

**Diffraction Bag Lady Stories and Kinship:  
Cartogra-ph-ying and Making-With Others in More-Than-Human Affirmative Spaces**

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### Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we, as early career researchers/educators, came together in digital spaces with a love of storytelling and playfulness in our being, doing, thinking, and making. This was underpinned by Le Guin's (2019) conceptualisation of *bag ladies* along with feminist materialism and posthumanist ways of thinking and doing. In our article, we examine the ways in which our bag lady storytelling became entwined with an online reading group. Together with fellow kin, we *wayfared* along our own paths, connecting in both virtual and physical spaces in which we formed meshworks of safety and companionship (Ingold, 2007). We developed our article along the way of these paths by taking a multimodal and polyvocal approach. Together and individually, we considered how we are the apparatus through which we diffract posthumanist and feminist thinking. We end our article with an invitation to those who read and engage with our work to join our bag lady collective.

**Keywords:** Kinship; cartography, affirmative, more-than-human, bag lady storytelling

### Introduction

***Note to the Reader:*** *By clicking on the hyperlinks throughout this paper, you will access the linked "Bag Lady Blog", created as a living ecosystem of our emerging thinking with each other and beyond. These links will take you to other times and spaces, affording you the choice of how, where and when you access the material. Each hyperlink is an entry and/or exit point, thereby enacting agential cuts and rendering this article as a [rhizome](#) (Barad, 2007; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).*

## Welcome to Our Collective Space of Disruption

The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, it stories our insights and experiences. Second, it offers potential readers an opportunity to share their stories and to create their own ecosystem of knowledge-ing in kinship and collaboration with us on our bag-lady blogsite. Despite our “early career” researcher status, our aim is to bring together the richness of our lived experiences with new ways of becoming, thinking, and doing academia differently (Osgood et al., 2020). We invite you to step outside the boundary of the academic machine and join us (Manathunga et al., 2020). We hope that in doing so, you find and embrace what Braidotti (2018, 2019) refers to as the *potentia* of kinship in unexpected places, the empowerment that feminist activism offers.

As a collective, we trouble the conventional understanding (in the UK) of bag ladies. For us, they are not the women/people who live on the streets and who carry all their belongings around in whatever is available to them, be that plastic carrier bags, backpacks, prams, etc. Instead, we see ourselves as bag ladies, even though we live in houses, because we hold and carry *stories* in our own bags. We draw our inspiration from Le Guin’s (2019) conceptualisation of carrier bags. We also take up Fairchild et al.’s (2022) expansion of this conceptualization and consider how humans can notice everyday moments to build understanding of the past and the present in/with/through their stories and recognising the power to think about life differently.

Our multi-modal and multi-layered article has also been inspired by Strom and Mills’ (2021) technique of drawing the reader in and out of text through hyperlinked documents. We too, link to documents, as well as to a podcast conclusion, and to a [blog site](#) which will serve as a living ecosystem resource for other emerging scholars to use.

Our collective space of disruption is an entangled assemblage of two embedded eco-systems, [a book club and a bag-lady collective](#). As Taylor (2021) suggests, the members of both, when brought together contributed to the cross-pollination of knowledge-ing. These connections and new relations were directly influenced by the affect and restrictive effects of the pandemic on in-person dialogue and collaboration. Because we felt an embodied loss of community, we sought new ways to share and create. We found affirmative opportunities for sharing, thinking-with, and making-with that were suggested by a body of Feminist Materialist and Posthuman theories.<sup>1</sup> Although we consider ourselves to have an “adequate understanding [of these theories, we recognised that despite] whatever is happening in the world, we cannot do this work alone” (Strom & Mills, 2021, p. 196).

Our entangled assemblage became a group of things, books, journals, ideas, percolations, speculations, laughs, [frustrations](#), and tribulations that came together at various moments in [time](#), in online spaces (Fox & Alldred, 2017). We were shaped by a wide range of flows and a desire to function productively. Our desire was affirmed through the energies within the entanglement that produced and revealed our connections to others, and which resulted in the development of kinships between humans and more-than-human (Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2020; Haraway, 2016).

