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The Time of Megatexts: Dark Accumulation and Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*

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> *"Stories can also be a series of themes unfettered by time."*
>
> —Myla Mint in Mark Z. Danielewski, *The Familiar*

Last week the fifth volume of Mark Z. Danielewski's massive serial novel in progress, *The Familiar* (2015–), was published. Similar to the author's first novel, *House of Leaves* (2000), which took film as its principal point of tropological reference and remediation, this most recent work is conceived as a "peak television" show in print, with Volume 5, titled *Redwood* (2017), marking the "Season One finale."[1] *The Familiar* has been contracted for an initial ten volumes, and, if it is selling well enough to warrant "renewal" by Pantheon after its second "season," will run to a projected twenty-seven volumes, published biannually, concluding roughly a decade from now in 2027.[2] Like individual television episodes, each volume in the series shares a

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Epigraph drawn from Mark Z. Danielewski, *The Familiar: Hades*, vol. 4 (New York: Pantheon 2017), 520. This talk was delivered on *The Power of Digital Talk* panel at the thirty-first annual Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts Conference at Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona on November 9, 2017. This is a work in progress. Please do not cite without permission.

[1] Mark Z. Danielewski, *The Familiar: Redwood*, vol. 5 (New York: Pantheon, 2017), verso gatefold.

[2] For some of the details about Danielewski's book deal, see Alex Sorondo, "Meta-Pleasure," review of *The Familiar: Redwood*, vol. 5, by Mark Z. Danielewski, *Open Letters Monthly: An Arts and Literature Review*, November 1, 2017, https://www.openlettersmonthly.com/meta-pleasure/.

similar structure: each is lushly illustrated and printed on 880 pages of high-quality, glossy

paper, the majority of which follow nine point-of-view characters who are all connected in some

way to the narrative's principal protagonist, a twelve-year-old girl named Xanther Ibrahim.[3] *The*

Familiar is also filled with graphically remediated ephemera taken from across the digital and

cultural landscape: previews, comics, commercials, YouTube videos in print, a lengthy list of

credits, and other materials fill the front and back matter of each volume. Aesthetically, formally,

and technically, Danielewski's novel is an immensely ambitious undertaking that, following N.

Katherine Hayles's reading of *House of Leaves*, "extends the claims of the print book by

showing what print can be in a digital age."[4] And though it shares a genealogical connection to

the serial novels of the nineteenth century, it is thoroughly contemporary. *The Familiar* is of, in,

and *out of* twenty-first-century time. It is also what I call a *megatext*.[5]

From even this brief description of a work I can hardly do justice to in my limited

remarks today, I hope it is already clear how important *time* is to Danielewski's current project,

and *The Familiar*'s emphasis on and exploration of temporality signals an important shift in the

focus of the author's work. Danielewski's first novel, *House of Leaves*, is in many ways a kind of

apotheosis (or perhaps the last gasp) of twentieth-century United States metafiction. This ergodic

novel follows Fredric Jameson's insight that in postmodernity, "our daily life, our psychic

experience, our cultural languages, are . . . dominated by categories of *space* rather than by

categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism."[6] *House of Leaves* is filled

with complex meditations on postmodern space: from the spatial play of text on the page, to the

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[3] Who has a strange relationship to a small cat or a "familiar."

[4] N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 112.

[5] For my prefatory discussion of megatexts, see Bradley J. Fest, "Toward a Theory of the Megatext: Speculative Criticism and Richard Grossman's '*Breeze Avenue* Working Paper,'" in *Scale in Literature and Culture*, ed. Michael Tavel Clarke and David Wittenberg (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2017).

[6] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 16, emphasis mine.

