



## SYMPOSIUM: CORPORATE POWER AND LOCAL DEMOCRACY: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND STRATEGIES

### From Carbon Democracy to Carbon Rebellion: Countering Petro-Hegemony on the Frontlines of Climate Justice

**Theo LeQuesne**  
University of California at Santa Barbara  
[tlequesne@ucsb.edu](mailto:tlequesne@ucsb.edu)

#### Abstract

*This essay combines salient instances of climate justice activism in key battlegrounds against the fossil fuel industry in the United States and Canada with theoretical interventions in studies of corporate power, grassroots democracy, and counter hegemony. It explores Timothy Mitchell's carbon democracy and the term's relevance to understanding the conditions in which climate justice activists must combat the entrenched interests of fossil fuel companies. It suggests that carbon democracy is a helpful concept for understanding how fossil fuel dependency both shapes and distorts democratic governance. Drawing upon insights in three case studies—activism against Chevron in Richmond California, the Water Protectors and the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock, and the First Nations-led fight against the Trans Mountain Pipeline in British Columbia—the essay supplements carbon democracy with two more terms: Petro-Hegemony and Carbon Rebellion. These reveal three power relations, namely consent, compliance, and coercion, upon which fossil fuel companies depend and in which climate justice activists must strategically intervene to move beyond conditions of carbon democracy. I show that dual power is a logic of strategic intervention that climate justice activists are successfully using to intervene in all three of these relations to reign in corporate power and assert their own sovereignty.*

**Keywords:** Petro-Hegemony; Carbon democracy; Climate justice; Blockadia; Social movements



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Responding to the global climate crisis and the equally urgent environmental injustices of local fossil fuel expansion, indigenous peoples, environmental justice activists, and grassroots democracy advocates have converged in what Naomi Klein famously calls *Blockadia*.<sup>1</sup> Their goal is to keep fossil fuels in the ground and advance a *just transition* away from extractive economics (2014).

On August 30<sup>th</sup> 2018, the Canadian Federal Court of Appeals “quashed”<sup>2</sup> permits for the Trans Mountain pipelines’ bid to carry diluted bitumen<sup>3</sup> from the Alberta Tar Sands through unceded First Nations’ territory to the southern coast of British Columbia (Nickel 2018). Just a year and half earlier, the Standing Rock Sioux and their allies—acting in the North American Indigenous traditions of “Water Protectors”—made their last stand against the “black snake” in what amounted to a military invasion of Sioux territory in the Dakotas. Their encampment, *Oceti Sakowin*, which had once housed thousands who gathered together in peace and prayer, was violently dismantled, the blockades dispersed, and the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) completed beneath the Missouri River (Levin 2017). Two years before that, the Richmond Progressive Alliance (RPA) swept aside over 100 years of Chevron’s influence on the Richmond city council in a stunning victory for grassroots organizers and activists campaigning against the company’s proposed refinery upgrade (McLaughlin 2018). These three fights have become some of the most salient examples of climate justice activism in the United States and Canada that showcase developments in the relationships between corporate power, local democracy, and grassroots climate justice activism.

This essay develops upon Timothy Mitchell’s term, *carbon democracy*, and how it illuminates one of the processes through which corporate power captures and perverts democratic institutions at local, national and global scales (2011). With a focus on dual power, this essay also examines one of the logics of intervention climate justice activists are using to reclaim and reshape democratic institutions while asserting community and/or Indigenous sovereignty outside those

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<sup>1</sup> Blockadia, as Klein explains, “is not a specific location on a map but rather a roving transitional conflict zone that is cropping up with increasing frequency and intensity wherever extractive projects are attempting to dig and drill,” and, I would add, transport or refine fossil fuels (2014, 254).

<sup>2</sup> The result came after a long legal battle between the pipeline company (Kinder Morgan), the Federal Canadian government, and the National Energy Board on the one hand and several First Nations and Environmental Non-Governmental Organization on the other, in which the plaintiffs appealed the government’s decision to approve the pipeline permits. The Federal Court of Appeals found that the company, the National Energy Board, and the Canadian government had failed in their duties to meaningfully consult with First Nations and carry out a full Environmental Impact Review. The court revoked the pipeline permits and recommended the government redo the permitting process.

