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'A stream of words' – the Antwerp Quay Poem as interrogation of urban open form, polyphony and radical dialogue

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ABSTRACT

This article examines polyphony and open form as key concepts connecting literary theory and urban planning. It focuses on Peter Holvoet-Hanssen's Quay Poem, an in-situ poem painted in 2011 on the floodwalls of the Antwerp quays during Holvoet-Hanssen's tenure as city poet. The long poem in public space provides important insights into how literary city texts and the discourses of urban development draw ultimately on similar narrative structures, in close dialogue with past layers of urban meaning and in the shadow of future material transformations. The poem gestures also to insights planning can gain from literary forms of storytelling, in particular in the way Holvoet-Hanssen's poem produces a remarkable openness of form; in the way it articulates a radical variety of different voices; and in the way it continues to speak after the text itself has disappeared from the public built environment.

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Located along the river Scheldt in Antwerp, the flood walls of the river display an ingenious work of poetry in public space: the Quay Poem, composed by the city's poet laureate Peter Holvoet-Hanssen. The poem was painted in 2011 in bright white on more than 3 kilometres of concrete wall. It is a collage of different voices: the words of more than 500 inhabitants of the city, composed by the poet in a single text, a multi-voiced narrative of and by the city's inhabitants. The poem, realised in collaboration with the city's planning department as part of their outreach for the redevelopment of the quays, functions on a variety of levels: as the marker of a material barrier; as example of public poetry; as a means to rethink relationships to

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Image 1. A view of the Quay Poem. 2019. Picture by the author.

the city's past and to its water infrastructure; and as an allegorical figure to unpack a range of topical themes, from ecological concerns to political and social modes of entrenchment and openness. This article examines how Holvoet-Hanssen's Quay Poem interrogates open form, polyphony, and radical dialogue. It also wants to provide a documentation of a poem that is no longer visible in its complete form in Antwerp since the gradual destruction of the quay walls begun in 2018 (Image 1).¹

The institute of the city poet and the inception of the Quay Poem

The institute of poet laureate in Antwerp, introduced in 2003², is part of Antwerpen Book City ('Antwerpen Boekenstad'), which 'carries out a support policy for existing projects and a promotional policy that positions Antwerp as the book metropolis for Flanders'.³ Antwerpen Book City also oversaw Antwerp's tenure as UNESCO World Book City in 2004. The institute of city poet laureate can be seen as both a continuation of the long historical tradition of officially sanctioned city poets (starting from Horace and present in the Medieval and early modern *encomium urbis*), and the much more recent competition between post-industrial cities for cultural capital on a global marketplace.

The Quay Poem was commissioned from Peter Holvoet-Hanssen, then newly inaugurated as fifth city poet laureate, by the urban planning department ('AG stadsplanning') in 2010. The urban planning department was looking for a way to enhance its communication of the upcoming quay redevelopment, one of the largest redevelopment projects of the new century.⁴

Holvoet-Hanssen recounts that agreeing to the invitation was his ‘most difficult decision as city poet’, since he was concerned that he would be appropriated by city politics, and that he would become associated with ‘concrete and design green’.⁵ While the function of poet laureate suggests an official capacity and hence a degree of formality, Holvoet-Hanssen repeatedly and emphatically emphasised his freedom and his ability to escape formal constraints, for example by demanding – and obtaining – a ‘vrijbrief’, modelled on the ‘letter of marque’ of the age of sail.

Work on the poem began with a large-scale open public consultation, in which inhabitants of the city were invited to contribute verses and words to the poem; some 500 people sent in contributions. Individual verses and words were selected by Holvoet-Hanssen in collaboration with his partner Noella Elpers. The resulting poem, officially ‘a project of the city planning department, in cooperation with Antwerp Book City’,⁶ was painted on 3, 2 kilometres of concrete along the river Scheldt, from the Rijnkaai to the Ledeganckkaai, some 6,300 letters in total. It was Holvoet-Hanssens’s second poem as city poet.⁷

Urban open form and the redevelopment of the Antwerp quays

Accompanying the inauguration of the Quay Poem in 2011, the City of Antwerp published and distributed a handsome booklet with the text of the poem and a map with the location of the words. The booklet included images of the location of the poem in public space, as well as an epilogue that looks forward to the future, including concept images of the redeveloped quays. The following quote from the epilogue provides a summary of the vision the planners had in mind for the Antwerp quays:

The quays will again belong to us.

The Scheldt quays are on the verge of a comprehensive redevelopment. A zone with a length of 6, 7 kilometres and a width of 100 meters, next to the city centre, will be completely redeveloped. This does not mean that our quays will lose their current character, on the contrary. The development team of the Quay Plan wants to enhance this open character and to make it into an ever more pleasant and beautiful place, and in particular, into a place that is more closely connected with the city and with the river Scheldt.⁸

As the quote shows, the development of the Antwerp quays is an exercise in preserving and enhancing the city’s relationship to the waterfront, by producing an urban material form that emphasises the open character of the city’s public space and that envisions an accommodating relationship toward both the city’s centre and its water infrastructure. But what is meant with open form, how does this emphasis on openness relate to the historical development of Antwerp, and to what extent is the focus on open form visible in

the formal features of the quay development and Holvoet-Hanssen's public poem?

Openness is foregrounded in a range of planning documents that relate to the quays and their development, and resonated also with the views of the citizens of Antwerp for how the quays could or should be conceived and developed, as documented in the 2009 consultation round for the development.⁹ 'Open', in these documents, means a range of things: it means openness to the city's inhabitants and thus *public access* (in Dutch, *openbaar*); it can also mean an open, unimpeded *visual access* to the river; an emphasis on leaving considerable parts of this area open and thus *unbuilt*; and finally, it also entails creating *flexible water defences*, rather than a closed infrastructure of rigid sea walls.¹⁰

The proposed open form of the future Scheldt quays must be placed within broader discussions in post-war architecture and planning theory. Such discussions spilled over from architectural preferences for open form as opposed to closed form, with figures such as Polish architect Oskar Hansen calling for 'open form' (in itself a critique of the 'closed form' ideal of CIAM modernists) and Aldo Rossi arguing, in opposition, for the ideal of a closed and stable architectural form.¹¹ More recently, Richard Sennett has made an urgent call for an 'open city', arguing that planning in the twentieth century has focused too much on achieving a closed system, defined by over-determination, equilibrium and integration. The open city, in Sennett's vision, would aim, by contrast, at an open system by incorporating the principles of 'porosity of territory', 'narrative indeterminacy', and 'incomplete form'.¹² Sennett's choice of words echoes concerns within narrative theory. The reference to 'narrative indeterminacy', in particular, foregrounds the notion – shared also within this article – that planning is fundamentally a form of storytelling,¹³ and that planning texts and practices are structured alongside specific narrative forms (open or closed, dialogic or monologic) that in turn feed into the built environment.

