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Towards a contingent intercultural methodology: The 2012 Québec student strikes and the rhetorics of universality

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Introduction

In the following article, I argue that speculative realism offers intercultural researchers heuristics to observe intercultural spaces without having to pay exclusive attention to the relationships present within those spaces. In other words, intercultural spaces can be considered independent of the researcher's mind, because they are co-created by intercultural researchers (Cummings, 2014, p. 129). Following Gabriel (2014), perspectives on intercultural spaces are just as real as the spaces themselves. It is intellectually unproductive, however, to compile a list of all possible perspectives on an intercultural space to know what it truly is, which is what the local only approach to intercultural research tends to presuppose. The list of all perspectives will not grant us access to the thing itself, despite said perspectives being real, because the space itself withdraws from our ability to access it fully (Gabriel, 2013, p. 126; Harman, 2009, p. 135). While not explicitly referencing this concept of withdrawal, Healy (2013) contends that the common schemes used to understand or translate another culture are inadequate because the contents generated from finding similarities with another culture do not guarantee complete understanding (pp. 272-273). In short, though translation enables the translated, in whatever mode, to appear in a context that is useful for the intercultural researcher, this appearance is always highly contingent.

One of the most curious lessons I learned about translation, contingency, and intercultural research came about when I was living near Québec circa 2011-2013, in the North Country of New York state. Specifically, I'd like to draw on the 2012 Québec Student Strikes, or the *le printemps érable*, the Maple Spring. In February of 2012, students across Québec "voted to go on general strike against the Liberal government's plan to increase tuition fees" (Sorochan, 2012, p. 4). Rather than reducing the 2012 QSS to responses to material and symbolic conditions (emic values), such as Bill 78, which, among other things, strictly prohibits spontaneous protests, my intercultural theory aligns closely with Žižek's (2001) universalist approach. Žižek argues that present situations are not just outcomes of past emic happenings, for instance, but are also

aggregations of dashed utopian and universal dreams “negated by [their] reality” (pp. 89-90). In other words, the student protests in Québec exist independently of our bodies’ contingent qualities and relations; some qualities and relations are actualized and some are not (Descola & Godbout, 2013, p. 79).

The idea that emic details are not the primary contents of reality resonates with *speculative realism*. Speculative realism, in its most distilled form, “aims at something beyond the critical and linguistic turns” (Bryant et al., 2011, p. 13) and this *beyond* is a mind-independent reality that will continue to be there even if a representational system, as in language or art, is unavailable (Gabriel, 2014). There is a subtle, though significant, nuance between speculative realism and *relationalism*. Relationalism is the claim that the meaning of an object depends on its connection to something else (Garcia, 2014; Harman, 2009). Speculative realism does not deny the reality of relations, however. What the speculative turn proposes is the idea that relations cannot exhaust the full reality of an object of study, in this case a series of student strikes (Harman, 2009, p. 132).

The intercultural theory I advance in this article will thus be largely hermeneutical and rhetorical, by which I mean I will focus on the movement of textual representations of the 2012 QSS and piece together the universal aspects of this event. By textual movement, I mean the transition from a local meaning to a universal one. I am trying to encourage intercultural researchers to approach the contingent richness of a given intercultural context ontologically, or with a realist attitude, which means a given intercultural space has the power to alter the way minds think about it rather than the other way around.

To advance this idea, consider Peter Hallward’s (2012) *Guardian* article, “Québec’s student protest give UK activists a lesson.” Hallward lauds the fact that the 2012 Québec student movement “sustained the longest and largest student strike in North America” and “has organised [sic] the single biggest act of civil disobedience in Canadian history (“Québec student”). As Hallward’s article develops, this text moves from situating the student strike as a uniquely Quebecois event to something universal. Hallward writes, “If enough of us are willing to learn a few things from our friends in places like Québec and Chile, then in the coming years such numbers may change beyond all recognition” (“Québec’s student”). The 2012 Québec student movements articulated a universal reality, but what needs critical attention are the normative frames that guide how this universality should be defined. There are competing definitions regarding the meaning of this event, in other words, but the range of these definitions does not rule out a contingently universal definition of culture (Butler et al., 2000, p. 164).

