

### “The Other ‘D’” Keynote Address: Disciplinarity and the Future of Dance in Canadian Universities

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This paper was presented as an invited keynote address at “The Other ‘D’” Symposium, University of Toronto, Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies, January 2016.



Thank you for coming this morning. Thanks also to Seika Boye and her co-organizers Heather Fitzsimmons-Frey and Evadne Kelly for doing such a wonderful job organizing this conference.

Interdisciplinarity is in ascendance. At my university, for instance, there are seventeen interdisciplinary degree and specialization options, including Art History and Visual Studies, Film Studies, Pacific and Asian Studies, Social Justice Studies, and Interdisciplinary Studies.<sup>1</sup> In addition to these degree options, there are eighteen research centres on campus that provide opportunities for scholars from different disciplines to gather and collaborate.<sup>2</sup>

There are several good reasons for this development, including fiscal and administrative exigencies as universities look to consolidate resources. More importantly, interdisciplinarity can also potentially help scholars to break free of traditional intellectual boundaries.

Given this trend, this conference provides an excellent opportunity for us to pause and consider the implications for dance within the academy in Canada. Specifically, I want to discuss how dance has benefited from the increase in interdisciplinary programs as well as why we might wish to proceed with caution as new alliances are forged. Finally, I am hoping we can discuss potential strategies to protect and promote the presence of dance in universities regardless of how the art form is positioned in relation to other disciplines.

#### My Experience

Before I delve into the topics I’ve just outlined, I want to say that it is wonderful to be back at the Drama Centre. My time here was pivotal to my development as a scholar. It was here that I met faculty and students whose research interests and methodological approaches were new and instructive to me. The Drama Centre’s inherent interdisciplinarity was exciting and intellectually inspiring.

Despite the fact that dance was not formally part of the Drama Centre, my supervisor, Stephen Johnson, and indeed, everyone I encountered during my time here, was ecumenically minded. Dance research was supported intellectually and financially—and to this day, I remain grateful for the education I received while I was here. What made my pedagogical experience possible was an intellectual environment with enough elasticity to accommodate doctoral projects that extended

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beyond the Centre's then primary focus on drama and theatre. In other words, intellectual flexibility is key, and an important point to remember when thinking about how dance can be positioned within academia.

I was lucky to find an academic position in the Department of Theatre at the University of Victoria in 2005. But once the euphoria of being hired began to dissipate, I was left with a small, but persistent sense of dread that I might be in trouble. Although my dissertation focused on an artist in the United States, most of the rest of my research related to Canadian dance topics. My sense—possibly mistakenly—was that scholarly dance editors and publishers in the US and Britain understood the value of dance scholarship, but that dance in Canada was viewed as largely derivative of international initiatives. Conversely, in Canada, none of the university presses had separate dance lists, and although Canadian-focused research was often central to the mandates of these publishing houses, Canadian dance scholarship was viewed as a peculiar and baffling impossibility.

My solution was to become a polyglot—to learn how to speak to colleagues in other disciplines who were asking the same kinds of questions I was pursuing in my own research. I did so by attending non-dance, often non-arts conferences, and by seeking non-arts publishing opportunities whenever possible.

Contrary to my initial fears, asking questions recognizable to other scholars, but doing so using case studies from Canadian dance history turned out to be an excellent strategy. My dance research was usually greeted with intrigued hospitality. I often felt like a distant relative who spoke the same language as everyone else, but with an accent others found charming, yet odd. I call it “the freak factor,” and I highly recommend putting yourself in academic situations and environments where you will inevitably be the weird one. Let's call this approach frontier interdisciplinarity. Deliberately introduce your discipline to colleagues who are encountering it for the first time. Rejection is one possible result, but this kind of advocacy for dance as a scholarly subject also can lead to rewarding interdisciplinary opportunities.

Being a polyglot scholar has other benefits. Having to communicate dance-related concepts or to describe movement for non-dance readers will make you a better writer. Reading widely in order to understand the genealogies, contexts, and conversations of other disciplines is another necessary part of this method and is important because it can help you to understand your subject in a larger context. Moreover, once you begin to read widely you quickly learn the value of transposing concepts or cross-pollinating ideas from one discipline to another.

