



# **Windschuttle at War: The Politics of Historiography in Australia**

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## **Windschuttle at War: The Politics of Historiography in Australia**

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Keith Windschuttle unleashed a storm of controversy with the publication of *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History: Volume One, Van Diemen's Land, 1803-1847* (2002; reprinted with corrections 2003). In a series of events unusual for works of this kind, Windschuttle's book received considerable media exposure: almost immediately it became the focal point of impassioned debate. The debate moreover continues and promises to be with us for some time. *The Fabrication* is in fact the first of a projected series of volumes in which the author proposes to reexamine the early history of relations between White settlers and the indigenous populations of Australia (Windschuttle, 2003c: 3-4).

The title Windschuttle chose for the book says a great deal about its contents. While purporting to rewrite a chapter of early Australian history, Windschuttle is in fact more concerned with examining recent Australian historiography. *The Fabrication* derives its power from being an act of accusation. Windschuttle's real intent is to expose what he sees as gross malpractice within the Australian historical profession. His chief accusation is that a number of leading academic historians—including Lyndall Ryan and Henry Reynolds—have falsified the picture of race relations in early Australia. They have, according to Windschuttle, unduly over-emphasized conflict and violence as their main themes in discussing relations between Whites and Blacks. Windschuttle criticizes Ryan for using the term genocide to describe settler behavior towards the indigenous Tasmanians (Windschuttle, 2003c: 4, 13; Ryan, 1996: 255). He chastises Reynolds for depicting the Tasmanian Aborigines as engaged in a guerrilla war to defend their lands against the White invaders. He deplores the way both historians stress that British settlement of Tasmania proceeded through a process of physical elimination of the native populations.

Windschuttle does not deny that frontier violence took place. Nor can he evade the fact that the end result of White settlement in Tasmania was the demise of the native population. What he argues is that the conflictive nature of the relations between Blacks and Whites—particularly instances of physical violence and killing—have been grossly exaggerated in the service of a political agenda having to do with restoring Aboriginal land rights (Windschuttle, 2003c: 28). His thesis is that historians like Reynolds and Ryan have “fabricated” a version of early White settlement in Tasmania to suit their political stance. They have developed and promoted what Windschuttle describes as an “orthodox” view of the Australian past, a view now uncritically shared by other historians and journalists of similar political persuasion.

It is this orthodoxy that Windschuttle is setting out to expose as a lie. He contends that it has no basis in fact, but has been concocted in order to foster a culture of guilt among present-day Australians. But Windschuttle's book is more than mere accusation; it also contains a fair amount of demonstration. In order to make his charge of fabrication stick,

Windschuttle engages in what might be called a return to the sources. His method centers on a critical reading of Ryan, Reynolds, and others in order to ascertain whether the primary sources they cite in support of their claims actually justify the interpretations they offer. Windschuttle not only subjects the various works of these historians to close scrutiny, he also goes back to the archives and libraries to check the originals.

The point of the exercise is to determine whether the information contained in the source materials cited support the inferences the historians have drawn from them. It may sound like a tedious procedure, but the findings Windschuttle announces are sensational: he believes he has uncovered enough evidence to warrant a charge of malpractice against the historians examined. Large sections of *The Fabrication* might fairly be described as a laborious demonstration of this point. Of course Windschuttle also has a wider agenda: the exposure of malpractice within the historical community is meant to be the first step towards a recovery of Australia's "true" past. Windschuttle duly presents what he calls a "counter-history" of early race relations in Tasmania, one in which Aborigines die mainly of disease and other causes rather than at the hands of settler violence. But as the title of the book itself clearly indicates, what *The Fabrication* primarily sets out to do is to undermine the credibility of another story, the story of the physical extermination of Blacks by Whites that historians have been researching over the past thirty years.