In this vein, local only approaches to culture do not describe a context as it is but rather enable researchers to bring order to contingency (Gabriel, 2013, p. 130). Local only approaches claim to have access to what’s real in a given intercultural space, but that is only accomplished if we disregard many aspects of that space. Ultimately, I will argue that intercultural spaces such as the 2012 QSS and its (mis)translations should not be thought of as solely constituted by local practices, but instead through contingent universality, defined as the myriad possibilities that exist independently of the minds of intercultural researchers (Garcia, 2014, p. 144). Taking these

mind-independent possibilities seriously, this article maintains, will enable intercultural researchers to expand their own explanatory resources by returning to universality in a new way.

The aporia of culture and its definitions

The difficulty of engaging culture as a consistent term stems from the work of thinkers like Bruno Latour (1993). For Latour, culture as a discreet pole or region that can be identified and zoomed in on using Google Earth, cannot be maintained. This aporia of culture, or inability to define that which is apparent to us, is evident in Hall's (1989) notion of the cultural unconscious. Hall argues that culture includes what he calls "manifest ways," or the idea that beliefs and rituals are not internal but external: culture is what we do, not necessarily what we think (p. 166). Cultural processes are both visible and invisible to the people who are part of them, which makes it difficult to pinpoint exactly what culture is or means because its cause(s) are alluded to rather than concretely defined by a logical, representational system. Cultural processes, though visible, are the effects of something invisible, namely the unconscious ways in which members of a given culture react to these same processes.

The 2012 QSS consisted of several layers. What I call the first layer takes place in 2007, the date in which the Liberal government at the time proposed to increase tuition by \$325 dollars each year over a five-year period. Québec has historically oscillated between tuition increases and tuition-increase moratoriums, but 2007 to 2011 is significant in terms of the provincial government's commitment to increase tuition fees absolutely. In 2011, Finance Minister Raymond Bachard crystallized Québec's intention to raise tuition fees over a five-year period. The \$325 fee, arguably the lowest in Canada, was interpreted by key student stakeholders as a harbinger to come: the eradication of accessible education and the erasure of Québec's rich and complex history of attempts to abolish tuition altogether.

During the warm and humid month of August 2011, students articulated counterarguments against tuition hikes, the goals of which were to convince the government to stop its five-year plan for tuition hikes. In addition to the counterarguments against tuition fees, students planned peaceful rallies, especially in Montréal, to add to the momentum of pressuring the government to reconsider its financial course of action. February of 2012, however, signified the transition from the pre-strike layer to the first layer of the official manifestation, as students voted on February 13th, 2012 to go on strike.

Defining what culture is by paying attention to unconscious manifestations, Hall argues, has to happen in concrete situations, however, meaning the sterile environment of a laboratory, which is echoed by Geertz (1976). Geertz recognizes the desire to look for causes, but counters this impulse by admitting that "[c]ultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete" (p. 29). To put it in Descola & Godbout's (2013) terminology, the ways humans develop and create relationships in a given environment is open to analysis, but not a complete understanding of causation. In other words, the reality of culture is not elsewhere but within the given culture itself (p. 30).

Foreclosing the metaphysics of culture

If the reality of culture is not elsewhere but within a given culture itself, then cultural formation is not an effect of some transcendent concept, entity, or invisible force. Whatever cultural

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formation appears in a given context does not have to pay recourse to something that lies beyond or behind it (Gabriel, 2009, p. 83). Appadurai (1996), in a similar register, theorizes that culture after modernity became fractal and “polythetic.” (p. 46). In other words, stability in whatever formation is not privileged; there is movement and movements within movements. Welsch (1999), echoing Appadurai argued, “[w]e are cultural hybrids” (p. 46). There is no determining cause for whatever hybrid form takes shape within a given culture. The local and global overlap and change.

Globalization, another supposed cause of culture, has thus been articulated by Featherstone (1995) as “Third cultures,” cultures that cannot be reduced to their nation-states (p. 60). The current phase of globalization, he claims, is highly contingent on networks that compress space-time and give the appearance of cultural homogenization, yet local cultures are not always “battered out” by these techniques (p. 61). Featherstone argues that we are seeing myriad reactions to what he calls “intensified globalization” (p. 60). World cities, which are limited in number, create transnational cultures. The mistake, however, is to consider Third cultures as future prototypes of a common, global culture.

