

# Articulations of Memory: Reflections on Imagination and the Scope of Collective Memory in the Public Sphere\*

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During the decades following the pioneering work of authors such as Walter Benjamin or Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s and 1930s, it has become increasingly common to refer to memory as a source not only of personal identity or of the identity of small groups but also of large collectivities. In recent years an ever growing number of studies in a variety of disciplines employ the concept of collective memory. My purpose in analyzing this concept here is not to provide a survey of the ways in which it is employed but to investigate its precise meaning in the methodological perspective of philosophy. I shall examine what exactly we mean when we refer to “collective memory,” and the role of imagination as a source of collectively remembered, communicable experience. My aim is to elucidate the way in which collective memory might be demarcated from constructs of the imagination, above all in the *public* sphere.

Upon initial examination, the concept of “collective memory” presents an immediate difficulty. According to its primary signification, remembrance is carried out in the original sphere of the self. In a strict sense, collectivities never “remember” any more than they have an autonomous, substantial being. And yet, members of a community, vast as it may be, may share remembrances of what can be publicly communicated through word, image, and gesture. In the public sphere, however, it is not generally possible to convey what memory recalls in immediate personal experience: people and things, events and situations as they actually present themselves in a direct encounter or, so to speak, “in the flesh.” My understanding of this term draws on phenomenological theory, and above all on Edmund Husserl, who equated original experience with what he termed experience in the flesh in a given living present

\*A preliminary version of this article was presented in May 2010 at the University of Konstanz to the Max Planck research group “Geschichte und Gedächtnis,” directed by Aleida Assmann.

(“leibhafte Erfahrung in einer jeweiligen lebendigen Gegenwart”).<sup>1</sup> If photographs, paintings, or descriptions may revivify these encounters or publicly relate to them through signs, images, or gestures, they can never replace this primordial capacity which is unique to remembrance in the original sense. Let me illustrate this by means of a brief example.

To elucidate what might be termed experience “in the flesh,” it will be helpful to draw on the kind of account that is best represented in literature. A particularly vivid example of such an encounter is provided by François-René de Chateaubriand in his *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, an autobiographical memoir composed in different periods of the author's life and modeled along the lines of a confession. Chateaubriand formulated the purpose of this work in the following way:

to account for myself to myself . . . ; to explain my inexplicable heart, in seeing finally what I will say once my pen abandons itself without constraint to all of my recollections.<sup>2</sup>

With this aim in mind, in an early chapter of the work Chateaubriand recalls his experiences as a young man when, in the early 1790s, he embarked on a voyage to the New World. After he arrived in Philadelphia he was invited to the home of George Washington, the first President of the United States, who was in Philadelphia at that moment. And Chateaubriand recounts their first meeting, before seeing him the next day at a dinner to which he was invited in the President's unassuming residence; Washington is “large in size, appearing calm and cold rather than noble, he resembles his portraits.” And, regarding the dinner in the presence of Washington and of a small number of his friends, Chateaubriand relates that while the President was “at his brilliant apogee” (“dans tout son éclat”), he himself was completely unknown. “I was happy, however,” he writes, “that his gaze turned toward me! I felt enheartened by this encounter for the rest of my life!” (I: 221, 222)

At roughly the same period, the United States Congress commissioned the French sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon to fashion a marble

<sup>1</sup>Other persons, for Husserl, present themselves to us “in the flesh.” In a precise sense, this signifies that their bodies, movements, and gestures are displayed to us and it is by this means that we gather in a secondary manner their inner thoughts and feelings. The term, “in the flesh,” *leibhaft*, is also applied by him to other things in the world as to the givenness of the surrounding world itself. See, for example, Husserl 1973: 278–79.

<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own. Chateaubriand's account of the aim of his work is found in his first description of it which is preserved in the form of a manuscript in the archives of Combourg, France; see, in this regard, Maurice Levailant's introduction to the Pléiade edition of this work (Chateaubriand 1951, I: x–xi).

representation of the first President of the United States. He made the trip from Paris to the New World to create this and other sculptures of Washington. The works were done in Washington's presence at his residence in Mount Vernon, Virginia, where the one commissioned by Congress is standing today. The candidness of expression and the imposing demeanor of Houdon's representation of Washington corroborate Chateaubriand's description of the statesman. But here we come to our principle point: in spite of the vividness of the evocations of Washington conveyed to posterity by the writer and the sculptor, nothing permits us to recall the *original* encounter with Washington "in the flesh" which Chateaubriand and Houdon each experienced at different moments and which it is the primordial capacity of memory to recall.

