

Interrogating the State: Recent Writing in Canadian Women's and Gender History

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Interrogating the State: Recent Writing in Canadian Women's and Gender History

FROM CATHERINE CLEVERDON'S *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* (1950) to Jennifer Stephen's *Pick One Intelligent Girl* (2007), Canadian feminist historians have long been aware of the central role that the state has played in Canada's past.¹ The publication of three new books in Canadian women's and gender history – Lara Campbell's *Respectable Citizens: Gender, Family, and Unemployment in Ontario's Great Depression* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); Janet Guildford and Suzanne Morton's edited collection *Making Up the State: Women in 20th-Century Atlantic Canada* (Fredericton, NB: Acadiensis Press, 2010); and Joan Sangster's *Transforming Labour: Women and Work in Postwar Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010) – offers an excellent opportunity to reflect upon how feminist historians have approached politics and government in Canada.² I argue in this review essay that four main interpretive frameworks are present in these works: 1) exploring women's political involvements; 2) investigating gender, race, class, and moral hierarchies; 3) examining citizenship definitions; and 4) challenging the state. After comparing these works' themes and findings, I propose that an especially fruitful approach to the history of the state is one that is attuned not only to women's political activism but also to the social consequences of state policies and practices.

Exploring women's political involvements

Recent feminist writing on turn-of-the-20th-century English Canadian middle class female activists has tended to emphasize the moralist, racist, and classist views of reformers.³ In contrast, two chapters in *Making Up the State* suggest that historians should direct attention to potentially subversive elements within bourgeois women's activism. Sharon M.H. MacDonald explores efforts by Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, intellectual and reformer Mary Russell Chesley (1847-1923) to bring about temperance, women's suffrage, and international peace. A prominent member of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), Chesley petitioned throughout the late 19th century for women's suffrage. She also defended, in letters to local, regional, and national newspapers, the militancy of British suffragists, and she helped create the first "Canadian chapter of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom" (55). Such activities, argues MacDonald, demonstrate that religiosity did not necessarily make English Canadian bourgeois female activists conservative.

1 Catherine Cleverdon, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974 [1950]); Jennifer Stephen, *Pick One Intelligent Girl: Employability, Domesticity, and the Gendering of Canada's Welfare State, 1939-1947* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007). I would like to thank Michael Boudreau, Dominique Clément, and Stephen Dutcher for their insights and suggestions.

2 "Feminist historians" are defined herein as historians committed to dismantling gender hierarchies.

3 See, for example, Mariana Valverde, "'When the Mother of the Race is Free: Race, Reproduction, and Sexuality in First-Wave Feminism,'" in *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History*, ed. Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 3-26, and Cecily Devereaux, *Growing a Race: Nellie L. McClung and the Fiction of Eugenic Feminism* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005).

Similarly, in an article about women in Woodstock, New Brunswick, Shannon M. Risk examines the activities of turn-of-the-20th-century Atlantic Canadian female reformers. Middle class women in Woodstock campaigned for temperance and suffrage; they also participated in campaigns organized by the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE), the Women's Institutes, and the Red Cross. From the perspective of early 20th-century women's activism, Minnie Bell Adney's endeavours are particularly compelling: she ran three times (unsuccessfully) between 1919 and 1925 for federal office (42-3). Aiming more to dispel equations of femininity and passivity than to probe the politics of temperance, suffrage, nationalism, imperialism, and maternalism, MacDonald's and Risk's contributions belong to an historiographical tradition, perhaps best exemplified by Cleverdon's *Woman Suffrage Movement*, that views women's attempts to enter the public sphere as more historically significant than the consequences of their actions. Rather than, for example, probing the ethnocentrism that may have been integral to Woodstock's IODE members' promotion of empire, Risk suggests that it is women's decisions to join the IODE that are significant.