<sup>3</sup> Tar sands oil is particularly viscous and needs to be diluted before it can be transported by pipeline.

institutions. Paying close attention to the experiences of the First Nations-led<sup>4</sup> fight against the Kinder Morgan corporation's Trans Mountain Extension pipeline (TMX), the Water Protector's struggle with DAPL, and the environmental justice victories won against Chevron in Richmond, California, I develop two more terms: *petro-hegemony* and the *carbon rebellion*. I use these to study the strategic interventions in relations of power that corporate actors and grassroots activists deploy to advance their respective agendas. I have found that strategic intervention through the carbon rebellion framework often operates according to the logics of dual power, while the fossil fuel industry's interventions through petro-hegemony are dependent upon dynamics contained within Mitchell's carbon democracy. Synthesizing the insights that emerged out of these struggles for climate justice, this essay offers carbon rebellion as a practical theoretical framework through which future scholar-activists might develop further strategies that confront the entrenched influence of the fossil fuel industry over democracy and the decisions that guide our lives.

### **Carbon Democracy and Petro-Hegemony**

Fossil fuels have made contemporary consumer capitalism both materially and ideologically possible (Huber 2013; Barrett and Worden 2014; Appel, Mason and Watts 2015). The United States is now the world's largest producer of oil and gas while Canada is home to the second largest oil reserves in the world (Bridge and LeBillon 2017). These two nominally democratic states are crucial regions of the world in which the climate justice movement and its campaigns to keep fossil fuels in the ground operate. In terms of world-systems analysis and climate politics, these two states are key battlegrounds in which curtailing the fossil fuel economy has global implications. Carbon democracy describes the intricate symbiosis of a particular kind of modern democratic politics and fossil fuel energy, and helps us make sense of the implications of their relationship in Blockadia. While carbon democracy is a condition that fashions and is fashioned by a particular type of purportedly "democratic" society, it is also a perversion of democracy that facilitates the corporate capture of institutions of government (Mitchell 2011).

Through carbon democracy, supposedly democratic societies, the United States and Canada prominent amongst them, have come to *count on* fossil fuel revenue, energy, and products to make promises to their citizens, manage their citizenry's material and political expectations, and ultimately uphold the legitimacy of their governance. This kind of democratic formation that is dependent on fossil fuels sets the political conditions that define carbon democracy. Mitchell explains that, "the leading industrialized countries are also oil states. Without the energy they derive from oil their current forms of political and economic life would not exist" (2011: 6). Yet,

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<sup>4</sup> The Union of British Columbian Indian Chiefs, and leaders amongst the Tsleil Waututh, Musqueam, and Squamish, Secwepemc First Nations are some of the pipeline's most vocal opponents.

the corporate capture and perversion of these democracies is endemic precisely because the energy they derive from fossil fuels is what makes their political formation possible. Securing access to fossil fuels becomes a strategically vital function of democratic governance and, in so becoming, this strategic imperative paradoxically undermines democratic governance. If access to cheap and abundant fossil fuels is curtailed, democratic governments' ability to reproduce the ways of life to which their citizens have become ideologically and materially accustomed enters a crisis of legitimacy. Reproducing the kind of democratic formations Mitchell describes therefore mandates highly undemocratic energy policy and decision-making.

This paradox illuminates the simultaneous capture and perversion of democratic governance and the ways fossil fueled interests are reproduced to maintain a corrupted democratic formation in Blockadia. However, carbon democracy also has limited explanatory capacity, as it tends to only signify democratic *governance*, whereas, the influence of fossil fuels goes far deeper than governance. Moreover, democracy itself is a frame that often encompasses not only governance but social movements, culture and values, economic relations, and a great deal more. Petro-hegemony, therefore, is a term I use to supplement carbon democracy with a broader understanding of the power of fossil fuel companies in nominally democratic states. While carbon democracy is the broader framework under which petro-hegemony operates, we can understand the climate justice movement's confrontation with the fossil fuel industry in hegemonic terms (Haluza-DeLay and Carter 2016; Adkin and Stares 2016). Elsewhere, I've argued for a reading of hegemony that recognizes its being constituted not just by the relation of consent, but by a synthesis and balancing relations of consent, coercion, and—I add to Antonio Gramsci's original formulation—compliance (LeQuesne 2018; see also Day 2016). Together, these three power relations are organized through petro-hegemony to maintain and extend carbon democracy's longevity.