In our contemporary world, such a limitation of original experience to direct personal encounters might, of course, seem hopelessly narrow. Nowadays, we have immediate ways of conveying encounters through radio and television, and we can watch video interviews with public figures long after they have ceased to exist. Nonetheless, these media, even if they are able to record events for an untold number of spectators and preserve them for a seemingly indefinite time in film archives, cannot replace direct encounters "in the flesh." Far from spontaneous encounters, even when they are, so to speak, "live," and not merely recorded, they are regularly organized or "staged," and they address a wholly *anonymous* mass audience with which there is only very rarely a possibility of interaction (see Luhmann, Feuer). In this respect, the difference between "live" and "prerecorded" broadcasts becomes inessential, for neither is able to reproduce the direct personal quality and the unique aura characteristic of situations and events as they are experienced "in the flesh." The cardinal importance that we attribute to such direct encounters is clearly illustrated by the role that we generally accord to eye-witness testimony in everyday experience. Of course, witnesses may in certain cases be mistaken or may even attempt to mislead us. Indeed, to return to our previous example, George Washington's records of his meetings during the month when Chateaubriand was in Philadelphia do not seem to corroborate Chateaubriand's account and have led some commentators to question the reality of this encounter, or at least the sequence of events as Chateaubriand recorded it in *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*.<sup>3</sup> We

<sup>3</sup>For an account of debate on this question, see the commentary by Jean-Claude Berchet in the footnotes of the Garnier edition of *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* (Chateaubriand 1989, I: 739–40), suggesting that Chateaubriand probably did encounter Washington, although he may have simplified the sequence of events in harmony with the structure of his narrative.

cannot exclude the possibility that further evidence might be uncovered at some future date proving that what Chateaubriand claimed to be an encounter “in the flesh” was in fact nothing more than a product of his literary imagination.

Beyond the possibility of mistaken or misleading testimonies, reports of direct encounters vary in terms of the witness’s involvement: eye-witness experience by passive bystanders presents a very different perspective than that of active participants in events, especially in violent or traumatic ones, such as war. Involvement in traumatic situations has been associated with well-documented forms of memory loss and, in extreme cases, with aphasia.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that we can represent fictive constructions as real events, that imaginative constructions may lead us to distort the recollection of “in the flesh” encounters, and that traumatic experiences can make us repress them, calls for caution in interpreting such accounts. We must allow not only for the possibility that purely fictive creations may be represented as experienced “events” but also for the fact that experienced events themselves are always perceived in a particular perspective and are necessarily reconstructed through interpretative acts. They may be subject to voluntary or unwitting re-processing, distortion, or suppression. Given the diversity of perspectives and the role of interpretative acts in the reconstruction of past experience, it would therefore be naïve to claim that encounters in the flesh directly register the “reality” of the events themselves, beyond the interpretative reconstruction of the viewer. And yet, in spite of this obvious limitation, eye-witness representations correspond to fundamental and irreplaceable kinds of experience. Far from recapitulating “reality” in some absolute sense of the term, they must constantly be complemented and corrected by other testimonies, which is why the comparison of numerous testimonies by different witnesses and their fit within the pattern of events remains the most reliable way to reconstruct the factuality of past occurrences. And here, not only in our everyday

<sup>4</sup>In this regard, a useful distinction has been made between what has been termed “eye-witness” and “flesh-witness” narratives. This distinction accounts for the difference between events witnessed by parties who are not themselves involved in recorded interaction and “flesh-witness” narratives by those who directly participate in the events. The concept of “flesh-witnessing” is particularly important in accounting for the difficulty of translating direct experience of traumatic events into readily representable categories. See, in particular, Harari, as well as Liu.

behavior, but also for the work of the judge or the historian, eye-witness reports are accorded particular importance.<sup>5</sup>

