

'Fuck normal': Praxis for learning from the profane

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Abstract

There is much to be learned through sharing stories of resistance to binaries. In this paper I introduce myself (so that you know a bit about how my experiences with privilege and marginalisation shape my view of the world and the knowledge which I create). I share some stories from my own life (and gifted to me) that make visible how binaries reinforce oppression, particularly how binaries reinforce colonial ideas about 'superiority'. I share news stories about two Indigenous change-makers, so we can dream about how to resist binary and how to support each other with the lonely work of being a bridge/veggie burger with bacon. I'm a teacher, so sometimes I invite you to check out my references to learn more about vital concepts that cannot be explored within this one paper. I include my entire self in this writing, through the inclusion of my humour, my heart and my voice. I have found the most belonging with communities who are comfortable existing in a world where sacred and profane have a lot of overlap. Usually this means communities who exist on the margins, which is a great place to engage in binary challenging praxis! It is a sacred act to keep my outraged profane voice, particularly in communities such as 'professionals' where this voice is often looked down upon, even as we claim to centre these voices. The part of me who says 'fuck' is the same part of me who expects justice for all, so shutting them up is impossible anyway!!

Who am I and why does this matter?

This paper was originally created by me, Stasha Huntingford (they/she) in December 2024. I was excited by this journal's call for stories about challenging binaries as I find this action key in disrupting oppression of all kinds. I speak as someone who values critical reflection in recognising the impacts of unequal power in our societies (Collins, et al., 2021). Before I share knowledge with you, I need to introduce myself in terms of the power that I hold. This is important information for you to have as a reader, because the social location that we are born into influences how we learn

and how we experience the world (Few-Demo, et al., 2022; Jackson, et al., 2023). For example, as a cis person or a person whose gender matches the gender they were assigned at birth, I have privilege in that I do not experience transphobia to the same severity as I would if my gender was different than the gender that I was assigned at birth. This positionality is important because my privilege in this area may mean that I have less experiential knowledge with how this form of oppression manifests itself. As someone who benefits from cis-privilege, such as people commonly assuming my pronouns correctly, I am more likely to miss subtle examples of transphobia and may fail to take risks to challenge this kind of oppression. If you are interested in learning more about this, here is source that provides an exercise to reflect on your social location, and explains why this is important (Rumble, n.d.).

For another example of why critical theorists introduce ourselves in this way, here is a picture of three fish (Mankoff, 1981) to illustrate the 'just world hypothesis' (Harrison, n.d.):

