Researching without representation? Language and materiality in post-qualitative methodology

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Researching without representation? Language and materiality in post-qualitative methodology

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The article imagines a materially informed post-qualitative research. Focusing upon issues of language and representation, under the influence of Deleuze's *Logic of Sense*, it argues for research practices capable of engaging the materiality of language itself. It proposes the development of *non- or post-representational* research practices, drawing on contemporary materialist work that rejects the static, hierarchical logic of representation, and practices such as interpretation and analysis as conventionally understood. The article explores the ontological and the practical implications of this state of affairs, via a re-reading of a fragment of what would have been called data. Offering relief from the *ressentiment* and piety that have characterised qualitative methodologists' engagements with scientific method, the 'post' could therefore be read as signalling the demise of qualitative research. Or at least, as inaugurating a qualitative research that would be unrepresentable to itself.

Keywords: post-qualitative research; new materialism; language and representation; Deleuze

Preamble

I want to pursue the possibility of a materially informed post-qualitative research.

Focusing upon issues of language and representation, I argue for research practices that would be capable of engaging the materiality of language itself – its material force and its entanglements in bodies and matter – and wonder what such practices could consist of. I argue that materialist research must involve *non- or post-representational* thought and methods, drawing on contemporary materialist theories that reject the hierarchical logic of representation. Representational thinking still regulates much of what would be considered qualitative research methodology. This needs to change.

The article is written under the particular influence of Deleuze's (2004) *Logic of Sense*, as it is in this work that Deleuze comes closest to a philosophy of language, in its doubled relation to the materiality of bodies and the incorporeality of thought. Deleuze identified something wild in language: something that exceeds propositional meaning and resists the laws of representation. Deleuze called it *sense*, this non-representing, unrepresentable, 'wild element' in language. Sense is important for a materialist methodology because it works as a sort of 'mobius strip' between language and the world (Deleuze, 2004, p. 23). Sense 'happens to bodies and …

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insists in propositions' (p. 142), allowing them to resonate and relate, while never being reducible to either 'side' of that old duality that separates the material world from the words that putatively represent it.

Like several other articles in this special issue, this one is indebted to work that has begun to incur the label of 'new materialism' (Hird, 2009) or 'new empiricism' (Clough, 2009). This work is theoretically diverse, though many theorists share an allegiance to feminist thought and practice. But it is united in its insistence on the significance of materiality in social and cultural practices. The new materialisms work across boundaries of science and the social, nature and culture. All, in their various ways, contest the notion of nature as merely the inert scenery against which the humanist adventures of culture are played out. Science can no longer be thought, therefore, as the bad other or the big brother of qualitative research. On the one hand, this promises some relief from the *ressentiment* and piety that have often characterised qualitative methodologists' engagements with the supremacist ambitions of scientific method, locking us into years of unedifying jousting and justification.[1] However, a materialist ontology also challenges the status of qualitative research *per se*, since boundaries between qualitative and quantitative cannot stand. The 'post' could therefore be read as signalling the demise of qualitative research. Or at least, as inaugurating a qualitative research that would be unrepresentable to itself.

The materialist critique of representation

The critique of representation as the dominant image of thought is a key element of Deleuze's philosophy. For Deleuze (e.g. 1994) representational thought is 'sedentary', categorical and judgemental. It is the enemy of difference, movement, change and the emergence of the new. Pure difference, 'difference in itself' is 'crucified' by representation, Deleuze (1994, p. 174) writes – trussed up and pinned in place by its 'quadripartite fetters, under which only that which is identical, similar, analogous, or opposed can be considered difference'. Representation serves the 'dogmatic image of thought' as that which categorises and judges the world through the administration of good sense and common sense, dispensed by the autonomous, rational and well-intentioned individual, according to principles of truth and error.