Through petro-hegemony, the fossil fuel industry produces conditions of consent to its operations by disseminating and reinforcing favorable narratives and public discourses that shape “common sense.” Where it loses consent, it represses or circumvents dissent through its access to the coercive resources of the state, such as legislation, regulatory agencies, or militarized police forces. And finally, by blurring the distinction between consent and coercion, the industry manufactures compliance by structuring economic dependency upon its product, tax revenue, and jobs. These are all considered legitimate modes of intervention under conditions of carbon democracy. Placing petro-hegemony under the broader framework of carbon democracy thus illuminates the strategic interventions that fossil fuel companies are able to deploy to advance their interests in purportedly democratic governance systems that have been captured by fossil fueled interests.

In different ways, the politics defining all three examples of Blockadia activism outlined in the introduction illustrate how petro-hegemony operates under conditions of carbon democracy,

particularly when carbon democracy is threatened by limitations on access to fossil fuels. Curtailing access to fossil fuels produces a crisis of legitimacy in carbon democracy that can only be overcome by reestablishing and securing said access. Governments operating under conditions of carbon democracy are faced with a strategic imperative to open up access to fossil fuel companies even when this has undemocratic consequences. In this way strategic intervention through petro-hegemony may deploy coercion and yet be considered legitimate under the terms of carbon democracy. Invoking the United States' long legacy of colonial dispossession, the confrontation at Standing Rock demonstrated the extent to which the interests of contemporary governance and industry converge to produce strategies that operate through petro-hegemony. Where consent to the industry's operations are challenged, and particularly where Indigenous communities are concerned, state-sanctioned coercion is deployed to secure access to this strategic asset and assert "Energy Dominance" (Intercept 2018).

Carbon democracy's entanglement with fossil fuels are highly visible in Canada too. There, First Nations' assertions of sovereignty and allies' activism has blocked the completion of a number of tar sands pipeline projects. As TMX met with this sophisticated resistance, Kinder Morgan corporation representatives claimed that "radical activists" and the British Columbian government had conspired to create political conditions in which it was impossible to build the pipeline and abandoned the project (Cryderman and Baily 2018). After weeks of closed-door negotiations, the Federal Canadian government stepped in and spent billions of dollars of public money to buy the project from Kinder Morgan, arguing that exporting tar sands remained a strategic priority and "in the national interest" (Hall 2018; Austin 2018). Ensuring cheap and easy access to fossil fuels, even in the context of looming climate catastrophe, is a strategic necessity for states whose relationship with the fossil fuel industry renders them unable to imagine how they would manage the expectations of their citizens without fossil fuels. This imperative overrides community democracy, Indigenous sovereignty and local rule. As Mitchell's thesis proposes, this is true for petro-states in industrialized nations that consider themselves democratic as well as in postcolonial industrializing ones to whom the term "petro-state" is more commonly ascribed in academic discourse.

### **Confronting Petro-Hegemony Through Dual Power and the Carbon Rebellion**

In response to the conditions of carbon democracy that petro-hegemony maintains and extends, counter hegemonic interventions in relations of consent, coercion and compliance can be organized through a framework I've called the *carbon rebellion*. Here the climate justice movement seeks to wrest consent away from the industry and build a new consensus around an alliance of social struggles instead. It simultaneously works to curtail and reverse the industry's coercive capabilities through direct action, legal action, or electoral and legislative action, and

break the relation of compliance by intervening in dynamics of economic dependency through a *just transition*.<sup>5</sup> I've found that one of the logics of intervention that operates across all three power relations is that of dual power.