In certain exceptional situations, publicly significant events may be experienced as encounters “in the flesh,” but only rarely and by a very small minority of remembering individuals who witnessed them directly. Even in such cases the direct experience of a given event does not necessarily entail comprehension of its *publicly* significant scope. In such instances, the unbridgeable gap between the recollections of individuals or of members of small groups and what might be termed “public memory” in the sphere of vast collectivities might well lead us to question the legitimacy of any application of the concept of “memory” to the public sphere as such. Large-scale public commemorations, indeed, almost always recall what is beyond any possibility of remembrance by those who participate in them, since the foundation of a State or the occurrence of other politically significant events most frequently lies beyond the scope of what any living individual might have experienced and remembered. In all such commemorative ceremonies, as in any form of representation of publicly constituted collectivities such as national groups, it might seem more just to refer not to “collective memory,” but to images that are products or “figments” of the imagination. It is this consideration which has led numerous theorists of the social world to follow the lead of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* and consider such vast collectivities “*imagined*” because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 6).<sup>6</sup> As a means of accounting for collective identity and group cohesion on a vast scale, insofar as it is rooted in the reminiscence of a shared collective past, this recourse to the term “imagination” permits us to avoid the dilemma that the concept of “collective memory” would seem to introduce, since imagination as a power of maintaining and reviving an “image of communion” on a large scale in no way requires that we invoke the most original feature intrinsic to remembrance of past experience, which is to have encountered what is remembered “in the flesh.”

<sup>5</sup>See in this regard the insightful analysis of this theme by Renaud Dulong. On the concept of the witness, see also the classic study by C. A. J. Coady.

<sup>6</sup>Aleida Assmann begins her investigation of the legitimacy of the concept of collective memory with the question, “Collective memory — is it a fiction?” (“Kollektives Gedächtnis — eine Fiktion?”) and then gives cogent reasons for answering this question in the negative (Assmann 29–31).

Admittedly, however, the term “imagination,” as it engenders such “images of communion,” raises another kind of difficulty since, indeed, this terminology might seem to blur any distinction between an interpretation of social cohesion which traces its source to blanket fantasy or fiction and one which admits that, if social cohesion draws on the imagination, it may also lay some claim to a basis in a “remembered” past, even where recollection is indirect and borrowed from the past experience reported by others. We may, of course, deny the importance of such a distinction and claim, with Nietzsche, that all viable social existence and political cohesion depend upon roots in the mythical *Heimat* and mythical maternal bosom (see Nietzsche 1993: 141). Indeed, as Nietzsche well appreciated, it may in many instances prove more in keeping with the requisites of a healthy vitality — and certainly of group contentment — to forget what is bothersome in the past or to recreate the past along the lines of fiction. In referring to remembrance of the historical past, Nietzsche therefore frankly suggested that it is only when historical narrative is reframed as a “pure work of art” that it may sustain or even awaken vital instincts.<sup>7</sup> However, our experience with political myth of the most sinister kinds in the twentieth century necessarily leads us to moderate Nietzsche’s radicalism at least in distinguishing between different varieties of myth on which collectivities may be founded. Here the delicate question of the relation of imagination to what is held to be a remembered past — even a past which has been remembered and related by others — must once again be asked.

To a large extent this question is of a semantic order. Ordinary language refers to “memory” or to “imagination” as if they were clear-cut and separate functions whereas even in the immediate personal experience they play multiple roles and are always interconnected. Far from designating simple operations, the words “memory” and “imagination” cover a whole range of capacities.

Indeed, in the original sphere of intimate life the verb “to remember” is indifferently applied to a vast variety of experience: I can remember a fantasy I have had, as I can recall persons, events, or situations I am convinced I have known. On another level, I can remember an algebraic formula or how to ride a bicycle, just as I can remember how to do other things that I have learned to do, both purely intellectual and more corporeal and physical. The single term “memory” clearly covers a whole

<sup>7</sup>“Nur wenn die Historie es erträgt, zum Kunstwerk umgebildet, also reines Kunstgebilde zu werden, kann sie vielleicht Instinkte erhalten oder sogar wecken” (Nietzsche 1968: 59).

range of possible experience, actual or fictive, sensuous or intellectual, passive or active.