Windschuttle, it should be noted, would not accept that he is trying to undermine anything. He has consistently portrayed himself as a former true believer in the Reynolds view. His road to Damascus was a book by Rod Moran. Tipped off that something might be amiss, Windschuttle set out, as he says, on a search for the truth (Windschuttle, 2003a). His initial misgivings confirmed, he published a preview of his findings in 2000. From that point on, he has been tireless in his pursuit. Indeed the very relentlessness of his campaign has led some to believe that his disinterested stance might be nothing more than a pose. Reactions to Windschuttle's offensive have varied, but there is no shortage of those who counter-expose the exposé by suggesting that Windschuttle too has a political axe to grind (Manne, 2003: 1-13; Krygier and van Krieken, 2003: 83; Ryan, 2003b: 35 and 2003c: 232). Proponents of this view can point to Windschuttle's access to the media, his connections with the conservative journal *Quadrant*, or to his being awarded a medal by the Prime Minister in 2003 "for...services to history" (Moses, 2003: 368). On the other hand, to accuse Windschuttle of pursuing political ends merely reverses his own charge against Reynolds, Ryan, and others. It intensifies the polemics of the "history wars" and deflects attention from a key issue: whether Windschuttle's critique of the historians is based on a sound understanding of scholarly practice.

Surprisingly little attention has been paid to this question. Windschuttle's attack has been greeted with moral outrage in some quarters (Reynolds, 2003). Others have expressed their indignation at the spectacle of eminent members of the profession being subjected to judgment by an outsider. Many have noted that Windschuttle's book is self-published, that the author himself is not an academic in the true sense of the term, certainly not a highly qualified historian on a par with his adversaries. Meanwhile the real issue at stake—whether or not Windschuttle's log of claims against the historians has any substance—has too often been bypassed. The historians under attack have been left alone to mount personal cases for their integrity, so much so that at least one of them has complained of being abandoned to the wolves (Ryan, 2003a: 108).

The purpose of the present paper is to consider some of the historiographical issues raised by Windschuttle's critique of the Australian historians who are his principal targets. Windschuttle himself describes his book as "an excursion into the methodology of history" (2003c: 10). In his own words, *The Fabrication* is an enquiry into "how we can know the past, the kinds of evidence we can regard as reliable, and how to detect false claims when they are made" (ibid.). These are important if unfashionable questions. They suggest there are two key areas that need to be addressed in assessing the validity of Windschuttle's critique. First one must determine what scholarly standards Windschuttle is applying in his evaluation of the historical works he subjects to critical scrutiny. Second one must ask whether the standards he applies are up-to-date, appropriate, and widely shared by the international community of practicing professional historians.

These two areas are closely related and need to be investigated together. Moreover the second question may be harder to resolve than may at first appear. Historiographical practices tend to vary across the profession. They also tend to be controversial and remain to a large extent uncodified. Nevertheless it is a presupposition of what follows that there exists among professional historians a tacit consensus regarding the conventions that govern processes such as peer review, thesis examination, and other forms of evaluation. Issues covered by such conventions include the use and abuse of primary source materials, legitimate vs. illegitimate readings of evidence, and the rules of engagement that inform critical scholarship. As an outsider, Windschuttle has every right to question the validity of historical scholarship. But by the same token he may well be out of step with prevailing historiographical practice. In this case there could be a serious discrepancy in his applying standards that are at variance with accepted professional norms.

Let me give an example of what I mean. It concerns a crucial chapter in *The Fabrication*, chapter five, "Historical Scholarship and the Invention of Massacre Stories, 1815-1830". In this chapter Windschuttle's intention is to offer "a close assessment of the quality of evidence deployed by members of the orthodox school of Aboriginal history in Van Diemen's Land" (2003c: 131). Indeed on the same page Windschuttle describes the chapter in question as "largely a critique of the methodology of two of the writers this school endorses as its most scholarly and distinguished contributors", i.e., Lyndall Ryan and Lloyd Robson. Thirty-five pages later, at the end of the investigation, Windschuttle feels that the exercise has revealed that "standards of proof, accuracy and rigour are largely absent from the work of the current practitioners of Aboriginal history" (2003c: 166). But what standards has Windschuttle applied, and do these standards match with what Ryan, Robson and other practitioners would regard as normative?

Windschuttle is crystal clear about the standards he expects to be met. He focuses his attention on the issue of documentation, and in particular on the citation of sources in footnotes. He correctly observes that "the footnote's role is to permit a reader to check the author's sources, references, facts, quotations and generalisations" (2003c: 132). Footnotes, in other words, provide the documentation on which a given historian's conclusions—presented in the text—are based. The question arises, however, as to the extent of the documentation required to support a particular conclusion. On this point Windschuttle is categorical: "To act in a properly scholarly fashion, authors should be able to support, through their footnotes, every factual claim they make" (2003c: 132-133).

