

Māori girl with a typewriter, 1906

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ABSTRACT: This paper takes its title from a photograph held by the Alexander Turnbull Library. Recorded by Stefano Webb Photographic Studio of Christchurch, it is a studio study that falls somewhere between being a portrait, commercial illustration or candid record. The subject for the photograph - as the name reveals - is a young Māori woman sitting in front of a typewriter. Her fingertips touch the keys of the machine but her relationship to this quintessential object of the "modern" office-place is juxtaposed against surfaces that are distinctly indigenous: the woman wears a feather cloak and the typewriter is placed on another flax one. In turn this display is situated in a generic office environment. In totality the photographic is thematically and pictorially enigmatic, and we might reasonably wonder what purpose it served? In this work I conduct a comprehensive visual analysis and suggest that there may not be one main motivation behind it but a series of experiments, both conscious and unconscious to the photographer, that govern the creation and interpretation of this photograph. Central to my reading is the presence of an architectural *mise-en-scene* that organizes and activates the pictorial mystery, and so, while this does not depict an heroic architectural object it nonetheless depends upon an appreciation of how architecture might organise a photographic record.

Many photographs announce their importance because of a notable subject, historical association or a visually engaging composition. But in many more photographs the distance between an exposed shutter and an engaged viewer becomes so pronounced that significance can often be lost. So, when choosing an archival photograph to examine there will always be a compelling temptation to choose an image that announces historical importance. As I write this, the Alexander Turnbull Library has many hundreds of digitised images indexed as "architecture" from the period 1900-9 available for viewing. Many of these provide irresistible images: a startling round meeting house at Mohaka,¹ Rev George Hunter McNeur in front of the

¹ "Maori group outside the round meeting house at Mohaka" Ref: 1/2-029587-F.

Chinese temple at Round Hill, Otago, in 1903,² or Parliament Buildings draped in bunting on the death of Queen Victoria.³

These three examples present their architectural subjects with a clarity that invites iconic presentation, with their implied visual narratives, be that indigenous vernacular, bi-cultural adaptation or national funerary. They invite scholarly consideration by already illustrating a worthy topic. But what of those "other" images? The ones that present as mundane and forgettable, such as one taken by Frank A Denton, in 1907, that depicts the

² "Reverend George Hunter McNeur outside the Chinese temple at Round Hill" Otago. Ref: 1/2-019171-F.

³ "Parliament Buildings, Wellington, draped with funeral bunting on the death of Queen Victoria" Ref: 1/1-006695-G.

Albion Hotel in Wanganui.⁴ This is an architecturally-ordinary image that might have been taken in many parts of New Zealand in the decade surrounding the turn of the century. This is not to conclude that it is without historic interest - the astoundingly large dog warrants some mention - but, despite what stories we might weave around it, this is, nonetheless, not a photograph we would expect to find in a grand architectural narrative.

There are many, many photographs like that of the Albion deposited in archives around the country. It would be arrogant and presumptuous to suggest that these images hold no historic value. Indeed, it is the case

⁴ "Albion Hotel" Wanganui. Ref: 1/1-016852. Market Place borders Moutoa Garden.

that in their very ordinariness they provide important historical evidence for what is sometimes thought of as "ordinary" life. But as more and more photographs become digitised and made publicly available via text-based search engines it does seem to me that there is a genuine risk of image overload, and that faced with hundreds of options our natural default as historical researchers will be toward those photographs that evoke immediate and obvious disciplinary resonance.

But do these photographs reveal more about the world at their time of recording or the preferences and biases we bring to research in our period? Of the three photographs I named I am more than confident that each would have provided a robust armature to wind a sufficiently secure historical account around. Indeed, I know this to be the case of the Mohaka meeting house as I have alluded to it elsewhere,⁵ and I have a close colleague whose research has shown the immense value in taking temporary architectural regalia seriously.⁶ Of the Chinese temple at Round Hill I would invite a far more suitable researcher than I to trace this account as soon

⁵ Wood "An Examination of Photographic Records" pp 111-119.

⁶ McDonald "Britons in Maoriland" pp 171-196.



Figure 1: Steffano Webb Photographic Studio "Maori girl with a typewriter" (1906) Ref: 1/1-005490-G.

as possible.

