

## Tender Research: Field Notes from the Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre, New Denver, BC

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*Abstract:* The Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre (NIMC), located in new Denver, BC, is a small-scale community-initiated preservation project that materialized from the efforts of 20 previously interned Japanese Canadian residents. The site preserves architectural remnants from several original internment shacks established in this area during World War II. This paper examines the presence of gardens, common at heritage sites such as this one, and raises the question of how gardens, as *living things*, embody memory. In so doing it reflects on the research approach appropriate to such a vexed site of collective trauma, through the notion of tender research. This article features online (<http://www.cjc-online.ca>) photographs of the Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre.

*Résumé :* Le Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre (NIMC), situé au Nouveau Denver en Colombie Britannique, est un projet communautaire de conservation à petite échelle qui est le fruit de gestes posés par vingt canadiens de souche japonaise qui ont la distinction d'avoir été internés. Le site en question conserve des détails architecturaux tirés de plusieurs cabanes d'internement situées dans cette région durant la Deuxième Guerre mondiale. Cette étude fait le point sur l'existence commune de jardins se retrouvant sur de tels sites patrimoniaux, et pose la question à savoir de quelle façon ceux-ci, en tant qu'entités vivantes, incarnent la mémoire. Le but de cet exercice est de remettre en question, au moyen du concept de recherche douce, la perspective de recherche appropriée d'une enquête sur un tel site de traumatisme collectif. Cet article inclut des photos du Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre disponibles sur le site web de la revue : <http://www.cjc-online.ca>.

*Keywords:* Heritage; Culture; Japanese Canadians; Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre

Places as depicted on maps are places caught in a moment; they are slices through time . . . The description, definition and identification of a place is thus always inevitably an intervention not only into geography but also, at least implicitly, into the (re)telling of the historical constitution of the present. (Massey, 1995, p. 188)

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**Canadian Journal of Communication, Vol 31 (2006) 215-225**

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A vexed history mar(k)s the site of a small garden plot I am tending.

In 1942, in the midst of World War II, Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King invoked the emergency *War Measures Act* to define Japanese Canadians as “enemy aliens” and a national security risk. This resulted in the incarceration of 22,000 Japanese Canadian civilians from the “protective zone,” an area that extended along the Pacific Coast and 100 miles inland. Using “evacuation” as a misnomer for imprisonment and the violation of human rights, the British Columbia Security Commission sought locations to which to “evacuate” the Japanese Canadian community from the coast. Impoverished towns in the Interior of British Columbia, many of which were ghost towns following the collapse of once-lively mining economies in the early part of the twentieth century, were approached by the Canadian government, offered financial incentives (including the prospect of cheap labour), and became “host” to the “evacuees.” Ken Adachi describes the selection and preparation of the various internment camps in greater detail, including some of the virulent anti-Japanese racism that resulted from exploration of potential campsites:

The six camps were chosen by the Security Commission for their isolation and because the sparse local white population and their dignitaries—unlike other areas in the province and in Canada—were generally delighted that the influx of evacuees would revitalize their depressed economy . . . The abandoned ghost towns, then, were almost ideal from the standpoint of their isolation and relative lack of racist opposition. (Adachi, 1991, pp. 254–255)

The Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre (NIMC) is one marker of this vexed history. It is a small-scale community-initiated preservation project that materialized from the efforts of 20 previously interned Japanese Canadian residents. It preserves architectural remnants from several original internment shacks in New Denver, BC, one of the Japanese Canadian internment camps that were established in this area during World War II. The site is one of initial trauma for the Japanese Canadian community. Gardens surround this ensemble of mnemonic markers of Japanese Canadian and, more generally, Canadian histories. The presence of gardens is common at heritage sites such as this one, and it raises the question of how gardens, as *living things*, function to embody memory in specific ways.