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uncanny house at the center of the book's narrative that is (infinitely) larger on the inside than on the outside, Danielewski's breakout success from the last year of the twentieth century was, in a very real way, about the horrors of what happens when *space accumulates*. His second major book, *Only Revolutions* (2006), a rigorous Oulipian long poem deeply concerned with history, was also profoundly spatial. As Hayles writes: "*Only Revolutions* . . . interrogates the datasphere by accentuating and expanding the role of *spatiality* in a literary text. . . . Among the transformations and deformations the text implements is a profound shift from narrative as a temporal trajectory to a *topographic* plane upon which a wide variety of interactions and permutations are staged."[7] And though it would be a mistake to ignore or gloss over *The Familiar*'s obvious concerns with space (e.g., even just the *considerable* place it anticipates taking up on its readers' bookshelves!), Danielewski's recent work sees him once again inverting and subverting his previous formal, thematic, and technical concerns to produce a book that multiplies the *temporal* planes in which it exists and to which it connects. From the deep time of its cosmic frame tale and the shifting temporalities of globalization experienced by its cosmopolitan characters, to its confrontation with Anthropocenic planetarity and its biannual, serialized release schedule, *The Familiar* asks its reader to confront what it means to live in and at too many times. Like other massive transmedia texts produced during the twenty-first century—such as massively multiplayer online roleplaying games, the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* (2008–), or Richard Grossman's forthcoming three-million-page "novel" *Breeze Avenue*—Danielewski's own megatext-in-progress emerges from and responds to a world in which time is no longer out of joint, but overwhelmingly and catastrophically multiple.

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[7] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 221, emphases mine.

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The Familiar multiplies different experiences and encounters with time materially, formally, and thematically. To begin with *The Familiar*'s material temporality, consider the following times: eight and three-quarter hours—roughly the time it takes to read each volume (the equivalent of 250 pages of prose in a typical novel); forty-four hours—its current runtime; 236 hours or nearly ten days—its projected final runtime; six weeks—how quickly one could read the entire series by devoting forty hours a week to it; six months—the average time between each volume's publication; eleven years—how long Danielewski has been working on the project; twelve years—the amount of time projected between the publication of *The Familiar*'s first volume and its last; twenty-seven years—the time between "Redwood"—a piece Danielewski wrote in 1990, destroyed, and that would later become the impetus for *House of Leaves*—and the fifth volume of *The Familiar* sharing the same name; and I could go on.[8] Like other megatexts, which I define as unreadably large yet concrete aesthetic and rhetorical transmedia objects produced and conceived as singular works, and which depend upon digital technology and collaborative authorship for their production, *The Familiar* is not only an ergodic novel that requires nontrivial effort to peruse; it frustrates its own traversal to the point of unreadability. Unlike Grossman's *Breeze Avenue*, which I have written about elsewhere and which achieves megatextuality through its sheer unreadable length, *The Familiar* is a megatext because of its massive and complex temporal existence.

Formally, though *The Familiar* aspires to similitude with television shows such as *Breaking Bad* (2008–13) or *Sense8* (2105–16), and it certainly tells a compelling story—particularly after the first volume or "pilot" *One Rainy Day in May* (2015) is completed and readers become familiar with the novel's narrative conventions—it is hardly a text one can "binge watch" let alone "binge read." Though Danielewski is as equally capable of producing

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[8] "Redwood" was restored by Danielewski's sister.

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page-turning prose as any Stephen King or J. K. Rowling, and indeed, great swaths of *The Familiar* can go by in a breeze, much of it is too experimentally difficult for the duration of its reading to be absorptively, passively enthralling.[9] As a review on the back of Volume 5 informs us and as Jessica Pressman has argued elsewhere, Danielewski's touchstones are the high modernism of Flaubert, Freud, "Mallarmé[,] and Joyce" as much as the "golden age" television of *Mad Men* (2007–15) or *The Wire* (2002–08).[10] From the discombobulating narrative snippets that begin each volume, to the interruptions made by the metafictional Narrative Constructs that exegetically comment on the story they are telling, from the figures and images made out of wispy, tangled words, to the inscrutable triangle patterns in the middle of each page, *The Familiar*'s heady mixture of allusion, mystery, and textual play make traversing its forty-four hundred pages an exercise in anti-absorptive (and surprisingly modernist) reading.