Margaret Conrad's contribution to *Making Up the State*, which also explores the history of women in public life, offers a different perspective. Examining the decisions and actions of the first 13 Atlantic Canadian women who served in the House of Commons, Senate and/or provincial legislatures, Conrad argues that these women's activism made it "impossible for misogynists to argue that women were for some reason unworthy to participate in a public life" (77). Instead of offering a celebratory history, Conrad explores these women's beliefs, connections, and experiences – revealing that Atlantic Canadian women who became successful in politics were "welfare state liberals" with party connections. Conrad's contribution is explicit in terms of why women's political involvements are significant. Democracy "is diminished if half the electorate is excluded from the exercise of political power at every level" (75), she argues; thus historians must attend to women's attempts to correct the state's gender imbalance.

Gail G. Campbell shares Conrad's optimism regarding the potential for women to work within government to achieve change. Her chapter is an exploration of New Brunswicker Muriel McQueen Fergusson's activism during her term as senator between 1953 and 1975; it reveals how women's activism influenced federal initiatives on equality. By maintaining connections with the Canadian Federation of Business and Professional Women, the Canadian Federation of University Women, and feminist civil servants, as well as by advocating for women's equality in the Senate, in the media, and in letters to officials, Fergusson applied enough pressure to help ensure that certain reforms, including the "right to sit on juries, equal pay for equal work legislation, a Women's Bureau in the Department of Labour, [and] a Royal Commission on the Status of Women" (194), were enacted. These are important achievements, argues Campbell, because they represent efforts to mitigate inequality; they also demonstrate that "scholars' tendency to overlook the contribution and essentialize the feminism" of pre-1980s liberal activists is unwarranted (194).

Janet Guildford's chapter in *Making Up the State*, on Atlantic Canada's four provincial status of women councils, echoes Campbell's contention that liberal feminists helped to create positive reforms. Launched between 1975 and 1980, the councils were dependent on government appointments and funding, and had less clout

than many would have liked. Still, they advised governments on such issues as financial inequalities between men and women, violence against women (including domestic abuse), and the importance of social assistance (232-3). Their publications also documented gender discrimination and stimulated discussion of gender inequality. For these reasons, argues Guildford, their funding, activities, and presence within the state machinery have been invaluable.

Investigating gender, race, class, and moral hierarchies

If some historians are cautiously optimistic about the state's ability to implement positive social change, others are more skeptical. The ways in which governments have upheld oppressive social hierarchies have especially come under scrutiny. Extending the findings of such historians as Margaret Little and Nancy Christie,⁴ recent research by Lara Campbell, Joan Sangster, Heidi MacDonald, Suzanne Morton, James L. Kenny, and Lisa Perley-Dutcher and Stephen Dutcher demonstrates that 19th- and 20th-century federal and provincial policies on welfare, Aboriginal relations, and labour issues have upheld white, male, heterosexual, and economic privilege in Canada, and have entrenched the marginalization of all who did not belong to these categories.

How the state upholds the patriarchal nuclear family has received special scrutiny. Since the late 19th century, as Perley-Dutcher and Dutcher show in their contribution to *Making Up the State*, the federal Indian Act has regulated identities and family structures within First Nations. Between 1869 and 1985, "Indian women who married non-Indians" became non-Indians in the eyes of the state, and could therefore no longer "hold property on [their] home reserve[s]" or "vote or participate in any way in band governance." And even in the event of the death of their non-First Nations spouse – or divorce – Aboriginal women could not regain their status. Similar policies did not apply to male Aboriginals and, in fact, non-First Nations women who married First Nations men received full status. The Indian Act, as Perley-Dutcher and Dutcher point out, was based on European traditions that defined "women as the property of their husbands" and saw "male lineage" as the basis for familial relations, including inheritance (197). Bill C-31 (1985) finally eliminated this provision of the Indian Act, and restored "status to those who had lost it," including not only women who had married out, but also their children and in certain cases their grandchildren (198). However, it also denied status to the grandchildren of women who had lost status if one of a grandchild's parents was a non-First Nations person. Moreover, Perley-Dutcher and Dutcher demonstrate that the process of reintegration into the Tobique community proved to be a struggle for many Maliseet women and children after they regained their status. Due to scarce resources, some band council members were reluctant to welcome returnees into the community; as well, their return often "exacerbated some existing problems within the community such as the further dilution of Maliseet language and culture" (199).