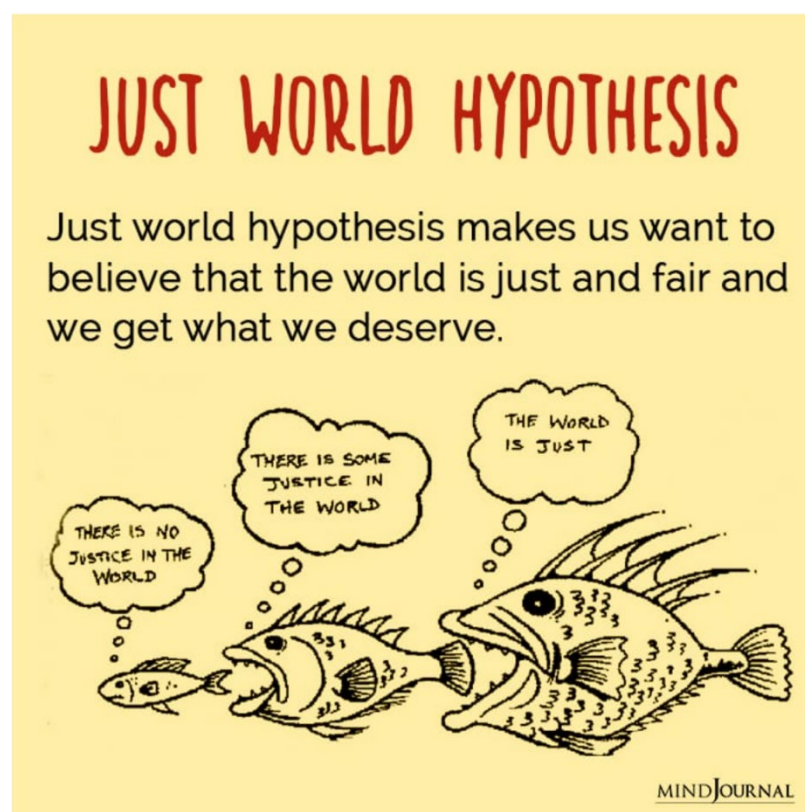


Figure 1: Text reads: "Just world hypothesis makes us want to believe that the world is just and fair and we get what we deserve." Image shows a big, medium and little fish. The biggest fish is moving to eat the middle fish, who is moving to eat the littlest fish. The biggest fish is having a thought bubble which reads: 'the world is just', medium fish's thought bubble reads: 'there is some justice in the world', smallest fish's thought bubble reads: 'there is no justice in the world'.

The just world hypothesis is our human desire to believe that hard work is rewarded, and that we live in a fair society (Harrison, n.d.). This desire can conflict with our ability to recognise social inequality and oppressive forces that shape our lived realities; particularly when we benefit from these unfair systems (DiAngelo, 2016). This lack of empathy can further limit our drive to be in solidarity with people who experience different forms of marginalisation than we do (Sang, 2024). My social location

informs your knowledge of oppressions where because of my privilege, I may be motivated to maintain the status quo.

To introduce the context from which I write:

As the plants and animals flee towards the poles (Daley, 2020) and the smoke obscures the horizon, we are living in a time where our relationships with ourselves and other living things, including the earth, have resulted in growing inequality, climate disasters, pandemics, and other threats to our existence (Butler, 2021; Kimmerer, 2022; Oliver, 2021). The impact of these issues is not equally distributed (hooks, 1984; Le, 2021).

My writing is influenced by my social location. I am a white, cis, settler, queer woman living with chronic health conditions, PTSD and hidden disabilities. I have diverse experience with class, including experience living in poverty, and sometimes having access to intergenerational wealth. I only speak one language and have always lived with the Rocky Mountains. I currently make a living wage and am precariously employed.

As a settler, human being, and someone who benefits from white privilege, I have an urgent ethical imperative to interrupt colonialism, racism, and other forms of oppression [because I benefit from these forms of oppression]. The TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada] Calls to Action (2015) and the National Inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls [MMIWG] (2019) contain clear direction from the people most impacted by ongoing colonialism on the land where I was born [Treaty Seven territory]. If we settlers do not fulfil our responsibilities to listen and act, we will continue to cause harm, and to benefit from the suffering of our fellow human beings, which is unacceptable.

(Huntingford, 2024, p. 1)

How am I living my values?

To expand on the action components of the TRC Calls to Action (2015) and the National Inquiry into MMIWG (2019) Calls to Justice; I want to share some examples of actions that I have taken in this area. For example, the TRC Call 1. Sections iii-v. requires:

Ensuring that social workers and others who conduct child-welfare investigations are properly educated and trained about the history and impacts of residential schools. iv. Ensuring that social workers and others who conduct child-welfare investigations are properly educated and trained about the potential for Aboriginal communities and families to provide more appropriate solutions to family healing. v. Requiring that all child-welfare decision makers consider the impact of the residential school experience on children and their caregivers." (2005, p. 1).

I have developed and adapted social work and general education curriculum to include in-depth and emotive discussions, experiences and readings relating to the impacts of ongoing colonialization. Indigenous people were centred and honoured in a good way for their knowledge sharing in this process. As a former social worker, I have a specific professional responsibility to engage in this justice work, because as professionals, we are often the ones carrying out unethical policies, particularly in

the context of violating Indigenous sovereignty and human rights, including endorsing residential schools (CASW, 2019).

For the inquiry into MMIWG (2019), every year at Halloween I engage in this action from Treaty Four territory (Hunter, 2016), of putting warning labels on racist Halloween costumes/putting pressure on stores to stop profiting off racism, in accordance with Call 2.6:

We call upon all governments to educate their citizens about, and to confront and eliminate, racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. To accomplish this, the federal government, in partnership with Indigenous Peoples and provincial and territorial governments, must develop and implement an Anti-Racism and Anti-Sexism National Action Plan to end racist and sexualized stereotypes of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people. The plan must target the general public as well as public services (p. 180).