One particular mode of openness mentioned by Sennett, 'Porosity' – the permeability of edges and boundaries, when used as contact zones rather than as dividing line – has a special resonance in the twenty-first century planning of Antwerp. In the city's master plan (the 'Strategisch Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Antwerpen')¹⁴, 'porous city', is emphasised as one of the guiding themes.¹⁵ Its meaning in the masterplan differs considerably from Sennett's use, and is meant to conceptualise above all the incorporation of underused urban (built or vacant) space.¹⁶ While 'porosity' is not explicitly applied in the city's planning documents to the quay walls, the idea of porous space is a concept that aptly describes how planners tried to resolve the conflicting aims at work in the quays' development by striking a balancing between creating a protective flood barrier and opening up access to the water. The quay development is first of all meant to 'safeguard the city

against possible floods in the future'; the key measures to be taken are to strengthen the quay wall and to raise the flood defences.¹⁷ There is, in other words, a stark contrast between the two express aims of the quay development: on the one hand an emphasis on an ideal 'openness' (of the city to the natural environment; of urban public space) and on the other hand an awareness of 'closedness' – a strengthening and heightening of the material structure of the quays. A degree of formal 'porosity' is what allows a balance between this dialectic of open and closed at the quays, strengthening the city's water defences while allowing tidal movement and public access to the waterfront. In a public announcement, the Sigmaplan describes these porous dynamics as follows:

Along the floodable riverside, the open space keeps its maritime character, among others by reusing existing cobblestones. The existing rail tracks of the cranes are kept and large sea-going vessels can continue to moor at the bollards along the 'blue stone'. A square/beach with a sloping plane was realized at the Zuidersluis to allow everyone to come close to the water. During high water levels, this side of the quay will continue to flood, and will thus belong sometimes to the city and sometimes to the river Scheldt.¹⁸

An image of the future Zuidersluis is included in the epilogue to the Quay Poem booklet from 2011, foregrounding future close interaction with the water, with the actual quay wall out of sight ([Image 2](#)).

In the context of Antwerp, the focus on openness in contemporary planning is rooted in a number of historical developments that had created a cultural image of Antwerp and its river as defined by a dialectics of enclosure and contestation of enclosure. Such developments included the historical closure of the river Scheldt by the Dutch (from 1587 to 1795); the expansive fortification of Antwerp, from Middle Age walls to the famous star-shaped

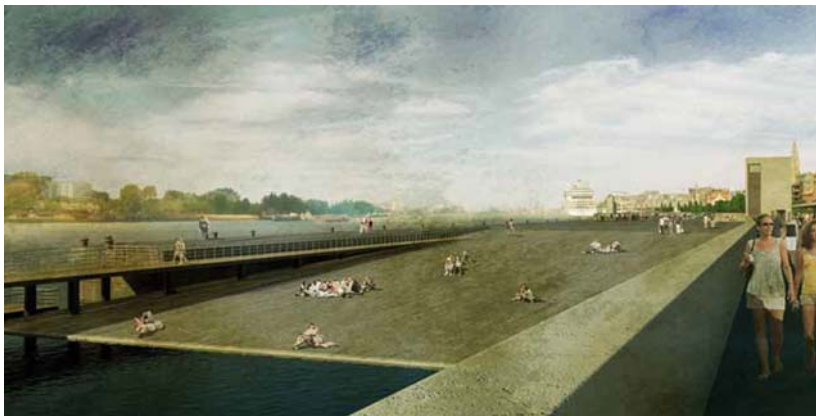


Image 2. Zuidersluis. Source: © PROAP and City of Antwerp, 2011.

citadel completed in 1572, to the circle of independent fortress built in the run-up to the first World War (vividly described in Sebald's *Austerlitz* [2001]); or the image of the city as 'Occupied City' in what is arguably still the most well-known iteration of Antwerp in literature, Paul van Ostaijen's modernist *Bezette Stad* ('Occupied City'; 1921).¹⁹ The most recent fortifications still visible on the quays are atomic bomb shelters on the Loodswezen site, the smallest one accommodating just six persons.²⁰

An important turning point was the straightening of the quays in 1875–1883, a massive operation carried out by the French engineering firm Couvreux & Hersent (also responsible for the Suez Canal), in which the city's relation to the water was altered radically. The river was deepened and widened, the quays were strengthened, and between the city and the newly harnessed water arose a wide swath of land dominated by warehouses and a railroad.²¹ Antwerp figuratively 'turned its back on the river',²² limiting access to the waterfront for much of the following century. In the second half of the twentieth century, with harbour activities leaving the inner city, the quays became a zone of post-industrial blight. Locally, the quays became known as 'the most beautiful parking lot of all of Europe',²³ the city's largest and potentially most valuable open space underused and decaying.