4 Margaret Hillyard Little, *No Car, No Radio, No Liquor Permit: The Moral Regulation of Single Mothers in Ontario, 1920-1997* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998) and Nancy Christie, *Engendering the State: Family, Work, and Welfare in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

Scholars have also drawn attention to the ways in which the state has entrenched the male breadwinner/female homemaker family. In *Respectable Citizens*, a study of gender, ethnicity, and class in Depression-era Ontario, Lara Campbell shows that municipal relief programs were structured according to the assumption that men were responsible for earning their family's income while women were responsible for performing unpaid domestic and reproductive labour. Relief provisions were designed for male workers and "gave preference to married men." Unmarried, unemployed women were "left to the care of private charities" while "married women were classified as dependents of men" (5). Such policies had devastating consequences as not only were women and most youths ineligible for relief, but wives and children were left in dire straits when their husbands and fathers deserted them. For their part, penniless wives and children with abusive husbands and fathers often had little choice but to stay with them. On a broader level, such policies perpetuated the notion that the nuclear heterosexual family was the ideal and that female breadwinners and non-normative families were deviant. Indeed, Ontario's Children of Unmarried Parents Act (1921) was designed to punish men who failed to become normative breadwinners. At the same time, unmarried mothers did not receive aid from the provincial Mother's Allowance program. State policies, in essence, shamed and impoverished women who did not conform to prevailing moralities; they also entrenched mothers' and children's ongoing dependence upon men (109, 52).

Similar themes pervade Heidi MacDonald's chapter in *Making Up the State*, which investigates Depression-era policies in New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Nova Scotia. Through an examination of the training initiatives these provinces offered to their youth between 1937 and 1939, which used funding supplied by the Dominion-Provincial Youth Training Program, MacDonald illustrates that each of these provinces viewed male unemployment as more worrisome than female unemployment. Not only did they pour more money into job training for male youth, but their programs for female youth suggested that women were temporary and ancillary wage earners. Courses on handicrafts, domestic service, and home economics encouraged young women to envision themselves as homemakers and mothers (171-2).

This patriarchal family model remained a cornerstone of state policy well into the 20th century. In *Transforming Labour*, a study of women, gender, and employment in Canada from the late 1940s through the 1960s, Sangster includes a chapter on federal work and training programs for First Nations people on the prairies. When designing initiatives involving First Nations people, civil servants, economists, lawyers, and others drew upon Eurocentric assumptions about the male-headed nuclear family as well as upon mainstream assumptions about the centrality of men's wages to the family income. Recognizing that many First Nations people were finding it difficult to rely on hunting, fishing, agriculture, and handicrafts for survival, the federal government experimented with work and training programs. Relocation programs designed to move families closer to mines assumed not only that people would migrate in nuclear family units, but also that men should embrace breadwinner roles and that women should perform the unpaid tasks of homemaking and childcare. Government-sponsored migrations of First Nations families to work in sugar beet fields similarly assumed that First Nations husbands and fathers would earn their family's wages. So adamant was the state that women should not become breadwinners that it refused to allow single,

pregnant women, as well as single women with children, to join the sugar beet migrations. Such policies enforced Eurocentric kinship norms and made it difficult for First Nations women to live independently (213-6).

Gendered policies that were intended to promote the well-being of Canadians, but that actually entrenched the economic marginalization of women and their dependents, were also present in New Brunswick. Kenny's study of the joint federal-provincial Northeast Plan (between 1964 and 1972), which was intended to modernize the lives of northeastern New Brunswickers – many of whom were of Acadian descent – indicates that the relocation, placement, and training initiatives described by Sangster had counterparts elsewhere. "Despite the presence of women" in the economy, the plan "was concerned . . . with creating modern industrial jobs for unemployed or underemployed men" (170). Rather than offering women training and placement programs, the "architects" of the plan taught women to make and sell handicrafts, keep house, and ease their children's and husbands' transition to urban life (170).