To the lay ear this may sound quite reasonable. The professional historian knows such a program would be impracticable if for no other reason than that its implementation would make history impossible to produce. Desirable as it might be to do so, historians are simply not in a position to reproduce exhaustive lists of their sources accompanied by lengthy disquisitions on how they reached certain conclusions. The best they can do is to present a selection of their material, often scripted in shorthand. What this means is that there is rarely going to be a precise and perfect fit between the hard evidence in the notes and the inferences historians necessarily draw from it. All historians walk on the knife-edge between their evidence and the interpretations they weave out of it. Historians are interpreters of documents, not transparent mirrors; they expect other historians to challenge their conclusions and they expect that challenge to involve to some degree their selection and use of documentation (Evans, 1999: 94). If all this sounds controversial, it is not. Such views are well and truly in the mainstream of the profession, both here and overseas. It is Windschuttle who has—inadvertently perhaps—set up a standard of scholarly performance that is both inappropriate and unrealistic.

It is in fact possible to test my assertion simply by checking the main authority Windschuttle cites in support of his own view. He quotes approvingly from Anthony Grafton (1997: 15) to the effect that in historical scholarship “the text persuades, the notes prove” (2003c: 132). But either Windschuttle has not read Grafton with care, or he deliberately attempts to convey the false impression that the eminent Princeton historian shares his views. To see how far Grafton actually is from offering support to Windschuttle on this point it is enough to read his full text. The formulation “the text persuades, the notes prove” is in fact Grafton’s own summation of the principles of historical scholarship as they were embodied over one hundred years ago in a classic manual by Langlois and Seignobos. Grafton quickly moves on from here to distance himself from the traditionalist assumption “that authors can, as manuals for dissertation writers say they should, exhaustively cite the evidence for every assertion in their texts” (1997: 16). In actual fact, writes Grafton, no one can cite the full range of relevant sources. This is why, in practice, footnotes never provide complete and totally irrefutable evidence for the assertions made in the text. To try to do so would soon prove impossible. It would also be useless, since “no accumulation of footnotes can prove that every statement in the text rests on an unassailable mountain of attested facts” (1997: 22). The selection, reading, and interpretation of historical evidence are marked by an inescapable margin of subjectivity, and this carries over inevitably into the apparatus of the footnotes. Despite their impressive scientific pedigree and pretense, footnotes are arranged for effect. To pretend otherwise is to be out of line with accepted international standards of history as practiced today. As Grafton writes, every historian “rearranges materials to prove a point, interprets them in an individual way, and omits those that do not meet a necessarily personal standard of relevance. The very next person to review the same archival materials will probably line them up and sort them out quite differently” (1997: 16-17).

If footnotes cannot prove “every statement of fact in a given work”, if they cannot “prevent all mistakes or eliminate all disagreements” (Grafton, 1997: 233), then what purpose do they serve? Grafton identifies two principal functions: first, footnotes can demonstrate that the conclusions reached in the text are based on research; second, footnotes provide a list of the sources actually used. Under normal circumstances, footnotes do not reveal exactly how the historian reached the conclusions presented in

the text. Yet the notes “often give the reader who is both critical and open-minded enough hints to make it possible to work this out—in part” (Grafton, 1997: 22-23).

Windschuttle may wish to argue of course that Grafton’s comments only show how far the modern history profession has deviated from its original mission. Such an argument has no bearing on the three points I will make here. First, the onus remains on Windschuttle to cite some credible, up-to-date authority to support standards of historical scholarship which on the face of it appear to be outdated by some one hundred years. Second, it is clear that the chief authority Windschuttle does cite goes directly against the grain of the case he wants to argue, an instance by the way of the creative footnoting he so deplors in others. Third, the standards Windschuttle applies to the historical works he examines in this chapter are both arbitrary and unfair, given that they do not represent those that have been in vigor in the profession in recent decades. Indeed the only other source Windschuttle cites to support his views provides an account of footnoting that is substantially in agreement with Grafton’s (Himmelfarb, 1994: 127-128).