Petro-hegemony and the carbon rebellion were rendered highly visible at Standing Rock. With frames like *Mni Wiconi* (Water is Life), alongside their assertion of Indigenous sovereignty through protecting the land and water in “peace and prayer,” juxtaposed with viral images of the intense policing and violence to which they were subjected, the Water Protectors deployed an incredibly effective discursive intervention, winning what Reinsborough and Canning call “the battle of the story”<sup>6</sup> and wresting consent away from DAPL (2017; Dhillon and Estes 2017). Ultimately, however, delegitimizing the industry and articulating consent around alternatives was not enough to curtail the coercive violence through which petro-hegemony responded. While the Water Protectors expertly intervened in relations of consent, their interventions in coercion and compliance were thwarted. Yet, in their assertions of sovereignty and centering the resurgence of Indigenous governance and culture, their interventions also mirrored a form of dual power, as they engaged with dominant institutions while prefiguring decolonized governance and sovereignty at the *Oceti Sakowin* camp.<sup>7</sup>

Shifting from the pipeline fights in the Dakotas to Chevron's refinery in Richmond, California, we can find forms of political intervention illustrating strategies that engage with power relations across the carbon rebellion framework. Activists in the city have demonstrated how successful intervention in consent, coercion, and compliance can be deployed. The city lives in the shadow of Chevron's refinery, California's largest stationary emitter of greenhouse gases. The city's majority low income communities of color are most heavily burdened with the health implications of the refinery's pollution (Choy and Orozco 2009). Over several decades, Richmond residents have been organizing to hold Chevron accountable for its pollution and more recently to thwart its plans to upgrade the refinery to process heavier crude oil. Bringing Green Party members, Independents, and progressive Democrats into allegiance, the Richmond Progressive Alliance (RPA) began organizing the city's progressive community around winning city council elections in 2003. The Green Party's Gayle McLaughlin was a founding member and won two

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://ClimateJusticeAlliance.org> for more on Just Transition. In short, a just transition is intended to decarbonize, decolonize, democratize and decentralize energy and economic systems. It takes leadership from those most impacted by fossil fuel pollution and climate change as well as the workers whose livelihoods would be most impacted by energy transition.

<sup>6</sup> The battle of the story is positioned against the story of the battle. Reinsborough and Canning argue activists are very good at telling each other the story of the battle and reinforcing their own belief systems, but need to get better at fighting the battle of the story, which is the struggle over the discourses and narratives we use to make meaning of the world around us and shape common sense.

<sup>7</sup> See Sâkîhitowin Awâsis (2014) on Indigenous resurgence and its connection to land struggles.



terms as the city's mayor, helping lay the foundations for further interventions against Chevron. However, it was not until 2014 that the RPA, alongside grassroots climate justice campaigns defeated all of the council's Chevron-backed candidates in a damning indictment of the corporation's century-long corruption of local democracy.

The RPA's rise and electoral success was a product of decades of community organizing and alliance-building alongside environmental and social justice organizations (Early 2017). While Chevron's refinery upgrade was eventually approved, it had to cede a great deal more ground than ever before, agreeing to millions of dollars in community benefits and increasing its share of taxes (McLaughlin 2018). The corporation also had to promise its refinery would not process tar sands crude from Alberta. Moreover, through this fight Chevron lost the community's consent that it had sought over years of engraining its presence in the community consciousness as a benevolent neighbor. It pumped \$3 million into the 2014 city council election, but every one of the candidates it supported lost. The RPA's influence on council has curtailed Chevron's ability to force its will on the community while also opening up resources for local activists to start breaking the city's economic dependency on the company and begin experimenting in just transition projects. Meanwhile, that same election saw activists with the Our Power<sup>8</sup> campaign engage in a sophisticated "story-based strategy" to delegitimize Chevron and build community consent around climate justice instead. Combining deep engagement with local democracy and prefiguring climate justice solutions, Richmond's activists have forced back Chevron's influence over city politics.