Indeed, I draw on other disciplines regularly in my research. When asking questions about microhistory, for instance, I draw on New Cultural History, which itself was influenced by Anthropology. In this way, we might remember that there are no “pure” disciplines. Or as Jerry A. Jacobs reminds us in *In Defense of Disciplines*, “the notion of academic disciplines as silos uninterested in external developments has been debunked” (Jacobs 2013, 225). In other words, interdisciplinarity is arguably an inherent condition of humanist research whether it is called such or not.

## **Dance Studies at Canadian Universities**

If interdisciplinarity has been central to my personal path, it is worth acknowledging this situation parallels the institutional history of post-secondary dance in Canada. Dance in Canadian universities

has always been interdisciplinary in nature, though the experiences and engagement with interdisciplinarity are individual to each institution.

*York University*

In reviewing a few of these institutional examples, I will start with York since it is the oldest degree-granting dance program in Canada and because it was the program where I did my master's degree and had the good fortune to meet some of my most important mentors. As Norman Sue Fisher-Stitt has previously outlined, when the school was founded in 1970, it offered a wide variety of classes, including ballet and Graham technique (Fisher-Stitt 2006, 138). In addition, the department's foundational Dance Experience course was offered from the beginning, as well as three theory classes, including Values of Dance, which examined the social, psychological, aesthetic, and physical values of the art form. Dance history and dance therapy were also part of the original syllabus. By 1974, the program had grown sufficiently that students could focus on performance, but they also could specialize in "History and Criticism, Composition, Dance Therapy, Notation, and Teaching" (Fisher-Stitt 2006, 139). More recently, the program has embraced cultural diversity, social dance practices, and dance dramaturgy, and since 2008, students can earn a doctoral degree in dance at York, focusing on the dance ethnography and cultural research or dance history and heritage studies—diverse streams that demonstrate the encompassing nature of dance as a scholarly topic.

In many ways, the program at York is a successful example of *intradisciplinarity*—a thorough examination of dance from a variety of primarily dance-related perspectives and approaches. This kind of plurality is best served by administrative dexterity to allow the institution to remain responsive to new developments in the field.

*Simon Fraser University*

From its inception, the dance program at SFU has been situated in a convergence of arts disciplines resulting from an institutional commitment to interdisciplinarity that reaches back to 1965 when non-credit dance classes were first offered prior to the establishment of the academic fine and performing arts program in 1975 as part of the Centre for the Arts (now the School for the Contemporary Arts).

Alana Gerecke has written in her history of the dance program at SFU that the interdisciplinary relations between dance and the other art forms at the Centre has both distinguished the program and caused strain (Gerecke 2012, 141–54). The presence of dance allowed the program to separate itself from its counterparts at the University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria, yet having non-dance specialists participate in the hiring of dance faculty because dance was part of a larger academic unit sometimes led to competing priorities. Moreover, as Gerecke writes, "the tension between interdisciplinary porosity and disciplinary rigor has ebbed and flowed over the years, and an effort to strike a balance shaped the Centre's early dance curriculum" (Gerecke 2012, 148). As a result, the SFU experience reminds us that interdisciplinarity and notions of expertise do not always coexist with complete ease. Issues of disciplinary authority remain in interdisciplinary settings.

*Montreal*

Since the early twentieth century, there has been dance activity in universities in Montreal. McGill's physical education department, for instance, offered credit courses in creative and interpretative dance as early as 1929. But it was in the 1970s that dance degree programs began to flourish in

Quebec. A certificate in dance was established at the Université de Montréal in 1978. Concordia University introduced a BFA in Fine Arts, which included dance classes, in 1979. Students at UQAM could enrol in a BA in dance beginning in 1979. Since 1997 it has been possible to complete a PhD in dance at UQAM through its interdisciplinary doctoral studies and practices of the arts in the Faculty of the Arts.

The departmental homes for dance in universities in Montreal were varied. Université de Montréal's dance classes were originally hosted by Physical Education. At Concordia, dance classes were offered by the Visual Arts department and at UQAM dance grew from Theatre and Kinesiology (Davida and Lavoie-Marcus 2012, 160).