My notion of “tender research” considers gardening as embodying tending, tender gestures that have a temporal and affective quality, as well as being subject to other forces; I extend this embodiment of stillness and receptiveness to scholarly research activities and the relations between researcher and research subject. In this, I draw upon Scott Toguri McFarlane’s reflections on the artists’ gardens of Ron Benner as “scenes of the tender.” As McFarlane writes: “They are scenes produced by the artist/gardener who tends the plot. But they are also the products of so many other tender forces—including the work of insects, fungi, mildew and, of course, the weather. Gardens are thus not so much invented as always erupting from the difference between the plots of gardeners and the traces of other forces at work in their midst” (McFarlane, 2002, n.p.). In another scene redolent of the

NIMC gardens, he describes one of Benner's photographs of Robben Island, the site of Nelson Mandela's imprisonment, "where agave, marvel of Peru and bougainvillea are spotted growing in the courtyard. As it climbs the walls, the bougainvillea signals the potency of other forces to erupt and transform the architectures that would imprison them" (McFarlane, 2002, n.p.).

My project seeks to engage the memorial's garden as a living site, and speculatively as a *living archive*, to explore the particulars of how memory is generated in relation to the temporality of living landscapes. These field notes initiate an exploration into how gardens figure in the vast vernacular of mnemonic landscapes such as graveyards, war and other memorials, heritage centres, and museums. As Potteiger and Purinton suggest, ". . . instead of the landscape functioning as a locus of memory, it is also a site of 'cultural amnesia.' The landscape is replete with 'dead metaphors'—sites where original conjunction of meaning is taken-for-natural" (Potteiger & Purinton, 2002, p. 142).

I must confess I was unprepared for the strong effect that the landscape would have on my imagination of the history of this place as I drove into the BC Interior this past summer with my travelling partner, Larissa Lai. Deer, elk, mountain goats, and stories of bears and cougars accompanied us from the east: from Calgary via the lower Kootenays and up through Nelson (whose main Baker Street is home to the *Diamond Grill*, Fred Wah's [1996] brilliant bio-text and mnemonic excavation of his father's Chinese diner). Ten camps occupied the Slocan Valley during World War II, and their names would be resonant for many familiar with Japanese Canadian history: Rosebery, Lemon Creek—pretty-sounding names, even. This pleasantness resonates so coherently with the Department of Defence's unbelievable suggestion in the propaganda film *Of Japanese Descent* (1945) that because of their remarkable scenic locations and breathtaking vistas, the internment camps were like extended summer vacations, a claim made ludicrous when one examines the un-insulated conditions of the shacks that were inhabited in below-zero temperatures and heavy winter snows. *A Path of Leaves*, a teaching guide produced by the Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre, details how the town of Sandon had 27 inhabitants when 933 Japanese Canadian women, children, and elders were interned, 100 of whom would die during the first winter because of inferior living conditions combined with record-low winter temperatures. The ghost towns, their histories and integration into contemporary folklore and tourist venues in the region, lend a spookiness to the isolated geography, a temporal denseness where remote voices and sounds from the past seem proximate, almost within earshot.

We drive from the east and the Kootenays, and I now understand the dramatic physical impact of the landscape as one swerves and dips through the valleys and mountains that eventually lead into the small town of 571 inhabitants, New Denver. The Silvery Slocan Loop can be driven from Nelson in four hours, we are told, and it is favoured by recreational motorcyclists who enjoy its winds and dips. Another friend tells me of his motion sickness in the back of a minivan making its way along Highway 6 North. I cannot help but wonder if this was not a nausea

emerging from some deeper connection with and revulsion to the histories of this remote topography, where his immediate family were separated and scattered among several camps in this remote and isolated geography between 1942 and 1945.

This community, idyllically set on the northeastern shore of Slocan Lake, appears to be a sleepy mountain town. But don't be deceived. New Denver is a busy center for hikers, anglers, boaters, skiers, snowmobilers. Back in the 1890's [it] was to be called El Dorado, but did not ever produce gold. It did however have silver, lead and zinc. (British Columbia Adventure Network, 2006, <http://www.bc.adventure.com>)