This year I'm looking for new ways to escalate or further collectivise this action, as the profit motive continually escalates, and colonial thinking about 'superiority' continues to infect our minds. The MMIWG2S memorial on February 14th is another way to show up to mourn and demonstrate care for the families who have lost loved ones to the impacts of colonialism (Djan, 2025). As my friend Michelle Robinson mentions in the article, these Calls to Action and Justice were created by Indigenous people who survived terrible traumas; so we have an ethical responsibility to ACT on them (Djan, 2025).

Six of the MMIWG Calls to Justice (2019) refer to providing education about sexual exploitation for children, youth, families and professionals; which I have done for more than twenty years. I built relationships with many Indigenous youth who were suffering so deeply from the violence of ongoing colonialism. It broke my heart to hear news stories about youth deaths describe these sacred beings as 'a person entrenched in street life' or 'a known prostitute/criminal/drug addict'. It is so unjust for these young people to be further dehumanised after their deaths. All the social roles named in the headlines are binaries where one half of the binary is seen as having no value (in this colonial society). I have lived on the 'inferior' side of these binaries, and many of my loved ones also live there; so I am not talking about this stigma hypothetically.

No matter what topic I am teaching/learning about universities, we talk about 'Starlight Tours' (Legal Aide Saskatchewan, 1990) and other ways that colonialism in ourselves, in our institutions, in our communities, and in our countries continues to attempt to eradicate Indigenous people. 'Starlight tours' are the murder of Indigenous people by the police, and are an ongoing oppression (Hausch, 2023; Moore, et al., 2024; Morin, 2024). I believe that it is vital to continue building awareness of the ongoing oppressive forces of colonialism, so that we can disrupt these forces.

What does it mean to be weird* during fascism?

In addition to introducing myself, I wanted to include the context of rising fascism on the continent I was born on, particularly in the form of threats to the bodily autonomy of at least half the population (Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights, 2022; Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2023; Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2024; Public Safety Canada, 2024; Secreti and Cheung, 2022; Trans Legislation Tracker, 2024; Vogel and Duong, 2022). It is within this context of solidarity being the difference between life or death, that I share these stories.

As a person, and as a teacher at a university, it is my responsibility to challenge fascism at macro, meso, and micro (including internal) levels. I would like to credit the many youth without homes, who nurtured the fascism-resisting qualities of curiosity and irreverence in me, and role modelled how to embrace the messiness of being a human. Curiosity, irreverence, and playing with other weirdos*, are my greatest strengths in this work of challenging binary.

Our fear to be seen as ‘weird’ can limit our ability to relax enough to play and share dreams, which are some paths to changing the world (Huntingford, 2024). To me, the term ‘weird’ indicates celebration of creativity, an embracing of diversity, non-conformity with the status quo, and the courage to try new things (Garner, 2024; Kartsaki, 2024; Long, 2013). I think these values are just, so I don’t think that the word is an insult. When someone calls me weird, I light up with the hopes that they can introduce me to other people who they put in this category.

This concept of ‘weird’ strikes me as particularly relevant in the discussion about resisting binary. As Eirini Kartsaki (2024) explains [emphasis added]:

Weird women, [...], are artists who challenge boundaries and are *uneasy within neat, already existing categories* of art, sex, identity, and desire. Their existence is emphatic; yet the categories we already have cannot account for the complexity of who they are. Weird women seem to suggest that a new language is necessary, one that will point towards our unnamed desires, [...], and unknowns. The weird not only points to *something we do not yet have the language for* but also demands a reconsideration of its articulation. The weird could be thought of as another category, but more accurately as *a fascination with the uncategorized*. (Abstract, p. 144)

The praxis of ‘fuck normal’ upholds the most inclusive communities that I am part of and has saved my life on more than one occasion (Annamma, et al., 2013; Maté, & Maté, 2022). Praxis challenges the binary between theory and practice, enabling us to learn from both inductive and deductive methods (Lather, 1986; White, 2007). Praxis gives us methods to live our values, to find practical solutions, and to value different ways of knowing (Lather, 1986; Reason, 2005; White, 2007).