Underpinning these diverse genealogies was a debate about the multifaceted character of dance that crystallized into one question articulated later by Dena Davida and Catherine Lavoie-Marcus: “Should university dance be considered above all as a physical discipline, a performance art, a full-fledged creative art or a theoretical field of knowledge in its own right?” (Davida and Lavoie-Marcus 2012, 160). In this way, we need to remember that although interdisciplinarity may, for many people, imply a breaking free of disciplinary exclusionism or elitism, and may resonate with a sense of innovation, communalism, and intellectual openness, the disciplinary soil from which interdisciplinarity grows often continues to exert a force.

#### *University of Calgary*

Also beginning in the 1970s—1976, to be precise—dance at the University of Calgary had homes in two different divisions: the School of Physical Education and the Faculty of Fine Arts. Both divisions claimed that dance belonged within their respective constellation of programs—a situation that meant dance had two administrative masters (Flynn 2012, 171–86). As a result, dance had multiple personalities and roles: Within the School of Physical Education, dance was a form of recreation (Flynn 2012, 173). Health benefits and social inclusiveness were the goals. Dance in the Faculty of Fine Arts at first meant ballet and modern dance, and the resulting training was focused on dance as a professional art form equivalent in stature with theatre, music, and visual art (173). This divide, as Anne Flynn has pointed out, closely echoed territorial tensions that had emerged earlier in the United States (172). In 1995, the ideological schism was resolved when the Faculty of Kinesiology, which replaced the School of Physical Education, and the Faculty of Fine Arts jointly offered a BA in Dance. Dance now resides in the School of Creative and Performing Arts.

The University of Calgary offers a cautionary tale about the need to position dance carefully within a university setting to prevent turf wars. Having two distinct ideological stances about dance—dance as a form of exercise and social engagement, and dance as a theatrical art—could potentially offer an expansive experience for students, but interdisciplinarity best works when a plurality of approach and purpose are respected and not in competition.

### **Issues to Think About**

Clearly, I am a proponent and a product of interdisciplinarity, and I value the diversity of disciplinary influences in the history of dance in Canadian universities. However, as the examples I've just mentioned demonstrate, we need to be strategic and careful in how we position dance in order to avoid potential headaches and misfortune.

It is worth noting that the place of dance within universities has been debated in the US, Britain, and Europe, with arguments coalescing around two main issues (Bales and Eliot 2013, 3–7). On the one hand, there have been critiques of dance as too specialized and a call for interdisciplinary approaches to help “bring dance closer to the intellectual mainstream” (Koritz 1996, 89).<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, some dance scholars have lamented a perceived loss of fluency in the languages of dance due to an emphasis on interdisciplinarity (Bales and Eliot 2013, 4).

With these thoughts in mind, here are a few of my concerns about dance within interdisciplinary relationships.

#### *Superficial scholarship*

Without distinct disciplines, I fear the potential danger of interdisciplinarity that leads to research tourism or academic dilettantism. Without fully understanding the contexts, histories, and terminology of dance subjects, we might end up with ill-informed and deficient dance scholarship. (Of course, we must also be attentive to this potential pitfall when dance scholars venture into other disciplines.)

#### *Dance without dance*

If scholars are not conversant in dance methodologies, there is a potential for the resulting research not to contain dance. That is, there is the potential to produce dance scholarship that remains at the level of narrative analysis without ever mentioning what distinguishes dance from other art forms: the primacy of moving bodies (Bales and Eliot 2013, 4). We need the ability to generate Geertzian thick descriptions—the meanings of behaviour and their contexts—based on an understanding of movement analysis principles, regardless of the kind of dance style or choreographic work under examination (Geertz 1973, 3–30).

#### *Historical sources*

Archives and their collections are never neutral, but the products of ideological choices and biases. This assertion is an important one. We also need to acknowledge that dance scholars have always known the value of viewing embodied experience as historical knowledge. Dance has long understood the benefits of moving away from the printed word to examine the performative, and in this way dance studies and performance studies are very much akin. The body as a source of archived knowledge and the oral and embodied transmission of dance vocabularies, techniques, and actual dance moves have been predominantly person-to-person.

Yet, archives are still important resources for scholars interested in the performing arts. The collection and preservation of dance’s material history has been crucial to our ability to piece together past practices and events. I would hate to see dance researchers ignore the archives because archival research is currently treated with suspicion or seen as passé or too flawed to have worth.