The terms of reference set by Windschuttle are therefore seriously flawed. To “expose” the incommensurability between the evidence cited by historians like Ryan and Reynolds and their conclusions is to reveal the obvious. That one does not find in the footnotes of such historians full and incontrovertible proof of their every assertion is no revelation; it is to be expected. That their notes do not exhaustively indicate the processes whereby they were able to reach certain conclusions is equally evident. What one does expect to find in their notes is an accurate list of the sources, which would allow a fair and open-minded critic the opportunity to reconstruct those processes, at least to some degree.

With regard to its critique of Australian historians, *The Fabrication* implements general parameters of judgment which are inappropriate. Time after time the investigation “reveals” that the documentation quoted by the historians does not prove in any absolute way the validity of their theses (Windschuttle, 2003c: 49-50, 134-143, 151-158, 270-280; also 2003b: 103-105). Whether Windschuttle has approached his task in a spirit of fair play and open-mindedness is best left to the reader to decide. Yet it should be noted that where they have responded the historians under scrutiny have sometimes offered highly plausible, detailed explanations as to how they reached certain conclusions on the basis of the available evidence (Ryan, 2003c: 235-240). To suggest this is not to deny that Windschuttle’s investigation also turned up a disturbing number of misstatements, inconsistencies, and inaccuracies. Several instances of selective quoting or misquoting of key documents showed up in the works of Henry Reynolds (Windschuttle, 2003c: 95-99, 168-169, 182-183; Reynolds, 1995: 66 and 1996: 29). Reynolds has acknowledged these and is in the process of revising them out of new editions of his works (Windschuttle, 2003d: 14; Reynolds, 2004: xx, 66). Similarly, Lyndall Ryan has explained how her notes were “scrambled” in the passage from Ph.D. thesis to book (Ryan, 2003c: 234). This resulted in a number of her notes failing to substantiate, or even to address the issues being discussed in the text (Ryan, 1996: 92, 102, 139). Yet another case of inaccuracy concerned Lloyd Robson’s account of a massacre of Aborigines at Oyster Bay in 1815 (Windschuttle, 2003c: 144; Robson, 1983: 50). Closer scrutiny of the source revealed an overstatement of the evidence which historians have taken into account by now referring to Oyster Bay as “a possible east coast massacre” (Boyce, 2003: 53).

In such cases Windschuttle is perhaps vindicated in his campaign to show “what happens when moral sensitivity prevails over historical methodology” (Windschuttle,

2003c: 144). What happens is that bits and pieces of evidence get misread, errors creep in that tend to flow in the direction of the thesis being argued. Historians know this and keep a vigilant watch: Henry Reynolds for example has frequently been accused by his professional colleagues of being biased and one-sided in his treatment of settler violence towards Aborigines (Attwood, 2003: 171-174). But it is a long way from acknowledging minor infractions of this sort to sustaining a case for wholesale fabrication. Windschuttle demonstrates that the historians under investigation made errors, and that these errors tend, as members of the profession have recently written, to move in the same direction (Macintyre and Clark, 2004: 169). That is, they tend to validate the overall thesis of frontier warfare being waged between settlers and Blacks. Regrettable as such lapses may be, they are not an uncommon occurrence. They do not, in the present case, invalidate the general theses being argued. Most importantly, their number falls far short of the critical mass that would be required to mount a case for fabrication. To see what such a case might look like it is enough to consider that compiled against David Irving in the recent libel trial during which he failed to clear himself of the charge of having falsified history (Evans, 2002).

Windschuttle's tactic has nevertheless been to exert maximum leverage from the errors he has uncovered. The idea seems to be to conflate minor errors into a general case for fabrication. Windschuttle's success with the wider public stands as a warning to historians as to what can happen if standards of accuracy are allowed to slip. The consequences are potentially dire and include the loss of public confidence in the results of historical research. This is particularly regrettable in the light of what has been demonstrated so far, i. e., that Windschuttle's main offensive is based on misrepresenting the basic contours of professional historical practice. In fact, misrepresentations similar to those noted above guide other sections of *The Fabrication* as well. Windschuttle appears to believe, for example, that the historical record is unequivocal in what it tells us about the past (Macintyre, 2003: 70). In order to know what really happened, we need only consult the record. Yet few if any practicing historians today would accept such a view. The historical record consists of facts, documents, and testimony that require interpretation. Interpretation involves selecting and sifting the available documentation into patterns of meaning. As Grafton and many others reiterate, no two historians, working on the same set of historical records, are likely to construe the past in exactly the same way. Each will do so to the best of their ability, in accordance with their particular perspective on events. The fact that Windschuttle, in returning to the documents, is able in so many instances to establish an alternative version of what happened is of no real significance. It does not mean that he has, as he claims, uncovered the truth and exposed falsification. It simply demonstrates yet again what all historians know: that the same set of documents is subject to multiple interpretations. Does this mean that Windschuttle's versions of events are of equal value to those of the historians whose work he is attacking? Not necessarily, and here we reach another area of divergence between Windschuttle's standards and those of the profession at large.

