
Québec Research Relating to Aboriginal Peoples in the Age of the Knowledge Society and the Knowledge Mobilization¹

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Abstract

The landscape of research relating to Aboriginal peoples has completely changed over the past twenty years with the emergence of the knowledge society. New avenues are opening up for researchers who want to play a part in deepening and renewing knowledge and in working to transform relations between the academic and Aboriginal milieus. This article begins by looking at a few milestones in the recent history of this research field and then highlights the experience of the DIALOG network, which is helping to renew practices and means of producing knowledge relating to Aboriginal issues and to set up a constructive and innovative dialogue between the academic and Aboriginal milieus in regard to research.

Keywords

Research; Aboriginal Peoples; knowledge society; DIALOG Network.

Résumé

Le paysage de la recherche relative aux peuples autochtones s'est complètement transformé depuis une vingtaine d'années à la faveur de l'émergence de la société du savoir. Des pistes nouvelles s'ouvrent pour les chercheurs désireux de participer autant à l'approfondissement et au renouvellement du savoir qu'à la transformation des liens entre le monde universitaire et le monde autochtone. Cet article retrace d'abord quelques jalons de l'histoire récente de ce domaine de recherche; il met par la suite l'accent sur l'expérience du réseau DIALOG qui favorise un renouvellement des pratiques et des modes de production de connaissances en regard des questions autochtones et contribue à la mise en place d'un dialogue constructif et novateur entre le monde universitaire et le monde autochtone en matière de recherche.

Mots-clés

Recherche; peuples autochtones; société du savoir; Réseau DIALOG.

Resumen

El paisaje de la investigación sobre los pueblos nativos se ha transformado completamente en los últimos veinte años debido a la aparición de la sociedad del conocimiento. Nuevas pistas se abren para los investigadores que desean participar tanto en la profundización y renovación del conocimiento como en la transformación de los vínculos entre el mundo académico y el mundo aborígen. Este artículo reconstituye en primer lugar algunos hechos de la historia reciente de esta área de investigación; posteriormente se centra en la experiencia de la red DIALOG que fomenta la renovación de las prácticas y las formas de producción del conocimiento en relación con las cuestiones indígenas y contribuye al desarrollo de un diálogo constructivo e innovador entre el mundo académico y el mundo aborígen en materia de investigación.

Palabras claves

Investigación; pueblos nativos; sociedad del conocimiento; Red DIALOG.



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INTRODUCTION

The sphere of knowledge is in the midst of rapid change. From a responsible, citizen's science to strategic knowledge, from the democratization of knowledge to the co-production of knowledge in the natural and social sciences, from a questioning of the social and ethical role of knowledge institutions to the creation of new spaces for the exchange of knowledge: these are but some of the many initiatives that have led to a crossing of disciplinary boundaries, to a re-examination of the ways in which knowledge is created and to questions about how knowledge is circulated and about the ends and social uses of knowledge. Governments, large international institutions, companies and universities are becoming increasingly involved in this shift in knowledge, where the rules of scientific production are being revised and where collective, inter-institutional and interdisciplinary projects are tending more and more to replace individualized, isolated and sector-based research (AUCC 2002, 2005; CSTQ 2003; Gouvernement du Québec 2001; OCDE 2000; OECD 2000, 2001; UNESCO 2005).

Some Québec and Canadian funding agencies are already offering funding to researchers and universities in order to foster an interdisciplinary convergence of questions about research and to promote collaborations between universities, on the one hand, and government, union or community organizations, on the other (CMEC 2005; CRSH 2005). Moreover, in the case of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), one of the three main Canadian funding agencies, programs to set up and implement large strategic knowledge clusters are already well under way. Through such programs, these funding agencies are contributing to the international debates sweeping through both academia and society, and are thus part of the new knowledge society.

In the business world, in the areas of health and education, and in the domain of public policy, new forms of production, co-production and sharing of knowledge now refer to complex systems of knowledge exchange, knowledge translation, knowledge transfer or knowledge

management. An increasingly diversified scientific literature is examining, analyzing and evaluating these changes and even challenging the role of social science researchers and research, in questioning the very notion of knowledge, in looking at the impacts of knowledge on society and in promoting more collaborative and participatory research practices (see, for example, Callon, Lascoumes and Barthe 2001; Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons 2004; Lesemann, Boisvert and Saint-Pierre 2001; Ouellet 2004).