In a similar manner, the word “imagination” has a whole range of connotations, which ordinary discourse rarely distinguishes in an explicit manner. We generally recognize the work of imagination in the production of fictive events — the so-called “als-ob Erlebnisse” — as also in the less coherent flights of fantasy. From a theoretical point of view, the phenomenological research of Edmund Husserl has emphasized the fundamental role of imagination at the heart of perceptual acts. Where perceived objects always present themselves partially in a given field of view and always from a given standpoint, it is imagination, he explains, in an act of “fulfillment,” which permits its identification as a meaningful whole. Still another fundamental capacity of the imagination is identifiable in what might be termed its *deliberative* capacity.<sup>8</sup> It is this activity of imagination which permits us to localize past events in memory and place them in temporal sequence. If I have lost a key, I may apply this deliberative capacity of the imagination to envisaging all of the places where I might have inadvertently dropped it in order to find it again. This topic remains beyond the scope of the present paper; it has been interpreted from different theoretical standpoints since Aristotle, Hume, Kant, or Husserl, to name only the best known interpreters. I will limit my comments to the collective sphere and remark that here too, if we are to interpret collective remembrance by vast groups in public life, it is necessary to precisely identify its relation to “imagination.”

How might we understand the role of imagination in the realm of collectively remembered, publicly communicable experience? Certainly fantasy and myth play a central role at all levels of social existence but, as I interpret it, the social bond is not simply based on imaginary creations, for it must be traced to a more fundamental function of imagination in the communal sphere, which interweaves the very fabric of communal cohesion. Imagination in this sense is a precondition for social existence *per se* and, as such, configures the basis for all that is communally sig-

<sup>8</sup>In *De Anima* (434a) Aristotle already clearly distinguished between a sensuous imagination (*aīsthētikē phantasia*) common to humans and other animals, and a deliberative imagination (*bouleutikē phantasia*), which only humans possess. For Goethe, imagination takes on a further sense as a capacity to distinguish the “truth of reality” or, as Goethe remarked in a comment to Eckermann, a “Fantasy for the truth of reality” (“Phantasie für die Wahrheit des Realen,” Goethe 154). See Ernst Cassirer’s interpretation of Goethe and this faculty of the imagination (1992: 204–206).

nificant. This primordial role of imagination, while distinguishing it from all other connotations of the term, renders what is collectively significant communicable by embodying it in *symbols*. If, however, I identify this work of symbolic embodiment with an act of the imagination, it is not imagination conceived as an abstract function, but as part of a fundamental anthropological unity in which memory is primordially intertwined. In the collective sphere, on the basis of this original unity, a fund of remembered significations are patterned through the imagination in the form of communicable symbols. And here matters suddenly become more complex, for imagination, through this work of embodying communicable symbols, lies at the source both of group fantasy and fiction and of what is accepted to be communally significant reality.

To clarify this role of imagination, we must provide a precise conception of the *symbol* at play here. Symbols have most often been interpreted in two different ways in accordance with two long-standing traditions. First, in the narrow sense, the symbol represents, by virtue of sensuous images, what lies outside of possible sense perception: the lamb, for example, symbolically represents the person of Christ; the flag stands for a given nation. Second, in the broader sense, the symbolizing function includes representational images, language, and gesture more generally.<sup>9</sup> Both of these conceptions of the symbol deploy an identical act of imaginative association: indeed, the narrower interpretation of the symbol, as representing what is absent in experience, presupposes and extends beyond the scope of experience the essential function that the broader interpretation of the symbol engages — its work as a collectively-mediated organizing principle through which experience is endowed with a communicable sense. All symbols perform this minimal task, since they are all engaged in the transmission of publicly communicable experience through the activity I term “symbolic embodiment.” It is *symbols* which confer spontaneous sense on experience by lending it a communicable order at the primary level of its organization and articulation. Symbols lend a communicable order to experience by patterning it in terms of spatial, temporal, or numerical and other conceptual relations.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup>For a more detailed examination of the theoretical background and implications of these two ways of interpreting the symbol, see Barash 2007.

