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Reflections on the heuristic power of Contemplative Art in teaching and research

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Abstract

Keywords

Contemplative and creative practices; Arts-based research; Heuristics; Learning feelings; Contemplative learning; Learning and transformation

In this article I discuss the heuristic power of combining contemplative and creative practices using different stages of my research into learning through contemplation. This began with a realisation I had, in my first meditation retreat, about the similarities between creative and contemplative consciousness. It initiated twenty-three years of applied and theoretical research that started with contemplative art workshops I ran in rehabilitation centres. In PhD research that followed I tested a hypothesis of learning through contemplation founded on the concept of an elemental ground of learning that contained an integrating force I termed the feeling nexus. In later research examining the egress of meaning where practitioners return from contemplation, I discovered that art-making can act as a bridge between pre-conceptual knowing and cognitive assimilation of that knowledge. Recently I created the Meditative Process Art (MPA) method that engages the heuristic power of combining creative and contemplative practices.

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Reflecting on the many years I have combined art and contemplation in my art, community development, and research practices, I can trace back to a moment that initiated my investigation of the heuristic power of integrating the creative and contemplative. In that moment, on the second day of my first meditation retreat, I was surprised to feel something I already knew. I realised it was the same feeling I'd had when making art, of being deep "in" my painting. This sensation, that was somehow a location inside contemplative consciousness, felt like a "place" outside of time and space. While the Wisdom Traditions have explored this place/state for centuries, a more contemporary and possibly more familiar depiction, is Mikel Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of "Flow." Csikszentmihalyi, who developed his flow theory after observing artists at work, suggests that flow is characterised by the merging of activity and awareness, intense focused concentration, a loss of self-consciousness, the distortion of time, and autotelic experience.

Investigating the heuristic power of combining creative and contemplative practices

Learning about "flow" and realising the commonality of creative and contemplative consciousness initiated a long applied and theoretical exploration of the heuristic power of contemplative art. My investigation started in community art programs that I designed and facilitated for individuals in drug and alcohol rehabilitation centres. Having taught more technique focused art classes it seemed, when I compared the outputs of participants in both programs, that adding contemplative practice to art making had a heuristic power. Intuitively, I felt this resulted from the way contemplation enabled entry to participants' preconceptual consciousness. A state/place where they could access the idiosyncratic symbol language they used in their artworks. It seemed that the art making visually fixed realizations that arose from contemplative engagement with this "language." When this happened, participants could then dialogue with the resulting art works, which cemented insights gained in contemplation. However, it wasn't until I conducted academic research that I found theoretical support for my intuitive sense of this process. Below are two art works describing bodily awareness by individuals in a workshop I ran in a dual diagnosis rehabilitation centre in Auckland, New Zealand:

Photograph 1. Dual Diagnosis Program, New Zealand



Photograph 2. Dual Diagnosis Program, New Zealand

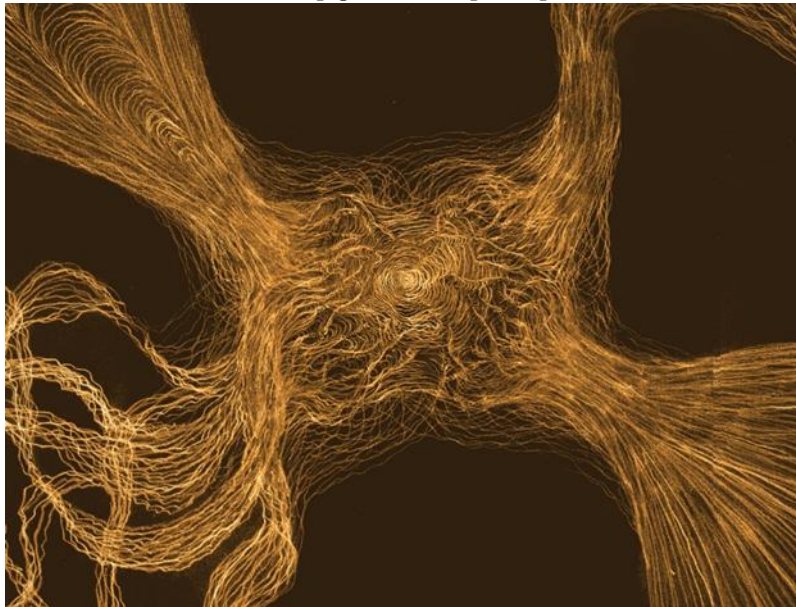
Learning Feelings: Examining the workings of the contemplative state of consciousness