The ‘fuck’ part of ‘fuck normal’, honours my belonging with communities who value irreverent rage (Fine and Corte, 2024; Wood, 2019). Profanity assists with “challenge dichotomy through being irreverent towards titles, hierarchies, and unquestioned assumptions” (Garrison, 2009; Irizarry, 1987 as cited in Huntingford, 2024, p. 56). I have written elsewhere about how profanity respects the urgent need for social change, specifically how “irreverent dreaming about oppression helps us to respect and amplify the urgency of fighting for a better world” (Hensley, 2018; Romanski, 2019 as cited in Huntingford, 2024, p. 55).” The ‘fuck’ part of ‘fuck normal’ is my indignant rage at being told that some people will have to wait for human rights. Another way to express this idea is this post on Bluesky about methods of responding to fascism where Sara@aeirllys.bsky.social (January 31st, 2025) says:

Do Not Comply in Advance (Snyder, 2017): bossy, already a cliché, implies permission to comply later.

Fuck You, Make Me: leads by example, directs yelling at opposition instead of allies, easy to chant at protests or put on a banner

The power of story

In this article, I want to share some stories about the power of resisting binaries, and I want to introduce you to some veggie burgers with bacon. These stories contain examples of what rattling our chains makes visible about power (this refers to a metaphor often attributed to Rosa Luxemburg, she's introduced in the references). Most people who have experienced othering can fill in these stories after the first sentence; due to othering (powell and Menendian, 2024) being such a predictable, harmful, and entirely uncreative formula. Critical theorists who developed this term, W. E. Du Bois and Edward Said are introduced in the references.

Storytelling is a human meaning-making activity, as Freire (1970) said "To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it." (p. 51). Shawn Wilson (2008) explains Indigenous storytelling as relationship-based knowledge generation, in his book *Research is Ceremony*. Indigenous storytelling is a powerful form of praxis, where each teller of the story adds their knowledge in the telling of it (Goodman, 2023). Storytelling is an important decolonising praxis, as marginalised people often have stories told *about* them, while their own stories are silenced (Collins, et al., 2021; Wiebe, 2019). If I was sharing these stories orally, my body language and facial expressions would be included as ways of knowing; I would be responsible to you in a way that is more relational than you reading these written words (Goodman, 2023; Wiebe, 2019; Wilson, 2008). When presenting stories orally the teller is able to adjust to the learning context of specific listeners (Goodman, 2023). I highly value that Indigenous storytelling includes non-human beings, such as rivers and lichen (Goodman, 2023; Wilson, 2008); as this fits with my ethics of valuing non-human beings and how we are all connected.

Let's examine some stories together and see what becomes visible about how power works.

Storytime: The flimsy fabric of gender

Once upon a time, in a conservative cowboy town, a woman and her male partner switched shirts at a bar. This story was gifted to me by a university student, when I requested his permission to share this knowledge. Now I use it as an example of how weak/strong the gender binary is in this settler colonial patriarchal society. The student who shared this story experienced privilege in almost all areas of social location (Duckworth, n.d.; Jacobson, & Mustafa, 2019; Rumble, n.d.); so this experience stood out to him as a time when he experienced the violence of being othered.

Anyone who has played with the gender binary, even a little bit, has access to this story. Most men who have worn eyeliner know this story. Most tall women know this story. Anyone who has made the tiniest deviation from the gender binary has access to this knowledge, has experienced how fast the smallest deviations are punished.

When the storyteller put on his girlfriend's gold crop-top, the people around him suddenly became very interested in his fashion choices. They asked him what was wrong with him. They assumed his sexuality had changed from a moment before. They approached in groups to threaten him, and to question his gender identity. How remarkable the power of this shirt to instantly change his sexuality AND gender identity! How interesting that people playing pool with the couple suddenly no longer wanted to be associated with them. How interesting that his girlfriend's sexuality and gender appeared to remain intact.

As a class learning from this story, we discuss how her gender and sexuality are less at risk of being disturbed, because she is moving her identity towards what is seen as superior (Duckworth, n.d.). We discuss examples of when she would be called a 'dyke' or a man, just for switching her shirt. We talk about when it was illegal for women to wear pants (Allen, 2018), and how hilarious and hopeful it is to think about thin pieces of fabric bringing down society one binary at a time. We gave many other examples of how easy it is to be kicked out of the 'normal' category, and how dangerous this can be. We talk about the importance of solidarity; that solidarity is difficult and will be punished, and that this is why/how it changes the world (Sang, 2024).

