to interpret images and texts together. This resonates with the recent interest in comics literacy in classrooms (e.g. Cromer and Clark, 2007; Jacobs, 2013; Kirtley et al., 2020) and the efficacies of comics in improving the literacy skills of incarcerated youth (Gavigan, 2017). The use of comics in classrooms aside, we should note that the multimodal appeal of the Real Cost of Prisons comics is particularly significant for incarcerated readers, whom the comics reached via mail and books-to-prison programs. This is because multimodal literacy is an integral part of prison literacies. In “‘Absolutely Truly Brill to See From You’: Visuality and Prisoners’ Letters’, prison ethnographer Anita Wilson (2000) shows that combining image and text is a routine practice in prison reading and writing. Extreme visual embellishments in the form of drawing or meticulous lettering help incarcerated people ‘do time’ creatively: ‘Levels of absorption in the task go some way towards transporting a prisoner out of the drabness of the environment in which such work is created’ (Wilson, 2000, 197). The same can be said for reading image–texts. It is not a stretch to assume that gazing at the splash pages like ‘Cycles of Exile’ or immersing oneself in the details of drawings is appealing to incarcerated readers.

While there is no exact way to measure comic readership in prisons, especially given the fact that texts often travel from cell to cell and sometimes as contraband, we can assume it to be high. For instance, SureShot Books, which specialises in supplying books to carceral institutions, currently lists nearly 22,000 comics and graphic novels amongst the ‘staff selections’, suggesting that comic reading is a common pastime in prison. Furthermore, cartooning has been an established practice in prison journalism and political agitation, which has recently drawn criminologists’ attention (Richards-Karamarkovich et al., 2024). Although prison writing attracts more attention in the ‘outside’ world and academia (see e.g.; Kelly and Westall, 2020; Murphet, 2023; Rolston, 2021; Larson, 2024), graphic art is part and parcel of carceral textual cultures and prison activism. The comic form, then, was a particularly apt choice for the Real Cost of Prisons Project to reach out to incarcerated people, map out the historical dynamics of the carceral regime, and inform them about their position within this carceral landscape.

The Real Cost of Prisons Project facilitates a dialogue between the inside and outside of prisons, where the comic form serves as a common language to discuss the US carceral regime. The democratising force of comics and their appeal to multimodal literacies is not limited to an outside-to-inside flow of information. As Ahrens (2008) notes in her preface, alongside the demands to receive more comics, incarcerated readers sent out their comics to the Real Cost of Prisons Project, which can be found on the website. The Comix From Inside page serves as an activist archive for seventeen incarcerated cartoonists. Most of them are different graphic interpretations of the abolitionist themes in *The Real Cost of Prisons Comix*, like Jacob Barrett’s Hard Times series, which alludes to the establishing caption of *Prison Town: Paying the Price* and represents just one aspect of Barrett’s repertoire, which ranges from producing the oral history podcast *Lifer’s Archive* to writing for the Solitary Watch’s

Voices from Solitary series⁶. Some are incredibly prolific cartoonists, like Carnell Hunnicutt, whose art exceeds the comic books and splashes on the envelopes he had sent his works in. The archive introduces us to Adam Roberts, for instance, who met Craig Marcell Campbell during his artist residency and collaborated with him on comics projects, publishing *Their Dungeon Shook* in 2020. Its archiving of the comics from inside creates an important source of prison-born, carceral comics – a genre yet to be explored by comics scholars.

In addition to its archive of carceral comics, the Real Cost of Prisons Project also provides links to other websites where one can find prison art. Most of them lead to page-not-found errors, reminding us of the difficulty of establishing sustainable resources for prison activism. Nevertheless, *Realcostofprisons.org* continues to be an invaluable resource for activists, even though underfunding has caused it to lag behind many of its aspirations. The website provides inexhaustible lists of resources ranging from academic publications to prison writing. Its comics archive is a unique source for those who study prison-born texts. Functioning as an activist archive and providing an abolitionist bibliography to anyone with internet access, The Real Cost of Prisons Project seeks to articulate solidarities across prison walls.

In addition to circulating within prisons, the *RCPC* also aims to bring together activists and educators from across the United States to advance the collective project of abolition. Michael Sutcliffe has charted the various ways in which the addition of the *RCPC* in his classrooms has ‘improved my course in ways that far exceeded my expectations’ (Sutcliffe, 2015, 19) and testified to marked improvements in his students’ critical thinking and writing skills. Most importantly perhaps, he notes that students ‘report applying their ideas outside of the class’ (19), with some students joining organisations dedicated to social justice initiatives. He frames his critical pedagogy and the incorporation of the *RCPC* in the classroom in light of Angela Davis’s and Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s call for a political ideology of prison abolition that foregrounds ‘education and incremental moves towards the deconstruction of mass incarceration and the reinvention of an authentic democracy’ (19–20). Similarly, Nisha Thapliyal, reviewing the *RCPC* for *The Radical Teacher*, discusses how the comics demystified students’ perspectives on criminality and the US justice system more broadly (Thapliyal, 2009, 65). Crucially, she points out that her students were initially confident at arguing ‘philosophical questions such as “Why do we have prisons?”’ but struggled as the discussions became ‘less abstract and more situated’ (62). This captures the very real success of the *RCPC* in articulating the abstract with the concrete, or as one student put it, how ‘stories’ become ‘personified’ (65).