Our kinships became a “body without organs” that pushed the conventions of organisation and linearity in academia (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 3). Our body without organs was

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://phematerialisms.org/>

predicated on spontaneity, a creative force that is experimental (Thanem, 2007). According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987) “[t]he full body without organs is a body populated by multiplicities” (p. 3). We argue that our body without organs consists of nomadic singularities that productively draw together unrelated bodies. When these bodies are drawn together, as Sidebottom (2021) argues, this results “in the creation of ‘constellations of practice’ (Mycroft and Sidebottom, 2018) [that she defines as] emergent gatherings of people [human and non-human] with shared values who group themselves around a project or idea, often for a limited time” or what we call kinship (p. 21). For us this is deeper, our kinship is ethical, political, emotional, relational and embodied. Our coming together and kinship was unrestrained and nomadic in nature. It offered “the possibility of an ethical relation” that empower others in affirmative and ethical ways (Braidotti, 2011, p. 3).

### **Kinship with Others**

The human bodies within our entanglement are disparate, both geographically and in terms of lived experience. We also each bring our own subject specialisms and personal uniqueness to the group. We log on from different time zones with one member connecting from Aotearoa, and others from different physical places and spaces in the UK, including farms, caravans, and holidays to share stories and build kinship. As a collective, we feel that we have been presented a unique opportunity to unlearn humanist, western approaches, by way of contributions from Aotearoa that draw on Te Whāriki <sup>2</sup> and Indigenous knowledges. Our collective, as a body without organs, helps us disrupt and decolonise our entrenched patterns of western thought. We do this by listening and attending to our Aotearoa peer as we think-with and learn-with her as a group.

Haraway (2016) advised that we should “[f]unction in a group, function in a pack, make an assemblage. Function in a herd. Run with the she-wolves” (p. 91). She goes on to say that we should “not imagine for a minute that [one] can take on this system alone” (p. 91). Our collective demonstrates how story-ing, with/through each other can make new kinship practices possible. Our stories, often about mundane and everyday things, hinted at the previously unnoticed, thus revealing our capacity to perceive life differently (Fairchild et al., 2022). We used our stories as early career researchers and emerging scholars, during these troubled, ongoing COVID-19 pandemic times, to exchange ideas and notice how our two groups intermingled, overlapped, and became enmeshed. This encouraged us to *do* academia differently and to have the courage to follow different academic lines of flight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Within and beyond this article, we hope our stories detail, what Haraway (2016) describes as meaningfully sustained kinship that goes beyond simply human friendships that can lead to mutual responsibilities and respect to and for each other. We also hope that they challenge the status quo, in ways similar to what Strom and Mills (2021) meant when they wrote that their collaborations enhanced their own ability to “enact a collective, political praxis of hope, compassion, and transformation” (p. 190). Strom and Mills’ (2021) webinar, [\*Enacting an Affirmative Ethics in the Neoliberal\*](#)

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<sup>2</sup> Te Whāriki is an Early Childhood curriculum that was introduced in New Zealand in 1996, updated in 2017. Te Whāriki places children in the middle of the curriculum, putting forth a vision of the child as a confident and competent learner and communicator, secure in their sense of knowledge and belonging, and actively contributing to society. Unlike other curriculums, Te Whāriki is not centered on developmental milestones, it is a cogent and progressive document that sets expectations for well-being, tolerance, respect, and cultural diversity. More information is available through the Aotearoa government: [The Ministry for Education website](#).

[University through Peer Reviews](#), in collaboration with the feminist online collective PheMaterialism 3rd Wave, transformed us. It provided us with a model for working-otherwise. As a result of attending their webinar, what emerged for us was the [organic growth](#) and entanglement of our two groups, the bag ladies and a reading group. The bag ladies deliberately chose to write with no capitalisation to disrupt traditional and dominant conventions used to communicate that can obscure hierarchies that are taken for granted, and thus, perform academia differently (Sellers, 2015). The reading group met to discuss books and articles about performing academia differently. Both groups had no [hierarchical structure which in itself was different from the hierarchical modes of operation in academia](#). After forming and performing in these groups, we recognised the inherent danger of them becoming inward-facing and “cliquey.” So, we stay conscious and vigilant against the pull of the hierarchical structures that maintain the status quo of existing neoliberal academic conventions (French, 2014).

