

A Guide to Indigenous Concepts of Wellness & Wellbeing

Prepared for
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THEMES

Indigenous concepts of health, wellness, and wellbeing are diverse and evolving. This document serves as a window into understanding by presenting, on a rolling basis, the historical and contemporary discourses about these complicated topics to a predominantly non-Indigenous audience.

To do so, we must first present foundational themes in academic literature and Indigenous thought that define terms and situate the readers, as well as these topics about Indigenous wellness, within their spatial-temporal and social contexts. Once this has been established, the more nuanced questions, concepts and frameworks that can aid the RECOVER team in expanding their perspectives on building wellness in Edmonton can be explored.

At the close of the document, we are including ideas or topics we came across in our research that were not directly related to our research purpose but could be of interest to the RECOVER team now or in the future.

(Urban) Indigeneity

“Our DNA is of the earth and sky. Our DNA is of past and future. We are the Halluci Nation. We are the evolution, the continuation.”

A Tribe Called Red

Before we delve into Indigenous concepts of wellness and wellbeing in an urban context, it’s worth backing up to explore the term “Urban Indigeneity” as often scholars point to this, “rural/urban dichotomy as a false expression of Indigenous reality,” despite it influencing so many of our discussions about Indigenous people living in urban centres.¹ As a majority of Indigenous people today live in population centres of over 30,000 people (and that number is continuing to grow) this discussion of the nature of urban life for Indigenous peoples is not a niche topic, but a central one in Indigenous circles.

The urbanization of Indigenous peoples in the 20th and 21st century has been an enormous social and cultural movement, detailed in popular media as well as academia as at once a liberation and as a threat to Indigenous ways of life, and many point to this narrative as the soil in which the concept of “urban Indigeneity” took root. It is a term that most academics trace to non-Indigenous peoples in their attempts to make a clear distinction between what are “civilized”, “European” spaces and what are the spaces set apart for Indigenous peoples. This is, of course, ignoring the truth that Indigenous peoples have been living and working in urban centres since the very beginning of the colonial era.

Additionally, but no less dangerously, adding the “urban” modifier to Indigenous identities suggests that an Indigenous identity alone cannot withstand “the corrupting influences of modernization,” and a *pure*

Indigenous identity must be, “defined by their remoteness from all things civilized and modern.”²

It goes without saying that just as older generations of Indigenous people proudly identify themselves as “Indians” today, there are many Indigenous peoples who live their lives in cities who take up this problematic “urban Indigenous” identity with pride. Helpfully, Indigenous thinkers and actors on both sides of the identity discussion agree that questioning the term and its roots, while important for reasons such as illustrating the ongoing work of unveiling the layers of colonialism that remain entrenched in our thinking and language today, ultimately strays from some of the most important discussions Indigenous people are having about contemporary life in the city. Discussions that begin with the question: *How can we reclaim spaces that have been alienating to Indigenous peoples in the past as spaces where Indigenous peoples can create meaning, express our identities, and imagine a future even more free?*



Bold Steps by Jeffrey Veregge.

¹ Susan Lobo and Kurt Peters, *American Indians and the Urban Experience* (Los Angeles, CA: American Indian Studies Center)

² JT Johnson, *Dancing into Place: The Role of the Powwow within Urban Indigenous Communities* (Indigenous in the city: Contemporary identities and cultural innovation)

On Wellness vs. Wellbeing

“My idea of wellbeing is about trust and time and holding onto the faith that we are all well, perhaps just in various states of it.”

Jada-Gabrielle Pape, Saanich & Snuneymuxw Nations

In Indigenous circles, the pursuit of wellness and the pursuit of wellbeing are understood as interrelated but functionally different topics. Wellness often refers to measures of individual physical health, often in aggregate across a population, and is pursued by defining and removing sources of illness or disease. Wellbeing is commonly understood as a shared state where culturally-coherent processes of balance-seeking across all parts of the self are engaged with. In nehiyawak tradition, “all parts of the self” are often referred to as the spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental aspects of being, and many other Indigenous cultures share a similar view.