Many new materialist writers – significantly for my arguments here – have been especially critical of the 'linguistic turn' in post-structural theory, detecting a pervasive 'representationalism' that has rendered material realities inaccessible behind the linguistic or discourse systems that purportedly construct or 'represent' them – even when the express intention has been to deconstruct that material-discursive binary (cf. Barad, 2007; Hekman, 2010; Rouse, 2002).[2]

The critique of representation does not deny that it does indeed happen, and that its cultural, ideological and symbolic productions form a legitimate focus for research. The logic of representation is, after all, 'the structuring process that constructs a liveable world around us… [producing] stable meaning and stable subjects to exchange it' (Lecercle, 2002, p. 60). But representation is seen as a second-order intervention, a kind of 'stop-operation' or 'back-formation' in Massumi's (2002) terms, that creates structure and stasis out of movement and proliferation. In place of the hierarchy of representation, therefore, materialist ontologies prefer a 'flattened' logic (DeLanda, 2002; Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010) where discourse and

matter are mutually implicated in the unfolding emergence of the world. Different theorists have found different words for this non-hierarchical organisation: assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004); entanglement (Barad, 2007); mangle (Hekman, 2010; Pickering, 1995); manifold (DeLanda, 2002); actor network (Latour, 2007). Lecercle (2002, p. 54), writing of the Deleuzian assemblage, calls it a 'logic of unholy mixtures'.

In these flat and proliferated assemblages, the world is not held still and forever separate from the linguistic or category systems that 'represent' it. Language is deposed from its god-like centrality in the construction and regulation of wordly affairs, to become one element in a manifold of forces and intensities that are moving, connecting and diverging. 'In assemblages', Deleuze wrote, 'you find states of things, bodies, various combinations of bodies, hodgepodges; but you also find utterances, modes of expression, and whole regimes of signs' (2007, p. 177). Words collide and connect with things on the same ontological level, and therefore language cannot achieve the distance and externality that would allow it to represent – i.e. to stand over, stand for and stand in for – the world. In place of the representational 'logic of INSTEAD', things relate in the material-discursive manifold in a 'logic of AND' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004; Lecercle, 2002).

Moreover, the subject is radically decentred in the collective assemblage of enunciation. Utterances do not come from 'inside' an already-constituted speaking subject. Language, already collective, social and impersonal, pre-exists 'us', and my voice comes from elsewhere: 'the collective assemblage is always like the murmur from which I take my proper name, the constellation of voices, concordant or not, from which I draw my voice' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 93).

The materialist critique of representation has radical implications for qualitative methodology. It would no longer allow us to work under the auspices of common sense wielded by responsibly autonomous human subjects (aka well-trained qualitative researchers). We would no longer be able to appeal to a fundamentally good sense guiding wise judgement in the arbitration of categories and hierarchies, and the detection of error. Such wise judgements, based on the representational 'fetters' of identity, similarity, analogy and opposition, underpin the analytic enterprise as conceived in many methods textbooks and in our everyday habits as researchers: *this is like that (so we will call it a theme); that is an example of this; this belongs under that code; this is a metaphor for that; this is a sub-category; this interviewee is not saying what she really thinks*.

The materialist critique of representation would also confound *interpretation*, to the extent that this implies a critical, intentional subject standing separate and outside of 'the data', digging behind or beyond or beneath it, to identify higher order meanings, themes or categories. This again is the logic of representational thought, operating under the 'logic of instead': *instead* of multiple instances, interpretation substitutes patterns or meanings.

This calls into question the very notion of what will count as 'data', and of our relation to those data. In a materialist ontology, data cannot be seen as an inert and indifferent mass waiting to be in/formed and calibrated by our analytic acumen or our coding systems. We are no longer autonomous agents, choosing and disposing. Rather, we are obliged to acknowledge that data have their ways of making themselves intelligible to us. This can be seen, or rather felt, on occasions when one becomes especially 'interested' in a piece of data – such as a sarcastic comment in an interview, or a perplexing incident, or an observed event that makes you feel

kind of peculiar. Or some point in the pedestrian process of 'writing up' a piece of research where something not-yet-articulated seems to take off and take over, effecting a kind of quantum leap that moves the writing/writer to somewhere unpredictable. On those occasions, agency feels distributed and undecidable, as if we have chosen something that has chosen us.