In my PhD dissertation, *Learning Feelings: Foundations of Contemplative Education*, I spent an extended period investigating the workings of the contemplative state of consciousness. In this applied philosophical study of the contemplative state of consciousness and learning, I drew on phenomenology and classical yoga philosophy to explicate the data I gathered from 86 students and academics at four North American universities. It is beyond the scope of this article to detail all of the theoretical work I employed but some of the major influences were the following. First, Transpersonalism, including Braud and Anderson's (1998) collective and individual work on intuition, integral inquiry, and transpersonal research methods, and Ferrer's (2000, 2002, 2005) writing on Transpersonalism. Second, Hindu Philosophy, including Bannerjee's (1982) work on Systems Philosophy and Sāmkhya-Yoga; Chapple's (1998, 2000, 2008) scholarship on Hinduism; De Michelis's (2005) history of modern yoga, Eliade's (1963, 1970) seminal work on yoga, and Feuerstein's (1989(a) (b), 1989, 1990, 1996, 2008) comprehensive Yoga research. Third, Embodiment, including Leder's (1990) "The absent body" and Welton's "Soft, smooth hands: Husserl's phenomenology of the lived body." Fourth, Phenomenology, including Fasching's (2008) "Consciousness, self-consciousness, and meditation"; Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment and perception (1945/1962, 1964, 1968), Varela's (1996) Neurophenomenology, Varela and Shear's (1999(a)) first-person

methodologies and their (1999(b)) “View from within: First-person approaches to consciousness”, Kleinberg-Levin’s (1985, 1999) work on phenomenology and embodiment, Husserl’s (1977) “Cartesian meditations: An introduction to phenomenology”, and Behnke’s engagement with Husserl’s work on affectivity. Fifth and finally, Contemplative Philosophy and Education, including Hart’s (2000, 2004, 2008) work on Contemplative Education and Neurophenomenology, and Bai’s extensive individual and co-authored contemplative philosophy and education scholarship (2001, 2014, 2015; 2020).

Drawing on this literature to understand participants’ contemplative experience revealed mechanisms of learning inherent in contemplative experience, starting with the identification of a preconceptual ground of learning and an integrating force at work in it. I termed their experience of this internal merging of different modes of human experience contemplative synaesthesia. Participants’ frequent descriptions of feeling this “synaesthesia” led to my hypothesis that they were engaging an elemental gestalt force. I titled this force the feeling nexus (illustrated below), and believe that it grounds learning through contemplation.

Photograph 3. Learning Feelings



Additionally, participants described a heuristic process I termed learning feelings that happens in a series of stages, starting with pre-conceptual, pre-verbal meaning making framed by somatic experience. This was followed by an intermediary stage of learning feelings where participants moved between pre-conceptual and somatic, and somatic and cognitive meaning making. Lastly, the cognitive translation of their felt meanings could initiate participants’ realisations or “learning” and changes they made in their lives. In these three stages, participants developed idiosyncratic feeling languages and maps to navigate and describe their interior landscape. My exploration of these feeling languages and maps concluded my PhD study. While the ontological work I conducted in my PhD provided a schema of learning through contemplation, it wasn’t until I conducted preliminary experiments for an article on contemplative mathematics that I could explore the pedagogical significance of contemplative art.

Art bridges preconceptual and cognitive knowing

In the article “Cultivating the Ineffable: The role of Contemplative Practice in Enactivist Learning,” co-authored with Professor Dor Abrahamson (2016), I examined the egress of meaning at the point practitioners return from contemplation. This transitional space was something I’d not had time to focus on, or create practices to engage, in my PhD research. As I worked to understand what was happening in that heuristic tidal zone of meaning making, I once again encountered the challenge of the proposed ineffability of preconceptual experience. It is described by Munz (1993), who claims that since the age of Romanticism “subjective and individual experience is ineffable . . . these subjective states are essentially, not accidentally, inchoate and are not even articulable by the person who has them” (p. 41). I knew this was not correct because so many of my PhD participants had described, if somewhat awkwardly, their subjective contemplative experience.