For decades across Turtle Island, Indigenous peoples have been engaging with the topic of wellness through the lens of seeking healthcare equity.³ There are many contributing factors as to why this has been a long, difficult fight, ranging from interruptions in traditional foodways and medicine to barring Indigenous people from entering health professions to systemic barriers for accessing high-quality healthcare for rural populations –just to name a few. All have contributed to the disproportionate poor health outcomes Indigenous people experience and generations-long distrust of the healthcare system at large.

An example often referred to in Indigenous health circles is one consequence of the 1867 British North America Act which determined how Indigenous peoples’ health, then “Indian health,” would be paid for: the provinces or the federal government? This confusion produced dangerous jurisdictional battles over specific patient care well into

³ Alfred Dockery, *Culture and Wellbeing: The Case of Indigenous Australians* (Social Indicators Research)

the 20th century, finally culminating in the 1999 “Jordan’s Principle,” named after a young Indigenous boy who, “spent his entire short life living in an institutional hospital setting, not just for medical reasons but because of a jurisdictional dispute between federal and provincial departments over who should pay for his home care.”⁴

Health initiatives that have been successful in years since make “ethical space”⁵ for Indigenous communities to develop their healthcare strategies, include their medicines and ceremonies, and collaborate on the development of measures of health outcomes. Collaboratively problem-solving in this way has been called “two-eyed seeing,” which was first introduced to research from Mi’kmaq Elder Albert Marshall, explaining that it means, “to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing, and to see from the other eye with the strengths of Western ways of knowing, and to use both of these eyes together.”

It is in these processes of collaboration that the understanding of wellness expanded into a more complex and encompassing concept of Indigenous wellbeing that fully emerged in academic literature and in the healthcare consciousness. Today, wellbeing research is a multidisciplinary field led by economists, technologists, spiritual leaders, and healthcare professionals across the world.

⁴LG Lavoie, *The Aboriginal Health Legislation and Policy Framework in Canada* (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health)

⁵ Willie Ermine, *The Ethical Space of Engagement* (Indigenous Law Journal)

Foundations of Indigenous Worldviews

“Nanaboozhoo spoke and said, “I am going to dive to the bottom of the water and grab a handful of earth. With this earth, we could make a new land on which to live.”

Anishinaabe Turtle Island Creation Story

It is often said that Indigenous worldviews are critical to understanding Indigenous peoples. But what does this really mean?

A worldview is often referred to as a fundamental, shared perspective of a people which underpins all the “stuff” of culture. There is a joke that the last thing a fish notices is the water, and this is the primary reason why the concept of “self-location” emerged as a necessary step of engaging with “Two-eyed seeing” research processes. Self-location is the process by which someone, “returns to and remembers our own stories and origins,” and is a necessary part of removing the observer from an assumed place of “objectivity” and placing them instead as a reflexive being with their own worldviews that they carry with them, influencing their gaze.⁶

Understanding what Indigenous worldviews are and how they differ to non-Indigenous worldviews are key to continued engagement with Indigenous concepts of wellness and wellbeing. In the following pages, we will take a quick tour of the history of how Indigenous peoples in Canada began on Turtle Island, reacted to newcomers, evolved as nation-building began in earnest, conceptualized themselves in contemporary times and contemplated the future.

Histories of Turtle Island

Ask any knowledge-keeper, and they will tell you that Indigenous peoples have resided on Turtle Island (North America) as far back as we can remember. Even the word “Indigenous” demonstrates this belief, a word derived

from the Latin *indigena*, meaning “sprung from the land.” This connection to land is foundational to understanding the complex and dynamic relationality that underpins the worldviews of Indigenous people.

An example that is often drawn on is that of language. Elders often remark that speaking a language Indigenous to the place you’re in is taking part in singing the song of the world. Indigenous languages on Turtle Island have always been diverse, some as different as German is to Cantonese and some as similar as Italian is to Spanish.

Because Indigenous peoples understand all things and beings as connected to the land, we understand ourselves as connected to one another. All things are literally our brothers and sisters, moving alongside us as we live upon our mother, the earth. This belief influenced the creation of complex and varied governance models, many of which include a strong spiritual element at their core.