Initiatives surrounding the Atlantic Canadian fisheries, as Suzanne Morton shows in her chapter in *Making Up the State*, also limited women's economic opportunities. For much of the 20th century, Atlantic Canadian women were integral to the fisheries. In addition to performing unpaid reproductive labour, they processed the fish after it was brought ashore. Yet government programs affecting fishers and their families were structured around the male breadwinner ideal. From 1957 until the 1980s, women married to fishers could not claim unemployment insurance; instead, their earnings were "credited to their husbands' earnings" (152). State attempts to modernize the fisheries were also discriminatory. During the 1990s the Atlantic Groundfish Strategy (TAGS), designed to help restructure the economy after the cod collapse, operated on the assumption that men should train in such high-paid areas as aquaculture while women should train in "traditional low-paid women's work, such as hairdressing" (155).

The state in Canada, finally, has also acted as a powerful agent of moral regulation. As Sangster demonstrates, many postwar federal initiatives were premised on the belief that First Nations men and women should conform to prevailing notions of respectability. Placement officers involved in relocation schemes inspected houses to ensure that First Nations women were keeping clean and tidy homes as well as saving for modern kitchen appliances. Training and placement programs for First Nations women who had moved to urban areas were also infused with attempts to make such women conform to prevailing ideals of femininity: they were to smile more and to become more talkative. Officials were particularly concerned with First Nations women's morality. According to a 1959 report by Jean Lagasse for Manitoba's Department of Agriculture and Immigration, First Nations women were both naïve and interested in sexual relationships with white men. For this reason, argued Legasse, they required care and surveillance. Sangster notes that this image of the "available, promiscuous Indian woman was a staple of racist ideology" (228).

Examining citizenship definitions

Along with exploring how the state has enforced social hierarchies, some historians have inquired into how Canada's inhabitants have defined their relationships with the state. As Shirley Tillotson notes in her contribution to *Making Up the State*, the women's suffrage movement was suffused with debates on the rights and obligations

of citizenship. Drawing attention to a major aspect of these debates, namely taxation, Tillotson's article deepens understandings of how Atlantic Canadian women viewed such "relations of extraction" between 1910 and 1949 (93). Tillotson also demonstrates that while some suffragists from the region, including journalist Ella M. Murray of Halifax, believed that taxation was a fundamental obligation of citizenship, women who were economically marginalized viewed taxation as a burden.

Lara Campbell also examines citizenship. Inquiring into how individuals and interest groups imagined their responsibilities and entitlements during the Great Depression, her book reveals that Ontario's inhabitants drew upon prevailing social norms to articulate their relationship with the state. The Depression triggered a widespread "political and economic crisis" that "was experienced in personal relationships between family members"; in response, wives, mothers, husbands, and fathers were spurred to express their thoughts on the economic, moral, and political relationships that should exist among women, men, and governments (6). Gender was crucial to such discussions. When women appealed to the state for assistance, whether it was through letters to officials or through more direct forms of action such as protest marches and sit-ins, they drew upon their roles as mothers to justify their claims. As responsible caregivers and homemakers, they believed they were entitled to a decent living standard. Men, too, referred to familial responsibilities. They claimed, for instance, that as husbands and fathers they were entitled to jobs so that they could provide for their families. Men who had engaged in military service, and thus had performed manly obligations, considered themselves especially entitled. And ethnicity further framed citizenship arguments. As Campbell argues, people of Anglo-Celtic descent believed that their British heritage made them respectable members of Ontario's polity, and thus deserving citizens (150-88).

Challenging the state

A final theme that has engaged feminist historical writing on politics and government may be referred to as "challenging the state." At various moments during the 20th century, Canadians have called attention to inadequate public policies and practices. Indeed, the very decisions that the women studied by Sharon MacDonald, Risk, and Conrad made to advocate for female suffrage and seek election to government office were challenges to the state in that they criticized the discriminatory equation of masculinity with citizenship. Demands made by Ontario's residents upon the state for welfare provisions and jobs also challenged the state, for they called attention to the state's unwillingness to intervene in the economy. Efforts made by journalists, senators, civil servants, feminist groups, and members of provincial advisory councils on the status of women to spur state action on violence against women, pay inequity, maternity benefits, and childcare were further challenges.