But if I was to be honest with myself, I would have to say that these images drew my attention not simply for their internal qualities but because they stood out amongst the plethora of photographs available. Which is to say that they too easily became representative precisely because they aren't typical, common or archetypal. This overabundance of low hanging fruit is, I would suggest, a particularly contemporary problem for architectural historians.

The deliberate slowness of a traditional archival retrieval could be frustrating, even infuriating, but it demanded of those items found a consideration regardless of their obvious merits (or lack thereof). As archives make more and more historic photographs available online visual researchers are required to become adept at trawling through hundreds, if not thousands, of images superficially, and it seems to me that there is a genuine risk that only those photographs that present with impact stand forth. And I wonder if we, in focusing on these as the promise of a value worth the effort of textual extraction, are not simply projecting expectations onto our work that are already

far too loaded in social, cultural and historical bias to uncover anything other than a muddy reflection of our current values?

The Photograph

With that preamble done I would introduce the photograph I will be discussing here; "Maori Girl with a Typewriter, 1906" (**Figure 1**).

It would be disingenuous of me to suggest that I made any attempt at a random selection. I began this project in a familiar manner with a year bracketed search of the holdings of the Alexander Turnbull Library's online pictorial collection. This revealed the three photographs I have briefly discussed, but the search parameter of "architecture" did not produce an image that held my interest sufficiently to demand further inquiry. An open search within the period of the 1900s presented this photograph, attributed to the studio of Steffano Webb. But, as I say, there is nothing accidental in my selection. The photograph is technically-proficient presentation of an office interior that displays good tonal contrast and sharp focus. But it is the subject, as given in the title, that arrests: "Maori Girl with a Typewriter" immediately sounds like a patronizing contrast between

race and technology (how much lesser the impression might have been had the title declared "Maori Girl with Poi" or even "Unidentified Office Interior with Female Administration Worker, and Typewriter").

The implied dialectic of the old and the new, gender and machine, or race and technology, does appear as the dominant visual theme of the photograph. As the title loosely describes, a young Māori woman is pictured seated before a typewriter but after this fact it is the contrast that defines the scene. The figure is clothed in a particularly fine feather Māori cloak (kākahu) while in front of her two other kākahu appear to serve as table clothes. Placed on the centre of the first of these cloaks is a typewriter whose exposed mechanism serves to emphasise how coyly covered the human figure is, and, while her fingers are touching the machine's keys, I find it hard not to read into her concentrated facial expression some trepidation at the interaction. We can hardly believe that this is a candid snapshot into turn of the century office administration, and yet it also lacks the formality of period portraiture (or the requisite identification that gives portraiture its potency).

It is quite rare to find a photograph of Māori

that cannot be categorised as either documentation of an indigenous underclass or ethnographic portraiture of the noble savage. A third class of image that seems particular of the 1900s is that of the assimilated native in which western clothing – corsetry for the women, trousers and jackets for the men – offers a particularly repressive symbolic agency.⁷

But "Maori Girl with a Typewriter" refuses to fall into any of these camps, and for this reason alone I think it demands some consideration. Whether this examination will reveal anything of architectural worth will be found in the words that follow, but, in advance of them, I would ask if we need, or should, be too calculated when selecting visual material for analysis. I would suggest that images which promise architecture literally are those most likely to delivery on that trust in literal and predictable ways,

⁷ It is important to point out that in many of the examples of this kind the figures remain anonymous, thus suggesting that the significance of the portraiture was not as a depiction of a notable Māori figure who happened to prefer western sartorial habits, but rather that the image served political purposes as providing emblems of "successful" integration as demonstrated through the progression from native costume to European finery.

while those that test our visual acumen and evidential observation might just be the source of new understanding. If hypotheses and conclusions, evidence and argument are hard fought, then isn't that exactly as it should be?

But to begin I should at least consider that "Maori Girl with a Typewriter" takes place within a building.

The Office

We can be confident that the interior portrayed in this photograph is an office because it tells us so. While it is not completely in focus the word "OFFICE" written across the window in the background remains legible. What is significant is that we can read the signage correctly from the photographer's position, indicating that the main office lies beyond this threshold. The window itself is contained by a partition wall and the space above it suggests that the "office" has been annexed off a much larger space. Placed high in the half-wall the window does not allow a line of sight and we might presume that it serves to allow light in but that it might also introduce an air of professional expectation. Of this wall it is simply constructed and left unpainted but it

does serve to display the quality of the timber. To the right a wall mounted gas lamp is visible.