The emergence of sense: what happens when the data 'glows'

In a previous article, I described that kind of encounter in terms of the data beginning to 'glow'. I will be crass enough to quote myself, and at some length too, because the quotation seems to me now, meeting it again in a different place and time (indeed a different assemblage) to be 'about' sense. I want to try to use the passage therefore as a way of sidling closer to the notion of what sense might involve, without trying to define it or to paraphrase the arguments in *Logic of Sense*. The passage below describes how data fragments would sometimes seem to glow during team meetings of four researchers, as we gathered to analyse video recordings and fieldnotes from a project on challenging behaviour in UK early years classrooms (involving children aged 4–5 years):

> [S]ome detail – a fieldnote fragment or video image – starts to glimmer, gathering our attention. Things both slow down and speed up at this point. On the one hand, the detail arrests the listless traverse of our attention across the surface of the screen or page that holds the data, intensifying our gaze and making us pause to burrow inside it, mining it for meaning. On the other hand, connections start to fire up: the conversation gets faster and more animated as we begin to recall other incidents and details in the project classrooms, our own childhood experiences, films or artwork that we have seen, articles that we have read. And it is worth noting in passing that there is an *affective* component (in the Deleuzian sense) to this emergence of the example. The shifting speeds and intensities of engagement with the example do not just prompt thought, but also generate sensations resonating in the body as well as the brain – frissons of excitement, energy, laughter, silliness. (MacLure, 2010, p. 282)

At the time of writing that passage, the glow was described in terms of affect. Returning to it now (or being pulled back to it) I would not want to dismiss that reading.[3] But, under the intervening influence of *The Logic of Sense*, it strikes me now as an account of the emergence of sense in encounters with data. The glow seems to invoke something abstract or intangible that exceeds propositional meaning, but also has a decidedly embodied aspect. The passage thus calls up the double-sided, material-linguistic status of sense, 'resonating in the body as well as the brain'. This body-mind doubling also inhabits the word 'frisson' itself. Indeed both *glow* and *frisson* seem to me to be words that insinuate the action of 'sense'. Deleuze does not provide any single definition of sense, and in any case, conventional definitions would strictly be invalid, since to define is to return to the logic of representation, where words 'refer' to entities as if these were separate and distinct from one another. He does move though various images and formulations, including 'pure difference' and the mobius strip mentioned above: that is, a line whose two 'sides' are in fact a single surface. One cannot afford to come to rest for too long on a single alternate word that would risk 'standing for' sense. Williams (2008, p. 33) attempts a variety of approximate descriptions of sense, the most extended of which is: 'forms of significance resistant to fact-based and meaning-based analysis' (where 'significance' contrasts with the logico-grammatical operations of 'signification').

The quotation also presents the emergence of the glow as something not under our conscious or intentional control as analysts: the grammar assigns agency to the detail that arrests our gaze and makes us pause; the connections that start to fire up; the conversation that gets faster and more animated. Sense, for Deleuze (like the chronologically later concept of the assemblage) is pre-personal and pre-conscious. It also belongs to the realm of the virtual – that is, the region of potentialities, real but abstract, outside of determinate time and space, that may or may not be actualised in specific forms, according to chance alignments and divergences within series (see below) that are not within our control.

The passage also conjures a certain 'event-ness' – the glow as a kind of 'surface effect', to use one of Deleuze's terms, of something that is befalling us. As noted, the account also inhabits a virtual space: the glow is described as singular, but not (yet) attached to specific instances. These are characteristics of the 'pure' event – i.e. the event as virtuality 'prior to its spatio-temporal realization in a state of affairs' (Deleuze, 2004, p. 25). For Deleuze, sense and the pure event are one and the same, or perhaps two and the same. He writes, 'We will not ask therefore what is the sense of the event: the event is sense itself' (p. 25). Sometimes Deleuze uses the hyphenated 'sense-event' to register its duality as the 'boundary between propositions and things', that which is expressed in propositions and attributed to states of affairs. 'This flat world of the sense-event', he writes… (p. 25). We cannot master sense or the event: 'To the extent that events are actualised within us, they wait for us and invite us in' (p. 169). As the passage above suggests, in the research relation with data, we must be invited in.