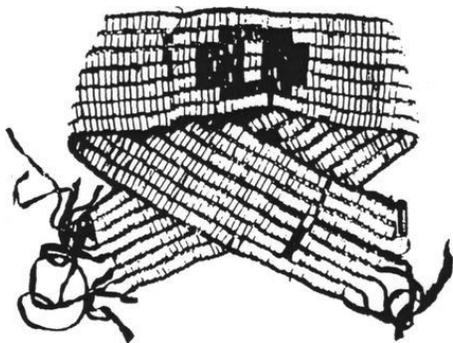
A simple but powerful example of one of these models is that of the circle. The circle is a tool used in governance systems globally by Indigenous peoples to acknowledge that we alone cannot perceive full truths or solve problems entirely as individuals, but that the collective can. If we were to imagine a tree in the centre of a circle of people, it would make sense to us that each person would describe the tree in a slightly different way. Some viewpoints would be very similar, as they are physically situated close to each other, while others might be very different. These viewpoints are not in competition, but rather in relationship, producing a greater understanding of the tree in the centre if all people in the circle listened to and trusted one another. This way of building

⁶ Gillies, Burleigh, Showshoe, and Werner, *Walking in Circles: Self-Location in Indigenous Youth Violence Prevention Research* (First Nations Perspectives)

understanding was used to explore more complex problems in Indigenous communities and is the reason why most Indigenous mythologies include a problem that only gathering in a council, or a circle, can solve.

Perfecting these systems of inter-group governance on Turtle Island eventually opened opportunities for tackling intra-group governance. The key tool that enabled peace between cultures was that of treaty-making which developed over time. There were many names for these agreements, mostly which translate closely into English today as closer to “an understanding” than a word we might recognize as a legal agreement.

Most of these treaty processes were rooted in kinship and were intended to be carried out before conflict occurred, rather than as a method for ending wars. An example of a pre-contact treaty is the “Dish With One Spoon” wampum which was made between the Anishinaabe and the Haudenosaunee in 1142 CE.



These treaties allowed for an incredibly active Turtle Island, with Indigenous peoples travelling long distances and engaging with different cultures before contact, as evidenced by linguistic similarities between groups, ancient trade routes, and stories of great migrations and descriptions of people encountered along the way.

European Contact & the Fur Trade

Arriving amid an arms race of European empires, many newcomers landed on Turtle Island with the intent to capture as much land and resources possible for

economic development and military control. Several major underlying beliefs justified this rapid expansion, such as the notion of Terra Nullius and the Doctrine of Discovery.

Despite these generally accepted ideas, European peoples differed in how they viewed the land, Indigenous peoples, and the manner in which interactions should be carried out. While all newcomers were interested in commercial relationships and military alliances, the Dutch and French engaged with Indigenous ways of relationship building through kinship and the creation of treaties.

It is important to know that the first relationship agreements on Turtle Island between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples followed Indigenous legal tradition rather than European tradition. One of the earliest was the “Two Row Wampum Treaty” or *Kaswentha* made in 1613 between the Dutch and Haudenosaunee. It is often considered the grandfather of all treaties.



Though Indigenous-European marriages and families formed shortly after contact, the descendants of those unions believe that the distinct Métis cultures are tied to the distinct communities that formed over time, rather than simply the mixing of blood.

The Conquest Era

Following the Seven Years War, England gained control on Turtle Island with the Royal Proclamation of 1763. Among other things, the Royal Proclamation recognized the inherent right Indigenous peoples had to the land. This did not include the Métis. British interests then

sought allyship with the Indigenous groups that had been previously aligned with the French.

As the fur trade declined, a new economy based on resources began to emerge in the early 1800s. This shift altered how newcomers viewed Indigenous peoples: from partners and allies into barriers to progress. Treaty-making with Indigenous peoples was still legally required for westward expansion following the Royal Proclamation, but now reflected a growing paternalism.

A policy of non-recognition of the Métis as an Indigenous people with rights to the land continued. The decline of the bison and increasing agricultural settlement affected Indigenous peoples' ways of life, and in 1867, the federal government assumed executive power over Indigenous peoples and their lands as part of creating a federated Canada.