The emphasis on the 'open character' of the city also contains associations with urban cosmopolitanism, drawing on the complex dynamics between the image of a long history as cosmopolitan merchant and port city, and the reality of a city that, from the second half of the twentieth century onward, developed into a stronghold of right-wing nationalist parties. When Antwerp became European capital of culture in 1993, the rise of extreme right in the city in the 1980s and early 1990s was one of the reasons to give the name 'open city' to the architectural programme. The term 'open' was explicitly understood in the 1993 programme as going against xenophobia.²⁴ The xenophobia of the 1990s had been for the most part directed at the non-European communities in the city, with people from North African descent constituting the largest group of foreign background.²⁵ During the 1990s and early 2000s, the political extreme right was kept out of City Hall by left-leaning coalitions led by the social-democrats. It is one such coalition which oversaw the instatement of the office of city poet in 2003 and which, in the same year, introduced a new city slogan: 't Stad is van iedereen' – 'Antwerp is from everyone'. The slogan was used on all publications of the city and also prominently visible on the front cover of Holvoet-Hanssen's *Quay Poem* booklet when it was published in 2011. When, in 2013, a centre-right coalition led by the democratic Flemish nationalist party came into power in Antwerp, the slogan was one of the first things to go. The marketing slogan on the *Quay Poem*'s publication provides one example of how public poetry is drawn into competing

discourses of a city's political self-image. It should be noted that Holvoet-Hanssen, while acutely aware of the societal and political implications of his work, and of the historical complexities of working as a poet in Antwerp's public space, aimed to steer clear from city politics during his tenure as city poet, an independent course symbolised by the 'vrijbrief' he obtained from the city.²⁶ A poetics of open form, rather than an explicit political message, would be his method of choice for advancing his view of poetry's interaction with the city.

Radical dialogue

On the ground, and in its physical appearance on the flood defences, the Quay Poem enacts a remarkable openness: openness towards the river with which it is aligned, to the left bank from which it is visible, and to the city's inhabitants on whose perspectives it draws. An important textual feature is how it radically opens up its space to other voices than that of the poet. In addition to being a poem composed of citizens' voices (a feature which will be discussed in the following section), the Quay Poem also engages forcefully with earlier writing about Antwerp and its river in a way that foregrounds the intertextual, poetical, but also political antecedents of Holvoet-Hanssen's public poem. There is an intertextual nod to Paul Van Ostaijen (4), a reference to Wannes Van De Velde (15–16), Antwerp's most celebrated folk singer, and spatial dialogue with Adriaan de Roover's public poem visible across the river (see below). But the Quay Poem's most radical dialogue with an earlier text is its engagement with a poem that had earlier adorned the quay wall: the 'Walking Poem' ('Wandelgedicht') by Herman J. Claeys, an activist poet who had painted the poem illegally on the water defences in August 1991. Claeys's poem was a highly political statement in a city whose left-leaning cultural scene had been shocked by the political turn towards extreme-right in the early 1990s. The time of writing precedes by a few months the elections of 'Black Sunday' (November 1991), when the extreme-right Flemish nationalist party became the largest political party in Antwerp. Some remnants of the paint were still visible on the wall in the 2010s, when work on the Quay Poem began, and for Holvoet-Hanssen, one of the aims of the Quay Poem had always been to pay tribute to Claeys's forgotten legacy and to make visible the traces of earlier poetic intervention in public space.²⁷ The Quay Poem quotes a number of verses from Claeys, words that, in their direct address, refer forcefully to the wall both as built infrastructure and as allegory for social and political entrenchment. They accuse the reader of closing their world from the outside:

... do you build here a new “Fort Europa” with anxious human-closed walls and scarce entrance gates just like this lockable water-tight floodwall?

The reference to ‘Fort Europe’ frames questions of open and closed form within the perspective of mass migration, rising xenophobia and the creation of new kinds of European borders. The key question posed in 1991 by Claeys – what justification for walls? – has remained valid, while the meaning of the words on the flood defences has shifted with changing contexts. A reader in the 2010s will have read the text against the background of increasing globalisation, the refugee crisis of 2015, but also in a context of continuing military presence in Belgian cities in the wake of the Brussels attacks of 2016. On the ground in Antwerp, the mention of the ‘scarce entrance gates’ is uncannily tangible, since the words are just a short walk away of one of the few physical floodgates – heavy movable metal locks – in the wall. It is clear to the poet what should be done with such infrastructure of closure:

... you who stroll now along this quay: cut here a breach in this dike, the dike of your compulsive resistance against the swiftly spring tide of your unchecked urges ... and let your swirling tidal waves rage inland and inundate the unyielding citizens with your storm ... (6–7)

The flood wall is also a symbol of the reactionary forces within the reader, which keep in check the Dionysian forces symbolised by spring tide, tidal waves and storm. But the victory of instinct over reason demands that new walls need to be constructed against the “stench of brown plague” (8), a clear reference to the spectre of fascism in the context of rising extreme right in the city. Rather than an unequivocal call for openness, Claeys’s verses call for old barriers to be torn down and new ones to be erected.

In its relationship with Claeys’s protest poem, Holvoet-Hanssen’s Quay Poem opens up most radically to political questions and to earlier poetic interventions in public space. The long quotation foregrounds poetry’s ability to engage with complex societal and political developments in ways that actively intervene in the city’s public sphere. It emphasises the political, but also the poetical stakes at work in the Quay Poem, as a poem that opens up to a diversity of voices. The long quote also has consequences for literature’s relationship towards the material on which it is situated.²⁸ The verses that were retained, with their direct address of the passer-by, use an age-old rhetorical device: the direct address of a passer-by was a strategy already used by Greek epigrammatic poems in public space, typically as an exhortation to consider the fate of the buried dead or the gods on display.²⁹ Rather than commending the works of men or of the Gods, the invitation of Claeys’s poem-in-the-poem to an unnamed you is a radical invitation to do away with the very material on which the poem is written. I will return to the

ecocritical consequences of Claeys's exhortation to breach the flood walls in the final part of this article.