The changes that have marked the sphere of research relating to Aboriginal peoples since the early 1990s are also part of these new currents of thought, of action and of questioning. New avenues are opening up for researchers wishing to participate in both a deepening and renewal of knowledge and a transformation of relations between the academic and Aboriginal milieus and thus between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Over the next few pages, an examination of a few landmark events in the history of this research field in Québec and Canada will hopefully foster a better understanding of its specificity within the social sciences, of the changes characterizing this field, of the challenges now facing researchers and of the approaches likely to transform the research sector, research practices, and relations between researchers and Aboriginal people in regard to research.

And, more particularly, our situating of the context will allow us to present the case of DIALOG — Aboriginal People Research and Knowledge Network, created in 2001 in Québec and funded by both the Fonds québécois de recherche sur la société et la culture and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. To its member researchers, students and partners from Aboriginal organizations and communities, DIALOG offers new research and knowledge synthesis tools and promotes the renewal of research practices and of the ways in which knowledge is produced in the area of Aboriginal issues.

1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The sphere of research relating to Aboriginal peoples has a long tradition, dating back to the end of the nineteenth century, and was initially forged by the disciplines of ethnology and anthropology. But it was with the emerging trend of Aboriginal peoples' affirmation of their identity and their political affirmation in the 1960s that this research sphere became more widely established and institutionalized. At that time, a number of universities included, in their curricula, courses on the culture, history, religion, kinship systems and languages of First Peoples (the first educational program entirely devoted to Aboriginal studies was launched at Trent University, Ontario, in 1969). Teams began to focus on particular themes or groups; a good example of this is McGill University's research program on the anthropology of development, with one of the program's research topics, on the Crees of James Bay, beginning as early as 1966 (Lévesque 2002a). At that time, the sphere of academic research relating to Aboriginal peoples was almost exclusively oriented by the work of anthropologists. Staying with the populations they studied in keeping with their training, anthropologists produced monographs on various facets of the past and present way of life of First Nations and Inuit groups, or, from the perspective of social and cultural change, examined the new living conditions of groups that had recently gone from a nomadic to a sedentary lifestyle, or studied the advent of paid work in populations of hunter-gatherers, industrialization, interethnic relations, or acculturation (to use the vocabulary of that era).

In the 1970s, research and teaching efforts intensified in many Canadian and Québec universities, with an increased focus on the claims and rights of these new actors in the Québec and Canadian political arenas. This was the time of the major development projects, which also mobilized many anthropologists across the country. The James Bay hydroelectric project, for example, led to the James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement in 1975, the first modern treaty of its kind, signed by the Crees of James Bay and

the Inuit of Northern Québec. Also in the 1970s, the project to build the Mackenzie Valley pipeline resulted in the first public impact assessment study, in this case regarding the pipeline's projected impacts and repercussions on the surrounding environment and local populations, which led to a study commission where, for the first time, personal testimony was given by the Inuit and Dene on their close ties to the land and the importance of ensuring the continuation of their ways of life, all of which ultimately resulted in postponement of the project. This era was also characterized by the arrival of new actors in the sphere of research relating to Aboriginal peoples, including geographers, linguists, sociologists and, especially, jurists and lawyers, who were increasingly called upon by both Aboriginal groups and governments in land claim cases, and historians, called to testify in a number of legal cases regarding Aboriginal peoples' occupation of the land in question.

In the 1980s, when the Canadian Constitution was repatriated, followed by the various constitutional conferences, relations between the State and Aboriginal groups worsened, resulting in a large number of court cases. The first generation of Aboriginal academics (mostly lawyers) now took an active part in the debates of the time, or became teachers who in turn trained new student clientele. There were an increasing number of legal, political and historical studies on constitutional matters, land claims and self-determination. New voices were now being heard, especially those of Aboriginal women, who were fighting for abolition of the discriminatory clauses of the Indian Act, in opposition to male Aboriginal leaders, and the voices of Aboriginal people living in urban areas, who were being ignored by government policies and whose population had grown considerably by that time. Even today, researchers pay too little attention to these situations, despite the fact that they show the complexity of the issues that characterize the Aboriginal world and highlight other facets of the Aboriginal reality.