Then it struck me that the resolution to these opposing views was provided by Giorgi (2015) who, when clarifying how to legitimise spiritual experience, spoke of “category mistakes.” He explained that “to judge a religious phenomenon by scientific criteria is like a category mistake, and the opposite is equally true. We need religious criteria for religious phenomena and scientific criteria for scientific phenomena” (p. 8). While not necessarily researching religious phenomenon, Munz and others who deem pre-conceptual experience ineffable appear to be applying cognitivist criteria to states of consciousness that are pre-verbal. Expecting a direct discursive response from a pre-verbal realm is a category mistake. It also seemed problematic to expect practitioners to immediately shift between states of consciousness. I felt there needed to be a space or bridge between the pre-conceptual and cognitive, and that it could be provided by art-making. To test this, I combined art and contemplation in two short experiments that comprised the empirical research for the “Cultivating the ineffable: The role of contemplative practice in enactivist learning” article.

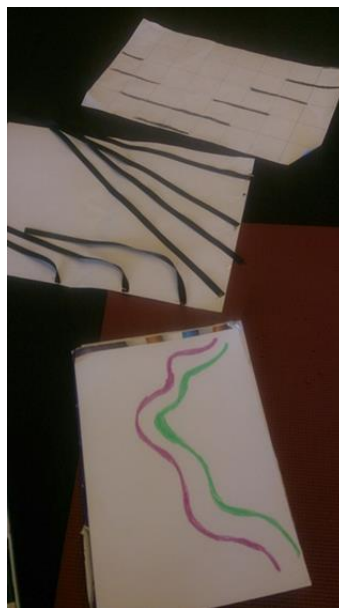
Before detailing that contemplative arts-based research, it is important to know that while mathematics education theorists have begun to engage ideas concerning the potential role of somatic–contemplative contributions to supporting enhanced pedagogical practice, much of their focus is on the remedial qualities of contemplative practice. For example, Brunyé et al. (2013) include contemplative practice in mathematics pedagogy for students suffering high math anxiety; Rodd (2006) examines the effect of “meditational mathematics” on special-needs students’ affect, and Wolcott (2013) investigates “intentional structured reflection” for mathematics researchers. For our exploration of the “epistemic bottleneck” from felt to cognitive knowing I created two contemplative art experiments. In the first I sought to develop points of intersection between contemplative practice and the embodied interaction (EI) exercises for mathematics developed by Abrahamson & Trninic (2011).

In the first experiment I worked with Angela, a past student from my Meditation Lab program at UNSW, Sydney. I introduced her to a range of contemplative slow-stretching or yoga-like exercises designed to induce relaxation and deep focus in the body. These somatic contemplative exercises provided entry to a contemplative space that Angela remained in for her practice of four mathematically focused contemplative art exercises. Two exercises related to geometric figures and two to proportion. In the proportion exercises Angela and I sat facing each other and I asked her to copy my movements. I placed my hands level in front of me and then, gradually raised both hands while moving them apart and together (proportionally) to create an expanding gap, and contracting gap, which Angela emulated. This can be seen in the photograph below.

Photograph 4. proportion exercise and experiment with Angela

Following this part of the exercise, Angela drew on a page that had a grid on it and interacted with a sheet that had a soft grid made of black ribbons attached to the sheet.