This simple fixture is consistent with the basic design known as an Argand Lamp after its inventor, Aime Argand. If this is the case then it presents as an anachronism as the Argand was a gravity fed oil lamp that was largely made redundant when kerosene, with its capillary action, was developed in the mid-nineteenth century (and thereby replacing whale oil as a fuel).

We can make some estimate concerning the overall orientation of the building from the elevated window that opens into what I am considering the office behind the partition wall. Placed high on the wall the height of the room is once more emphasised, but more importantly the brightness of the exposure here indicates a strong source of natural light which in turn makes a case that this not only an external wall but one oriented toward an open area. In other words, it indicates a street façade.

The Furniture

Overall, the interior of the room should be considered spartan. While the timber

panelling lends some warmth to the environment there is little else by way of compromise. The wall above the dado appears to be painted in a pale colour and there is little by way of ornamental or decorative addition. The only detectable concession in this regard is a flash of paisley upholstery fabric visible beneath the trailing edge of the central korowai.

Behind the cloaked figure is a small and seemingly empty bookshelf, and behind this again the turned leg of a modest table is visible. These are small details but they lend weight to an interpretation of the space as a relatively new commercial premise; one that has not yet had time to collect debris nor suffer scaring. A new business then, but of what kind?

Chairs feature in nineteenth-century portraiture. The reasons for this are varied. In the early days of photography, a chair would have added a stable platform to help accommodate long exposure times. In other situations, a chair could have accommodated the infirm, elevated status, or simply have served to layer large group portraits. And in some instances, such as that of an unidentified man photographed by William James Harding

between 1870 and 1889, the extraordinary nature of the chair completely usurps the presence of the sitter.⁸ In numerous examples chairs were used by photographers as plinths for the portraiture of children. Or, as in the case of a portrait of the Vogel family in 1921, a chair has been used as a place holder to allow the photographer to photomontage the family patriarch into the scene later.⁹

Of what we can make of the chair in the image under scrutiny it appears to combine elements of spindle-back chair construction with a bent timber top rail. While I am not confident attributing it to the French furniture manufacturer Thonet, I do think it compares to the Thonet's A9800 dining chair that entered production ca1900, or Thonet's earlier Fischel chair, of 1880.

The only other artefact in the photograph sufficiently visible to warrant examination is the screw press observable under the interior window. The screw press is a utilitarian object whose origins can be traced back to Roman use for wine and oil production in the first

⁸ Harding "Unidentified man, seated on an ornate chair" Ref: 1/4-006453-G.

⁹ See "Vogel family" Ref: 1/1-004112-G; "Vogel family" Ref: 1/1-004103-G.

century AD. However, the one depicted here can be identified with confidence as a cast iron copy press that was in production between 1860-1900. While these are often associated to the book binding industry, they were in fact widely used for making copies of handwritten letters by banks and law offices. While these were a generic instrument, the straight handle would suggest an English origin (American models were using a wheel by 1900) but otherwise specific attribution is futile.¹⁰ However, by the time this photograph was made the screw press had been replaced as a reproductive tool by the widespread adoption of carbon paper in typewriters.

Carbon paper, which is essential to the reproductive ability of the typewriter, had been invented by Italian Pellegrino Turri, in 1801, as a solution to the problem of getting ink between paper and the striking key. The first patent for carbon paper was lodged by Ralph Wedgewood in 1806 but its universal adoption for verbatim reproduction would not be fully realised until the development, in 1878, of what became the first commercially-successful typing machine, the Sholes and

¹⁰ Rhodes and Streeter *Before Photocopying* p 111.

Gidden Type-Writer.¹¹

The Typewriter

Discussion now turns to the dominant mechanical object in the photograph. It will be observed that to the left of the typewriter is a shaped metal case with a carry handle. Clearly visible on the case is the brand name Remington, and, although it is faint, the Remington logo is legible. This identifies the typewriter as a Remington Standard, with the placement of the bell to the front, and the ruler guide bar, indicating a No. 5 model.