In some instances, challenges to the state have been piecemeal and subtle. Sharon Myers's contribution to *Making Up the State* examines the case of a Prince Edward Island woman – Minnie McGee – who was sentenced to life in prison for murdering her eight children in 1912. Myers shows that miscommunications between government officials and health workers, together with lack of funding for the province's only institution for the insane (Falconwood), meant that McGee's imprisonment was treated haphazardly. After spending four months at the federal Dorchester Penitentiary in New Brunswick, McGee was transferred to Falconwood,

which declared her in good health in 1927 and released her. McGee obtained work in a nearby hospital, but after hospital personnel discovered she was a convicted murderer she was shipped to the federal prison for women in Kingston, Ontario. Eight weeks later she was pronounced insane and transferred back to Falconwood. There she lived the rest of her life, save for excursions lasting up to eight weeks to visit friends and family. Certainly McGee's experiences do not represent a progressive challenge to state policy, but they do indicate that state decisions – in this case, life imprisonment – have not always been fully carried out. Certain members of Falconwood's medical staff, together with supportive members of the surrounding community, believed that McGee was harmless; they may have also believed that allowing her to leave Falconwood at various intervals would facilitate her rehabilitation. Such sentiments contradicted state policy and reveal that, at certain times in Canada's past, the state has been, as Myers argues, "contested, and at times simply limited, by its internal fractures" (20).

Challenges to the state have also included an avoidance of certain laws and policies. Although relief fraud in Depression-era Ontario could result in a jail sentence, judges tended to be sympathetic toward men who committed fraud to provide for their families. Instead, as Lara Campbell notes, courts often handed down fines and "suspended sentences" (69). In her chapter in Guildford and Morton's volume, Sasha Mullally explores how people challenged the state from within government. Providing an analysis of public health nurse Phyllis Jane Lyttle's experiences in Baddeck, Nova Scotia, between 1938 and 1948, Mullally demonstrates that Lyttle performed work beyond the scope of her duties. Public health nursing in Nova Scotia was to encompass "health problems which affect the whole community," such as tuberculosis and immunization clinics (128); only physicians were to perform surgery or obstetrics. But out of necessity Lyttle disregarded these boundaries, and at times acted as both midwife and surgeon. In this way she responded to the needs of her community as well as expanded her training.

Quiet manipulation of the law has also occurred. According to Barry Cahill's contribution to *Making Up the State*, Nova Scotia amended its Barristers and Solicitors Act in 1917 to allow women to be called to the bar. It did so not because it viewed the ability of women to become lawyers as a fundamental right of citizenship, but because "there were women law students on track for call to the bar" (91). Indeed, the 1917 amendment was merely a rubber stamp of the Nova Scotia Barristers Society's decision made two years earlier to "file articles of clerkship for a woman" (80). Nova Scotia's decision to allow women to be called to the bar represents an instance in which women achieved particular rights not due to prolonged advocacy but due to a decision made by a professional association. This aspect of Nova Scotia's history does not represent a radical challenge to the state, but it does reveal some of the ways in which outside decisions and events shaped women's relationships to it.

If some challenges to the state were individualized and subdued, others were collectivist, sustained, and well publicized. As Linda Kealey shows in her chapter in *Making Up the State*, the New Brunswick Nurses Union (NBNU) called loudly on the provincial government to behave in ways that were more responsible and equitable. Their actions began in April 1991, when the Liberal government of Frank McKenna announced "wage freeze legislation [for] all public servants" (218). The NBNU was furious, for it had signed a new contract with the government only three weeks earlier.

To protest, members of the NBNU created advertisements stating that wage freezes represented broken promises as well as a decline in patient care. Seventy per cent of nurses also voted to strike. In response, the government “threatened fines and legal action.” In 1992 an arbitrator was brought in and negotiators for both sides eventually accepted a compromise: postponing wage increases until the end of the contract period. More than 60 per cent of NBNU members voted in favour of the settlement and a strike was averted (223). This conflict illustrates how female government employees often encountered major difficulties in achieving adequate wages and working conditions, and how they have had to launch campaigns to protest state labour policies while making explicit the link between their work and the protection of their communities. Such events remind us, as Kealey writes, “the state is not always the protector of those with fewer resources or even a defender of basic human rights, especially for women” (227).