Poetical polyphony

Central to the Quay Poem is its commitment to radical dialogue, and its openness to a diversity of voices. This commitment is rendered, among others, by way of intertextual references – such as the quote from Claeys's poem – but first and foremost by how it draws on an extensive range of citizens' voices. Fascinating is not only the consultation process, in which all inhabitants of Antwerp were invited to contribute verses to the future poem, but also how these lines from various backgrounds were incorporated in the final poem in a way that decisively directs the poet himself to the background. The vast majority of the poem consists of the original words of citizen contributions, written between quotation marks. Only the words not between quotation marks are by Holvoet-Hanssen – a formal method of assigning voice that enables a remarkable degree of transparency. In the colophon of the booklet, a full list of contributors can be found. Several of the longer quotes are introduced with reference to a name (which can be connected to a name in the colophon), as if the reader is witnessing stage directions complete with colon: 'or Janno: ...' (12) 'to Kirsto: ...' (11); 'and Marco: ...' (11); 'and Rik: ...' (13). One particularity of the text, in other words, is that the different voices are not presented in summarised or paraphrased form but are explicitly indicated as separate utterances by their placement within quotation marks. As such, the text provides a truly multi-voiced narrative of and by the city's inhabitants. It is Bakhtinian polyphony in practice, producing a text that is not subordinated to a dominant authorial consciousness but consists instead of 'a *plurality of consciousness*'; a text in which the protagonists are 'not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse'.³⁰ This characteristic of the Quay Poem is closely aligned with the broader oeuvre of Holvoet-Hanssen, which has repeatedly been read as 'the result of an absorption and transformation of other voices',³¹ and 'fascinated by ... radical polyphony, the combination of diverse voices that take centre stage one after another'.³² In some of his other poems as poet laureate, Holvoet-Hanssen had actively reached out to residents from particular backgrounds, collaborating, for example, on a 'tree of stories' with co-authors who did not speak Dutch as their first language.³³ In the consultation process of the Quay Poem, there was no active outreach to particular population groups, and names with a foreign background are relatively under-represented in the colophon. But the text explicitly draws attention to this relative lack: Holvoet-Hanssen added between brackets the words: '(Hey, where is Samira and Abdul?)' (11–12), allowing even an absence of voices to become visible in the poem.³⁴

In the opening section of the Quay Poem, the selection of citizen contributions is introduced as ‘poetical debris’; ‘verses that came floating in the wind’ or that ‘were washed ashore’ (1). They introduce the poet as a collector of the flotsam and jetsam provided by the ‘stream of words’ that is the city. Many of the individual contributions, placed between quotations, indeed feel like ‘debris’, fragmentary bits and pieces, sometimes of only a few words. Without context, they feel similar to patchy pieces of overheard and possibly misunderstood conversations. The fragmentary characteristics of the Quay Poem resemble modernist experiments with form, which have been read in part as endeavours to come to term with the unsettling cacophony and diverse stimuli of the modernising city.³⁵ Part of the modernist technique was to include found objects by way of a montage: fragments of advertisements and signs in public space; overheard conversations; foreign words; shouts and screams. In modernist literature, the fragments of urban polyphony tended to be a minority within the global text, subjected to the organising vision of the narrator. But in the Quay Poem, the relationship between visionary poet and urban polyphony is inverted, with only a small portion of the poem by the poet himself. In the figure of the beachcomber, Holvoet-Hanssen performs the role that Walter Benjamin saw for Baudelaire and other poets of modernity: to be a ‘ragpicker’ who goes ‘botanising on the asphalt’, and who transforms the ephemeral and transitory into art.³⁶ Benjamin writes how already at Baudelaire’s time of writing, ‘the conditions for the reception of lyric poetry have become increasingly unfavourable’, in part because, ‘only in rare instances does lyric poetry accord with the experience of its readers’, experiences which are typically ‘isolated’ in the modern city, rather than rooted in traditional community.³⁷ It is one of Holvoet-Hanssen’s contributions to have inserted poetic expressions – based on a variety of highly personal everyday experiences – back into the material urban public sphere, the same sphere from which it takes its inspiration.

The variety of voices is also mirrored in the poem by a range of narrative genres and techniques. There are personal anecdotes that read like microfiction: ‘I brought my dockworker his forgotten bread’ (3). There are fragments, sometimes consisting of only a few words: “‘Jiassou baba’”; “‘do I smell the scent of rope and tar’”; “‘flapping flags’”; “‘back towards home’”. In the case of “‘Jiassou baba’”, the foreign words (possibly a name?) without context make the utterance to all effect unintelligible, with a focus on pure sound, which also remind the reader of the linguistic diversity in the city – the fact that “‘migrants there will always be, sitting on the blue stone on that anchor post’” (14). But the other examples quoted above are almost as incomprehensible in their fragmentary nature. Some of the fragments consist of a single poetic image: “‘My sky colours magenta-red’” (1); other read like mundane aphorisms: “‘What happens behind this wall? Tragedy and romance’”.

In most of the cases, the material placement of the poem adds an important dimension. Meaning is created in the relation between the words one can see from a particular vantage point and their immediate material surroundings. The utterances can be seen as ever so many invitations to test whether one's own impressions along the quays conform to, or differ from, those of other citizens quoted in the poem. Walking along the quays, can I still smell the "scent of rope and tar" or hear the "flapping flags"? What colour is the sky above Antwerp at this very moment? Lines such as "What happens behind this wall?" invite the passer-by to turn the eyes from the words on the concrete to the city that lies behind it and imagine the lives being lived there. One of the functions of the poem is thus to call on the reader to forcefully imagine other lives on the basis of disconnected fragments. It is an operation that is as typical of city literature as it is of urban life.³⁸ As a reader, we run up against the incompleteness of the information we have about these other lives, which come to us in disconnected fragments, scattered 'debris'. At the same time, we are drawn into the realisation that these touch our lives and share the same material space. In this way, the poem in public space plays on the inattentive way in which city dwellers tend to interact with the built environment. Walter Benjamin speaks in this respect of the audience's 'state of distraction' and notes that this is particularly typical of interaction with architecture, since buildings are experienced 'much less through rapt attention than by noticing the object in incidental fashion'.³⁹ Benjamin's observations were written in the context of his theory of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, and he notes that '[e]ven the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be'.⁴⁰ The Quay Poem is situated in an age when reproduction has moved into the virtual realm – Holvoet-Hanssen's poem can be seen on a map interface, on YouTube, as online publication, as well as on paper. But in its material positioning on the flood walls, the Quay Poem is also a poem with 'its unique existence', a work of public art that draws the attention of distracted passers-by not only to the city's built environment, but also to the social and linguistic make-up of the city, and to the unique positioning of a particular reader at a particular time of the year and the day.