My initial focus in visiting the NIMC was to examine the Peace Garden and vegetable gardens. Upon our arrival in New Denver and the NIMC, Larissa and I were greeted with the news that one of the town's elders, Mr. Tad Mori, had passed away quite suddenly that very morning. Mr. Mori was one of nine or so living elders who were adults when they were forcibly removed to the New Denver internment site in 1942 (he was then 29 years old). He was also a member of the Kyowakai Society, the group responsible for initiating and maintaining the NIMC. All those affiliated with the NIMC and its immediate communities exchanged news of his unexpected passing with some shock. For Larissa and me, Mr. Mori's passing would be an immediate, affective insight into the tight community at New Denver and the significant effort of the Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre to palpably hold the sixty-or-more-year history in the tangible landscape and psychic topography of the Slocan Valley and Kootenays in the BC Interior. In light of his unexpected death, therefore, it seems inevitable that someone will affirm the importance of interviewing the last elders still living in New Denver. The seemingly self-evident need for oral histories implicitly guides several oral history projects in Vancouver and Toronto, as well as much of the major research undertaken by Kirsten Emiko McAllister in her doctoral thesis, entitled *Remembering Political Violence: The Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre*, (1999). This premise (or promise?) holds that the history of the internment in some way belongs first, and most vitally, to those still living on the actual site of history's occurrence, and that this relation must, in the first instance, and at all costs, be respected. Working with my own commitment to the Japanese Canadian community and its histories, I want to explore the particularities of these gardens, as well as prod and tend to the implications of this nexus of community, responsibility, and memory, in order to examine what is at stake in the imperatives that drive community-motivated research. How do political desires and ethical considerations impact broader questions of historical memory and epistemology? What questions or issues arise, and remain unspoken, from this triangulated pact?

Faced with Mr. Mori's death, those present, including Larissa and me, encounter the precarious state of oral histories, as if these stories and histories sit in uncertain limbo on the verge of disappearance, waiting to be told and revealed. Indeed, they are carried by those who can tell them, should they be given the occasion. It seems somehow counterintuitive not to value those personal stories most

highly. Yet I have arrived as a researcher with an altogether different project in mind, one that will have me tending to the landscape, its gardens, and its small building structures as carriers of memory in themselves. With Mr. Mori's death, however, I am faced with the anxiety that my own project is defying a certain logic, that this moment is not merely co-incidental, and that although I have been brought here under the guise of an interest in the NIMC gardens, the inherent nature of the site and its own epistemological demands are making themselves known and revealing themselves in this unsettling convergence of circumstances. I have lost my bearings as a researcher. With a still camera, mini DAT recorder, and video camcorder in hand, I do not dare use these to document anything. The intrusive and predatory nature of documentation, despite its increasing ease with newer, faster, smaller, and more discreet technologies, seems especially acute. The only documentation of the site that I take home on our first day is that which Larissa captured with her new Canon PowerShot. My only use of the video recorder is when I turn it on myself to video-journal beside the ice-cold Slocan Lake, substituting for note-taking, which is altogether too slow.

Isn't this what death would do?

Visitors pass through the site, each with their own reasons for being there. The site's programmer, and our guide for the day, video artist Ruby Truly, mentions the voluminous stories she has heard and "holds": of those who were born at this site, of others who had somehow averted internment by quickly re-locating to Toronto before the incarceration of civilians began in the summer of 1942. There are also those non-Japanese Canadians who had witnessed their neighbours "evacuated" from their homes, awakening one morning within the "protective zone" along the West Coast, in towns such as Steveston or Port Moody, to discover intact abandoned Japanese Canadian homes in their neighbourhoods. Some visitors have pilgrimaged to this site to startlingly encounter their own repressed stories, hearing them for the very first time as words unwittingly spill from their mouths. Perhaps such journeys to the NIMC hold the promise of clues to familial histories, secrets or revelations on the "evacuees" and their whereabouts following their disappearances.

Even the language and writing that would offer testimony to the internment and on behalf of those who have passed away has its own layers, clandestine folds, and disclosures—a haunting textuality that struggles to properly name the interned: "evacuees," "prisoners," "internees," "Japanese," "Japanese Canadians," "enemy aliens," "Japs." The lexicon employed to describe the internment continues to be the subject of repeated qualification, most comprehensively summarized by Roy Miki, when he describes how "evacuation" was used as an euphemism:

For the government, constructing euphemisms was an effective mechanism to whitewash its actions. Euphemisms helped to translate the inherent racism of its policies for Japanese Canadians into the language of bureaucratic efficiency. This way of neutralizing the abuse of power generated a complex of terms that rendered "normal"—in the eyes of the Canadian public—its brutal implications. (Miki, 2004, p. 51)

He describes how “evacuation” has come to identify all phases of this experience, more explicitly naming “dispossession, deportation, dispersal and assimilation” (p. 50); he also details how “evacuation” has consequently been normalized as a descriptor and used uncritically, even by Japanese Canadians themselves (in Ken Adachi’s *The Enemy That Never Was*, 1991, for instance). Across several essays experimental in literary form, Miki has captured the linguistic violence of these namings (Miki, 1997) and the discursive multiplicity with which the histories are maintained (Miki, 1998).