The Remington Standard is recognised today as the first fully-modern "word machine" using a QWERTY keyboard layout and having introduced upper and lower case options through the use of a "shift" key. The No. 5 was available from 1887 and differed from earlier models due to a modified carriage that recognised the demands of the British market. The tall stature of this machine was an outcome of the striking mechanism in which

¹¹ It was the patent for this design that was sold to Densmore & Yost, who in turn forged an agreement with E. Remington and Sons who manufactured the aforementioned Type-Writer. It is an odd linguistic anachronism but when we "cc" parties into an email we are using an acronym derived from "carbon copy."

the keys were hung in a vertical "nest" and thus required a tall frame. All the Standard models presented with these slightly neo-classical proportions, like small technical temples. Between 1886 and 1898 some 15,000 No. 5s were made and, although this sounds impressive, the reality is that this model was a commercial failure for Remington and it is considered a desirable model for collectors because of this.¹² What we can say of its presence here is that it is an American typewriter that probably found its way to New Zealand through an English source.

Attribution for the typewriter's invention is credited to four Americans: Christopher Latham Scholes, Frank Haven Hall, Carlos Given and Samuel W Soule. Of this quintuplet Scholes contributed the innovation of the QWERTY keyboard. However, he was also the first to become disillusioned by their achievement and he shortly thereafter disowned his association to the Type-Writer with the missive that it looked "like a cross between a piano and a kitchen table."¹³

In our photograph an implication of this

¹² Lippman *American Typewriters* pp 177-180.

¹³ Current quoted, Jocher "The Typewriter and the Men Who Made It" p 198.

account is found in two parts. The first is the symbolism of a generational step in mechanical reproduction as coping for legal purposes shifted from reproducing written script using a screw press to producing identical versions on a typewriter. The second narrative element is apparent in the awkward placement of typewriter and figure in the middle of the room. As Scholes had seen at its inception, the typewriter presented itself as a machine uncertain of its architectural responsibility, vacillating between the mechanical poetry of a piano or the prosaic utilitarian servitude of a table. And with this dilemma it is somewhat indecisive about its spatial allocation: is it properly an instrument of legal reproduction and commercial industries, or does the intimate relationship between machine and user make it more personal and domestic?

Today we might willingly see the typewriter's digital progeny, the word processor, as necessarily belonging to both worlds. But at the turn of the century this relationship was still in negotiation. Central to this situation here is the placement of the typewriter on a culturally specific cloth.

The Kākahu

I have planted the idea that the cloaks depicted here are can be treated universally, but this is not the case. Traditional Māori clothing included a number of kākahu types that spanned between pragmatic pake (rain cloaks) to ceremonial kahu huruhuru of kiwi feather. Here the seated figure wears a feather cloak, but the two other cloaks being used to cover table surfaces are of a distinct design known as korowai.

The korowai were traditionally of flax fibre and can be easily identified by the decorative hukahuka (tassels) that would sway and ripple with the movement of the wearer.¹⁴ An example of how the korowai was worn is found in a photographic portrait attributed to William H St Clair.¹⁵ Sadly, the male figure is not identified, but the date of 1905 makes this image contemporary to the one under discussion. A similar korowai is found in William Henry Thomas Partington's portrait of Ngarangi Kaihuia, 1910.¹⁶ These two cloaks are so similar as to suggest the possibility

¹⁴ Anon. "Korowai style of cloak" np.

¹⁵ "Bearded man wearing a kakahu" St. Clair, William H. Ref: APG-2067-1/2-G.

¹⁶ Partington "Ngarangi Kaihuia wearing a tag cloak" Ref: 1/1-003113-G.

either they are the same kākahu (or made by the same hand) or that the photographers William H St Clair and William Henry Thomas Partington operated from the same studio and provided dress for portraiture.

In particular the frequency with which St Clair's Māori subjects wear indistinguishable korowai presents a real challenge to any assumption that these were items belonging to those depicted and not a part of the photographer's collection of costumes for natives.¹⁷ Whether he supplied the korowai or not, Partington's portraiture of Māori displays a predilection toward this type of cloak. In this Partington may well have been following the influence of CF Goldie in whose portraiture of Māori his subjects are

¹⁷ I would like to be clear in separating this claim for the korowai from the other artefacts evident in these portraits. While a strikingly familiar korowai recurs through Partington's images there is not such consistency to the weapons and pendants depicted. These objects are far more unique and valuable and it is beyond contention that they would have belonged to the Māori involved. At the same time, it cannot be so easily assumed about the huia feathers that often adorn figures. While they are undoubtedly rare even by 1900 their frequent reproduction in Partington's portraits suggests otherwise. Here I wonder if we find Partington using another "native" prop.

frequently wear similar korowai.