One way in which Holvoet-Hanssen effects a democratisation in form is by a mixing of high and low. Many of the fragments have a prosaic feel, challenging traditional assumptions about the lofty form and content of poetry. Some make use of the local dialect, in particular in utterances that can be interpreted as expressions between lovers (or loved ones): "you are really a little sun" (15); "come here you darling" (12). In both examples, there is a direct address in second person singular, made all the more direct by the use of local dialect 'gij' instead of the standard 'jij'. This 'you' can be

interpreted as an unnamed addressee, known only to the speaker, but it can also be interpreted as the reader or even as the river, in a poetic dialogue between quays and river Scheldt. Especially when reading the poem in its material context on the quays, the river itself takes centre stage as the implied addressee of the words, quite explicitly so in the following fragment:

you touch our land with softly stroke and carry birds along your back (15)

The subtle iambic metre of the line, which I have attempted to accommodate in the translation, shows how the Quay Poem oscillates between highly mundane dictum and more formal features associated with traditional poetry, such as metre, inner rhyme, and personification. On the page, it is relatively easy to recognise such rhetoric and poetic strategies (as in the example above). On the ground, it is much harder to distinguish such elements, also because the occasional stroller will read only a random part of the text and is as likely to read the text from back to front as from the front to back. The reader is literally confronted with a ‘stream of words’, whose most distinguishable feature is its unrelenting linearity. This linearity, too, is a feature that enhances the democracy between the different words: on the quay wall, no utterance takes precedence over another by virtue of its placement within a verse or stanza (apart from the very first and very last words).

The Quay Poem creates the illusion that these different voices and different utterances are haphazardly brought together, as coincidentally as sound ‘floating on the wind’ or debris ‘washed ashore’ (1). Only the river and the quays constitute a connecting theme. But it is important to reiterate that this is also a poem with a clear purpose within frameworks of urban policy, as a poem composed by the city’s official poet laureate (who functions by the grace of Antwerp Book City and its ‘promotional policy that positions Antwerp as the book metropolis for Flanders’), and as a poem commissioned by the City of Antwerp as part of the communication strategy for the redevelopment of the quays. Some of the contributions can easily be interpreted as direct feedback to the city planners:

Noordkasteel from behind my window there where the trees have to remain
(3)

they won’t tear down the hangars won’t they (4)

No wall between me and the river (10)

These utterances can be interpreted as love declarations to the river and the city, in tune with many other fragments in the Quay Poem. But they are also reactions to local policy and planning: respectively, a reference to the ‘Oosterweel Link’, the controversial and long-running plan to close the Antwerp ring road, and the development of the Noordkasteel area (visible from the

Bonapartedok, the location of the verse); a reference to the uncertain fate of the obsolete hangars located along the quays; and finally, a reference to the more general discussion about the connection between city and water. They are a tangible reminder that the poem was also part of the communication strategy of the planning department, and that the separate contributions were collected in a process that resembled urban planning consultation.

Textual open form

The poetic programme of textual open form, as it took shape in the Quay Poem, is profoundly grounded in the broader poetics of the oeuvre of Holvoet-Hanssen. The poet who was approached by the city planning department to create a literary work that would evoke the Antwerp quays, their relation to the water, and their imminent redevelopment, was particularly well-placed to create a poem aligned with a programme of open form. For much of his literary career to date, Peter Holvoet-Hanssen has been concerned with critiquing the constraints of narrative form and has endeavoured to break out of the straight-jacket of various kinds of formal restraints. This was the case already in his debut poetry collection, which has been described as an exploration of the theme of how ‘to escape the closedness of a system’,⁴¹ an escape act which took the shape of formal experiments with roots in the historical avant-garde and in postmodern experiment, such as extensive use of quotations, an indiscriminate mixing of genres and styles, and the fusion of personal life, public figure, and art. As Holvoet-Hanssen’s oeuvre developed, this mixing and breaking of categories resulted in the gradual creation of a vast network of intertextual, intratextual, and extratextual configurations, questioning the demarcations of individual art works and the border between art and real life. As a result, Holvoet-Hanssen’s work can be described as distinctly ‘centrifugal’, defying fixed categories or the restrictive hierarchies of one-sided interpretation.⁴² The text as open form in the context of Holvoet-Hanssen is not only an issue of poetics. It also has a bearing on the relationship between poetry and the outside world. Bart Vervaeck argues that ‘literary fiction, for Holvoet-Hanssen, serves to open up reality ... to uncover its [reality’s] magical dimensions. And the other way around: reality serves to open up fiction, to allow the language of humans be spoken’.⁴³ In this sense, the poetry of Holvoet-Hanssen has been seen as an example of the ‘return to reality’ in recent literature.⁴⁴ Openness is not only a central characteristic of the poet’s work, but also a feature of the readerly reaction it wants to invite: with his work, Holvoet-Hanssen suggests to his public the possibility an ‘open reading attitude, against the closed straight-jacket’ of a criticism that looks for fixed meaning(s).⁴⁵

The urge towards experiments with open form, in Holvoet-Hanssen’s work, can be seen as set against classical ideals of the poetic work as a

closed, self-contained and self-referential totality, evoked in the image of the poem as 'well-wrought urn'.⁴⁶ And it is also rooted within postmodern thinking of literary texts as set on a continuum from 'closed' to 'open', or in the terms of Roland Barthes (1975), from 'readerly' (lisible) to 'writerly' (scriptable).⁴⁷ The open or 'readerly' text aims to remain radically open to numerous approaches, using the 'disruptive aesthetics of modernism or of the avantgarde'.⁴⁸ While this kind of openness would at first sight seem to put the emphasis on the writer as creative force able to compose an intricate web of multiple meanings, the real responsibility (and agency) in this view of the text lies with the reader, who, in their approach to the text, is invited to activate particular meanings. This is a view also associated with Umberto Eco's theory of the *opera aperta*, or open work, which foregrounds the malleability of an artwork (such as a musical composition) in its consecutive performances, but also the openness to interpretation and the active role of the reader.⁴⁹

In the Quay Poem, these complex poetics combine in a way that defies interpretation and that opens up in multiple ways. Openness is evident in the multiple and open-ended varieties of the work, which exists in different versions: it could be visited on the ground in Antwerp throughout the 2010s; it exists in the form of a booklet published by the city in 2011; it is also published in the double book that collected the author's poems as Antwerp's poet laureate.⁵⁰ On the internet, it can be found (among others) on the official website of Antwerpen book city, both in plain textual form and in the form of an interactive map.⁵¹ One of the elements of openness is arguably the text's fundamental fleetingness, its conception as poem-in-situ that was always intended to be transitory. As Holvoet-Hanssen said in one interview: 'I hope you like it. And if you don't, it will soon be demolished anyway'.⁵²