Every attempt to define what culture is will continue to confront this aporia, or inability to create an ultimate definition for culture, because of contingency. Perhaps, then, culture exists when contingent possibilities and relations are narrowed to something manageable at the expense of other possibilities and relations. And this is why the intercultural is important. The intercultural is important because it maintains the aporia within culture itself. What this means is that the intercultural enables researchers to realize that we might be wrong about culture. Intercultural spaces can provoke us to think and to behave differently. Our minds alone do not produce them, as a given intercultural space has the power to show us that our minds have a poor understanding of that space. Intercultural spaces are ethical, too, because when I am provoked to think differently I might be compelled to reflect critically on how I should move forward now that I know my interpretive framework is wrong.

Foreclosing the metaphysics of culture, means giving up the desire to find the essence or ground of culture. Stemming from Hall (1997): the material world exists, but meaning does not inhere in it. Bearing this in mind, cultural movements are processes of translation and construction, but what precisely are they translating and constructing? Haslanger writes: “We must be aware that the classifications we employ in our theorizing may not be capturing differences already there, but may be responsible for creating them” (p.112). There are social facts, which are objective indeed, but said facts are framed by social conditions. When we reduce culture to minds and language, we are ultimately falling in to an idealist trap. DeLanda (2012) argues that, “Different cultures do attribute different importance, relevance, or significance to different things because their practices (not their minds) are different” (p. 47). So, understanding the 2012 QSS means understanding it as a product of the cultural system of Québec.

Late May of 2012, which I call the second layer of the 2012 QSS, was significant. Up until that point, students accelerated their pressure on the government by intermixing direct democracy practices and civil disobedience tactics with the support of several student organizations, especially CLASSE (Coalition large de l’ assé). CLASSE was considered the leading student

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organization that advocated for civil disobedience in addition to applying direct democracy practices by proposing to the government a method by which a tuition-free Québec could be realized by adding a small tax on banks. The application of direct democracy practices by CLASSE and other student organizations put the government on the defensive. From February to April of 2012, the government would not meet with student spokespersons, as CLASSE called them, in good faith and the students interpreted those gestures as the government trying to undermine democracy. Consequently and significantly, students, aided by the compass of civil disobedience, began to disrupt the economy of Québec and Montréal by occupying major bridges and parts of Montréal's metro system.

From February through May 2012, students demonstrated daily, and government and student negotiations broke down repeatedly, but in late April of 2012, the Liberal government decided to meet with students. The meeting, however, was not in good faith, according to the student organizations who met with government negotiators, as the Liberal government at the time offered student spokespersons a new tuition hike plan that consisted of a \$254 dollar yearly fee hike over the course of seven years, not five years as was proposed in 2011. This was subsequently interpreted and calculated by the students as a higher increase than before.

Late April through May 18th of 2012, however, inaugurated the second layer of the strike, as I am calling it, a layer that could not have been predicted, despite its retroactive magnitude from the perspective of this study. Coming off the heels of one of the largest rallies in Québec history, a rally wherein Earth Day environmental protestors formed a coalition with striking students, on May 18th 2012 the Nationally Assembly of Québec enacted into law Bill 78. Bill 78 was a law that criminalized the strikes preemptively, proscribed measures to resume the fall 2012 and winter 2013 terms, and thereby nullified students' democratic right to strike.

In late May of 2012, I was in Montréal. The student strike was in the second layer of the movement. One of the major east-to-west arteries in Montréal is Rue Ste Catherine, a bustling street that connects motorists and pedestrians to businesses, educational institutions, and cultural centers such as the Place Des Arts. I was on my way back from a creperie on Ste Denis, a north to south street. From Ste Denis I walked onto Ste Catherine and headed west towards Complexe Desjardine where my car was parked, and in a vacant lot to my right, I saw what appeared to be a rallying point for riot police. Their presence was spectacular; I felt fearful and incredibly anxious to the point where I could not move.