This success is also testified to within the *RCPC* itself through the various ‘Readers Respond’ sections following each comic. More than simply providing positive testimony, though, these response sections articulate the numerous spaces and institutions in which the *RCPC* has circulated. For example, Shira Hassan, Co-Director of the Young Women’s Empowerment Project in Chicago, notes: ‘We take it with us to detention centres, group homes, youth shelters and social justice organising projects. Everywhere we go we see youth nodding with agreement and getting excited to see their reality validated in print’ (in Ahrens, 2008, 43). These testimonies continue the work of connecting strangers in political solidarity. While the comics themselves work to disarticulate the seemingly natural or inevitable links between the various parts of the prison-industrial complex, the ‘Readers Respond’ sections articulate the multiple levels at which organisations and activists are working towards prison abolition. It clarifies the nuanced and multifaceted nature of the

⁶ *Lifer’s Archive* is produced by people incarcerated at the Oregon State Correctional Institute: <https://anironroad.wordpress.com/about-the-lifers-archives-podcast/>.

Barrett’s autobiographical writings bear witness to the detrimental effects of solitary confinement: <https://solitarywatch.org/2025/05/22/voices-from-solitary-crawling-out-of-the-darkness-part-1/>.

abolition project. In addition, including the names and institutions of each responder gives the reader a clear sense of the various institutions through which they might contribute. This complements the Real Cost of Prisons Website, which the reader is directed to at the end of the text ‘for more detailed information about the organizations working on each of these and other issues’, to prompt readers to join organised action. Activism does not end with memory work: the consciousness raised by the comics is presented simply as the first step towards social justice, which is shown to be an ongoing project undertaken by myriad activists whom the reader is invited to join.

Conclusion

In this article, we analysed *The Real Cost of Prisons Comix* through the lens of memory studies to demonstrate how graphic memory work, graphic witnessing, and activist archiving operate together to establish political solidarities across manifold positions within the ‘Prison Town’. We suggested that these comics are, first and foremost, pedagogical tools that make the historical and social dynamics of the prison-industrial complex intelligible to audiences with varying degrees of familiarity with the topic and a range of literacies. They belong to a typical consciousness-raising repertoire, simplifying complex histories and putting a human face on systemic violence through witness narratives. Importantly, they do so in a cultural form that is appealing and accessible both within and outside of prisons. The Real Cost of Prisons comics challenge the mainstream comic book industry, which is itself implicated in the production of penal common sense. By offering a space of critical reflection upon the social relations shaped by the neoliberal carceral state and providing historical knowledge to foster political consciousness, the graphic memory work in these comics charts a counter-hegemonic carceral memory with the aim of decarceration.

Twenty years after their original publication, the comics remain among the most accessible educational materials of the ongoing abolitionist movement. Of course, recent developments in the US carceral state, such as the expansion of jails and short-term detention (see Norton et al., 2024) and the acceleration of immigration detention alongside many controversial ICE activities, have generated a need for a more diverse array of educational materials. Pending adequate resources that can meet the need for producing and distributing such work⁷, these comics continue to resonate with the renewed urgency to demystify the US carceral state. Prison activism often relies on first-person testimony, and abolitionist pedagogues have no shortage of writings from within: activist archives of witness narratives, such as the American Prison Writing Archive, offer important resources from incarcerated authors for activist classrooms (Leuner et al., 2022). However, witness writings can be limited resources in the face of resistant readers – resistant either to reading the text itself or to the testimonies of criminalised individuals. By appealing to visual literacies, providing the actively forgotten histories of mass incarceration, and offering alternatives to the criminal justice system, the Real Cost of Prisons comics expand the repertoire for communicating decarceral visions. The archive of prison comics made available by the project stands as testimony to its success in establishing dialogue in a

⁷ Lois Ahrens’s preface reminds us that securing funding for the production and distribution costs of pedagogical activism is immensely challenging and does not follow a supply-and-demand logic:

With the success of the comic books, I began receiving suggestions for new comic books... I had mistakenly thought that the demand and the apparent usefulness of the comic books would generate funding for new ones. Unfortunately this has not been the case. Instead, The Real Cost of Prisons Project including the workshops, our Train the Trainers program, the website and news blog and the printing and distribution of free comic books are all unfunded despite numerous requests. The work continues but no new comic books have been created and in the near future the supply will run out. (2008, 14)

multimodal language and its invitation to sustain that dialogue. In his introduction to a special issue on 'comics activism,' Martin Lund states: 'No comic will ever spark a revolution. No comic will ever single-handedly change the world' (Lund, 2018, 52). Yet, he concludes that 'Comics is uniquely well suited for that task' of consciousness-raising (52). This is particularly true for the abolition movement, which cannot solely address the 'free world' for rescue missions. Multimodal literacies from the 'inside', which demand further research, make graphic memory work a democratising tool to bring together 'insiders' and the 'outsiders' in the project of abolition.

As Lisa Guenther succinctly states, 'abolition is a world-building project; it requires both a collective memory of the world before prisons and police and a collective imagination of a world beyond prisons and police' (Guenther, 2024, 262). The *Real Cost of Prisons* comics briefly explore both directions on a local level: Anytown, USA, exists before the Prison Town, and the alternative justice models they envision are laid bare on splash pages. Remembering the past and imagining a just future go hand in hand in these comic books and the comics they inspire.

Data availability statement. All comics are publicly available on the website of the Real Cost of Prisons Project: <https://www.realcostofprisons.org/comics.html>.

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