The Indian Act consolidated all pre-Confederation treaties and made them Canadian law, at once protecting and threatening them. Following the Métis rebellion in 1870, the new Canadian government agreed to set aside lands for the Métis as well as other First Nations. The government made the transfer of land through "scrip."

Following confederation, the Dominion of Canada expanded into the west with the numbered treaties which are a series of eleven treaties signed between 1871 to 1921. The process of negotiating those treaties varied. Though the treaty-making processes differed between British interests and Indigenous peoples, both traditions were understood as legally valid, referred to today as a *sui generis*, or a special case of law called an *inter-societal judicial system*. In this system, because non-Indigenous peoples had their own systems of law prior to contact, Indigenous law is considered valid and equal to the European systems of law. This is why verbal accounts of historical agreements and non-Indigenous interpretations of law based on Indigenous worldviews is considered permissible evidence in court.

Throughout this era of the making of the numbered treaties into the 20th century, perceived success in the "settling" of Turtle Island galvanized a unique, "refined" cultural assimilation policy that differed from the American method of physical eradication. This cultural eradication aim drove policies like the Indian Residential School System, enforced enfranchisement, and the band council system to encourage Indigenous peoples to assimilate into non-Indigenous society. At this time, cultural practices were outlawed and engaging in practices went underground.

In the north, despite the key role they played in early encounters with Europeans, the Inuit were largely neglected by the Canadian government. It wasn't until the economic crisis in the '30s which created widespread poverty and famine that Canada intervened, creating settlements that forced whole societies to change from their traditional ways of life to an industrial one within a generation. These policies, as well as others, were made without consultation from the Inuit or translation into their language.

In 1969, the Canadian government submitted a white paper on the *Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy* which proposed the abolishment of all laws in existence to protect unique Indigenous rights, including the Indian Act and all existing treaties within Canada. The backlash was widespread and united from Indigenous peoples across the country, who rejected the idea that the unique legal status of Indigenous peoples was antithetical to a fair and just society. The Indian Association of Alberta, led by Harold Cardinal, responded immediately with Citizens Plus or the "Red Paper" which was endorsed by other national Indigenous groups.



Eventually, the Canadian government retracted the white paper and the 1982 Constitution Act included Section 35, which enshrined Aboriginal Rights into the Canadian Constitution.

Modern Relations

Much of the current state of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canada is influenced by events that came after 1982. Most notably, the consequences of the 78-day standoff between Kanesatake protesters, police, and Canadian army occurred near Montréal in 1990 which ended after military intervention. It was a moment that surprised some Canadians at the time, spurring the creation of a Royal Commission which is an official inquiry into matters of public concern. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples began in 1991 was mandated to investigate and propose solutions to the challenges affecting the relationship between Aboriginal peoples, the Canadian government, and Canadian society. To date, it is the most extensive research project on Indigenous peoples in Canada, producing over 440 recommendations ranging from a new Royal Proclamation to the recognition of an Aboriginal order of government.

At the same time, a global working group of Indigenous peoples and human rights experts began drafting the

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which was presented and adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007. In its 46 articles, UNDRIP addresses the most significant issues affecting Indigenous peoples internationally including civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights. Though Canada originally voted against the document, along with the United States, New Zealand, and Australia, it was adopted officially in 2010 as an aspirational document.

Since then, inquiries into specific harms done by historical and ongoing colonization have continued. Most famously perhaps, is the The Truth and Reconciliation Commission which was created and paid for by the parties of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement in 2008. Over six years, commissioners travelled around Canada to hear the testimony of more than 6,500 witnesses including residential school survivors. The TRC final report was released in 2015 with 94 "Calls to Action" aimed at addressing the legacy of the Residential School System.

Indigenous Intersectionalities

“The future is already over, but that doesn't mean we don't have anywhere else to go.”

Billy-Ray Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*

Understanding the flow of history from a macro level perspective often requires generalization, which has been a continuous challenge to meet for Indigenous scholars, activists and politicians in Canada ever since terms grouping vast diversities of Indigenous peoples as one body began. The realities of Indigenous life in history as well as in contemporary times is that of divergent lived experiences informed by culture, generation, rural/urban location, degree of cultural disenfranchisement, and occupation—just to name a few.