I stopped and faced them, separated only by a row of crowd control partitions. I wanted to take a picture of the spectacle, but it occurred to me that I was in a grey zone: I felt as if the laws that protected me and ensured the stability of my existence and citizenship in the US were inoperative. I approached a man in his mid-to-late thirties and asked him about what I was seeing. In broken English, I was told that they were there to stop the manifestation of Bill 78. I thanked him for his time and walked quickly to my car, as I feared getting arrested given Bill 78's parameters of guilt by association, especially when 50 or more people have been assembled.

I am not arguing against the idea that there are not differences and similarities within intercultural events. Of course there are, but when similarities function as the building blocks of

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intercultural reality, conceptual problems arise, as the only available schema to talk about differences and similarities is the local event itself. Below I explore this concept more thoroughly.

Moving beyond the emic

Calling something an intercultural event, such as the 2012 QSS, means that this event has the capacity to challenge the mind's grip on it. As an intercultural researcher, I might be wrong about a particular event and its implications. So what I am advancing here is a way to describe events such as the 2012 QSS with a realist attitude, but a contingently realist attitude. To do this effectively, however, means that we should not cleanse culture of its aporia. This is not a cheap trick, but a viable way to continue to engage the concept of culture without the need to reduce it to some other thing, such as language, in order to understand it completely, which has been impossible from the beginning of cultural studies (Vismann, 2013, p. 89).

The intercultural, as I am defining it, is a universality, however, because, following DeLanda and Malabou (2008), its significance and materiality are irreducible to a specific cultural space. In other words, the 2012 QSS was an intercultural movement that is irreducible to the ground (symbolic and material) from which it erupted. The objects and textual practices of the QSS will not be able to make the ground of Québec society finally realized because those very things are rendered incomplete by being enveloped in the broader context of Québec. Put differently, it is the broader context of Québec that prevents or severs everyday things or cultural movements from the essence of Québec. There is no way to compare the things and contents of everyday life to something behind or beyond the everyday.

Gabriel & Žižek (2009) introduce the idea that critical comparativity cannot transcend its own limited point of view. Within this thread, they offer intercultural inquiry the following: "We cannot get outside the finitude of frameworks but at the most change them from within" (Gabriel & Žižek, 2009, p. 66). Changing a framework from within ensures a realist attitude because of the act of selecting one framework and not another. It's also important to pay attention to the ways a newly selected framework functions as a mechanism to enable specific cultural actors to exist alongside universality, e.g. the cultural space itself.

Culture and its maximization

The myriad interpretations of the 2012 Québec student strikes offer, I argue, a new way to think about how cultural processes appear in a contingently universal light. It might be helpful to see what a contingently universal interpretation of the event looks like through the ways scholars of the 2012 QSS have defined and contextualized the future of the movement, specifically the authors of the 2012 special edition of *Theory and Event*. Two out of the sixteen articles in the special edition are written in French. This is important because, following Derrida (2004), the French have two definitions for future: *futur*, which is predicable, and *l'avenir*, which is unpredictable.

Table 1.

Uses of the word future in Theory and Event's 2012 special edition

Author	Title	Language	Correlated Future	Open Future
Alia Al-Saji	“Creating Possibility: The Time of the Québec Student Movement”	English	7 (p.11)	11 (p.11)
Darin Barney	“The truth of le printemps érables”	English	2 (p. 39)	1 (p. 36)
Thomas Lamarre	“Outlaw Universities”	English	1 (p. 57)	2 (p. 57)
Krista Genevieve Lynes	“Poetic Resistance and the Classroom without Guarantees”	English	2 (pp. 72, 75)	1 (p. 73)
Erin Manning	“Propositions for Collective Action – Towards an Ethico-Aesthetic Politics”	English	0	2 (p. 77, 80)
Brian Massumi	“Buying Out: Of Capitulation and Contestation”	English	0	1 (p. 86)
CLASSE Manifesto	“Share Our Future: The CLASSE Manifesto”	English	1 (p. 50)	2 (p. 50)
Erik Bordeleau	“Intuition première: la force étrange du printemps Québécois”	French (<i>futur</i>)	0	1 (p. 45)
Olivier Asselin	“Carré rouge. Le destin politique d’une forme colorée”	French (<i>l’avenir</i>)	0	1 (p. 20)

The uses of relational future(s) by some of the authors in the above articles are critical statements about a future that cannot reference something beyond the current political and economic situation of Québec; they are futures wedded and correlated to neoliberalism, in other words. The open futures, by contrast, are lines of thought that think the future beyond 2012 and beyond the logics of neoliberal economic and political theory and practice; they are hopeful and optimistic futures. These futures beyond the scope of the current situation in Québec, then, constitute an intercultural event, because they are futures not wedded to the local. The open future use, in English, changes one's knowledge of the event and provides windows into the possibility of the event coexisting with other versions of the event.