In contrast to the unpretentious korowai, the figure seated at the typewriter wears a kahu huruhuru, a feather prestige cloak. Dating such an item is best left to experts working with the actual article, but what is observable here is the use of peacock feathers in the cloak. This is not at all unusual but it does identify this as a late specimen. A cloak of this quality is not easily mistaken and yet a thorough search of New Zealand's online visual archives has not realised a comparable example. The closest is drawn once more from the work of William Henry Thomas Partington and while this is a magnificent kahu huruhuru, and includes peacock feathers, the differences between this and the one work in the photograph under review are marked. Could it be that the young Māori woman is wearing a personal item? If so, this would mark her as a personage of considerable status, and somewhat at odds with the role of typist.¹⁸

However, one small detail does present itself. Of the two korowai visible in the typist photograph, one displays the addition of a

¹⁸ Partington "Pare" Ref: 1/1-003100-G.

distinctive stitched cross-hatched panel. A remarkably comparable korowai feature is apparent in a photographic portrait by Frank J Denton, of Wanganui. A comparison of these does not provide sufficient evidence to conclude that these are one and the same, but might it add some circumstantial weight to a case of Pākehā photographers dressing Māori subjects for their portraits?¹⁹

The Typist

It is a dubious appointment, but the world's first typist is generally thought to be Lillian Scholes, daughter of the typewriter's disillusioned inventor. Since that moment it has been an accepted stereotype that the work of typing is gendered as almost exclusively female. There are exceptions here, particularly where typing has been associated to zones that have been demarked as determinedly masculine, such as in the military or myths of the male author. What would seem to distinguish the male use of a typewriter from the female typists is the issue of mobility. For men the typewriter is a portable instrument that facilitates their activities in the world at large alongside the other tools of their trade

¹⁹ Denton "Unidentified Maori woman, Wanganui region" Ref: 1/1-021015-G.

(in one version it complements a firearm, in the other a whiskey bottle). For the stereotype of the female typist, it is the reverse. The typewriter for the female worker is a large, heavy and often generic instrument that ties the professional activities of women to a highly specific, stable and hierarchical place in the world as exemplified in the open plan typing pool of mid-twentieth century business practice. This model is not universal, but the fact remains the typewriter is a device of gender division that serves, on the one side, the mobility of a heroic man producing words of significance (be those martial or fictional), while on the other side the same technology assigns a woman as anonymous worker meekly reproducing the words of others (who are probably male).²⁰

Alternatively, I might dwell on the marriage of race and machine presented in the photograph "Maori girl with a typewriter." The contrast between a modern machine (at that time), and a figure dressed in pre-industrial clothing is stark. Add to that the

²⁰ This, I would suggest, is a greater anxiety than ever before. As we choose between desktop and laptop computers, we are obliged to balance the advantages of a stable workplace against the risks of boredom predictability familiarity brings.

title. While the fingers of that photograph's eponymous figure appear to touch the typewriter keys, the title says otherwise: "Maori girl *with* a typewriter," and all the racial condescension this implies. Two other images add some weight to a claim that the activities of typewriting are not seen here as an activity suitable to Māori. The first depicts a typing class at Wellington Technical School c1900.²¹ The second displays typing class at Wanganui Technical College in 1923.²² The classes are, predictably, composed of female students. But it should also be observed that these are exclusively Pākehā students.

Naturally this reflects social biases of the day, with Māori in this period still largely associated with rural New Zealand rather than the kind of urbanised environment where the skill of typing would be valued. But this only adds to the incongruity in Stefano Webb's photograph. Are we to interpret this as an image of empowerment, or patronization?

²¹ "Typing class at the Wellington Technical School" Ref: PAColl-3271-3.

²² Denton "A group of girls, with their tutor" Ref: 1/1-016013-G.

The Photographer

To take this further it becomes necessary to test the motives of the photographer. This is true anytime photographic images are analysed. While the camera is sometimes presented as a neutral visual witness to a scene the reality is that it is as open to distortion as any other expression of reportage or art. This seems of particular importance when an image taken by a commercial photographer does not hold an obvious commercial value.