The manifold points of access to the NIMC are suggestive of how the site is saturated and embedded with meaning and power for those who encounter it. While some visitors are pilgrims, others may just happen on to the centre, following a gas fill-up at the Petrocan a few blocks away or a stroll on the lake’s edge.

The Memorial Centre sits on an area the size of one town block and is composed of three brown, wood internment shacks, one of which is the reception area, two others of which have been re-fashioned to represent the original time period of internment inhabitation. There is one original three-stall outhouse and one prop version constructed for Anne Wheeler’s film, *The War Between Us* (1995), which was shot on location in New Denver. There are two small buildings: one holds the permanent exhibition, the original communal Japanese bath (*ofuro*), and a *but-sudan*, a Buddhist altar used both historically and currently for spiritual ceremonies; the other is Kyowakai Hall, the community social space and Kyowakai Society’s meeting room, and the location where archives are stored. The Centre houses various objects such as clothing, furniture, luggage, and other artifacts (some of the 150 pounds of possessions adults were restricted to bringing into the camps; children were permitted 75 pounds). As well, there are paper archives made up of photographs, letters, newspapers, and numerous documents, some of which are displayed in a permanent exhibition that chronologically narrativizes the internment and redress movement. The Centre’s complex undertaking of self-archiving may be in part symptomatic of the legacy of dispossession by the government during the mass expulsion, one enabled by racialization wherein, paradoxically, “the ‘Japanese Canadian’ subject was rendered invisible—i.e., visible only in unilateral terms as a figure ‘of’ administrative mechanisms and discursive fixations” (Miki, 1998, p. 190), a construction that facilitated the confiscation and liquidation of Japanese Canadian private property that would pay for the internment.

I am standing in front of the vegetable patch that holds a dozen or so plants that bear no vegetables yet, as it is July and still early in the growing season; from the leaves, I can detect squash and *fuki*.<sup>1</sup> Behind me is a dry rock garden composed of river stones set into the earth and fashioned as a narrow flowing river. Flanking its banks are garden plants requiring little water, and two bridges cross the stone river. There are evergreen bushes, succulent plants, hostas, and a petite Japanese red maple, as well as several stone benches for sitting and a *yukimi-gata* stone lantern (so named for the manner in which they delicately hold snow, *yuki*, on their roofs). The gardens are not visible in their entirety, as they are constructed around the shacks and buildings as seen in the photograph. Instead, one moves through

the designed landscape as an ambulatory kinaesthetic experience along curved paths and small bridges. The Peace Garden liberally styled in a *Karesansui* Japanese dry rock garden aesthetic by Japanese Canadian landscape designer Roy Tomomichi Sumi, himself an internee at Rosebery, snakes widely around the buildings, and the very small vegetable patch sits at the back of the site. The site is delineated by a fence and Peace Arch, in a West-Coast-meets-Japanese aesthetic of vertical natural wood planks and criss-crossed logs. What is of interest in these gardens is not their careful tending, nor their design, stylistic, or horticultural elements (that which would be the purview of garden history and garden studies [Hunt, 2000]), but rather their location within this former internment camp and the histories to which they bear witness.