2. IMPACTS OF THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON ABORIGINAL PEOPLES

In the early 1990s, studies on Aboriginal peoples were well established in a number of Canadian and Québec universities and covered a wide range of areas, including Aboriginal peoples' relations with the Nation-State, feminist studies, education, languages, health services and social policies, to name but a few. However, the launching of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in 1991 gave them a new impetus that led to consequences of various kinds and sparked a major change in the academic world (CRPA 1996).

Thirty years after the study, *A Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada*, by Harry Hawthorn and Marc-Adélar Tremblay,² the Royal Commission took an innovative approach, first by placing a great deal of emphasis on the words of Aboriginal researchers and Aboriginal people themselves in the studies then being undertaken. The Commission also called upon specialists in every field and every discipline in the social sciences and humanities. It also fostered the conducting of a variety of theoretical, archival, statistical, analytical and empirical studies across Canada, resulting in a new and wide-ranging overview of knowledge on First Peoples (their histories, cultures, knowledge, societies, economies, struggles, searches for autonomy and aspirations), which remains today a unique reference source for researchers, students, Aboriginal organizations and governments in the provinces, territories and the country as a whole.

² This is the title of the report of the Hawthorn-Tremblay Commission, the first federal commission on Canada's Indian populations. In 1964, the Department of Citizenship and Immigration (which was then responsible for Indian affairs) had asked the University of British Columbia to undertake a study, together with scholars from other universities, on the social, educational and economic situation of the Indians of Canada and to make useful recommendations. The study was co-chaired by Professor Harry Hawthorn of the University of British Columbia and Professor Marc-Adélar Tremblay of Université Laval (province of Québec).

Although on the political level, the Commission's report, published in 1996, did not have the repercussions and influence expected given the vast array of resources mobilized, and although most of its recommendations were not implemented, this initiative shows how far Canada has advanced in the area of research relating to Aboriginal peoples. To this day, no other country in the Americas has accumulated so wide a range of knowledge in this area, and there have been many spin-offs from this knowledge: one has only to think of the Aboriginal health research institutes or of the new funding programs directly targeted to Aboriginal realities that were launched in the wake of the Commission, of the rise in research interest in this area on the part of researchers and students not only in Canada but also in the United States, Europe and Asia, more and more of whom are examining the situation of Aboriginal people living in Québec or Canada, and, on another level, of the repercussions in education and training as teachers take advantage of the Commission's archives.

3. CHANGES AND CHALLENGES

In the past decade, these situations, these events and this history have helped to radically transform the field of research relating to Aboriginal peoples. This research area is now developing and growing in all the social sciences and humanities; although still strongly marked by anthropology, research relating to Aboriginal peoples is now being pursued in linguistics, law, history, political science, geography, sociology, education, criminology, environmental science, administration, literature and communications. Aboriginal peoples studies are now an integral part of the history and transformation of humanity. In a time of accelerated change and multifaceted globalization, Aboriginal peoples studies provide an intellectual space for the exploration of issues such as the relationships between peoples and states, cultural diversity, the affirmation of identity, and the coexistence of different types of knowledge (Aboriginal knowledge and scientific knowledge; knowledge derived from experience and

disciplinary knowledge) and skills (Lévesque 2002b).

And, since the Royal Commission: 1) Aboriginal policies are a key area of governmental concern; 2) new research themes are attracting the attention of researchers, governments and Aboriginal organizations: globalization, intercontinental alliances, transculturality, intercultural education, community development, social cohesion, social tourism, governance, transnational collective action, sustainable development, the social economy, etc.; 3) other, more traditional research themes are being revisited in light of the issues and challenges facing Aboriginal people throughout the Americas and around the globe: racism, discrimination, the mixing of races, intercultural relations, citizenship; 4) Aboriginal peoples' movements of affirmation of their identities and political affirmation are on the rise; 5) issues regarding Aboriginal peoples' autonomy are being expressed on both the local and international levels; 6) there are a great number and great variety of projects involving agreements, partnerships, resource sharing, and coexistence and co-management; and 7) First Nations, Inuit, Aboriginal women, Métis, and urban Aboriginal populations are all engaged in active processes of affirmation and appropriation, including in regard to the academic sphere.