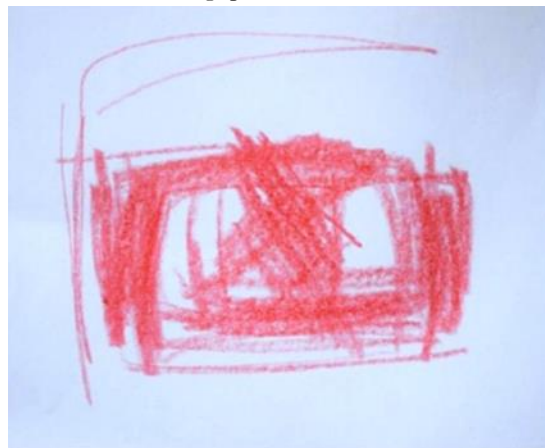
In brief, the preliminary somatic contemplative movements supported Angela's entry into a light contemplative state. Once in this state, the contemplative mathematically focused exercises provided the liminal space for Angela to engage pre-conceptually with a range of possibilities from which a feeling could arise. As she exited the pre-conceptual state, the drawing and soft grid were provided as a bridge between the pre-conceptual and cognitive with which she could solidify feelings into symbols before using words. Lastly, Angela discussed her experience with me. Through this discussion and after observing her drawing and manipulation of the soft grid, we were interested to find that despite there being no mention of proportion, her pre-conceptual feelings had hardened into mathematically oriented symbols (This can be seen in the photograph of her three works below.) In the debriefing at the end of the practice, Angela emphasized her feeling of the size of the gap between her hands changing (Morgan & Abrahamson, 2016).

*Photograph 5. proportion exercise soft lines*

In the second experiment I started by taking Ruth, another student from the Meditation Lab, through the Yoga Nidra practice. This is a somatic contemplative exercise in which the participant focuses on different parts of their body, as the facilitator names those body parts in a particular sequence. This helped Ruth relax and move into a somatically focused contemplative state from she was led through a practice based on an academic problem that she had been struggling with. Ruth, an undergraduate accounting student, had been grappling with this problem: $CAPM = r(f) \times [r(m) - r(f)]$; $WACC = [w(d) \times r \times (1 - T)] + [w(E) \times r(E)]$. Rather than engaging the problem cognitively, she explored it contemplatively through image and sensation. For example, she was guided to walk around the problem experiencing its colour and size. She was also given undirected time in her interior landscape and before describing what she experienced, Ruth had time to draw what she had felt/seen. She then explained what had happened using her drawing to anchor her experience. Ruth spoke of moving through two stages. First, she saw the equation as a very solid red box with a cross marked on its lid. Then as the contemplative practice continued, a large wave broke over the box and shattered it into pieces. While Ruth didn't "solve" the problem, she began the process as she felt the wave breaking the red box into pieces.

She realized for the first time that she could break the equations into pieces to help her solve the whole problem. This experiment, and the earlier experiment, provided the opportunity to test and confirm my hypothesis that art practice can bridge the pre-conceptual and cognitive, while translating between the two.

Photograph 6. Ruth's red box



Touching on theories of learning in contemplation

To gain further theoretical insight into the heuristic power of contemplative art practice, we looked to Gendlin's "focusing" theory (2010) and his (1997) work on problem solving where he proposes endless potentialities of "relations and differentiations" that exist in a pre-conceptual ground of experience. These "felt meanings" can be activated and a possible solution "symbolised," or they can remain "mulled." According to Gendlin, what is required for the practitioner to symbolise felt meaning is a thatness. This is something the individual already knows, which they use as a "grip" or reference to transition from felt meaning to cognitive problem solving. The mathematics theorists, Mason (1998, 2002, 2011) and Roth (2012) have developed theories similar to Gendlin's "focusing." In his theory of "noticing," Mason (2002) emphasises the need for focused attention, or as he describes it, being "sensitive to possibilities," for learning to occur. From Mason's theory of noticing and Roth's

phenomenologically articulated presence or state of pure being, we turned to an aspect of Whitehead's (1960) process philosophy related to meaning making. For Whitehead, new meaning arises in a continuous uninterrupted oscillation between the old and new, and at a point where the two merge. Returning to Gendlin's terminology, the old is a "grip" that travels with the new meaning being made, which Whitehead terms the "creative advance." Importantly here, "feelings" are the conduit for the creative advance and are described as vectors by Whitehead, for they are directed toward the new meaning, entering it and forming its core.