#### *Will dance be subsumed by other disciplines?*

I also have concerns about dance being subsumed by other disciplines. As Erin Brannigan has argued, dance performances in and with art galleries and museums have garnered significant scholarly attention, but the attendant conversation—if not necessarily the practice—has been dominated by visual arts frames of reference and interests (Brannigan 2015, 8).

Dance-focused research needs to remain at the fore to prevent dance from simply becoming secondary when two or more disciplines are in conversation. To this end, we should be attentive to

Stanley Fish's caution that, "the interdisciplinary impulse . . . does not liberate us from the narrow confines of academic ghettos to something more capacious; it merely redomiciles us in enclosures that do not advertise themselves as such" (Fish 1989, 18).

I should emphasize that none of what I am saying makes dance hermeneutically sealed and accessible only with a special initiation into the dance studies club. But these are factors that need to be considered when doing scholarly dance research.

### *Epistemic exclusion*

There are other factors that have marginalized dance in academia. First, and pragmatically, there is the issue of resources. Studio classes need spaces that are large and have sprung floors. Dance classes sometimes need an accompanist as well as an instructor, which is an added cost. If dance classes require people to move around, the ratio of students to instructor needs to be small, which again has cost implications.

I think, however, that there are other, more politicized, reasons for the scarcity of dance in Canadian universities. (There are only nine universities that have degree-granting dance programs or offer dance courses as part of their curriculum versus the 655 programs in the United States that Susan Manning mentioned in her keynote address).<sup>4</sup> To what degree is epistemic exclusion a contributing factor to this situation? Feminist philosophy can provide a useful framework to help us to think about dance as an under-accessed mode of knowing. In particular, Miranda Fricker, a philosopher at the University of London, has suggested that "identity prejudices" can lead to "testimonial injustice"—a kind of discrimination that occurs when individuals or specific demographics of people are dismissed because who they are is equated with a lack of credibility (Fricker 2007, 9–29).<sup>5</sup>

Dance scholars arguably have a credibility problem that facilitates testimonial injustice. We deal with the arts, which traditionally have had a marginalized place within Canadian society. Even more problematic, we deal with a subject that addresses the body as its main mode of usually ephemeral, nonverbal, nonprint expression, and we deal with a subject that often has been feminized and associated with emotional expression. All of these components are antithetical to traditional notions of reason that are the bedrock of universities.

Some of these concerns are easy to remedy. For instance, the ephemerality of dance hardly limits the potential of the art form as a scholarly subject. It's true that the exact moment of a particular dance event or activity or "enunciation," if you will, cannot be studied repeatedly in the same way that a play script or musical score or painting can. Similarly, while digital recordings of dance can be useful, they remain flawed and limited as research sources. That said, how do we study the Second World War or any historical event? Through their material remnants. Dance is no different. In other words, dance scholars need to be vocal in addressing and dismantling ignorance about what we do.

For more deep-seated suspicions of dance, we might return to Fricker, who, in the process of countering testimonial injustice, counsels virtuous hearing, a strategy that involves developing "reflexive critical awareness" to correct for "prejudice in one's credibility judgment" (Fricker 2007, 91). While helpful, Fricker's advice assumes a willingness of those who subscribe to intellectual orthodoxies to rethink their positions. In the case of dance, persuasion is more important. Specifically, I think we need to convince our colleagues in academia of the advantages of having us around.

So, how do we do this in dance?

### **What can Dance Offer the Academy?**

Although there are other reasons why dance—in the studio and the classroom—should be mandatory for all students interested in studying different modes of performance, I will just mention two here.

#### *Awareness of one's body*

Sometimes when I see young theatre students, it is clear to me that they have more knowledge of their computers than their own physicality. Without a sense of alignment, and without control of muscular articulation, students' performative potential is limited.

#### *Kinetic literacy*

Secondly, I think it essential that we all have a kinetic literacy that involves the ability to do close readings of the formal and contextual elements of movement. Regardless of whether one is studying ballet, the lindy hop, a rave, a marathon, a boxing match, or any event involving bodies in motion, kinetic literacy is a useful tool. Dance scholarship has developed vocabularies and methodologies for analyzing movement that anyone interested in researching performance or corporeality would benefit from learning.