<sup>10</sup>My approach to the symbol is in part inspired by the thought of Ernst Cassirer. What I have borrowed from him concerns less the theory of symbolic forms that he presented in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* than what he conceived to be the “primordial forms of synthesis” (*Urformen der Synthesis*) — space, time, and number — for which symbols provide the ordering principle (see Cassirer 1994, III: 17).



Symbolic embodiment renders communicable direct experience as it is remembered “in the flesh” long after the person or group who initially remembered it existed to recount it in person; symbolic embodiment also sets fictional or mythical creations in communicable form.

And here we come to the crux of the matter. If the work of symbolic embodiment renders communicable both what we take to be fiction and what we take to be reality, both fantasy and remembered experience, what permits us to distinguish between these two realms? The most common answer to this question is drawn from our everyday ways of making such a distinction, based on our capacity to reinsert what is purported to have been experienced into the broad context of reported events — including events in which we ourselves have participated and which we may have forgotten — in order to test the coherence of its fit within this larger web. Here Husserl’s principal criterion for the distinction between remembered and fictive events proves particularly helpful: remembered experience is characterized by its fit within the larger web of *temporal* relations to which all experience is necessarily bound. Fiction in a general sense, Husserl stipulated, is unrelated to this real temporal order and, where it displays temporal structure, it does so in a separate temporal framework or, to use Husserl’s term, a “quasi-time” (*Quasi-Zeit*).<sup>11</sup> By contrast, what we take to be the reality of temporal events depends on our ability to fit them into the larger series of temporal relations in an overarching dimension of experience. Such temporal relations have little significance for fictive events which take on significance in relation to the fictive temporal worlds that they construct. Following this line of reasoning, if I am able to determine that something is fictive, it is because, in an immediate sense, I find a discrepancy between a fictive event and the spatio-temporal and conceptual order in which it purports to fit. It is evident that in eye-witness testimony, an account which claims to have perceived something which goes against the logic of the spatio-temporal order is discounted, for if a certain person was seen by a large number of people at a given time in a given place, it is impossible for him to have been in another place at the same time.

Here, however, we must go a step further and specify that this “fit” within the web of events depends precisely on the prior organization of this web in relation to a symbolic order — or better, symbolic “orders” — which the public sphere presupposes. It is here, indeed, that the pos-

<sup>11</sup>Husserl 2001: 327–54; see also Husserl 1985: 184–207.

sibility of re-inserting events into the web of the past presupposes the symbolic character of temporal, spatial, or conceptual relations in terms of which it is organized. It is symbolically mediated in the sense that there is no experience in the abstract and that, as Cassirer has pointed out, even what is taken to be the most basic kinds of spatial or temporal perception and its concrete conceptual elaboration presupposes the work of symbolic embodiment insofar as concrete unities are isolated within the flow of experience and treated as equal or unequal quanta, of greater or lesser intensity, belonging either to uniform processes or to different and incomparable orders, such as the sacred and the profane, the utilitarian and the aesthetic, the good or the reprehensible. In all such situations we invest them with a symbolic sense through which they may be meaningfully communicated to others and in terms of which the possibilities of their coherent fit into the web of reality may be explored. It is in this specific sense, therefore, that imagination shows itself to be intrinsic to the public construction of reality, but it is not for this reason that such constructions are “imaginary.”

This idea may be illustrated more clearly if we briefly examine the most ubiquitous of all prerequisites of experience — that of time perception. In dealing with time we must be wary of the categories of ordinary language which, in referring to “time” in the singular, immediately lead us to interpret it as an autonomous, uniform medium of experience. We must employ the philosopher’s skepticism concerning the persuasive power of ordinary language and inspect more closely what we mean by “time” and the “temporal web” of events. Unless we presuppose that time exists primordially as an undifferentiated *durée* in the sense of Henri Bergson which, as such, can be the basis of no articulation and of no communication, temporal relations, as soon as they are brought to awareness and divided into numerical units, are necessarily mediated by *symbols*, for they are always ordered according to some communally intelligible numbering system. Such temporal relations are further charged with symbolic meaning when they are fit into the web of time in calendar form, be it in the Christian, Jewish, or Moslem frame of temporal reference. To be remembered and publicly communicated, all events that are placed in a temporal web of relations depend on imagination in its fundamental way of situating them in the symbolic order to which they are bound. To frame this idea in more technical philosophical terms: what Kant took to be the uniform schematizing work of pure imagination in the early part of the transcendental analytic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is more comprehensively characterized — without any necessary recourse to the Kantian or neo-Kantian epistemology and