In a knowledge society that emphasizes greater access to knowledge, a renewal of the ways in which knowledge is produced, and the sharing of information, this specificity of the area of research relating to Aboriginal peoples poses four main challenges for the scientific community: 1) to build bridges between various disciplines whose traditions of research in this field (except in the case of anthropology) are still fairly recent, and to work in so doing toward the elaboration of a truly transdisciplinary project; 2) to bring together existing knowledge that is still too often produced in isolation and that generally circulates only among specialists; 3) to more widely disseminate scientific work to Aboriginal communities and organizations; 4) to strengthen and develop academic curricula in this field and re-examine the foundations of training in this area in order

to make more room for diverse and collective forms of teaching and learning.

But the specificity of this research field also derives from something more fundamental. No longer seen as a distant and exterior focus of study, Aboriginal people have gradually emerged as knowledgeable and aware subjects. Since the 1990s, they have forcefully expressed their demands to directly participate in research projects that concern them. They are increasingly making their own research needs known, and are thus contributing to the renewal of research and to a greater questioning of research. They have developed new research protocols and ethical guidelines governing studies conducted in Aboriginal communities. From another perspective, research concerning Aboriginal knowledge is growing in popularity in both the Aboriginal and academic milieus, in the sphere of government (especially in regard to the protection of renewable resources and biodiversity) and among international bodies.

This particular context is raising even greater challenges for researchers and research, which involve: 1) a re-examination of modes of interaction between researchers and Aboriginal peoples, and questions about various possible types of participation and collaboration; 2) a reformulation of current conceptual frameworks in light of the issues raised by transculturality (that is, in taking into account differences in the types of knowledge — scientific and Aboriginal, for example — and in the many forms of knowledge creation); 3) a restructuring of areas of application and practices in order to promote ethical, aware and situated research practices (that is, practices grounded in Aboriginal peoples' social and political realities); 4) the production of new knowledge that is likely to support the social reconstruction initiatives being developed by Aboriginal peoples themselves and that reflects the new issues they face.

4. THE RESEARCH NETWORK AS A SCIENTIFIC AND SOCIAL RESPONSE: THE CASE OF DIALOG

These challenges require a repositioning of research within the academic sphere itself and heighten the need for new research and dissemination tools, especially when targeted to Aboriginal organizations and communities, the need to strengthen ties between the various research actors (researchers, students, collaborators from Aboriginal organizations), and the need to set up new spaces for discussion, exchange and collaboration. In other words, it is now important to develop ways to collectively reflect on the theoretical, epistemological, methodological and ethical issues involved in this research field.

A research network, the primary characteristic of which is to create an interface between academia and society, can represent this space that is crucial to a collective type of approach and can offer these new means of interaction. Inherent in the very structure of a network is a creative, dynamic and stimulating impetus towards the enhancement of knowledge, professional relations and interpersonal ties, since a network is open to many types of needs. The network is both a meeting point for individuals from diverse backgrounds and a platform for the development of research in the future. Unlike strictly academic groupings, the richness and strength of the network in fact lie in its individual members and the knowledge and skills that each person brings to the network. The network operates in a transversal fashion; it encourages openness and, supported by a core of multisectoral expertise, is outward facing in its activities (Castells 1998; Musso 2003b). The network is a mode of grouping which calls upon personal capacities that are vastly strengthened by the very fact that they are part of a collective undertaking, and, in this sense, the structure of a network is closer to the reality being studied by social science researchers. Moreover, social innovation “. . . never stems from the actions of a single individual or even a single organization; rather, it is the product of a network” [Our translation] (Gouvernement du Québec 2001: 12).

A research network thus simultaneously acts on both the scientific and social levels. From this perspective, the grouping into a network (networking) is not only a matter of infrastructure, dissemination or transfer of knowledge; it is also and especially a matter of re-examining epistemological positions, rethinking scientific paradigms and recognizing diverse relationships with the sphere of knowledge. Networking is a reasoning process, a way of conceiving of the world (“un procédé de raisonnement pour penser le monde”) (Musso 2003a: 7). It is a process that is based on the social link, on the equality of its members whatever their backgrounds, on the fact of belonging to a collective project for the mobilization of knowledge, and on the cross-fertilization of research—unlike other, more traditional forms of grouping based on institutional status, the superiority of academic knowledge over other forms of knowledge, hierarchical relations and the collecting of individual research work.