Experiments in Contemplative Art

Findings from this theoretical and applied research rippled through academic and community art presentations that followed. Some of these included: lectures on contemplative art at the Rhode Island School of Design

Photograph 7. Collective Contemplative Mark Making Rhode Island



UNSW's School of Art and Design, where I trialled collective contemplative art making;

Photograph 8 School of Design and UNSW's School of Art and Design



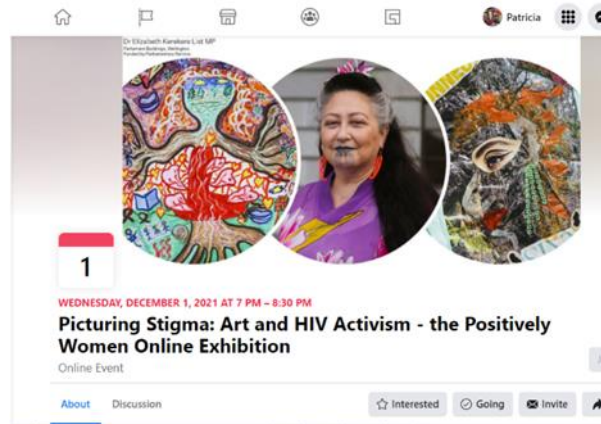
The invited workshop Contemplative Mark-Making for Self-Awareness and Change in Sustainability Programs, at the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies, Potsdam, Germany;

Photograph 9. Collective contemplative mark making for sustainability education, Potsdam, Germany



Picturing Stigma, Art and HIV Activism, a 2-hour virtual workshop with the New Zealand Greens Party, commemorating World AIDS Day

Photograph 10. Picturing Stigma



In this latter workshop I ran an online tour of the “Positively Women” online exhibition (<https://positivelywomenproject.com.au>). This exhibition resulted from the Positively Women research project I worked on at the School of Medicine, UNSW, Sydney. This project examined the heuristic power of the Meditative Process Art (MPA) method, which I created for the project.

Examining learning and change—using a contemplative art method designed to elicit transformation

As the Positively Women research project at UNSW, Sydney ran for two years, I had the time to expand on earlier findings from projects described above: at two data collection sites, during a four-part workshop series, at six online tours of the Positively Women virtual exhibition, and through data analysis and literature review. Through the latter, I was introduced to Susanne Langer’s philosophical works (1942/1958, 1962, 1967) and in particular, her philosophy of art (1953, 1957), which emphasises subjectivities of art making. Additionally, I was able to formulate a contemplative art method from many of the practices I had created over a 23-year period.

The resulting MPA method was designed to examine psychosocial aspects, or the interweaving of the subjective and social (Woodward, 2015), in individual and group practices.

This hybrid method, which draws from process art (Kaprow, 2003), contemplative education (Hart, 2008), contemplative science (Wallace, 2007) and creative arts therapy (Hogan, 2001), engages somatic and pre-conceptual consciousness. The MPA method combines contemplation and art in a range of exercises to afford access to preconceptual experiences that participants can assimilate using multimodal creative practices such as drawing, poetry, and movement. The method also utilizes the pedagogical scaffolding practice, in which participants move from introductory to more complex concepts and tasks (Berk & Winsler, 1995). After analysing data from the workshop series, I believe that the efficacy of the method resulted from this scaffolding and the method's iterative cycles: creation, reflection, realization, and application, facilitated by rounds of meditation, creative practice, storytelling, and sharing circles.

Photograph 11 Positively women



In the Positively Women project, my colleagues and I took a phenomenological approach (Smith, 1996, 2004; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) to data collection and analysis to gain insight into participants' workshop experiences. Ten central themes emerged from the data analysis. The first five, Relaxation and Reflection, Trust and Community, and Heightened Somatic Awareness, title foundational aspects of the MPA method. These are followed by two themes related to symbols—learning to create symbols and the development of a personally meaningful symbol language. Symbol making is an important feature of the MPA method and participants were introduced to it in Week Two of the workshop series.

For Langer (1942/58), symbol making is elemental, and the genesis of symbols or non-discursive forms lies deep in subjective terrain. As Langer explains, "If language is born, indeed, from the profoundly symbolic character of the human mind, we may not be surprised to find that this mind tends to operate with symbols far below the level of speech" (p. 127). Drawing from their inner worlds, using art materials and methods, participants sculpted the nebulous forms of their interior into symbols. In week three they used symbols, colour, and mark making to rework imagery from the past. As all participants had experienced stigma and discrimination, often through media representations of life with HIV, the ability to rework some of these stigmatizing depictions resulted in the release of negative affect and the development of agency. Release and agency are the eighth and ninth themes, and the MPA's

heuristic power is the tenth and final theme.