But this is not to say that Danielewski's writing hearkens back to T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound's relationship to the "tradition." Rather, his novel seems less anxious about the influences that contribute to its narrative texture than it appears to just take those influences for granted as the stuff out of which contemporary art is made. Indeed, the book is rather explicit about this. In a remarkable moment of metafictional honesty, one of the book's narrators, TF-Narcon[9] informs its readers that "I am not original. I am merely a blend of current texts neither influenced nor influential because all that I reveal can at any point be reconfigured [. . .]. I am [. . .] a conflation of convenient linguistic techniques, born out of context and choice, and balanced to best cover

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[9] On absorption and its relationship to poetic experimentation, see Charles Bernstein, "Artifice of Absorption" (1987), in *A Poetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[10] Danielewski, *The Familiar*, 5: back cover. For more on the relationship between modernism and twenty-first-century (electronic and digital) literature, see Jessica Pressman, *Digital Modernism: Making It New in New Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), esp. 158–74.

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those subjects I'm designed to address."[11] Rather than postmodern pastiche or what Jonathan

Lethem might call the ecstasy of influence, *The Familiar* shares with other contemporary texts

what Aaron Bady has noticed as a surprising "*lack* of anxiety when it comes to influence," or

what Northrop Frye might call an "undiscriminating catholicity."[12] *The Familiar*'s modernist

difficulty and plethora of languages other than English, rather than make its pleasures available

only to a limited, highly educated reading audience with the leisure time to spend on an immense

and demanding novel, shows a ubiquity or (perhaps) a mundanity of influence that both serves to

offset its modernist aesthetics—e.g., references to the Electronic Entertainment Expo and

Rihanna exist right alongside epigraphs from David Foster Wallace and Francis Crick[13]—and

alerts us to the foundation upon which textual production rests in the twenty-first century: what I

have elsewhere called *hyperarchivalism*.[14] *The Familiar* is assembled with the vast archive of

texts now available via networked digital computers as the primary support for its aesthetic,

formal, and technical experimentation. It is a book that understands the staggering number of

cultural artifacts at its and its reader's fingertips, and that *history* is available for its search-

engine-equipped readers differently than ever before. As its automated narrators or Narcons

continually emphasize, the book delights in the potential flights of googling fancy its textual

layering might produce, encouraging both fleeting *and* careful research into a variety of different

areas, including but not limited to "voicings typically characterized as [. . .] Modernist, Imagist,

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[11] Danielewski, *The Familiar*, 1:566. Danielewski makes extensive use of ellipses in his writing. In keeping with the established convention for other writers who make frequent use of ellipses in their prose (e.g., Thomas Pynchon), any ellipses I insert in Danielewski's prose will be bracketed.

[12] Aaron Bady, "*Stranger Things*, Season One," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, August 30, 2016, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/stranger-things-season-one/, emphasis in original; and Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957; repr., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 25. Also see Jonathan Lethem, "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism" (2007), in *The Ecstasy of Influence: Nonfictions, Etc.* (New York: Doubleday, 2011), 93–120.

[13] Mark Z. Danielewski, *The Familiar: Honeysuckle & Pain*, vol. 3 (New York: Pantheon, 2016), 94; Mark Z. Danielewski, *The Familiar: Into the Forest*, vol. 2 (New York: Pantheon, 2015), 144; and Danielewski, *The Familiar*, 5:7 and 5:729.

[14] For a further discussion of hyperarchivalism, see Bradley J. Fest, "Reading Now and Again: Hyperarchivalism and Democracy in Ranjan Ghosh and J. Hillis Miller's *Thinking Literature across Continents*" (forthcoming).

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Surrealist, Oulipian, Confessional, Postmodernist, Magical Realist, Postcolianlist, [. . .] Post-

Ironic Confessional," et cetera.[15] But, of course, one can also just *read* the thing, front to back,

Volumes 1–5, without consulting Wikipedia or one's knowledge of literary and cultural history

at all. In this way, and importantly different from television or other passive media, *The Familiar*

produces a *temporal and historical agency* in its readers who exercise an important role in how

long and in what ways they choose to pursue the many hyperarchival secrets and pleasures the

book makes available, co-creating at every step different versions and experiences of its temporal

existence.