Storytime: Refusing to capitalise

A note about this story, I have followed linda manyguns' lead on multiple protests and advocacy for justice for Indigenous people, and we worked at the same institution for a brief period of time. We haven't had tea in each other's kitchens, so I am just sharing the information available through these news sources. As linda expresses in some of these sources, she did press interviews after this happened in order to draw people's attention to the violence of the responses she received. linda's voice can be heard telling this part of her story (as well as the power of Indigenous oral storytelling) here: First Voices Radio (2021).

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Steinmetz, 2020) strongly influences how people react to social change efforts. To illustrate this, I share this story of when an Indigenous woman decided to live her values by not using capital letters, which resulted in homicidal threats from groups of people in another country. Let's try to understand why this elicited such a strong reaction. To summarise the situation: "In July, [linda manyguns] announced she would be using only lower-case letters for her name, in addition to not using capital letters except to acknowledge the Indigenous struggle for recognition" (Trembath, 2021, para 4). As linda herself reflected: "I had anticipated having to argue my position. I was ready to do that. I had no idea that my life would be threatened." (Trembath, 2021, para 5). linda was not expecting death threats for her stance, but she frames these 'responses' as an indicator that she is challenging the oppressive status quo (Trembath, 2021), and I agree with her.

When linda announced her commitment to the 'lower case movement', this story was picked up by right wing groups in the United States of America, as an example of "liberal bias and abuse on college campuses" (Eichholz, 2021, author's biography). The extreme reaction from these groups, forced Snopes to clarify the facts in this case, for example explaining that capital letters had not been declared racist, nor had capital letters been banned to avoid "frightening students" (Evon, 2021, para 4).

How interesting how much people care about an Indigenous woman's capitalisation! How interesting that the articles making fun of her efforts, chose not to spell her name with lowercase letters in the article. How powerful that linda's writing choices upset people across a continent. How interesting that the punishment for not capitalising is death.

Storytime: Veggie burgers with bacon

This story about the weakness/strength of binary, is about ordering lunch. Once upon a time, I ordered a veggie burger with bacon (Huntingford, 2015). The strong reactions from the restaurant staff, my friends and other community members, flagged this as binary challenging praxis. In addition to being

tasty, this lunch gifted me a metaphor for people who are mistrusted because we do not fit into the binaries that reinforce oppression in our communities. I enjoy how emotive this metaphor is, particularly how many people laugh the first time they hear the idea. What an interesting reaction to binary challenging! I'm fascinated to learn more about what this lunch order tickles and challenges.

Being a veggie burger with bacon is lonely, and it makes knowledge visible which is obscured by binary assumptions about one side of the binary being framed as 'superior' (Duckworth, n.d.; Huntingford, 2015). Identifying as a veggie burger with bacon has enabled me to meet other veggie burgers with bacon, such as bisexual people, people raised outside of their ethnic group, people who both provide and access counselling supports, people who care about the earth and depend on oil money to survive. There is a special kind of knowledge to be learned from being in both/neither side of a binary. Our existence is resistance because we show the world what is possible when we refuse to hold up binary as the only way of organising the world.

Who bears the costs of challenging binary?

A note about this story is that I have never met Ron Francis who lived this story; so this story is limited to the media reporting about this part of his story. When I heard this story in 2014, I was in the middle of my PhD, and getting divorced. I was struggling with how my professional education was reinforcing binaries between theory and practice, 'clients' and helping professionals, teachers and students; all while we were all being both students and teachers, 'clients' and helping professionals, theorists and practitioners. Just a note that I do not use the word 'client', for political reasons (Gubrium and Järvinen, 2014). For me, Ron Francis reminds me to be myself, to not be ashamed, to embrace all the parts of myself. I cry every time I see the picture that I share below, because Ron Francis deserved to be accepted.