Even though we worked hard to resist this pull and continue to do so, open dialogue conducted with an ethics of care is firmly at the heart of what we do. This is demonstrated through our ongoing and frank discussions around workloads, family pressures, and individual health and well-being concerns. It influences, for example, who takes the lead on which publication/presentation. As a collective, we take time to ensure the well-being of our colleagues, both personally and professionally. We ensure that each of us feels supported and always included because we recognise our individual and collective ability to “affect and be affected” within these entanglements (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 261). As it turns out, these entanglements and their affective intensities have their own lively ontologies that we have learned to draw on to (re)think how we understand ourselves, theory, and producing knowledge with and for others as an ethical endeavour.

### **Thinking-with Art**

Drawing on Haraway’s (2016) ideas about speculative fabulation and more-than-human matter, art is a point of connection for us. This article, for example, connects with Penny Hardy and enacts our thinking-with her *Blown Away* sculptural art series. An image of one sculpture in this series is shown below.



**Figure 1**  
*“Blown Away”*. A photo of P. Hardy (2018).  
*“You Blew Me Away”* [Sculpture]. (Lincoln, UK).  
 (Used with permission).

On her website, Hardy’s sculptures are described as “made from found bits and pieces of scrap metal, used to create a piece with renewed life and energy” (Penny Hardy Sculptures, 2018-2021). In her profile statement, Hardy, originally a scientific illustrator, describes how she engages with natural and human landscapes. As a result, each discarded, man-made piece of metal in her sculptures has a life and a vitality that is dynamic and appears to be in motion. The result is a tangible sculpture with visible energy. Her work extends how the world intra-acts with matter. It also provides us with an ecological perspective to view and think-with *affect*, a term that is a “shorthand for to-affect-and-be-affected” (Radman, 2019, p. 64). [Thinking-with the Cultural and Pedagogical Inquiry](#), Summer 2022, 14(1), pp. 152-165  
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<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/cpi/index>

[sculptures and other scholars](#), such as, Taylor and Fairchild (2020), Gregg and Seigworth (2010), and Deleuze and Guattari (1987), we felt the response in, with, through, and immanent to our bodies in relation to the matter. These responses revealed the intra-activity, and although experienced in the moment, the affect remained with us as sensations and emotions (O’Sullivan, 2001). While affect differs from emotions, the force of the affect can erupt in shared “ah-ha” moments of thinking together. This happened for us with this sculpture and validates Dernikos et al.’s (2020) observation that the turn to affect is not only a vibrant way to experience the world, but it also offers a methodological and theoretical framework for scholars in education studies, and therefore by extension in how knowledge might be produced in spaces and places.

### **Telling Our Stories of Affect Through-in Digital Spaces**

We have storied our knowledge-ing in terms of our entanglements, however, the way our bodies were (re)imagined as the metal pieces within the sculptures, produced an outward force that diffracted throughout this article via the hyperlinks. Our corporeal human bodies and more-than-human knowledges became conceptualised and reconceptualised in [online spaces](#). Our online space is predicated on the territorialisation and deterritorialization work of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) who argue that deterritorialization happens when political, cultural, and social practices are severed from the territory that provided them with meaning. This is a reality that we see often in our everyday lives and practices. For example, we see this in the traditional, collegiate, and academic discourses that have come to dominate education as knowledge transfer. In this sense, academic articles and studies can be figured as a territory governed by codes and guides. These codes enact a practice of *doing learning* or *producing knowledge* through procedural requirements, and normative practices (Fox and Alldred, 2017). When the governance of these dominant practices was suspended because of the pandemic, the structure of our academic lives was also disrupted. Oddly, we each experienced a separation from the university as a sense of loss even though we were aware of its controlling force and regarded it as somewhat negative. This said, it called us to question how we could support one another in troubled times. This sense of loss is what Braidotti (1997) might consider the crack of reactive forces. What emerged from this crack was our desire to be different and ever-changing. We acted on our desire and became nomadic in our thinking. We took up a feminist manifesto to promote and celebrate learning that is never a solo endeavour. We were also able to (re)think our political, cultural, and social practices around our academic work as a collective, by repurposing our private spaces as collegial territory, and relocating the university somewhere new.