I think there is also a suggestion in the passage above of being caught up in the forward momentum of *becoming* – of matters spooling out without a predetermined destination. This opening to becoming is the reason that sense matters: while the coding and categorising of data can reveal patterns and regularities, this is a retroactive, knowledge-producing operation that makes things stand still, and the price of the knowledge gained is the risk of closure and stasis (cf. MacLure, 2013). Sense is important for its potential to trigger action in the face of the unknown. In order to achieve this, we must be able to 'counter-actualize' the event that befalls us. In typically difficult language, Deleuze describes this as a matter of 'attaining [the] will that the event creates in us; of becoming the quasi-cause of what is produced within us' (2004, p. 169). I envisage this, loosely and imperfectly, as a kind of 'surfing' of the intensity of the event that has caught us up, in order to arrive somewhere else.

Finally, though this is only implicit in the above passage, sense is about resistance and perplexity: it transpires at points at which 'the data' resist analysis, refuse to render up meaning, and confound 'good sense' or 'common sense', which as noted is always associated by Deleuze with the banal violence of ordinary, representational language. The glow described above always appears around singular points – 'bottlenecks, knots and foyers' (Deleuze, 2004, p. 63) – that involve a loss of mastery over language (and ultimately, over ourselves, as described above). In the project described above this happened, for instance, as we puzzled over Hannah, aged 5, who would not, or could not, utter her name during the morning ritual of taking the register (MacLure, Holmes, Jones, & Macrae, 2010). Hannah's silence (but was it 'hers'?) sparked a kind of rage for explanation and meaning, as everyone sought to know *why* Hannah remained mute; what might have *caused* her silence; what it *meant*; whether or not it was *intentional*. In other words, what the silence *represented*. The disconcerting force of Hannah's silence was eventful: it moved outward

in concentric circles to affect all those in her ambit – class teacher, classmates, other school staff, parents, and of course we too as researchers. The undecidable nature of Hannah's silence, hanging in some threshold between language and something else, brought interpretation to a standstill in a blizzard of unanswered questions.[4]

This happened periodically during that research project: a point at which interpretation seemed to falter or stutter, turning the rage for meaning back on itself in a kind of vibrating immobility. It is notable, at least in retrospect, how many of these instances occurred at the boundaries of language and the body. Another example concerned a child who had started to vomit each day as lunch time approached. Again, the school staff, and we ourselves, attempted to bring the vomiting, and the child, into the scheme of representation, assuming that it, or she, must 'mean' something. Everyone wanted the vomiting to be codable – a sign of something else: 'attention seeking'; 'immaturity'; 'lax parenting'; 'timidity'… But like Hannah's silence, the vomiting remained a point of indetermination between the materiality of the body and the abstraction of meaning, quivering with the emotional intensities of sense, refusing to offer itself up either as signification or as 'mere' bodily process (see also MacLure, 2011).

Moments such as these, where bodily matters simultaneously demand and defy translation into codes and significations, expose the workings of representation in education and research. Children's actions and affects are fixed and tagged as instances of something else – such as 'behaviour'. But these moments also frustrate the workings of representation and expose the limits of rationality's reductive explanations. They push us to consider how the material world 'intra-acts' with children (Barad, 2007), as with all of us, in ways that do not necessarily pass through language in its 'ordinary' appearances, but instead manifest in and as sense.

The status of language within a Deleuzian/materialist research methodology

I think that there is more work to be done on the status of language itself within a materialist research practice. Perhaps the shock of the altered status of language within a materialist ontology has not yet been fully felt. In the materialist-discursive assemblage, mangle or manifold, we surely cannot expect language to work in the old ways that were given by discourse or constructionist theories. Or at least, not only in those ways. Deleuze's *Logic of Sense* urges a radically different view of language, one which does not see language as belonging on one side of two already distinct realms – discourse and matter – that will connect in the mangle. Rather, language is the 'metaphysical surface' (2004, p. 278) on which the very distinction between words and things is played out.

It is not just that language is 'demoted' from its imperial position as mediator of the world. It is that language itself, within a materialist conceptualisation, ought to be so fundamentally changed as to become almost unrecognisable. Thinking specifically of the language(s) of research: a materially engaged language would, as outlined above, be non-representational, non-interpretive, a-signifying, a-subjective, paradoxical and embroiled with matter. A reading of data as sense-event might represent a starting point. But we also, I think, need to find ways of researching and thinking that are able to engage more fully with the materiality of language itself – the fact that language is in and of the body; always issuing from the body; being impeded by the body; affecting other bodies. Yet also, of course, always leaving the body, becoming immaterial, ideational, representational, a striated,

collective, cultural and symbolic resource. But this collective space is itself cut and crossed by vectors, lines of flight that escape the grids of representation that capture meaning, to open onto the new (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004).