But lest I overstate the book's relationship to time and twenty-first-century digital

realities as an uncritical celebration of the overwhelming amount of information made available

to contemporary subjects, I should stress that time, as it exists in the diegesis of the novel itself,

is strikingly, intoxicatingly multiple, and to a rather disturbing degree. In "Clip 4," a short story

Danielewski published in 2012 set in the universe of *The Familiar*, the story's fictional author

writes about seeing a film that cannot exist in space and time as it does, "time is not merely 'out

of joint,' it is incoherent. [. . .] 'Something sure is rotten in the state of . . . of things.'"[16] In *The*

Familiar, if time is incoherent and rotten, it is because of how *much* of it there is, how many

different temporalities the book attempts to represent. The book dramatizes an encounter with

time that becomes particularly pronounced in the twenty-first-century. In the space of the book's

diegetic "present," 2014, the biggest to the smallest timescales converge and mimetically

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[15] Danielewski, *The Familiar*, 1:566.

[16] Mark Z. Danielewski, "Clip 4," *Black Clock*, no. 15 (2012): 175, http://tomabba.com/test/Clip4.pdf. "Clip 4" is an important though still largely unknown text for understanding *The Familiar*, and its publication three years before *One Rainy Day in May* indicates that it is both a teaser for the longer work and potentially an important key for understanding Danielewski's megatext. Further, in "Clip 4" we learn—through a reference to Danielewski's first novel: "*Super Navidson Record. Don't you think?*" (172)—that *The Familiar* and *House of Leaves* take place in the same fictional universe, which seems like an important piece of information for thinking about Danielewski's career more generally.

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interact, to the point where even the most powerful figures in the story—the Narcons—become

overwhelmed by the accumulation of different temporalities.

To start with large timescales: each volume of *The Familiar* begins with a pair of frame

tales, both of them placing the events of the book amidst a background of deep time in which the

only constant appears to be violence, suffering, and "war."[17] The first frame tale is the cosmic,

posthuman narrative, "Astral Omega," set "billions of years hence" at the end of the universe,

when matter has begun to decohere and the underpinnings of existence to dissolve.[18] Next, each

volume contains a brief story from the archaeological past—beginning over two hundred

thousand years ago in Volume 1, to one hundred thousand years ago in Volume 2, and on to

fifty-five hundred years ago in the most recent volume—and one imagines that these stories of

ancient humans will presumably get closer and closer to the story's present with each successive

volume.[19] Then there are the Narcons, which presumably exist in a technologically advanced

future. The Narcons appear to be telling the story of *The Familiar* to their contemporaries while

simultaneously broadcasting it into the past so that we can read it, blurring the line between past,

present, and future, and offering a challenge at the most fundamental level of the book's

narration to the historical relationship between humans and narrative. Paul Ricoeur, in his

magisterial three-volume work, *Time and Narrative* (1983–85), emphasizes that "time becomes

human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full

meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence."[20] For Ricoeur, narrative is the

fundamental way in which humans understand their existence in time, and Danielewski (I

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[17] Danielewski, *The Familiar*, 1:17.
[18] Danielewski, *The Familiar*, 1:15.
[19] See Danielewski, *The Familiar*, 1:35, 2:35, and 5:37. Volume 3's frame tale begins 73,656 years ago and Volume 4's 29,988 years ago (3:35 and 4:37).
[20] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 52, emphases from original removed.

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suspect intentionally) is using the rather brilliant metafictional device of his artificially intelligent Narcons to question the *human* in Ricoeur's equation. At a time when *nonhuman* timescales are beginning to have increasingly significant bearing on how we understand humanity's place in geologic history, and in a novel filled with posthuman and nonhuman entities and agents, particularly animals, whose subjectivity is rather sympathetically captured by our narrators, one of the achievements of *The Familiar* is to demonstrate the challenge facing humans *and* nonhumans attempting to narrate the multiplying deep temporalities of the Anthropocene.