Gardens in fact played multiple roles within the internment camps—a fact toward which I will only point here. They would, for instance, be used as sustenance gardens to grow fresh vegetables (including those used in Japanese cuisine) and to supplement the impoverished food rations provided by the government. In the context of the Japanese American internment, which both mirrors and differs from its Canadian counterpart, the development of sustenance gardens as a form of “food protest” in the camps is described by Jane Dusselier:

By 1943, over 10,000 acres of idle land in and around the perimeter of the camps produced daikon, strawberries, corn, watermelon, spinach and nappa cabbage. Many internees took advantage of land immediately surrounding living quarters by planting and harvesting vegetables and fruits. Even though

the energy and care devoted to these crops far outstripped the results, small plots on the side and in front of barracks were common features of camp landscape. (Dusselier, 2002, p. 155)

In Burritt's propaganda film, there are numerous shots of the "beautification" of the camps with flower gardens and the growing of vegetables in sustenance gardens, notably greens, tomatoes, and squash (Burritt, 1945). In Linda Ohama's *Obachan's Garden* (2001), the flower garden plays a central role of refuge; in a poignant scene anticipating the expulsion, the protagonist, Asayo Murukami, gives her friend Yasu some seeds from her garden, to plant "wherever we go."

McAllister compellingly describes how the NIMC Peace Garden and the surrounding landscape of the Kootenays seem to offer "... a soothing space for meditation on past deeds that must not be forgotten," the consequence being, however, that "the landscape is invested with a tragic beauty as opposed to recounting historical events" (McAllister, 1999, p. 276). These comments infer different representational registers of cultural meaning in gardens and landscape as opposed to how history is understood to be represented through explicit expressive modes and narratives. Historiography, in its active attention to the process of *writing* history, suggests that any recounting of historical events is not self-evident, but that it is also subject to exigencies, needs, and wants. Certain forms of explanation, chronology, interpretation, and display offer recognizable triggers for emotion and contemplation, of which a garden at a heritage site can constitute one vernacular. Tender research both recognizes and empathizes with these desires, while bringing attention to the idioms and limits of their representation.

A counterpoint to taking care of or tending to landscape is its neglect, and the resulting growth of wild, untended zones. One example of such an unplanned urban green space is the Topography of Terror in the centre of Berlin, where the idioms and desires for a particular recounting of horrific historical events were left undecided for almost 50 years. The control centres of German National Socialist terror organizations, the Gestapo and the SS, and the Main Office for Reich Security were concentrated here from 1933 to 1945, a time period that partially overlaps with the Japanese Canadian internment during World War II. When I visited in 2002, the site was a peculiar but substantive urban green space, with a minor, temporary photo exhibition in one area, essentially a sprawling fenced-in 15-acre green space within the centre of the city. Vegetation, trees, plants, and flowers (weeds?) covered former subterranean prison cells and interrogation rooms, the remnants of repeated Allied bombings and later a complete razing of the site in the 1950s. A bulldozer sat idly on the site. Untended, this was neither a proper archaeological site nor a park or memorial. The site's undecidedness—and as a result, its uncontrolled wildness—counterpoints the cultivated "naturalness" that meditative gardens offer in their calculated peacefulness. This undecided urban wild zone was a liminal site where trees and grasses and flowers were freely growing and marking time on their own, while the Topography of Terror Foundation floundered and debated the site's appropriate outcome.<sup>2</sup> In landscape architecture's textual metaphors, this would be an "open landscape narrative"

(Potteiger & Purinton, 2002, p. 143), though one not deliberately, just incidentally, so. The strangeness of this openness was the tension created by the lack of definitive narrative: tenuous, rather than tended-to, memory, as represented by the living landscape that seemed to defy convention and consensus about the atrocities of the Nazi regime. Is this a living archive? An archive of Nazi occupation? Or do the growing plants serve as a living archive of Berlin's neglect?

The implication is that remembrance must be actively cultivated to resist wild overgrowth. Yet is there rogue or wild memory? Memory bending to suit social convention? In the final footnote to Chris Keil's paper "Sightseeing in the Mansions of the Dead," he declares: "I have a recording, made at Birkenau on 5 July 2003, of a skylark, singing his head off above the ruins of the crematoria" (Keil, 2004, p. 492). These bird recordings were made at the site of the Nazi concentration camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and function to defy visitors' beliefs that birds no longer sing at this place where over one million prisoners were murdered during World War II. Based on his field recordings of birds singing at this site of atrocities, Keil concludes, "They do of course, but the imaginative demand for silence and absence overrides the evidence of the senses" (Keil, 2004, p. 492). Even birds and nature would bend to the cultural idioms of remembrance.