### **How Can We Strengthen the Presence of Dance Studies in Canadian Universities?**

If dance not only belongs in universities but also has much to offer other disciplines, how can we strengthen the presence of dance in post-secondary institutions in Canada? I'd like to spend the rest of my time discussing strategies and possible opportunities.

#### *Hire more dance scholars*

Naturally, I'd like to see more positions for dance scholars in universities. I'm not suggesting more dance departments but instead am advocating for more dance scholars.

#### *Introduce more dance-related courses in universities*

More scholarly dance expertise will naturally—I hope—lead to more dance-related courses at universities, both in the studio and in the lecture hall.

#### *Find allies / Build alliances*

I am continually finding more and more colleagues at the University of Victoria who are knowledgeable and passionate about dance. Colleagues and students in Art History and Visual Studies, English, Linguistics, Indigenous Studies, and Political Science have sought me out when they discover my research focus.

I would encourage us all to be proactive in surveying our own institutions to determine what kind of dance-friendly infrastructures might already exist beneath deceptive disciplinary labels in order to build interdisciplinary relationships.

*Move beyond modern and contemporary case studies*

In *Farewell to Visual Studies*, James Elkins calls for more research that extends beyond modern and contemporary visualities (Elkin 2015, 5). This advice has value for dance studies in Canada. A lot of contemporary research in Canada appears to favour contemporaneous topics. It is true that there are many exciting current issues and artists to discuss in dance, but the field—particularly in Canada—is still discovering its past. I'm not suggesting that there needs to be a conceptual binary; the past and the present do not need to be in competition, but there appears to be an imbalance between the two when reviewing dance research in this country. Let's fall back in time and access a fuller temporal range of dance experience. For instance, Professor John Freeman Davis's 1878 dance manual *The Modern Dance Tutor; or Society Dancing*, based on Davis's experience as a prominent Toronto social dance instructor, provides a fascinating glimpse not only of popular dances but also of the parameters of late nineteenth-century decorum in Toronto.

*Move beyond the same theorists*

Again borrowing from Elkins, I urge Canadian dance researchers to diversify the group of scholars we reach for as theoretical guides (Elkin 2015, 5). Let's take a break from Michel Foucault or Judith Butler or Diana Taylor precisely because they have been central to performance-oriented research. Instead, could we turn to more surprising, but potentially illuminating thinkers? For instance, could Miriam Adams' *Sonovovitch* serve as a theory of feminist agency that deploys humour and irreverence as its key strategies?

Could *we* go one step further and follow Susan Leigh Foster and other dance scholars in asking how dance and its contexts generate and function as theory—theory that not only tells us about the conditions and meaning of dance but that can be applied to other subjects? (Foster 1996). What theories of cities, public spaces, or site-specific art are generated by Québécois dance artist André Fortier's *Solo 30X30*? Or, what can we learn from George Clutesi, a Tseshaht artist and teacher, who appeared in front of the Massey Commission? Clutesi reminded Vincent Massey and his colleagues that the traditional dances of his people were outlawed, and that it was therefore erroneous to think that cultural freedom applied to everyone in Canada. How might Clutesi's comments contribute to a theory of indigenous activism in Canada?

In other words, through these case studies, I am asking how dance might augment, complicate, challenge, or redirect scholarly subjects and theory? How can dance add to the scholarly conversation, not just illustrate it?

*Internationalize Canadian dance studies*

Performance studies has helped to encourage Western scholars to expand and internationalize their research horizons, though, in truth, this phenomenon has been occurring in many of the humanistic disciplines, including history and literary studies, and so on.

Dance research in Canada (including my own) would benefit from moving beyond the containment of national perimeters and nationalist considerations of imaginary communities to query more transnational perspectives. How have dance ideas and practices transited to, from, and through Canada? In so doing, how and why have they been altered or, in turn, exerted influence? Modernist ideas about indigeneity, for instance, circulated the globe and from discipline to discipline. Toronto choreographer Boris Volkoff's iterations of primitivism in works like *Mon-Ka-Ta* and *Mala* share features with similar works created in Australia, including Beth Dean's *Corroboree*. Both artists "borrowed" indigenous narratives and iconography to create works that entwined history and

colonialism in order to express nationalist sentiments. There's a lot to be learned from placing Canadian dance in conversation with other international case studies, and from thinking about the international exchange and echoes of dance ideas and practices.