Though it began as an obscure legal term first coined by black feminist scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Intersectionality” is a commonly known framework today used to understand how, “aspects of one's social and political identities (gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, etc.) might combine to create unique modes of discrimination.”

To understand the context of urban-dwelling Indigenous peoples experiencing poverty, understanding how intersectionalities play out, often mediating *who* experiences cyclical, continuous, or intermittent homelessness and/or poverty, is critical. The following pages describe two key movements led by often-underrepresented and underserved communities of women and LGBTQ2S individuals.

Indigenous Feminisms

A common criticism of early feminist movements worldwide is that of a lack of inclusivity of representing and advocating for racialized women. In Canada, the Famous Five not only left Indigenous women out of their activism (Indigenous women were not allowed the vote until the 1960 *Canada Elections Act*) but also helped

garner support for Alberta's Sexual Sterilization Act in 1928 which disproportionately targeted Indigenous women.

Indigenous feminists are often reluctant to engage with western mainstream feminist theory due to its failure to recognize the effects of the gendered process of colonialism on Indigenous women, as well as a historical pattern of white women not understanding, or not being willing to be allies against, the unique oppression faced by Indigenous women. Moreton-Robinson explains this phenomena as a case of white feminists being “extraordinarily reluctant to see themselves in the situation of being oppressors, as they feel that this will be at the expense of concentrating upon being oppressed.”⁷

Due to this, the central canon of Indigenous feminisms takes shape around responding to how colonization “worked to restructure Indigenous social systems to fit within the white settler ideal” regardless of the pre-contact status of Indigenous women.⁸ This struggle is global and shared among Indigenous peoples across the world. Rauna Kuokkanen, a prominent Sami scholar, has argued that feminism is ultimately insufficient for the struggles of Indigenous women as it “often excludes notions of collectivity as well as land rights which are central elements for Indigenous peoples.”⁹

⁷ Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Univ Of Minnesota Press)

⁸ Edward Ou Jin Lee, *Examining Social Work as a Canadian Settler Colonial Project: Colonial Continuities of Circles of Reform, Civilization, and In/visibility* (The Journal of Critical Anti-Oppressive Social Inquiry)

⁹ Rauna Kuokkanen, *Towards an “Indigenous Paradigm” from a Sami Perspective* (The Canadian Journal of Native Studies)

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG)

An urgent project of Indigenous feminisms since its inception has been addressing the ongoing attempted genocide of Indigenous women in Canada. Now present in mainstream Canadian consciousness, the MMIWG crisis describes the overrepresentation of Indigenous women and girls among female homicide victims.

Notable cases include the Highway of Tears murders. The Highway of Tears is a 725-kilometre stretch of highway between Prince Rupert and Prince George, British Columbia on which dozens of Indigenous women, attempting to hitchhike, have disappeared since the 1970s.

In 2016, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls began, and through testimony from over 2,380 family members of those who have gone missing, produced a final report which stated the ultimate cause of the disproportionate violence as, "caused by state actions and inactions rooted in colonialism and colonial ideologies" and made 231 "Calls to Justice."¹⁰

Though primarily directed at educational institutions, governments, and social service providers, Section 15 contains Calls to Justice for all Canadians, including:

- Speaking out against violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people,
- Acknowledging and celebrating indigenous peoples' history, cultures, pride, and diversity,
- Reading and understanding the final report itself and acknowledge the land lived upon, and
- Allowing for Indigenous girls and women to generate their self-determined solutions.

¹⁰*Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*

Queer Indigenous Ethics

The impacts of colonization on Indigenous concepts of gender and sexuality is understudied and, as a consequence, are only now emerging as fields of study and areas for inquiry in concepts of Indigenous wellbeing.¹¹

The term "Two-Spirit" is an umbrella identity developed by queer Indigenous communities from across Turtle Island to celebrate and explore their shared sexual and historical heritage. While most Indigenous cultures have their own concepts of gender and sexual identity and how they play out in public life, the Two Spirit name was intended to serve as an act of self-determination across linguistic barriers, just as the term "Indigenous" was developed as a global political identity.