The crude facts of Webb's life are that he was born in Christchurch in 1880, and lived his entire life there. He married Beatrice Howard Buss in 1913. She thereafter bore him three sons and one daughter. He was a noted lifelong churchman and died in 1967.²³ Of his photographic profession it is thought that his career rose out of his father's amateur interest. He began working for *The Press* before establishing his own firm in Gloucester Street and soon after moving to 252 High Street, where he would remain for 50 years. Notably his ability (or connections) were such that at only 26 he was appointed official photographer to the New Zealand

²³ Steffano, Francis Paulovich Webb, 1880-1967.

International Exhibition, 1906-7. It might be concluded that Webb was a prominent man who lived a modest life dedicated to his church, his family, and his camera (probably in that order).

As a personal observation, I do not find Webb's images to be particularly interesting. His studio portraiture shows technical competency but outside the comfort of his workroom many if not most of his more images suffer in some way be it for poor focus, inconsistent exposure or obscure subject framing. One of the notable exceptions is that of his own offices in the Petersen's Building, High Street.²⁴ But the most notable aspect of Webb's work is his singular lack of interest in Māori subject matter.

Two other images from Webb's archive offer tantalising possibilities. "Desk with typewriter" promises to show the typewriter under study being used as a prop in studio catalogue shoot. But, alas, it seems more interested in the merits of the desk.²⁵ And despite superficial similarities the typewriters are different machines, with the advertising

²⁴ "Petersen's Building, 252 High Street, Christchurch" Ref: 1/1-021846-G.

²⁵ Steffano "Desk with typewriter, from Archibald Brothers, Christchurch" Ref: 1/1-005578-F.

subject being an Underwood Standard No. 5, which offered important technological advancements on the Remington Standard.

The second image, drawn from Webb's archive, is an interior recording of a small professional office.²⁶ While the resolution does not allow confirmation, the framed diploma and matched volumes of books strongly suggest a legal practice. Any expectation that this is the office of a successful lawyer is mellowed by the spartan setting with its mix and match carpet mats, naked gas light fittings and empty walls. But it is exactly this hurried occupancy that offers a resonance to "Maori girl with a typewriter." The problem is that this room contains nothing that might attribute this photograph some association other than Steffano Webb's name. Indeed, the only object that we might find particular here is a stag-themed wall clock, and that is not helpful at all.

Conclusion?

So where does that leave us? Well, even the most mundane historic photographs, when viewed with enough imaginative attention,

²⁶ Steffano "Interior of a professional's office, with reference books and diploma" Ref: 1/1-019484-G.

will reveal narratives of the past. These may not be grand stories but nonetheless such micro-histories play their part in our understanding of history. This image is no exception, but at the same time what real insights are we offered here?

Where there is an existing body of knowledge that a photograph can be historically contextualised with, we are all but guaranteed an essay that might easily pass as valuable if only because that standard has been borrowed in advance of the analysis. This approach provides assurances. It offers existing historical information to begin with, and consequentially a body of work that can be demonstrably, if modestly, contributed to. Used in this way researching historical photographs risks becoming an exercise in self-fulfilling prophecy as the image is used to find evidence for a narrative that is already in circulation. This does not mean such an approach is without merit - indeed, it has become a standard academic methodology - but it has the tendency to prefer entrenching familiar views over the vagaries of canvassing virgin territory.

This paper is an example of why visual researchers can be seduced by grand histories

already in circulation. 5,000 words after starting does "Maori Girl with a typewriter, 1906" offer anything more by way of an architectural understanding? If not, then this work suffers a fate worse than familiarity: that of intellectual indulgence. This, I would suggest, is an anxiety that stalks interpretative analysis. The hard sciences embrace the idea of a null hypothesis in which an experiment fails and a hypothesis is proved wrong, and yet the research remains valuable for the fact of removing uncertainty. But in the so-called "soft sciences" failure is usually a sign of failure.

So, at this point I am obliged to admit failure in this experiment. A conclusion is lacking. But perhaps that is okay if we appreciate that visual analysis as often an exercise in observation, inspiration and association, and we feel comfortable letting images open new, incomplete narratives, and not just iterating existing ones?

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