The loneliness of being a veggie burger with bacon should not be underestimated. The look on Ron Francis's face in this National Post picture (photo by Keith Minchin) says more about this than mere words can (Hopper, 2014). It breaks my heart the price that this man paid when he tried to raise awareness of the binary that makes professionals think that we can't also need psychological support. It breaks my heart to see the shame heaped onto him for challenging the binary that makes us see bars as different than supervised consumption sites. I'm especially fond of him for challenging the garbage idea that men can't cry/have hearts, as this idea kills people of all genders every year (hooks, 2004; Ilich, 2021). It breaks my heart to see his bravery in challenging the dichotomy between 'criminals' and 'heros' (especially in the context of colonialism), and to see his brave actions punished so severely, that he chose to leave this world (Hopper, 2014). Ron Francis still gives me hope ten years later, because he took these risks, despite/because he knew how much these binary-resisting actions are punished (Off, 2014). An important context note for the binary he challenged between 'criminals' and 'law enforcement'; he died in September 2014, and the cannabis that caused him to lose his job was legalised in October 2018 (Government of Canada, 2022). In war, bridges take the most fire, because bridges are weird* enough to make change and hope possible.

I wanted to quickly thank a few more veggie burgers with bacon who are creating praxis that rattles the chains of binary. The research and ideas behind these knowledge sources gives me some radical hope; the kind of hope where we act according to our values while going towards an unknown future

(Lear, 2006). One hope generator is people with autism pointing out the need for reciprocity when communicating across brain differences, this idea of Double Empathy (Milton, 2018; Rose, 2022).

I love what is made visible by Tricksters who challenge binaries such as the dead and the living, the fools and the experts, the powerful and the powerless (Garrison, 2009; Tsaplina and Astles, 2020).

Binaries are also resisted by Mad social workers being proud of how our brains work (Cranford, & LeFrançois, 2022; Warner, 2023). I feel so much gratitude to fungi, for bridging life and death, and showing us how silly it is to think of those concepts as 'opposite' (Sheldrake, 2020). And a big shout out to lichen for quietly alluding us for years, just by being a partnership of three, when we were looking for a binary (Yong, 2016).

Vital knowledge is being made visible by trans people experiencing different gendered socialization (Alter, n.d.). As binary thinking is the root of sexism, assumptions of cis superiority, and heterosexism; challenging these binaries shakes the foundation of the oppression rooted here; as Buggs and colleagues (2022) explain, "Sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, and gender expression all interact in non-binary ways that both inform and "trouble" the categories upon which sexism, heterosexism, and transgender oppression depend." (p. 199).

Finally, I wanted to recognise how prone to death whistleblowers have been this year, and every year (Daniel, 2024; Davies, 2024). There have always been brave veggie burgers with bacon, who know the risk and do the right thing anyway (Centre for Free Expression, 2024). A reminder dear reader, that how we protect/shame whistleblowers, also sets a standard for what values we accept in our communities. I dream of a society where we celebrate whistle blowers (instead of the people who silenced them). Here is a local (to me) example of a Reconciliation Action Group engaged in this work (Strasser, 2024). Here is an example of a whistleblower holding us accountable to our responsibilities, and building relationships with the next generation of activists, from beyond the grave (Steele, 2021).

Back to the beginning: What fucking now?

No matter the consequences for being our glorious selves, I'm going to err of the side of 'fuck normal' because it creates a more just world for us all. It is not a coincidence that many of these hopeful efforts require confronting how binaries are reinforced internally, through killing the cop in our head/hearts (Lamble, 2022; Rojas, 2009). We all have power. Some of us listen, some create art, some mediate, some record history, some redistribute wealth, some raise the next generation, some speak truth to power, some tie our fates with trees, some sabotage unjust systems, some provide counselling, some work on our emotional regulation, some burn things down, some try new things, some pass on intergenerational knowledge, some put their bodies on the line, some challenge intergenerational patterns of abuse. We need diverse strategies to "make the road by walking" (Horton and Freire, 1990). So keep it up you wise binary-resisters! Switch those shirts, letters, and food groups; keep turning hierarchical triangles on their head and seeing what all this makes visible!

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About the author

Stasha (they/she) is a curious person who is fascinated by lichens and other cooperatives. Stasha is a trickster who changes things in order to understand them. They believe in the sacredness of the profane.

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