As we (re)configured in digital spaces, in response to our sense of loss, there was a shift in our thinking. We became sensitive to what Taylor (2021) details as knowledge-ing. The concept of knowledge-ing enabled us to (re)consider the “redistributive processes through education in pursuit of a better, fairer, more inclusive society” (Taylor, 2021, p. 24). For us, this meant we shared texts, author’s words, and articles, and diffractively read them in shared spaces. By attuning to others and really listening to their understanding of the(ir) work, we found our own metaphors and made sense of theories that became intelligible to us personally. This has been and continues to be an energizing and ongoing process leading to unexpected or unthought possibilities (Taylor, 2021). For example, Hawxwell diffracts the stories through her memories and times with her Grandad and his binoculars and love of wildlife. Latto is drawn back to [washing lines](#), not as a patriarchal role divide but where she has the ability to provide and take care of her family and make connections across time. Albin-Clark refers to her students and the divide in spaces in

education. In this way, our knowledge enfolds/unfolds/folds, and is continually generative, embodied, and transdisciplinary. Like Fox and Alldred (2017), our matters of inquiry have shifted from seeking out human-centred agency to embracing affects, by adapting to affective flows and what can be produced by their capacities.

### *Diffraction* and *Speculative Practices of Bag Lady Storytelling*

Our collective stories and the playful ways in which we think-with more-than-human matter and with-others to make sense of feminist materialist posthuman theories. This can be, at times, complex according to Strom, et al. (2019). (Re)configuring entanglement of narratives, space, places, memories, time and matter, is a matter of additions or of "...and, and, and..." (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987 p. 25) – *ad infinitum*. We each hold our stories in bags of our own making, and these are speculative, functional, corporeal, and incorporeal. These stories might have led to moments of activism, acting as sites of resistance, and when storied with others they might have challenged and disrupted the status quo (Albin-Clark, et al., 2021). However, sometimes things fall out of our bags, telling of grim tales and vulnerability (Taylor et al., 2020). Sometimes, we let them fall out because we no longer need to hold on to them, or because they are already part of who we are, tied to our ethical response-ability to ourselves and each other.

It is through our everyday stories of our academic practices that we remind ourselves "it matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with...[and] it matters what stories make worlds and what worlds make stories" (Haraway, 2013, p. 4). As a collective, we work within feminist materialist posthuman frames that encourage close attention to the vibrancy and animacy of the material world and to the non-human and more-than-human bodies that share our worlds (Bennett, 2016; MacLure, 2013; St. Pierre, 2016). We also seek to generate and address new ways of thinking, being, and doing through speculative thinking and speculative practices.

To tell our stories, we think-with and make-with the figures of SF that include the string figures of speculative fabulation and speculative feminism Haraway (2016) discusses. We found that it was through speculative fabulation that we were encouraged to engage with our embodied histories as "a mode of attention, a theory of history, and a practice of worlding" (p. 213). In this way, speculation has played a performative role in our work and informs our ways of being, doing, and thinking. It informs who and what we attend to, who and what we notice, who and what we read and cite, and what we produce. It enables us to address, make, and even speculatively transform concepts "opening up the real, new types of subjectivity, and new relations between subjects and objects" (Grosz, 2011, p. 3). We use speculative thought to help build and generate knowledge from our embodied experiences that are grounded and situated in our past-present inheritances (Truman, 2018). As Åsberg et al. (2015) suggest, we also use it to build "specific historical, sociocultural, material, and bodily contexts" (p. 153). For example, in our stories we re-tell and re-story events that took place in our everyday lives and notice how these are entangled with ways of being and doing, and with thinking-with different objects and bodies beyond the human.