In its textual attributes, openness of form is most vividly present in the poem's openness to different kinds of voices and its openness to radical dialogue, as described in the previous sections. But on the ground, for the reader interacting with the poem in urban public space while walking along the Antwerp quays, the material positioning of the quay walls and the location of the text on the flood wall provides a concrete invitation to transgress borders and scale walls. The poem is not visible for someone who approaches the quay walls from the inner city, since it is painted on the side of the wall that faces away from the city centre, towards the river Scheldt and to the 'left' shore of the river. When I visited the quays in April 2019, I was guided by Michaël Vandebril, poet and coordinator of Antwerpen Book City. To get access to the poem, Michaël showed me how we had to get across the low wall (roughly one metre and a half), sometimes in quite awkward situations: evading bicyclers, negotiating portions of the wall where the poem was obscured by scaffolding or by the building material left by ongoing

redevelopment. To become a reader meant literally to become transgressive, to scale walls, to look at things from a different perspective – a perspective that was also, literally, that of the neglected ‘left’ shore of the river. In his conceptualisation of the dialogue between the two shores, Holvoet-Hanssen consciously played on the connotations of ‘closed’ and ‘open’ in the Dutch language: even before the inception of the Quay Poem, the poet had begun collaboration with local inhabitants of the left bank on a possible harbour poem, and Holvoet-Hanssen expressed the desire to ‘close’ with poetry the division between left and right banks – with a play on words on the Dutch word ‘dichten’ which means ‘to close’ as well as ‘to create poetry’.⁵³

A striking form of such ‘closing’ of the division between left and right bank is the Quay Poem’s interaction with the poem ‘My City’ by Adriaan de Roover, a poem from 1958 which was painted on one of the Europark Apartment Blocks on the left bank in 2011. One of the stated aims of the Quay Poem was to act as a ‘poetic answer to the poem’ by de Roover which can be seen from the quays.⁵⁴ It is a gesture of open dialogue towards an earlier generation of city poets, but also towards the neglected left bank of the river and the Europark Apartment Blocks, social housing towers constructed along modernist lines in the 1960s and 1970s. The dialogue between the two poems can be approached in terms of their textual resonance, but for visitors to the material site, the most compelling effect is not the words (which can hardly be seen from one site to the other without binoculars), but rather the way the poems in public space foreground the subtle material communication between two monumental constructions, one horizontal and one vertical. Both are large, public building projects that testify to the complex legacy of twentieth-century endeavours to solve urban problems with public infrastructure (rigid flood walls, and high-rise and densely built social housing, respectively), but whose viability is increasingly questioned in the present century.

The Quay Poem draws attention to the materiality of the matter on which it is written, as well as to the city’s broader built environment. But, as the discussion of the long quotation from Claeys’s earlier ‘Walking Poem’ shows, it does so in a profoundly critical manner, questioning the justification for the very infrastructure on which the poem is situated, urging passers-by to take action, with a direct address that has political as well as poetical undertones (‘... you who stroll now along this quay: cut here a breach in this dike ...’; 6–7). I raised the possibility that the ‘you’ who is addressed in such passages of the poem can be identified with the river Scheldt, an exhortation that foregrounds the agency of the river and that allows for an openness to natural forces in their most destructive form, even if it means they threaten the very material form on which the poem is written.

The ecocritical resonances of the invitation to actively breach the water defences gain further depth when it is read together with the lines that

immediately follow these by Claeys, lines which constitute a full quotation of the poem 'Ecocide' by Antwerp's unofficial youth poet laureate Yoni Sel. In terms of intertextual interaction, the quotation is an unusual form of dialogue. Holvoet-Hanssen extensively shares his platform as poet laureate with his younger contemporary counterpart; Yoni Sel's poem is the only text quoted in full in the Quay Poem, and takes up more words than Holvoet-Hanssen's own contribution (i.e. the words *not* in quotation marks). In its first (of three) stanzas, 'Ecocide' draws attention to how artistic form is implicated with the destruction of the environment:

If a young man likes to make paintings
 He needs paper for his idea
 So they've shaved forests stark naked
 To be used in his atelier
 The nature he wanted to paint however has been lost
 But there is NO PLANET B (8–9)

The desire to recreate the world in artistic form leaves its violent mark on the natural world: forests have to make way for paper to allow artist to create their products. But the materiality of artistic form (from the paper used for sketches to the concrete on which the poem is written) is entirely futile in the light of what may be irrecoverably lost. With its epistrophic 'there is no planet B', repeated at the end of each subsequent stanza, the poem opens new perspectives on the relation between poem, water and city. Sel's poem questions the artistic impulse to imitate nature by way of a material fabric (from paper to concrete) that is utterly complicit in our problematic relationship with the natural environment. The condemnation of cultural acts that in their material form perpetuate human exploitation of natural resources takes on particular urgency in the light of the immediately previous invitation to an unnamed 'you' to rise up and 'cut here a breach in this dike' (6–7). The material form on which the poem is written is no longer seen as an artefact of cultural heritage worthy of preservation; instead, what is foregrounded is the interaction between different kinds of material forms (including, and in particular, that of the river and its agency). This does not mean to say that all poetic expression is futile, on the contrary: the poem ends with a consideration of the powerfulness of the poem even as an immaterial utterance. The Quay Poem began with the suggestion that its different voices were 'verses that came floating in the wind' or that 'were washed ashore' (1). In the final words, there is the suggestion that the verses unite again with the wind above the river: 'my darling, listen to the wind, it's Wannes who whispers' (15). Earlier songs (by Wannes van de Velde, local folk singer) and the different voices of the Quay Poem merge with the wind above the river, a singsong that is perpetuated even as the quay walls are cut, breached, and remodelled.