Dual power is a strategic intervention that can be deployed through the carbon rebellion framework to engage with petro-hegemony across the relations of consent, compliance, and coercion. Dual power has a long legacy of influence in leftist political strategy. Since Vladimir Lenin's original use of the term during the 1917 Russian revolution, dual power has undergone several iterations and has been put to use in many different political projects (Marxists Internet Archive 2005). Dual power is an approach to radical social change that encourages simultaneous engagement with existing regimes of governance, while establishing alternative institutions that prefigure the political reality that will ultimately replace those dominant institutions. As Yates McKee describes it, dual power includes the "forging of alliances and supporting demands on the existing institutions—elected officials, public agencies, universities, workplaces, banks, corporations, museums—while at the same time developing self-organized counter-institutions" (2014). It recognizes that reclaiming democracy isn't just about governance or rights, but about

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<sup>8</sup> Our Power is a campaign the Climate Justice Alliance runs in 6 different regions of the United States working to break the influence of fossil fuel companies while advancing a just transition. The campaign's anchor organizations in Richmond are the Asian Pacific Environmental Network and Communities for a Better Environment. These, alongside the West County Toxics Coalition and the Sunflower Alliance, have been spearheading environmental justice activism and community organizing in Richmond.

forging a new culture and new relationship to the economic, political and cultural decisions that shape our lives.

Drawing upon Wini Breines' (1980) distinction between strategic and prefigurative politics, Jonathan Smucker warns against obsessing over the construction of alternative institutions as a possible distraction from engagement with the dominant ones that still exist (2017). Both Smucker and Breines voice skepticism about prefigurative politics as a refusal to engage with hegemony. Meanwhile, Ben Manski in conversation with Gar Alperovitz and Staughton Lynd, identifies the possibility of a "synthetic prefigurative-strategic politics," or a productive and positive relationship between prefigurative and strategic politics in which reclaiming democracy becomes both a means and an end (2015: 11). Dual power provides a strategic orientation that synthesizes and balances prefigurative and strategic politics rather than privileging one over the other. It is playing an increasingly important role in climate justice activism where it has helped synthesize strategic engagement with dominant institutions through blockades, electoral politics, and protest, while simultaneously creating opportunities to prefigure alternatives through people's tribunals, energy democracy, and Indigenous resurgence (Brecher 2017; Awâsis 2014).

The First Nations-led resistance to the Trans Mountain pipeline (TMX) in British Columbia helps illustrate dual power's role in the movement. As activists organized their communities in the cities of Burnaby, Vancouver, and across British Columbia, TMX became an important election issue in 2017. The opposition parties' commitments to blocking the pipeline was significant in ousting the Liberal Party in that year's provincial elections. The New Democrats now govern the province together with the Green Party, and Premier John Horgan has promised to use "every tool in the toolbox" to oppose the pipeline (Kane 2017). In the meantime, a coalition of First Nations alongside environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and grassroots community groups have fought Kinder Morgan and the Canadian government in the courts for their failure to adequately consult First Nations and to carry out a full Environmental Impact Review. These are important instances of social movements successfully engaging with dominant institutions, and creating more favorable political conditions, to curtail petro-hegemony.

Some First Nations activists and academics, however, have argued that engaging with electoral politics and state institutions like the courts plays into a "politics of recognition" that reinforces colonial domination by accepting the legitimacy of the colonial court system and governance structures on unceded First Nations territory (Coulthard 2015). Glen Coulthard, for example, argues that struggles for decolonization concerning defense of land should revolve around the assertion of Indigenous governance systems and cultures instead.

The tension between these two positions has played out relatively harmoniously in the confrontation with Trans Mountain because of a commitment to dual power. Asserting jurisdiction over their territory, the Tsleil-Waututh Nation conducted their own Environmental Impact Report



and found the pipeline's social and environmental costs would be unacceptable (Sacred Trust 2018). This was an example of strategizing outside the colonial environmental review institutions imposed by the Canadian government while simultaneously delegitimizing those colonial institutions. Moreover, while some First Nations representatives, NGOs and community groups fought the battle in elections and courts, or else participated in mass protest and civil disobedience, other First Nations activists and their allies set up camps and a Watch House to prefigure Indigenous resurgence, assert their sovereignty over the land, while also defending it from corporate-colonial intrusion. This too formed a version of dual power. The Protect the Inlet camp, for example, was governed according Coast Salish Indigenous peoples' protocols and customs. Meanwhile, through the camp, land defense became an assertion of sovereignty while also being a space for activists to converge and plan direct action to block the gates of Kinder Morgan's oil storage facility—the intended terminus of the TMX pipeline. There has been a good deal of coordination and overlap between those who engaged in the dominant institutions and those constructing alternatives. Dual power helped negotiate different strategic and political positions while maintaining a relatively cohesive front. The combination of the two approaches has so far prevented the completion of the pipeline and forced Kinder Morgan's Canadian subsidiary to abandon the project, leaving it in the hands of the Canadian government.