The research network in fact sees itself as a means of synthesis, meeting and a new form of organization. First, it encourages the synthesis of knowledge, experiences, expertise, skills, practices, and links. It facilitates and supports the meeting of the actors involved in the various stages of the knowledge process, that is, the production, use, circulation, dissemination, transmission, and sharing of knowledge. It also makes possible innovative forms of organization (relational data banks, collective research tools, knowledge syntheses) designed to encourage the circulation, sharing and social integration of this knowledge for the benefit of all the actors concerned, whether they are from the scientific community, government bodies or Aboriginal organizations. Research can thus help to change the world in which we live and, in the case of research relating to Aboriginal peoples, it can help to improve relations between Aboriginal people and other citizens of Canada and Québec, while also representing a vector in the full social recognition of groups that have historically been excluded from the public arena and that are strongly committed to moving toward autonomy.

This vision of research using a network approach has been fundamental to DIALOG's activities, actions and achievements since the network was launched in 2001. DIALOG is in fact contributing to the implementation of constructive, innovative and lasting dialogue between universities and Aboriginal organizations and communities: 1) by organizing public events, round tables, study days, and research forums in collaboration with Aboriginal and academic partners; 2) by regularly participating in the annual ACFAS conference (Congrès annuel de l'Association francophone pour le savoir); 3) by encouraging new collaborations between researchers and representatives of Aboriginal organizations and communities, especially in the context of projects that incorporate situated research practices; 4) by exchanges of expertise and knowledge in the context of academic curricula; 5) by providing additional financial support for members' and partners' activities that are in keeping with DIALOG's mission; 6) by providing travel allowances to students and researchers who wish to present their research findings to Aboriginal communities or Aboriginal organizations.

DIALOG also highlights and promotes scientific work relating to Aboriginal peoples: 1) by designing and testing bibliographical data banks; 2) by developing interactive atlases on the Internet; 3) by compiling documentation for the Québec, Canadian and international scientific communities; 4) by making collections of data and research findings available to researchers, students and Aboriginal communities and organizations. Finally, DIALOG helps its members to become positioned at the national, intercontinental and international levels: 1) by helping to disseminate their work and expertise; 2) by supporting discussion and exchange activities and national and international scientific meetings; 3) by supporting the participation of researchers, students and Aboriginal partners in national and international research forums on Aboriginal issues; 4) by welcoming researchers and students from outside Québec; 5) by fostering the collaboration of

Québec researchers on national, intercontinental and international research teams.

5. A NEW RESEARCH CULTURE

In the traditional research centre, a structure or grouping that is typically found in academia, and unlike the network, the primary objective is the advancement of knowledge for the benefit of researchers and the field or discipline to which they belong; the centre generally deals with academic realities, even when it includes actors from outside the university. DIALOG, an innovative type of grouping, instead also deals with many realities that are not part of academia, which may sometimes make it more complex to implement, but, on the other hand, gives it a unique identity and a much broader sphere of influence and requires it to develop original interaction approaches. DIALOG thus supports and promotes the development and setting up of another type of organizational and institutional culture around and based on research. DIALOG is thereby contributing to the development of a new "research grammar" so that all of its members, whatever their backgrounds, may speak a common language. This new research grammar is built on the following collective principles, among others: sharing, commitment, convergence, and awareness.

Partage, or sharing, has two meanings in French. The first meaning suggests a division (the dividing up of a given good among a number of people). The second meaning suggests a rapprochement around a good that is collective. A budget for a group of researchers may thus be shared (divided) among several people; in this context, the budget is viewed as common to all but is used to conduct individual research work. From another point of view, a budget can also be used by the collectivity made up of these people so that they can acquire goods, products or resources to which everyone has access in particular circumstances, but that these individuals could not have acquired on their own. The added value of a research network is of this kind: it allows people to acquire resources and create new products that individual researchers or other research

actors could not have acquired on their own. The product is consequently collective and accessible to all and, in addition, everyone can use it for his or her own needs. In other words, the scope of sharing, when understood as a collective principle, in fact greatly increases individual capacities.