Conclusion

The Quay Poem was originally commissioned as an act of communication by the planning department of Antwerpen, with the intention that it would be a temporary poem in public space to communicate the redevelopment of the waterfront. But when the destruction of the quay walls on which it was written began, in 2018, the sudden and violent disappearance of parts of the poem took many by surprise. Members of the public had become attached to the poem; Holvoet-Hanssen was dismayed by the fact the demolition began without prior warning or announcement, and lamented the fact that no efforts had been made to preserve some parts of the poem.⁵⁵ But the Quay Poem was never merely a one-directional act of communication. In its formal openness, its polyphony, and in how it enacts a radical dialogue with the city's material environment and its immaterial layers of meaning, it constitutes a powerful and tangible intervention that produces new perspectives on the city, its past, and its future development. It foregrounds formal questions of open and closed form in ways that go at the heart of contemporary discussions about city form and about social and political forms of entrenchment. In its remarkable polyphony and in how it includes unfiltered and contradictory voices of the city, it provides a blueprint for possible polyphony in planning and policy. It enacts a compelling dialogue with other structures in the built environment, with previous experiences of the waterfront, 'carried on the winds', and with the palimpsestic remnants of past moments of political contestation. When visited on the ground along the river, it proposes a profound material and physical positioning within urban space, inviting the reader to scale walls, to take new perspectives, even to breach the concrete on which the text is written. Finally, in its ecocritical gestures towards the powerful agency of the river, it questions not only the rationale of floodwalls, old and new, but cuts away at the roots of its own literary materiality.

Notes

1. In this article, I refer to the poem in the present tense, acknowledging all the while that it is no longer visible in full in public space.
2. Karolien Vermeulen, 'Home in Biblical and Antwerp City Poems – A Journey', *Arcadia* 52.1 (2017), pp. 161–82.
3. Antwerpen, 'Antwerpen boekenstad', *letterenhuis*, 2020. <https://www.letterenhuis.be/en/page/antwerpen-boekenstad> [Date accessed: 6 November 2020].
4. The Antwerp quay redevelopment is part of the Sigmaphan, a programme that aims to defend Flanders against flooding of the river Scheldt and its tributaries, while also enhancing and recovering river nature. The Sigmaphan, which was updated a number of times, was inaugurated in 1977 and aims to be fully carried out by 2030.

5. Peter Holvoet-Hanssen, *Antwerpen – Oostende* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2012), pp. 92–94. All translations from Dutch are by the author unless stated otherwise.
6. Peter Holvoet-Hanssen, *Welkom Pierewaaiers. Het kaaiengedicht, een woordenstroom van 't Stad* (Antwerpen: Antwerpen, 2011), np.
7. The full title of what I here call the 'Quay Poem' is: *Welkom Pierewaaiers. Het kaaiengedicht, een woordenstroom van 't Stad*. It does not translate easily; a close literary translation would be: 'Welcome drifters. The Quay Poem, A stream of words of the city'. 'Pierewaaier' is a slang term (which arguably entered the Dutch language from Russian via the Antwerp harbour); it denotes an easy-going, merry character, or more negatively, a profligate rake. In folk-etymological terms, it also sounds like a person who is likely to hang out on the piers and quays of the harbour. The term 't stad' (literally 'the city') is a colloquial word denoting Antwerp and underscoring the sense of Antwerp as the foremost city (at least in its immediate geographical, historical and cultural context).
8. Holvoet-Hanssen, *Welkom Pierewaaiers*, np.
9. Antwerpen, *Vraag en Antwoord. Infomoment Ontwerp Masterplan Schelde-kaaien* (Antwerpen: Antwerpen, 2010); *Antwerpen, Tussen stad en stroom. Het Masterplan Scheldekaaien Antwerpen* (Antwerpen: GSA, 2011); *Antwerpen, Loodswezensite. RUP voorontwerp. Toelichtingsnota* (Antwerpen: AG Vespa, 2016); see also Antwerpen, *Aanbevelingen tafelgesprekken. De Kaaien op Tafel* (Antwerpen: Antwerpen, 2009).
10. Antwerpen, *Loodswezensite*, pp. 49–50, 14–16.
11. Muriel Emanuel, *Contemporary Architects* (London: Macmillan Press, 1980), p. 339; Esra Akcan, *Open Architecture: Migration, Citizenship and the Urban Renewal of Berlin Kreuzberg* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2018).
12. Richard Sennet, 'The Open City', in Tigran Haas and Hans Westlund (eds.), *The Post-Urban World. Emergent Transformation of Cities and Regions in the Innovative Global Economy* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 97–106.
13. See James A. Throgmorton, *Planning as Persuasive Storytelling: The Rhetorical Construction of Chicago's Electric Future* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996); Lieven Ameel, *The Narrative Turn in Urban Planning* (London: Routledge, 2020).
14. Antwerpen, *Antwerpen Ontwerpen. Strategisch Ruimtelijk Structuurplan* (Antwerpen: Antwerpen, 2006).
15. Sigmoplan, 'Op 7 juli groot openingsfeest', *Sigmoplan*, 2019. <https://www.sigmoplan.be/nl/nieuws/op-7-juli-groot-openingsfeest-op-sint-andries-en-zuid-aan-de-scheldekaaien/> [Date accessed: 6 May 2020]. The other themes are: 'Antwerp as water city'; 'Ecocity'; 'Harbour city'; 'Rail City'; 'Villages and Metropolis'; 'Megacity'.
16. Antwerpen, *Stadsontwikkeling in Antwerpen. Antwerpen Ontwerpen* (Antwerpen: GSA, 2012), p. 19.
17. Holvoet-Hanssen, *Welkom Pierewaaiers*, np.
18. The 'blue stone' is a reference to the quay wall and its historical blue stone.
19. Antwerp is also the only Belgian city surrounded with an 'eruv', a ritual enclosure that enables Orthodox Jews a degree of movement during the Sabbath. The city is home to one of the largest Jewish communities of Europe.
20. Antwerpen, *Loodswezensite*, p. 27.