In Richmond dual power has looked quite different, but nonetheless manifests itself as interventions in dominant institutions and power structures alongside the simultaneous construction of alternatives. Together these interventions engage in relations of consent, compliance, and coercion. Through elections, community organizing, and experiments in just transition projects, the Richmond Progressive Alliance (RPA) and the Our Power campaign mobilized the community around climate justice and confronting Chevron's influence over city politics. The relationship between community organizers and "electeds" goes far beyond a convenient "inside-outside game" strategy and has developed a synergy between those confronting the dominant institutions and those prefiguring alternatives. For example, the RPA's influence on the council has helped divert resources—particularly funds from Chevron's increased taxes and community benefits—to community organizations working on just transition projects and developing alternative institutions. Worker-owned solar cooperatives, community gardens, community choice energy, subsidies for solar panels, and training programs for low income youth of color to build skills in renewable energy and energy efficiency are just some of the projects being tested. Here we find a dynamic in which, through a synergy between the constituent elements of dual power, the resources of the current institutions are being redirected towards alternative ones. The risk of state cooptation remains high, particularly as the RPA's influence wanes on council. However, the example also provides some helpful insights into how dual power strategies

might be more effectively coordinated to contest petro-hegemony and move beyond crises in carbon democracy's legitimacy.

### **Conclusion: Synthesis and Praxis**

This analysis has significant implications for the broader question of corporate power, its influence over democracy, and how local grassroots campaigns connected to a global movement might take on global capitalism. Understanding the relationship between corporate hegemony and democracy can help activists develop new tactics and tools with which to engage more strategically in this struggle. Climate justice campaigns to keep fossil fuels in the ground not only reveal the symbiosis between contemporary democratic states and fossil fuels, but also the relations of power upon which the fossil fuel industry itself depends. Carbon democracy represents a condition in which democratic governance has an undemocratic dependence upon fossil fuels. This condition is upheld through relations of consent, coercion, and compliance contained under petro-hegemony. Through the carbon rebellion framework, I've shown how activists can and are intervening in these relations to counter petro-hegemony. In this context, dual power has again proven itself as an essential strategy to undo carbon democracy's perversion of democracy by engaging with hegemonic power relations while prefiguring alternative relations and asserting community sovereignty. We have a lot to learn from the fights on the frontlines of Blockadia. Understanding these struggles in terms of carbon democracy and petro-hegemony, or the carbon rebellion and dual power, may help us apply some of these learnings elsewhere.

Climate change, the urgency of keeping fossil fuels in the ground, and the simultaneous development of "extreme extraction" in response to dwindling supplies of light sweet crude, are currently forcing a crisis in carbon democracy's legitimacy (Bridge and LeBillon 2017). Of another time and place Antonio Gramsci famously wrote: "The crisis exists precisely in that the old is dying but the new cannot be born. In the interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (1971: 276). We are experiencing such an interregnum today. The theory developed in these paragraphs can be transformed into tools that help us navigate this interregnum to strengthen strategies that reclaim democracy, keep fossil fuels in the ground, and advance a just transition. As petro-hegemony seeks to reproduce conditions of carbon democracy in an increasingly insecure energy landscape, state violence on behalf of extractive companies has come to characterize Blockadia. It is through this conflict that petro-hegemony—and the relations of power of which it is comprised—becomes visible. As they do so, I've shown how activists are deploying their own logics of intervention through the carbon rebellion framework. Dual power, and its orientation towards intervention in existing power relations while prefiguring new relationships, has emerged as a particularly important strategy that can intervene in consent, coercion, and compliance, and

can help move us beyond the crisis in carbon democracy. In providing these reflections, I offer an invitation and inspiration for this critical emancipatory struggle.

**About the Author:** Theo LeQuesne is a climate justice activist and PhD student in the Department of Global Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara. His research analyzes the power of the fossil fuel industry and the strategies climate justice activists use to contest it. He specializes in climate change, social movements, and culture and ideology.

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