its reference to the uniform transcendental subject as the source of all meaning-constituting acts — as the work of symbolization in its broadest sense, through which embodied symbols schematize experience by organizing it, at its most fundamental level, in terms of concrete, collectively mediated modes of interpretation. It is, therefore, in terms of its concrete symbolic structure that we must conceive of the possibility of distinguishing between fiction and reality in the public world of interpretable events, persons, and things. It is in terms of this possibility also that we may approach a past which lies beyond all contemporary memory — the remote memory borrowed from the testimony of others and attested by their traces. Insofar as it speaks to us at all, it does so from out of a network of embodied symbols in relation to which we may interpret its real or fictive character. This fund or network of embodied symbols, prior to any codified tradition or historiographical elaboration, is what I would term collective memory, with which the self-interpretation of groups in each successive present must grapple.

Symbols, of course, as I have pointed out, may be understood in two principle ways: either in the broader sense, as fundamental organizing principles of experience or, in a more narrow sense, as representatives or signs of something that cannot present itself before immediate perception. If this distinction, as I conceive of it, presupposes the basic task common to all forms of symbolic embodiment lying in the collectively-mediated organization of experience, through which experience is given a communicable sense, the different articulations of the symbol, both broad and narrow, correspond to a plurality of interrelated orders in which their embodiment is engaged. This may be seen if we pursue a bit further our interpretation of the symbolic embodiment of time. In an earlier reference to the elementary ways of dividing and enumerating time, I referred to the broadest sense of the symbol as it lends schematic structure to experience to render it communicable. In this sense, to return to Chateaubriand's account of his dinner with George Washington, it is possible to fit this encounter into the larger web of events in so far as they have been recorded, in which Chateaubriand's life and that of Washington were interwoven. This, however, designates only the most fundamental and general level of succession and simultaneity in the web of events corresponding to a broad symbolic interpretation of experience. As a personal record, it might be narrated in a diary or journal. Its particular significance to a broader public, however, conveyed by Chateaubriand's evocative style, lies not only in his personal impressions of Washington in the context of his voyage to the New World but, at another level of symbolic elaboration, in his interpretation of Washington's unique role

as a statesman. Here we enter a symbolic order of another and more specific kind, in which temporal relations are not only organizing principles in the immediate web of experience but are interwoven with a scope of reflection: in the symbolic interpretation, Washington's simplicity and imposing stature were taken to be attributes of the new political regime he represented. Chateaubriand's reminiscence of Washington stimulates, as he himself recounts, a reflection on the world-historical symbol that Washington incarnated in his eyes, which Chateaubriand develops in a comparison of Washington with his contemporary, Napoleon Bonaparte:

Washington cannot be characterized, like Bonaparte, as a being rising beyond all human stature. There is nothing astonishing about his personality. Far from being engaged in a vast theatre of action . . . , he defends himself with a handful of citizens on land without fame, in the narrow circle of domestic hearths. He does not wage wars to renew the triumphs of Arbelles and Pharsalus; he does not overturn kingdoms to reward others with their remains (il ne renverse point les trônes pour en récompenser d'autres avec leurs debris.) (1951, I: 223)

Here we recognize a powerful source of the imagery — indeed a variety of “political myth” — which Chateaubriand developed in detail in the course of his narrative: he juxtaposed what he took to be the corrupt old world with the untarnished simplicity of the new, and proposed a vision of regimes and of times which, in his eyes, Bonaparte and Washington symbolically exemplified.

My purpose in relating the concept of collective memory to the symbol through the work of imagination has been twofold: first, I have argued that “memory” on a collective scale corresponds to what can be symbolically embodied and communicated; second, I have stipulated that collective remembrance in the public sphere depends upon imagination for translation into symbolic expression, yet it is not for this reason simply imaginary. Only the skeptic can deny the nuances that distinguish different articulations of the imagination and, in view of ever-present possibilities of distortion and manipulation, invariably treat remembered experiences that are communicated among vast groups as so many *fables convenues*.

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