Windschuttle appears to believe he can undermine his opponents simply by showing that an alternative reading of the evidence is possible. His method is to show that while interpretation A is well established in the literature, one might well derive an interpretation B from the same set of documents. But the plausibility of B is not sufficient to overturn A. One must go further and show that B is preferable to A because it has greater probability of being a truer version of what happened. Windschuttle is certainly right to insist that historians who first decide what it is they want to argue, then go out

and locate evidence to support their case are not historians at all (Windschuttle, 2003c: 402-403; Krygier and van Krieken, 2003: 104). They are propagandists for a cause. Proper historians must as a matter of course consider the full range of possible interpretations suggested by the evidence (Haskell, 1998: 151-152). They then choose the one they decide has the greater probability of being the right one. But merely to show, as Windschuttle so often does, that an alternative is possible when the evidence is viewed from a different angle proves nothing. What Windschuttle needs to do, in order to substantiate the claim of fabrication, is to show that his alternative reading has greater probability, but has been rejected (or neglected) by historians for ideological reasons. This he generally fails to do, simply substituting for what he decries as one tendentious reading another equally tendentious one of his own.

The procedure can be illustrated by considering Windschuttle's approach to the events that occurred at Risdon Cove on 3 May 1804. Risdon Cove was the original site of British settlement in Tasmania. By 1804 the main settlement had moved down the Derwent River to Sullivan's Cove, later renamed Hobart Town. On 3 May 1804 some 80 Europeans still occupied the site at Risdon Cove (Tardif, 2003: 218). What transpired on that day can be briefly summarized as follows. An Aboriginal hunting party consisting of several hundred men, women and children came into contact with the settlement. An engagement lasting some three hours ensued, during which a number of the Aboriginal party were killed. The incident subsequently became known as the Risdon Cove massacre, an event that has been seen by some as marking the beginning of conflict between the settlers and the indigenous population.

Windschuttle's approach to Risdon Cove is to re-examine the primary evidence. His technique is to undermine in a systematic way the testimony on which the claims of there having been a massacre rest. The principal objective is to revise downwards the Aboriginal death toll as established by an official committee of enquiry in 1830. After interviewing witnesses and considering the evidence in the case, the Broughton committee of 1830 noted that the numbers of Aboriginal dead at Risdon Cove "have been estimated as high as 50" (Windschuttle, 2003c: 21). Windschuttle's comment is that the committee "should have been more circumspect in repeating this figure" (ibid.). Windschuttle's own examination of the evidence leads him to draw the conclusion that the engagement at Risdon Cove led to three ascertainable Aboriginal deaths, with one and possibly more wounded (Windschuttle, 2003c: 26).

There is nothing particularly shocking about this conclusion. Even Lyndall Ryan sets the Aboriginal death toll from the incident at "at least three", while Henry Reynolds admits the exact number of Aboriginal dead is likely to remain unknown (Boyce, 2003: 42; Ryan, 1996: 75; Reynolds, 2004: 76-77). What is disturbing about Windschuttle's manner of proceeding is his obvious determination to keep the death toll as low as possible, so as to exonerate the colonists of any charge of wrongdoing. A good example is his interpretation of the White settlers' use of the carronade to disperse the hundreds of natives thought to be threatening the settlement. All reports agree that the carronade was fired, the usual assumption being that it fired shot with devastating consequences. Historians are also cognizant of the fact, however, that the carronade may have been used to fire only a blank, thereby frightening off, but not physically harming the Aborigines (Reynolds, 2004: 76-77). Windschuttle sets forth the two alternatives, then opts for the blank discharge, not on the basis of any evidence, but simply because it fits in with his overall purpose, which is to portray the settlers as essentially well-intentioned and benign (Windschuttle, 2003c: 18). In other words, Windschuttle is guilty of

committing two sins he is usually in the habit of attributing to his opponents: first, he makes an assertion without sufficient proof; second, this assertion just happens to validate his general thesis (Tardif, 2003: 221-222).