We also considered speculative fabulation as a way to envision new possibilities for socio-material enquiries (de Freitas & Truman, 2021). Indeed, our bag lady storytelling enabled us to include, not only humans, but also non-human and more-than-human bodies and materialities. For example, Ovington's telling of the ways in which her daughter was entangled with her life as an

academic through the [objects she would leave in her office, the marks made on Ovington's notebook](#). Ovington's story, along with the others shared throughout this article and beyond, tell of ways in which our professional lives became entangled with personal and family time without us realising it. They also tell of how our lives are entangled with an earlier life, not necessarily our own through family stories, myths, and folklore, all of which have been gifted to us and that we are obliged to hold in trust for times unknown.

### **Knot-Making, Connection and Kinship**

As individual early career researchers and emerging scholars, we traced both our histories and involvement as a cartography. We, therefore, wayfare as the world is continuously in a process of being and becoming, adding to our own weave (Ingold, 2007). In sharing our stories, we make connections to others, both human and more-than-human, and create knots of entanglement that we infuse with meaning. These knots, these messy entanglements of meaning generated from the intra-action of the discursive and the material we carry in our everyday lives, are closely bound together. As Carpentier (2017) suggests, these “discursive-material” knots are forever seeking change (p. 4). They create the space and conditions for ideas to take flight, leading to new potentialities (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). We harnessed what Braidotti (2018) refers to as the power to track knowledge production through cartography and demonstrated the potential of storytelling to challenge dominant narratives within academia (Sidebottom, 2021). In both the bag lady collective, but in particular, the reading group, we committed to the principle of a discursive-material, non-hierarchical reading of texts which acknowledges the inseparability of meaning-making from matter (Carpentier, 2017). This generative reading approach is a simultaneously a mattering that is also representation (Dolphin & van der Tuin, 2012). Carpentier (2017) also argues that such an approach can prevent meaning from being produced discursively, and/or the agentic-ness of material from being overlooked. We, therefore, see in these knots a richness and a vibrancy that calls to us to generate new possibilities and new knowledges.

Haraway (2008) posits that we become response-able to others through the *sticky-knots* created by the intra-actions of humans, non-humans, and more-than-humans. Our bag-lady kinship is such a sticky-knot. It has grown from a group of four academics working together to a sisterhood; our own [she-wolf pack](#). In our she-wolf pack, our response-ability to care for each other with compassion considered the context and objects in and of our lives as we shared our worries about family and friends, and our concerns about managing workload, and family life (Cuomo, 1998, p. 130). We checked in with each other and provided care, concern, compassion, and love (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). We did this as an ongoing matter of ethical care and response-ability to each other. This kinship and response-ability to one another also extended to the reading club. The reading club space evolved from a space where members read texts and met once a week to a shared online Twitter group space. In our Twitter space, it was/is safe to speak about how our week has gone with work, with family, with partners, and with loved ones. It became a space where we could share our frustrations, our anger, our worries, concerns, but most importantly, it became a space where we laughed together.

### **Bag Lady Storytelling**

As already mentioned, the notion of bag lady storytelling originates from the science fiction writer Ursula Le Guin (1989, 2019) and specifically, from her text *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*. In this text, the human origin story is reframed from the linear hero narrative



of the hunter to a kinship narrative based on gathering and storing food. Here, Le Guin points out that in the main, sustenance came from gathering and scavenging plants, seeds, and nuts, thus, the receptacle used for carrying, rather than the weapon used for hunting, was the most important technology early humans developed. She suggests that stories were also carried in similar ways in similar metaphorical receptacles.

I would go so far as to say that the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag. A book holds words. Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us (Le Guin, 1989, 2019, p. 34).

One of Le Guin's legacies is her argument that arts and literature can reimagine alternative ways of being (Robinson, Bouttier & Patoine, 2021). Another legacy, according to Wiame (2018) is how storytelling has been taken up as a political and feminist tool by scholars such as Donna Haraway (2004; 2013; 2016; 2019), Isabelle Stengers (2018), and Anna Tsing (2015). Haraway (2004) proposes a "bag-lady practice of storytelling" as speculative fabulation, where "storying" and "worlding" can reimagine the destruction of the Anthropocene and instead, make kin across multi-species (p. 127). Haraway (2019) understands that carrier bag storytelling can also help address challenges, fears, desires, and ongoing injustices facing the entire planetary ecosystem.