Indigenous Queer Ethics is challenging to build an understanding of using recognized academic literature; a phenomena produced by what Billy-Ray Belcourt succinctly calls the inherent "uninstitutional condition of queer Indigenous ethics." Delving into these ideas requires alternative sources such as social media and informal gatherings among community members, reminding us that being Indigenous, queer and/or a two-spirited person is not just a case of experiencing "multi-faceted forms of oppression that "race" itself cannot fully account for."¹² How do we go about vocalizing our experiences of homophobia and transphobia when they implicate whole facets of our communities, including the sites of ceremony and post-secondary education?

It is valuable to understand this work because it highlights the central issues of "Resurgence" political philosophy which has been a dominant theory in Indigenous academia in Canada since the early 2000s. This philosophy suggests that the pathway forward for

¹¹Sarah Hunt, *An Introduction to the Health of Two-Spirit People* (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health)

¹²Lindsay Nixon and Billy-Ray Belcourt, *What Do We Mean by Queer Indigenous Ethics?* (CanadianArt)

Indigenous peoples is that of asserting concepts of sovereignty and nationhood which leads, ultimately, to “interventions into institutional spaces that constrain Indigenous peoples, such as museums, the academy and governmental band registration and management.” This aim overshadows other movements which seek to address the everyday lives of individuals who do not find themselves in those institutions who experience, “the daily violences that queer and trans Indigenous peoples contend with.”

How do we confront these issues? At this time, it is unclear, as truly interacting with these intersections

forces Indigenous communities to confront internalized colonial mindsets.

Considering Social Disruptions: COVID-19

“A medicine chest shall be kept at the house of each Indian Agent for the use and benefit of the Indians.”

Treaty 6

Since public health efforts began, it has been a well-known and highly-studied reality that Indigenous peoples in Canada disproportionately bear burdens of disease and illness. Historical and continued lack of access to traditional foodways and activities, adequate housing, and healthcare have led to higher percentages of Indigenous people suffering from chronic health conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, and auto-immune disorders. Despite modest improvements in the socio-economic status of Indigenous peoples in Canada in recent years, these health disparities continue today.

Due in part to this reality, it is widely acknowledged that Indigenous Peoples are more likely than other Canadians to experience severe health outcomes as a result of COVID-19. The short-term social implications are lesser studied, but understood implicitly by Indigenous community members who rely on many of the now-halted cultural activities, such as sweat lodges, to help weather crises like this one, who have family members reliving traumatic experiences of illness or isolation in Residential Schools or sanatoriums, or who are stranded in the city and have had their already-tenuous ties to their community members and culture severed.

To imagine the long-term implications of this outbreak, we need only look into the past and examine similar social disruptions (a term used in sociology to describe the alteration, dysfunction or breakdown of social life) driven by contagious disease epidemics.

As James Daschuk writes in *Clearing the Plains*, Indigenous communities have been experiencing waves of contagious disease outbreaks since contact. Smallpox was a major killer in the 18th and 19th century, and the

1918 Spanish Flu devastated many communities, leaving some nations like the Sawridge First Nation with only a few dozen able-bodied adults to take care of hundreds of children and elderly community members. Interestingly, he writes that the factor that mediated the infection and death rate of the Spanish Flu was whether or not the community was primarily Catholic or primarily Protestant. In contrast with the Protestant method of telling their communities to disperse into the bush when news of an epidemic arrived, Catholics “dealt with the suffering by bringing their communities together.”¹³

What follows these occurrences of widespread illness has varied through history. Where the scapegoating of black South Africans during the Spanish Flu outbreak formed some of the rationale for steps toward apartheid, it also, from oral histories passed down through the generations, has been a catalyst for positive social change within communities.

¹³ James W Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (University of Regina Press, 2013)

RESOURCES

This is a complete list of the materials leveraged in our research processes. As this is a living document, note that some resources may be missing from this list and yet referenced in the preceding pages, or vice versa, at the time of your reading.

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