How does ambling across these physical terrains, simultaneously landscaped and "natural," have its particular qualities that jostle memory in ways that other idioms for recollection do not? Paul Connerton contrasts inscriptive practices with incorporative practices in the context of memory-making. Inscriptive practices are constituted through information storage and retrieval devices—print, photographs, cinema, sound media, and computers. That such technologies ostensibly capture and imitate reality is interesting in problematizing the cognitive dimensions of memory and their relation to tangible images and sounds. Incorporative practices are those involving body postures, gestures, facial expressions, body movement, and table manners, and therefore, modes of storytelling, dances, ceremony, and other ritual forms. Paul Stoller refers to the latter practices as "embodiment" (Stoller, 1995, p. 30). Both inscriptive and incorporative memories are part of what Connerton refers to as "habit-memory," distinguishable from personal and cognitive memory, which have been more extensively studied (Connerton, 1989). To translate this to the NIMC, one might observe the specific memory function of material objects (Hallwam & Hockey, 2001), of paper documents and inscriptive technologies (photography, film, audio, computers), and then contrast these with a sense of incorporative or embodied memories, which brings into play performative practices such as oral histories and storytelling, rituals, ambling. And gardening.

Pilgrimaging to the NIMC, driving into the remote landscape, and walking this site produce an explicit idiom of recollection of these civil-rights violations enabled by the invocation of the *War Measures Act*. The movement toward this site highlights the delineation of the Centre, or locus: its marked-out, fenced-in boundaries. Walking through New Denver to this place also shows how memory is held not only within the NIMC's fenced interiors with its preservation of shacks,

archives, and particular ethnographic tellings reinforced through material objects and images. But memory is held, also, immediately *outside* the Centre, where other “shacks” were renovated into contemporary homes following the Second Uprooting after the end of World War II, when the internment camps were closed and internees were required to either disperse east of the Rockies or “repatriate” to Japan (problematic and traumatic for many Japanese Canadians who were Canadian-born and had never held Japanese citizenship). As all seized property had been liquidated by the Custodian of Enemy Property, no “home” remained to return to after incarceration. New Denver’s Orchard camp and sanitarium were retained to house Japanese Canadians who were unable to re-locate because of their fragile health, so they remained under the authority of the BC Security Commission until 1957. In 1957, “as a result of initiatives from the Japanese Canadian community, the BC government deeded the shacks and property to those Japanese Canadians still residing in the Orchard” (Kyowakai Society, 1999, p. 39).

Doreen Massey writes of a radical history of place, which might “not try to seal a place up into one neat and tidy ‘envelope of space-time’ but which recognised that what has come together, in this place, now, is a conjunction of many histories and many spaces” (Massey, 1995, p. 191). Rather than staking the site itself, or staking out its gardens, one might, as Massey suggests, fathom its temporal crossings as well: hear its whispers. Tender research recognizes the precariousness of the Centre’s spatial and temporal boundaries, that which is so aptly captured in the very senses of a ghost town: located in tangible space, alluding temporally to the afterlife, and in this, multiple—psychic? telepathic?—realms of consciousness. Perhaps this is the mnemonic liminality that gardens enable. The memorial garden, whether in the buzzing of its tender plots or the confoundedness created by its silent neglect, is worth attending to in its promises of a future.

### Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges seed support for this research from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council through the research group *The Sense Lives of Things*, as well as Concordia University’s General Research Fund and Hexagram.

### Notes

1. *Fuki* is also known as Japanese butterbur, an extremely hardy, rhizomatic perennial vegetable with large fan-like leaves and flexible stalks. It is usually braised.
2. The ambivalent relation of the City of Berlin to this site is implicit in the Topography of Terror Foundation’s self-description, also expressed elsewhere on their website. “The Topography of Terror Foundation, which grew out of a temporary exhibition project, has had a long and eventful history. Its establishment was the result of an extended and controversial exchange of ideas, in which the unwavering support of social groups and individuals played an important role and put an end to the many years of repression and forgetting” (Topography of Terror Foundation, n.d.). See also Rürup, 1989, especially *Return of a Repressed Past* (pp. 208–223).

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