Carrier bag storytelling has been used more recently in posthuman, feminist, and new materialism methodologies as arts-based research praxis (Adsit-Morris, 2017; De Rijke, & Osgood, 2021). Such methodologies provide mechanisms for participation and collectivism (Albin-Clark et al., 2021; Fairchild et al., 2022; Pérez-Bustos, Suchman & Piraquive, 2020). For example, arts-based assemblages and storytelling around the intra-activities of a children's book enabled De Rijke and Osgood (2021) to think with children's literature and reading in England. Adsit-Morris (2017) tells environmental stories as performance through her action research in a school in Canada. Here, the story methodologies afforded opportunities to think, to be active, to map, and remap flows of affect encompassing multiple locations and identities in experimental ways to craft new ways of knowing.

Bag lady storytelling also lends itself to collective undertakings as a way of making kin, because bags are capacious and can hold all kinds of things, ideas, and beings. Making kin across species is an urgent matter, suggests Haraway (2016) because we need to take care of our precarious environmental world and storytelling offers both participatory and ethical spaces for doing so. Arts-based practices, as a way of making kin, has been imagined with the verb "kinshipping" by Niccolini, Zarabadi and Ringrose (2018) who posit that by making kin we extend our kinship to others, and embrace response-ability via relational affirmative ripples. In this way, we are constantly paying forward, creating out/on/going opportunities for kinship as our feminist manifesto.

Working in participation with Columbian women who sew bags as receptacles for stories while listening and witnessing memories about conflict. Pérez-Bustos et al. (2020) argue that the ability to listen and learn from others is not a linear process as troubling stories of breakdowns are equally as important—they are generative. Similarly, Albin-Clark et al. (2021) puts to work bag lady storytelling as a mechanism to think with the non-human, everyday world, and the mundane politics that bothers or discomforts us, to think about what can change. Collective ways

of working with bag lady storytelling enables sharing, as well as generative and collaborative forms of thinking and doing change. Like Fairchild et al.,

We think that Carrier Bags thinking and doing can open new possibilities for stringing sympoiesis – for ethical practices of sharing the burden of whatever it is we’re carrying; for staying with the trouble; and for felting modest possibilities for new futures together through mutual encouragement. (p. 137)

Making stories and telling stories about kin making can be thought of as creating bags that hold the seeds of potentialities for new kinds of flourishing (Haraway, 2016).

### **Our Call to Join with Our Digital Cartography**

Bag lady storytelling as a collective endeavour can support “turning to notice” our entwined response-abilities to both human and non-human kin (Ovington, 2020, p. 15). As Le Guin (2019) reminds us, the generative nature of storytelling is because there is always room for another story to tell “and still the story isn’t over. Still there are seeds to be gathered, and room in the bag of stars” (p. 6). In this spirit of bag lady storytelling, we call for others to join us, to share your stories and continue to make connections across space, time, and matter. Working with an affirmative and collegial ethos, we offer safe spaces to connect, communicate, and create with other humans, non-humans, and more-than-humans. We offer an opportunity for you as readers to tap into our existing networks or forge new ones to experience kinship potentialities and lines of flight. We call for submissions to our linked blog, which can be as written texts, podcasts, videos, or whatever your creativity inspires.

We hope to welcome and to work with you to make new connections. We welcome you into our pack.

Some final thoughts...

We invite you to listen to our [podcast \(Isom, 2021\)](#). It documents some of our concluding insights and summarises our thinking and way of working in an affirmative way. This informal, wide ranging podcast covers questions from “What is this bag lady business anyway?” to “What constitutes a human and why just human anyway?” We leave you with some final affirmations from us all.

Albin-Clark shared that we should not be frightened of theory. Dive in and make it your own! Ovington reiterated that learning is never a solo endeavour, with Latto reminding us not to pull the ladder up behind us. Finally, Hawxwell reiterates the importance of connection, of being there, listening and attending fully to each other. We commit to continuing to pay it forward, by showing the generosity we ourselves have been gifted by other, more established scholars.

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