Finally, some of the work under review represents challenges to governance because, by criticizing state policies and programs, historians have revealed the shortcomings of past and present initiatives. Several of the chapters in *Making Up the State* can be included in this category, and so too can Sangster’s *Transforming Labour*. In addition to Sangster’s chapter on placement and employment programs for First Nations people on the prairies, *Transforming Labour* contains a chapter on the late 1940s recruitment of approximately 100 women from Polish refugee camps by Liberal MP Ludger Dionne (who put them to work in his rayon spinning mill in rural Quebec). Paternalism, the belief that “refugee and immigrant women from Europe were most likely candidates for service, domestic, and factory jobs,” and lingering anti-Semitism shaped not only Dionne’s decision to import Polish refugee women for factory work, but also the federal cabinet’s support for this decision (58, 54). In another chapter, on grievance arbitration, Sangster analyzes the promises and pitfalls of this postwar state initiative. Organized labour initially embraced grievance arbitration because it represented state support for workers’ rights to pursue redress for unsatisfactory conditions and wages. By the late 1960s, however, it had proved to be a mixed blessing. Sexism on the part of union officials and arbitrators, together with “the growing legalization and bureaucratization of the grievance process,” worked against individual women worker’s goals of achieving satisfactory conditions, schedules, pay, and benefits (163).

Conclusion

The chapters in Guildford and Morton’s *Making Up the State*, together with Lara Campbell’s *Respectable Citizens* and Sangster’s *Transforming Labour*, represent articulations of established trends in Canadian women’s and gender history as well as new directions for the field. Risk, Sharon MacDonald, Conrad, Gail Campbell, and Guildford demonstrate the ongoing imperative within Canadian women’s and gender history to explore political achievements while works by Myers, Mullally, Tillotson, Cahill, and Campbell offer reminders of the limits of state authority. Analyses by Heidi MacDonald, Morton, Kenny, Perley-Dutcher and Dutcher, Kealey, Lara Campbell, and Sangster reveal the importance of documenting the ways in which the state reinforces social inequality. And works by Lara Campbell and Tillotson show the promise of a relatively new strain within Canadian women’s and gender history: the exploration of citizenship.

Of the authors explored herein, two – Sharon MacDonald and Risk – offer cautiously celebratory depictions of middle class liberal and conservative women. Most others, however, are more critical of women's involvement in politics, recognizing, as does Conrad, the challenge to the equation of politics with masculinity that such involvement represented while also noting that women's political activism did not necessarily foment long-lasting feminist reforms. Related to this difference between commemoration and investigation is a tension between advocating for increased government intervention and exploring how government actions have entrenched social hierarchies. Whereas Gail Campbell and Guildford emphasize the seemingly positive role that liberal feminist civil servants, politicians, lobby groups, and provincial advisory councils have played in achieving intervention into violence against women, pensions, maternity leaves, childcare, equal pay for equal work, and property law, others are more skeptical of the state's ability to engineer a society that is reflective of the feminist principles of equality, diversity, and freedom from discrimination. Historians who focus on the latter are not opposed to reform, but they do believe it is imperative to investigate the consequences of discriminatory programs and policies.

Since our current era is characterized by ongoing cuts to government programs that are supposed to alleviate inequality and suffering, it is crucial that feminist scholars remain attuned to both liberal feminist activism and the broader social implications of state policies and programs. Liberal feminism, certainly, is not a political panacea. With some exceptions, it tends to view women as an homogeneous social group, prioritize legal over economic reforms, be supportive of big business, and focus on individual fulfillment at the expense of such other goals as sustainability, creativity, and diversity. Yet as Guildford points out, women today "still face inequalities, whether we are looking at the wage and wealth gap, sexual assault, male violence against women in domestic settings, low social assistance and pension levels, or access to education and training" (245). For this reason, contemporary feminist historians must remain aware of efforts to alleviate these conditions.

Feminist historical writing, certainly, has many goals. Yet one of its overarching objectives is to raise awareness of social hierarchies so as to facilitate their dismantling. And it is by building knowledge of government's twofold role as both a mitigator and a supporter of hierarchies that feminist historiography can make especially valuable contributions. Demonstrating that the state in Canada has historically paid lip service to equality even while its functionaries worked to prolong oppression, feminist research on the history of the state can offer important reminders of government's fundamentally limited ability to foster positive change.

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