The heuristic power of creating symbols in contemplative art practices, and the way these practices can provide access to a rich, internal world that is surprisingly familiar upon meeting it, is explained in Langer's thesis of feelings. She contends that "meaning accrues essentially to forms" (1942/58, p. 90) and primarily arts-based forms. Importantly, felt meanings, before taking form in an art work, arise between two poles: the exogenic (externally derived) and the autogenic (originating internally). Innis (2012), drawing from Langer, explains that "the art symbol, in whatever mode, is an objectified pregnant image. It displays the life of feeling, indeed the 'morphological logic' of feeling, in objective form" (p. 44). Art works, resulting from participants' progression through the workshop series, illustrated the development of the internal structuring or "logic" of their feelings, and the heuristic power of the MPA method.

In sum, the efficacy of the MPA method resulted, first, from its foundational contemplative and creative practices that encouraged the reflective, embodied states participants reported. Making art and meditating together became an intersubjective space from which participants built trust in their fellow artists and the practices. It is also where they gained heightened somatic and self-awareness, and experienced transpersonal resonance (Kossak, 2009) between themselves, their work, and their fellow participants. Iterative cycles of creation, reflection, realization, and application facilitated by rounds of meditation, art practice, discussion and storytelling provided a form of scaffolding that enabled participants to navigate their inner realms as they gained proficiency with the practices.

These creative cycles echoed the phasal structures and rhythms inherent in subjective life (Innis, 2012), while a sense of rhythm or driving force was also created by the artists' repetitive touch laid down in their art work (Langer, 1967). Participants' physical fashioning, in their art works, of their pre-conceptual experience left their works rich with the feelings and insights gained in their making. The resulting art works then remained as reminders of internal experience and realizations gained. For the participants these included: the release of suppressed negative emotion and trauma, gaining agency through reworking imagery from the past, discovery and embedding of feelings of strength, empowerment and pleasure, encounters with meaningful "power symbols," and gaining a sense of being more than HIV.

Langer's thesis of the connection between consciousness and aesthetics

Encountering Langer's aesthetics in the Positively Women project was very meaningful for me. She is not only the first woman to be recognized professionally as an American philosopher but her work is said to have shaped the course of the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of art, and art therapy. Langer provided concepts and words for what I had intuited and a philosophical explication of the heuristic power of combining contemplative and creative practices. Her presentation of the subjective basis of art making as a cogent academic topic validated the many years, I have sought to understand the transformative nature of contemplative art.

While Langer doesn't use terminology like contemplative or meditative, she does identify exogenic and autogenic poles between which felt meanings can take form in an art work. Learning of Langer's identification of this passage of meaning making, and her contention that art works offer the ideal form to fix the new meaning made, was very meaningful for me. Moreover, Langer (1962) doesn't privilege inner feelings; rather, she maintains that they precede the discursive and cognitive, and affirms that feelings (subjectivities) and cognition merge in an artwork. As an abstract visual formulation of feelings and cognition, art works are

what Langer (1957) terms “logical forms” that symbolize artists’ inner lives.

In conclusion

My early intuitive sense of the similarity between contemplative and creative consciousness initiated my use of contemplative art in drug and alcohol rehabilitation centres. Curiosity about the heuristic power of this contemplative practice led in my PhD research to question what the mechanisms of change are in contemplation. Asking what the mechanisms of change are in contemplation resulted in my *learning feelings* thesis, which among other things, contained a *contemplative trajectory of learning*. Conducting two experiments for an article on contemplative mathematics enabled me to focus in on the emergence of meaning at the point where practitioners return from contemplation. Through these experiments I found that it is necessary to bridge the pre-conceptual and cognitive with art-making. I took this realization into a range of contemplative art workshops that led, in the Positively Women research project, to my creation of a contemplative arts-based research method titled the Meditative Process Art (MPA) method. The Positively Women project provided both the opportunity to create this method, applying insights from the range of contemplative art projects described above, and it introduced me to Langer’s work. It also offered the scope, both in time and through the depth of participants’ experiences, to deepen my understanding of the heuristic power of contemplative art. The resulting MPA method, which is described on the Positively Women website and in more detail in an upcoming article, is available for researchers and pedagogues interested in the transformative and heuristic power of contemplative and creative practice.

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