21. The straightening of the quays was ready in time for the Antwerp World Exhibition of 1885, symbolically enclosing the river to better enable the city to open up towards the world. Both events resulted in one of the classics of nineteenth-century literature of Antwerp: *La Nouvelle Carthage* by Georges Eekhoud ('The New Carthage'; 1888), written after the straightening, but set before the events.
22. Bartho Hendriksen, *Capitool Antwerpen* (Antwerpen: Unieboek, 2009), p. 16.
23. Philippe Teughels and Alix Lorquet, 'Een vrijplaats tussen stad en stroom', *Ruimte Magazine* 1 (2009), p. 37.
24. Pieter Uyttenhove, 'Een cultuur van de stad. Open Stad, een programma voor stedenbouw en architectuur', in Pieter Uyttenhove (ed.), *Open Stad, stedenbouw en architectuur* (Antwerpen: Antwerpen, 1993), pp. 1–5; Pieter Uyttenhove, 'Open Stad', in Mieke Dings (ed.), *De Stad* (Rotterdam: 010, 2006), p. 263.
25. At the time of writing (2020), the majority of the inhabitants of Antwerp are of foreign background (including residents with foreign nationality, previously of foreign nationality, or who have one or both parents with foreign nationality). People of Northern African descent remain the largest group with foreign background in Antwerp. Antwerpen, Antwerpen, 'Rapport Demografie: District Antwerpen', *Stad in Cijfers*, 2020. https://stadincijfers.antwerpen.be/databank/Report?id=demografie_parents&input_geo=antwerpen_1 [Date accessed: 10 November 2020].
26. Holvoet-Hanssen, *Antwerpen – Oostende*, pp. 67, 92–95.
27. Holvoet-Hanssen, *Antwerpen – Oostende*, p. 93.
28. The wall, in its material properties, bears the physical traces of Claeys's work: looking closely, it is possible to see the palimpsestic traces of the earlier words. Along the quay, in an almost forgotten corner hidden by construction debris, two photos of Claeys at work could be seen during my visit in April 2019. These photos had been added to the concrete when Holvoet-Hanssen's poem was painted on the wall.
29. Mario Citroni, 'What is an Epigram? Defining a Genre', in Christer Henriksen (ed.), *Companion to Ancient Epigram* (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2019), pp. 23–24.
30. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 6–7. Original emphasis.
31. Bart Vervaeck, 'Onder de leeggeplukte appelboom: recent werk van Peter Holvoet-Hanssen', *Dietsche warande & Belfort*, 160.3. (2015), p. 93.
32. Dirk De Geest, 'Schakel fladderende woorden tot een zwerm aaneen. De poëziemagie van Peter Holvoet-Hanssen', *Ons Erfdeel*, 3 (2011), pp. 51–52.
33. For his outreach to diverse groups (among others in the poem 'Vertelboom' ['story tree']) during his tenure as city poet, Holvoet-Hanssen received the Arkprijs, a prize awarded for advancing the free word, in 2012. See Lukas De Vos, *Peter Holvoet-Hanssen. Kaapvaart* (Antwerpen: De Vrienden van de Zwarte Panter, 2012).
34. Other absences remain unspoken in the poem, but are felt in the background. One absence is that of the harbour itself, no longer actively present along the city quays, but a looming presence at the horizon; another the demographic shift that has seen residents with foreign background become the majority of the city's population, with white flight and middle class suburbanisation continuing apace in the twenty-first century.

35. See e.g. Robert Alter, *Imagined Cities. Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 20 ff.
36. Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 108, 68.
37. Benjamin, *The Writer*, p. 170, 171, 177.
38. Hana Wirth-Nesher, *City Codes. Reading the Modern Urban Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 10.
39. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 240.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 220.
41. Yves T'sjoen, 'Stem en tegenstem. Een dialoog met Peter Holvoet-Hanssen', *Dietsche Warande en Belfort*, 149, no. 1 (2004), p. 242.
42. Jos Joosten, "'Vlug volg zijn spoor.' Op jacht naar de vos bij Peter Holvoet-Hanssen', *Tiecelijn*, 15 (2002), p. 70.
43. Bart Vervaeck, 'Profiel van een piraat: over het proza van Peter Holvoet-Hanssen', *Parmentier*, 21.3 (2012), p. 16.
44. Vervaeck, 'Onder de leeggeplukte', p. 96.
45. Holvoet-Hanssen as quoted in Thomas Vaessens and Jos Joosten, *Postmoderne poëzie in Nederland en Vlaanderen* (Amsterdam: Vantilt, 2003), p. 69.
46. See Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947).
47. Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1976).
48. Peter Brooker, *A Glossary of Literary and Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 2016), np.
49. Umberto Eco, *The open work. Opera aperta, and other essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).
50. Holvoet-Hanssen, *Antwerpen – Oostende*.
51. Antwerpen Book City, 'Welkom Pierewaaiers', *Antwerpenboekenstad*, 2011. <https://www.antwerpenboekenstad.be/stadsdichters/1/peter-holvoet-hanssen/gedichten/49/welkom-pierewaaiers> [Date accessed: 6 May 2020]; Antwerpen Book City, 'Welkom Pierewaaiers', 2019. [https://uploads.knightlab.com/storymaps/b14512236f15e00def1c6e5f29728973/dichter-bij-peter-holvoet-hanssen/index.html?fbclid=IwAR0sD7ll7DU_GrVudqdZuKCxIMgEbKGAqFwmSt5gO-u\]4HJwWC5iZGcOU3k](https://uploads.knightlab.com/storymaps/b14512236f15e00def1c6e5f29728973/dichter-bij-peter-holvoet-hanssen/index.html?fbclid=IwAR0sD7ll7DU_GrVudqdZuKCxIMgEbKGAqFwmSt5gO-u]4HJwWC5iZGcOU3k) [Date accessed: 6 May 2020].
52. Quoted in Liesbeth Vermarcke, 'Gedicht "Welkom Pierewaaiers" siert waterkeringsmuur. Mooi poëtisch afscheid van oude kaaimuur', *Nieuwsblad*, 11 July 2011.
53. Holvoet-Hanssen, *Antwerpen – Oostende*, p. 92.
54. Holvoet-Hanssen, *Welkom Pierewaaiers*, np.
55. GVA, 'Voormalig stadsdichter betreurt communicatie over afbraak kaaimuur', *Gazet van Antwerpen*, 25 July 2018. https://www.gva.be/cnt/dmf20180725_03631453/voormalig-stadsdichter-betreurt-communicatie-over-afbraak-kaaimuur-ik-wist-dat-het-niet-anders-kon-maar-toch. [Date accessed: 10 May 2020].

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