Qualitative research is heavily invested in language practices: interviews, field-notes, focus groups, conversations, seminars, monographs, scholarly papers, etc. But conventional forms of analysis frequently find the bodily entanglements of language troublesome or trivial, focusing instead, as discussed above, on the ideational and cultural aspects of utterances (spoken or written) – what they mean; whether they are true, valid or consistent; whether they can be generalised to other contexts; whether they are collectable and codable under overarching themes, categories or ideas; how well arguments hold together; how power and subjectivity are constructed and negotiated.

Method is much less assured in dealing with quasi-linguistic stuff such as Hannah's silence, and all the tears, sneers, sighs, silences, sniffs, laughter, snot, twitches or coughs that are part of utterances. Interview transcripts seldom record what eyebrows, hands, shoulders or crossed legs are doing, and if they do attend to such features, the aim is usually to point to what they 'mean' – that is, to bring them within the compass of representation.[5] And fieldnotes certainly cannot register the body's autonomic responses in the unfolding scenario – the slowing or speeding of the pulse, the spasms of the bowel, the changes in skin conductivity and the dilation of the pupils. I am not suggesting that these things should be registered, at least within qualitative methodology as currently formulated. But they are instances of bodily incursions into language that pose a challenge for qualitative method. Rather than fleeing from the challenge, or trying to dissolve it by recruiting it to representation, we might welcome the event that it inaugurates.

Equally, there seems to be a kind of method anxiety concerning the feelings and sensations that circulate in and amongst the language of research encounters – for example, when we sense humour, mockery, disgust, fascination, unease or resistance, in ourselves or others. These sensations, in their queasy mixtures of body and mind, are problematic for any form of analysis that is looking for generalities, patterns, themes or meanings. Analysis either prefers to turn away as if these things were not happening or did not matter, or else treats them as impedimenta – as obstacles to the production of good data, clear ideas, or trustworthy accounts. Indeed, it is just at these moments – when the sensations and intensities that haunt the research scene are noticed – that method kicks in, to diagnose and treat them as instances of 'bias', 'impression management', poor interview technique, etc. Again, what appears to be troublesome for qualitative method is the manifestation of the body in the cerebral work of research. One could argue, indeed, that one of the main functions of method is to contain, manage or forget the bodily entanglements of language, so that it can be freed to represent.

Perhaps qualitative method wants its participants, both researchers and 'subjects', to be *angels*. Lecercle (2002, p. 85), commenting on the critique of linguistics by Deleuze and Guattari, writes that the 'scientific' study of language 'needs, and recognises, only angels'. Speakers need no bodies, no unconscious, no social fabrication or historical entanglements, in order to function as the mere emitters of signals or carriers of linguistic universals. Lecercle (2002, p. 87) elaborates:

> The reduction of the speaker to an angel, and of the situation of communication to a
> polite conversation between angels in Heaven inevitably turns langue (*sic*) into a

normal, what [Deleuze and Guattari] call a 'standard', form of language: angels do not speak dialects, they do not have a social or regional accent or lexicon. And, Heaven being a place of unspeakable boredom, much in need of a serpent to make it interesting, angels are no poets, in spite of their lyres.

We need to tangle with the materiality of language if we are to avoid recreating the boring, bloodless angels conjured in traditional linguistics and, I would add, conventional qualitative method.[6]

Sense and the event are superficial – of the surface. We must avoid the airy inefficacy of the bloodless angels that inhabit the heights of scientific rationality. But we must also, cautions Deleuze, avoid the abject allure of *depth*. 'Depth is no longer a compliment', writes Deleuze. 'Only animals are deep, and they are not the noblest for that: the noblest are the flat animals' (2004, p. 12). *Logic of Sense* was written under the influence of Lewis Carroll and Alice's Adventures, and Deleuze finally locates the logic of sense, not in the underground lair reached by the descent into the rabbit hole, but in Alice's 'climb to the surface' in the second volume of her adventures, and her transversal movements through the flat terrains of the looking glass and the chess board, and her encounters with depthless figures such as the playing cards.