The contingent response to Bill 78 marked a transition from a predictable future to an unpredictable future, in other words. Bill 78, in fact, attempted to contain the strikes within the coordinates of a predictable future, such as by enforcing the resumption of classes for the fall 2012 and winter 2013 terms. The local aspect of this response is the Bill's attempt to narrow contingency to a manageable timeline in order to restore cultural practices to pre-strike frames of reference. The students' response to Bill 78 not only led to the largest act of civil disobedience in Canadian history but the tactics, such as *manif des casseroles*, where protestors bang on pots and pans, confounded the police to the point where the numbers of protestors and creative strategies were too great and therefore became uncontrollable.

The *manif des casseroles* introduced an open future in the initial, locally rooted timeline of the strike. As an unforeseen open future, one that could not be predicted, the *casseroles* became an intercultural event as they introduced a new future for the movement: they altered the strike from local to nonlocal by inspiring demonstrations not only in other Canadian provinces but internationally as well. In other words, the *casseroles* were an intercultural event in the ontological sense because they conditioned a range of strategies and acts of creativity that could not have been predicted by isolating certain aspects of the strike to identify its causation. Sequentially and geographically, the *casseroles* were local, as they lasted for about two weeks in a number of neighborhoods in Montréal and elsewhere in Québec, but the open future they generated is irreducible to these local details.

The rhetoric(s) of the (intercultural) event

The philosophical project of Badiou (2002) is interested in the process by which actors in a given situation come to understand a rupture within a culture. For example, when I perceive an intercultural event and cultivate a fidelity to a particular understanding of this event, the events become representable and therefore open to critique. In short, for Badiou, an event is a mind-independent and non-relational occurrence, despite its appearance in a concrete situation. This means that the event has the power to constitute local actors into subjects of the event. The broader implication of Badiou's ontology for intercultural research is significant because it offers researchers a schema to move beyond relational or local only approaches. In other words, cultural frames alone cannot understand the effects of an event such as the 2012 QSS, as they lack the explanatory depth to address both the effects of contingency and, following Garcia (2014), the attitude of the realist: the event conditions my perspective as opposed to my perspective conditioning the event. The subtle difference between the conditioned and the conditioning is that the latter assumes correlationism, which is the idea that thought and reality

are related absolutely. The former, the notion that an intercultural event conditions my perspective, presupposes intercultural events as independent of minds.

Meillassoux (2008) claims that contingency alone is necessary, not a being or ultimate ground (p. 62). He writes, “Correlationism consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another” (p. 5). Meillassoux explains that, according to the correlationist:

One only has to think of Husserl’s famous ‘givenness-by-adumbrations:’ a cube is never perceived according to all its faces at once; it always retains something non-given at the heart of givenness. Generally speaking, even the most elementary theory of perception will insist on the fact that the sensible apprehension of an object always occurs against the backdrop of the un-apprehended, whether it be with regard to the object’s spatiality or temporality (p. 19).

Correlationism conflates that which *is* with that which *is thought*. The correlationist says: ‘had I been there to witness event X, it would have occurred according to the laws of physics.’ The anti-correlationist, or speculative realist, is not a relationist. What this means is that, for the speculative realist, using the QSS as an object of study does not require that every social actor in Quebec think about it. The reality of the QSS does not require the sum total of thoughts in order to be what it is, in other words.