To return to the main point, Risdon Cove illustrates how Windschuttle identifies clear alternatives, but without necessarily demonstrating greater probability for the alternative he himself favors. Risdon Cove also offers a veritable repertory of the devices Windschuttle uses in the service of his campaign to discredit what he labels "massacre stories". One of these is argument *ex silentio*: if an eyewitness fails to mention something, one can assume it never happened. Thus if, in their accounts of the engagement at Risdon Cove, witnesses on the day mention only three Aboriginal dead, that is where the death toll must stand. Yet the failure of a source to mention X does not prove that non-X is the case. Many years ago David Hackett Fischer diagnosed this type of reasoning as constituting what he called the fallacy of the negative proof (Fischer, 1970: 47-48).

Windschuttle also makes use of another fallacy listed by Fischer (9-12), the false dichotomy. This consists in setting up two alternatives as if they alone exhausted the full range of interpretative possibilities. In the case of Risdon Cove, Windschuttle offers only two possibilities: either three Aborigines died as a result of the encounter, or as many as 50 died, with no option left open for a mediating figure. Yet with at least one and possibly more wounded (Windschuttle, 2003c: 26), is it not likely that the death toll at Risdon Cove might easily have risen to four, to five, to ten or more? To limit the choice to two estimates only smacks of setting up a classic false dichotomy, in order to trap readers into having to choose between two equally implausible alternatives.

Windschuttle's whole approach to Risdon Cove suggests he is engaging in the tactics of what Fischer (28-31) calls counter-questioning. This consists in effecting "a mindless inversion of an earlier interpretation" in order to argue the exact contrary. Counter-questioning is typical of revisionism. Its methodological weakness lies in its adoption of an adversarial mode of enquiry. The method of claim and counter-claim may well be suited to a court of law, where the objective is to reach a verdict of guilty or innocent. It is unhelpful in the field of history for reasons not dissimilar to those that plague the false dichotomy. Counter-questioning too works on the principle of establishing two stark alternatives, neither of which exhausts the vast range of interpretative possibilities that lie in between. The dangers of counter-questioning include the risk that the critical exercise will degenerate into mere point scoring. The counter-questioner focuses on proving the adversary wrong as the best means of strengthening the counter-claim, all the while remaining blind to other, possibly more viable interpretative options.

There is of course a way of justifying Windschuttle's tactics, though it is a way of which he himself would certainly not approve. It consists in admitting that, for any particular set of historical circumstances, there exist multiple points of view, each endowed with equal validity. Thus in the case of Risdon Cove one might construe the Windschuttle offensive as presenting the White settler version of events, while others have presented the Aboriginal version. Some modern relativists would argue that the whole issue of greater probability is non-existent, because in relation to any historical event there are multiple truths (Burke, 2001: 6, 289). Thus the Aboriginal community has its truth about Risdon Cove, the White community has its truth, and these constitute irreducible entities. Indeed once the doctrine of multiple truths is accepted, the basis for rational comparison in the light of probability is gone. History becomes propaganda for a particular cause, a form of

special pleading. The only option left to those who subscribe to the concept of multiple truths is to line up behind the banner of their choice and to do battle with their adversaries (Haskell, 1998: 10).

Yet the acceptance of the rather obvious point that all history is partial and “positioned” does not mean one has to embrace the idea of multiple truths. First of all, truth in history is unattainable; all history is but an approximation of what actually happened. This applies to oneself very bit as much as to others. Second, it is not only possible, it is necessary to consider the evidence on which any and all historical interpretations must inevitably rest. Thirdly, any true process of critical scholarship must include ways and means of testing and comparing competing accounts of the same events. To say that all historical accounts are of equal value in relation to their perspective is too easy. It deprives history of its essential critical function and reduces it to mere rhetoric. It also means that the counter-assertions of revisionists like Windschuttle can be fought only on ideological, and not on historiographical grounds.

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