Qualitative inquiry might stop looking for depth and hoping for height. It might work instead with, and within, the flat topology of *events* which, according to Deleuze (2004, p. 12), 'are like crystals, they become and grow only out of the edges, or on the edge'. Analysis, if we still want to call it that, might be a matter of alertness to the mobius strip of sense/nonsense that runs through Deleuze's two primary series, bodies and language, focusing on instances where that frontier line between the two can almost be glimpsed as it rises to the surface. Hannah's silence and the vomiting child, mentioned above, are two such events. Others have been there already, of course. Deleuze found many instances in Lewis Carroll, including the 'Gardener's song' in Carroll's late work, *Sylvie and Bruno*, whose stanzas crop up intermittently throughout the tale, always bringing together 'two heterogeneous series', one of which comprises bodies or objects that eat or can be eaten and have a decisive physicality; the other composed of symbolic and linguistic entities. At the end of each stanza the Gardener 'draws a melancholic path' between the two series; 'for this song', Deleuze (2004, p. 32) concludes, 'is its own story':

He thought he saw an Elephant

    That practiced on a fife:

He looked again, and found it was

    a letter from his wife.

'At length I realize,' he said,

    'The bitterness of life'.

In place of the incorporeal angel or the stolid corporeality of the animal, Deleuze commends the stammerer – a figure who must slide and lurch from one resting point on the surface of language to the next. 'The first secret of the stammerer…: no longer to sink, but to slide the whole length in such a way that the old depth

no longer exists at all, having been reduced to the other side of the surface' (2004, p. 12).

It is difficult, of course, not to sink into the old habits of humanism and hubris that promise some kind of depleted mastery over the world through the dogmatic exercise of methodological good sense and common sense. St. Pierre (2011, p. 620), in her map of the possible contours of post-qualitative research, writes of how difficult it is to 'escape the "I"', even for those who have committed to the post-structural dismantling of that humanist subject. Part of the reason why qualitative research tends to collapse back into such positions is, I suspect, associated with our failure to engage fully with the materiality of language and its challenge to the workings of representation.

Notes

1. See Lather (2010) and St Pierre (2011) for critical discussions of the dispiriting effects of these encounters with science-based research and evidence-based policy and practice. I have entered that fray more than once myself: see for example MacLure (2005).
2. 'Language' and 'discourse' are not synonymous: especially within post-structural theory, discourse is not reducible to a matter of words or linguistic phenomena. It is, however, also the case that language and discourse are often conflated – for instance in the very notion of the 'linguistic turn', which is as much about discourse as it is about linguistics. This conflation is also seen in Susan Hekman's materialist critique, in her rather broad use of the term 'linguistic constructionism' as an umbrella term for the diverse post-structural or discourse theories that, in her view, prioritise discourse at the expense of materiality. My concern in this paper is with language, rather than discourse, as far as this distinction holds up.
3. They are not necessarily distinct readings in any case. DeLanda (2002) makes the point that Deleuze moves through different terminologies as his *oeuvre* progresses. DeLanda traces some links and discontinuities across key concepts.
4. In the article which explored Hannah's silence (MacLure et al., 2010), we found a connection to Melville's novella, *Bartleby the Scrivener*. However, at the time I was not familiar with Deleuze's own reading of this text, which construes Bartleby as an *event*, on account of the indecipherability of his 'formulaic' repetition of 'I would prefer not to'. It is tempting to read this dislocated connection between the time of the first article and of this present text as another instance of the event lying in wait.
5. Even tears, after all, are classifiable. Nelson (2000) classified adult crying into types such as 'healthy crying', 'crying for no reason' and 'prolonged or frequent crying associated with depression', together with types of 'inhibited crying' such as 'healthy tearlessness' and 'detached tearlessness', relating these to attachment styles and symptoms of clinical disorders.
6. Lecercle's angels are clearly a different species from the transgressive, perplexing annunciators of postmodernity, delineated most strikingly in my view by Lather and Smithies (1997) in their powerful and moving work on women living with HIV and AIDS. I would not wish to denigrate the power of the angel as a productive figure for postmodernism, but merely note here that – as Milton wrote many centuries ago – angels may play for more than one side.

Notes on contributor

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