Al-Saji’s (2012) theoretical response to the 2012 QSS argues that our inability to comprehend the movement is “an ontological feature of the movement itself” and not a symptom of a confused mind or an outdated epistemology, which is an anti-correlationist argument (p. 11-12). The emergence of the 2012 QSS as an intercultural event altered the coordinates by which the past could be used to predict the future of the movement by rendering problematic the perceiver-perceived correlation (p. 11-12). Al-Saji references Québec’s Quiet Revolution as an “unfulfilled promise” (p. 13), and key here is the anti-correlationist stance: critical reflections of participating in the strike are the outcome of the perceived having more power than her initial perceptions.

Harman (2009) has argued that “All [speculative realists] rely on the fact that there is something more to the world over and above what can be explicitly stated about it” (p. 175). A speculative intercultural methodology, with its rigorous attention to contingency and the ontological status of an intercultural space, could offer a fruitful way to recast the role of interpretative frames as a way to identify the complexity of intercultural spaces without having to sacrifice universality at the same time. The 2012 QSS was both an exigency and a response to an exigency. The protesters were motivated by the notion that the future of education and Québec could be otherwise. Such a notion is universalist in that it makes the contingency of structures visible. Structures can be otherwise and the task of the intercultural community is to make decisions about what kind of (contingent) structure is needed to achieve a particular set of goals for a particular culture.

The initial structure of the QSS was composed of cultural knowledge and opinions, as in proposals to increase tuition and counterproposals to put a moratorium on tuition or abolish it altogether. Each proposal and counterproposal was supported by various cultural systems of knowledge such as economics, history, and civil disobedience practices. The initial cultural structure is designed to incur modifications but not undergo radical changes or transformations. It is at this initial structural level where intercultural researchers can focus on emic details at the expense of other details in the cultural space.

If something novel happens, as in the students' creative response to Bill 78 through the *manif de casseroles*, the initial cultural structure lacks the conceptual resources to be able to give a meaning to this novelty as it falls out of the purview of the initial cultural space's interpretative frame. This is evident in the police's inability to control the *casseroles* the way they were able to control the rallies and demonstrations pre-May 18th, 2012. A rupture like the *casseroles* was ontologically effective because it produced its own contingent sets of goals. Students and student sympathizers of the *casseroles* were able to demonstrate spontaneously; they didn't have to inform the police with a list of information about the time and location of a particular demonstration eight hours before it took place, as was enforced by Bill 78. The social actors' perception was conditioned by the uniqueness of the *casseroles*. The initial cultural structure that Bill 78 enforced was ruptured by this intercultural event as it sparked a new form of fidelity.

The social actors involved in the *casseroles* became subjects as opposed to individuals. A subject is a universally contingent cultural behavior, in other words, and not a local individual vying for cultural preservation. The ethical rub of taking seriously the idea of contingent structures means knowing that I might be wrong about what I think, believe, and see in a cultural space. Badiou's subject-of-an event scheme is significant because it delineates cultural individuals from cultural subjects and therefore enables researchers to reconsider and possibly change what they initially thought was appearing at the emic level of a cultural space.

Conclusion

A contingent intercultural methodology has some viable functions to it that are important to consider more in-depth. The first function has to do with the attitude of the researcher towards their object of study. The attitude fostered in this study leans on two assumptions: my thoughts on a cultural space might be wrong and a cultural space might produce effects that take on lives of their own. An effect that takes on a life of its own, as was the case with the QSS after Bill 78 was enacted into law, is important in this regard. Intercultural events such as the *manif des casseroles* offer connective tissues between culture and intercultural events, happenings that break away from initial cultural practices and behaviors (emic details).

Another function of a contingent intercultural methodology is that it offers researchers a way to approach contingent universality. One of the ways it tries to do this is by developing a schema to discern the transformations social actors undergo in cultural spaces during ruptures in those spaces. When social actors take part in a happening like the QSS, their participation, language, and behavior, might become irreducible to their initial place within a cultural space or structure, and this methodology offers researchers a way to describe those experiences beyond the purview of local only approaches.

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In other words, the intercultural methodology as I am advancing here values the contingent aspects of the strikes. The students' response to a tuition hike proposal and Bill 78, for instance, could not have happened by the initial rules of the cultural space. The fact that there were responses in several modes was contingent. Valuing contingency means that researchers would be able to focus less on causation and more on the ways events like the QSS compose and generate their own concepts and practices that frustrate the frames used to bring order to contingency.

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