*Encourage more transdisciplinary engagement with dance*

Paradoxically, one of the ways to improve the situation for dance in Canadian universities is to ensure that it has a strong presence outside of post-secondary institutions. It's important to acknowledge and celebrate the longstanding presence of dance as a topic of investigation outside of academia in Canada. Several institutions have understood the cerebral value of dance and have become de facto sites for the transdisciplinary intellectualization of the art form perhaps because universities have been seemingly reluctant to do so.<sup>6</sup> Most notably, Dance Collection Danse deserves our gratitude for preserving the history of dance, for incubating dance researchers (myself included), and for raising the visibility of dance in Canada via a variety of means, including print and new technologies.

Dance presenters also are dance educators. Organizations like Dance Victoria, New Dance Horizons in Regina, the Canada Dance Festival in Ottawa or Danse Danse in Montreal have all contributed to raising the level of dance conversations in this country through pre- and post-show chats, dance salons, festival roundtables, program notes, and by organizing international tours for patrons. These events create informed audiences—people who might then pursue dance as a scholarly topic or who, at the very least, hopefully will not object to dance as a scholarly pursuit.

## **Final Thoughts**

To circle back to the issue of how disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity can be complementary and productive companions, I think dance studies is too small and too marginalized socially and academically to ignore the benefits of collaborating with other disciplines, particularly theatre studies and performance studies.

At the same time, I think dance is too important and too rich a scholarly subject not to safeguard as a distinct field of study. Even when dance is located within a protectorate department like theatre studies or performance studies, we need to remember that it can be instructive to these other disciplines.

Finally, the one thing that I absolutely want you to take away from my talk and that I've tried to emphasize is that Canadians who have wanted to promote dance as a legitimate subject for intellectual study always have had to be proactive, creative, and agile. So it is very exciting to learn that this spirit continues through the fiercely smart group of young scholars who are here today and to witness the sparks of what might come next.

Thank you for inviting me to your conference.

## **Notes**

1. The full list of “studies” programs is as follows: Art History and Visual Studies, Canadian Studies, Environmental Studies, Germanic Studies, Greek and Roman Studies, Hispanic and Italian Studies, Latin American Studies, Mediterranean Studies, Medieval Studies, European Studies, Pacific and Asian Studies,

Religious Studies, Germanic and Slavic Studies, Film Studies, Social Justice Studies, and Interdisciplinary Studies.

2. The centres at the University of Victoria include the following: Astronomy Research Centre (ARC), Centre for Aboriginal Health Research (CAHR), Centre for Addictions Research BC (CARBC), Centre for Advanced Materials and Related Technology (CAMTEC), Centre for Asia Pacific Initiatives (CAPI), Centre for Biomedical Research (CFBR), Centre for Early Childhood Research and Policy (formerly REACH)(CECRP), Centre for Forest Biology (FORB), Centre for Global Studies (CFGS), Centre for Social and Sustainable Innovation (CSSI), Centre for Studies in Religion and Society (CSRS), Centre for Youth and Society (CFYS), Centre on Aging (COAG), Institute for Integrated Energy Systems (IESVic), Institute for Studies & Innovation in Community-University Engagement (ISICUE), Pacific Institute for Climate Solutions (PICS), and the Victoria Subatomic Physics and Accelerator research centre (VISPA).

3. Koritz's statement is also quoted in Bales and Eliot (2013, 4).

4. These programs are located at Simon Fraser University, the University of Calgary, the University of Regina (dance is part of the university's arts education degree), the University of Manitoba (the dance program stream is as part of the Department of Theatre and Film), York University, Ryerson University, UQAM, Concordia University, and the University of Winnipeg (the Dance Program Stream is offered jointly with the Professional Program of the School of Contemporary Dancers). George Brown College also provides dance programs within its School of Performing Arts.

5. I am grateful to Carolyn Butler-Palmer and Eric Palmer for our lively conversation about testimonial injustice.

6. The term "transdisciplinarity" has been defined in a variety of ways, but my use of the term aligns with the definition promoted by Allen F. Repo in which different stakeholders from within and beyond universities, including the general public, gather to explore an issue. See Repo et al. (2014, 36).

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