Commitment as a collective principle is linked, in one form, to the modes of interaction between various research actors. In this sense, it is associated with the network's primary function of connecting its many actors. The network's activities and services become opportunities to reaffirm its commitment to all of its members, whatever their backgrounds, without making a distinction in status between academic actors and those from other milieus. In a second form, commitment means that it is the network's responsibility as an autonomous entity to create conditions and circumstances that encourage the meeting of these various actors in various places. In a third form, commitment refers to the efforts made so that the connections formed between members can continue to develop and be maintained beyond specific activities or meetings.

The third principle, that of convergence, is characteristic of the way a network operates, that is, its evolution and activities. In a network type of organizational approach, research activities that create knowledge cannot be distinguished from those that encourage dissemination of this knowledge. In the academic sphere, the dissemination and circulation of research findings are now commonly managed as independent activities staggered over time, and even seen as a rather annoying requirement of funding agencies. Moreover, from this perspective, dissemination often simply means sending texts to scientific journals. In the network approach, dissemination has another purpose and role. First, it occurs right from the start of the scientific approach; it is an integral part of determining the aspects that will be involved in the research topic as well as of the data collection and analysis. This approach has the advantage of not confining the dissemination to the research findings alone. In fact, from a perspective of dialogue with Aboriginal

partners, dissemination is part of a continuing relationship, and it results in the preparation of a wide range of products, and not just scientific articles intended for the scientific community exclusively. Finally, by including all the stages of research along the same continuum, researchers are helping to foster the appropriation of knowledge in milieus other than the academic milieu, and especially in the very Aboriginal communities that are the focus of specific research work.

The fourth principle, awareness, refers to the researcher as citizen. It encourages a scientific, social and political repositioning of research, which is then no longer the prerogative of researchers alone, but instead a possible space for reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and, by extension, a tool for social change and a means of mutual understanding (Lafrenière, Diallo, Dubie and Henry 2005). It also obliges researchers to be ever vigilant and responsible in terms of the role of research and the impact of their findings both within the scientific community and in society. Awareness is an active principle in the knowledge society, a society where the bearers of knowledge play a major role.

CONCLUSION: IMPACTS ON KNOWLEDGE, IMPACTS ON SOCIETY

By creating the conditions that foster constructive discussion and exchange between researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds and between researchers and collaborators from Aboriginal organizations and Aboriginal communities, and by setting up a relationship of dialogue between the academic and Aboriginal milieus, DIALOG is encouraging its members to question their approaches, practices and ways of interacting with Aboriginal communities and to envisage a production of knowledge that is more grounded in reality: "The notion of the 'knowledge society' is more or less explicitly based on the hypothesis of a dissemination of knowledge that is relevant to the governance of societies, thus realizing the often-expressed dream of a science that is useful for political regulation and no longer a science self-centred on its own

development, within each discipline” [Our translation] (Martin 2000: 57). DIALOG is thus part of a broad contemporary questioning of the role of researchers in society, the status of science and knowledge, and the relations between theory and action.

But, at the same time, Aboriginal people, who are at once emerging as political actors, knowledgeable and aware subjects, the holders of specific knowledge and the bearers of an integrated approach to reality, are also helping to transform the academic world. They are prompting questioning on the limitations of positivist approaches, on academia’s claim to represent a universal and objective science, on the role of the university as the only place for the production and transmission of knowledge, and on the ethics of knowledge and research. In the past decade, there have been many works by Aboriginal intellectuals that are contributing to a “rereading” and “reformulation” of science and that are exploring new methodologies and approaches (including Battiste and Henderson 2000; Mihesuah 1998; Mihesuah and Wilson 2004; Smith 1999). In many respects, the conclusions of these works are similar to those developed in other contexts by authors such as Delanty (2001), Touraine (2005b) and Latour (2005), who are attempting to more clearly define the links between science and society, who are advocating the democratization and sharing of knowledge, and who are insisting on the return of the human being in the social sciences (Touraine 2005a).

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