In terms of smaller timescales, again the Narcons show themselves to be remarkable figures, as they quilt together the book's deep time with its present narrative by explicitly accessing the most minute moments in the story's diegesis. As our TF-Narcon[9] puts it: "I know [Xanther] down to a near-atomic level—near because near-Planck scale analysis must address quantum superposition resolutions which do not always resolve considerably [. . .]. I know every reality Xanther has encountered whether pebble, pot holder, or tangerine seed. I even know those data points her mind has mis-indexed or never retained in the first place. In other words: I know that which is just beyond Xanther too."[21] Despite the timestamps that begin and end each proper chapter in the book, *The Familiar* rigorously resists placing its readers and characters in a stable, easily locatable and discrete time. From the near-Planck scale analysis TF-Narcon[9] can perform on the book's protagonist and all Xanther's possible permutations in the book's multiverse, to the desperate cry for existence made by the posthuman singularity at the end of time, *The Familiar* multiplies the temporalities of its diegesis to the point that characters themselves are temporally confused, unstuck within their own multiversal historical space, connected to too many others, incoherent, overwhelmed by the narrative possibilities of "every reality," awash in the digital temporality of their oceanic, distributed present.

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[21] Danielewski, *The Familiar*, 1:571.

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As the series has progressed, the instability and slipperiness of the book's temporal diegesis has become increasingly pronounced. In Volume 4, titled *Hades* (2017), Anwar goes to New York City for a job interview with the shady tech-giant Galvadyne and takes his adopted stepdaughter Xanther along. The representatives of this suspicious company pull no punches in attempting to woo Anwar to its ranks, making it clear that anything he or Xanther want is within their means to provide. Xanther responds to such largesse immediately: "'*Hamilton!*' she practically squealed. 'Can you get us tickets?'" The head of Galvadyne finds this request mystifying, as neither he nor Anwar have ever heard of the smash hit musical. All three of the story's Narcons are also upset by Xanther's request for *Hamilton* (2015) tickets: "(Static recall [reconstituting {. . .}]) / (That's not possible.) / (Confirming: not part of her historical possibilities . . .)."[22] This scene in New York takes place in early September of 2014; Hamilton would not debut until February of 2015. Though one might suggest that *Hamilton* was in production at this time and perhaps Xanther had heard it discussed in passing—or else this might just be a joke about the difficulty of acquiring tickets to the musical!—the more likely explanation, given the novel's temporal playfulness, is that Xanther has access to events that have not yet occurred, times that have not come to pass. It seems doubtful, given what information Danielewski has provided so far, that Xanther is precognitive. Rather, time in *The Familiar* just does not exist as a linear, diachronic series of events, but is rather a synchronic network of interconnecting temporalities in which individual elements of the narrative can overcome their own limitations, break outside the boundaries of anthropocentric spacetime, and access times that simply do not yet exist. In short, Xanther's imagination can access the *future*, and it is a future not foreseeable in the present but one that is nonetheless a desirable if already

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[22] Danielewski, *The Familiar*, 4:450. Note: to signal when the Narcons are speaking, the text of *The Familiar* uses a unique punctuation mark that my word processing software lacks. The closest analogue to this punctuation mark is a parenthesis, which has been used here.

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written one, a future whose possibilities for surprise and change, for giving voice to unheard

voices, has not yet been foreclosed by the cultural logic of its moment.

Mark Z. Danielewski has described *The Familiar* in an interview as "a longform

investment in the future,"[23] and I believe that we should take him very seriously at his word.

With the disastrous effects of rising atmospheric carbon becoming increasingly observable and

the relentless pace of neoliberal capital pursuing ever-increasing profit, the twenty-first century

appears to be a time of *dark accumulation*. Increasingly, the risks facing the overdeveloped

world stem not from absence but from overwhelming presence: everywhere there is a problem of

too much.[24] The logic of dark accumulation is also visible in cultural production, particularly

how digital technology and the ever-expanding global visibility of corporate intellectual property

have made it possible to produce unreadably massive texts that appear to be accumulating and

expanding with no end in sight. Megatexts such as *World of Warcraft* (2004–) or the endless

string of future *Star Wars* (1977–) transmedia products awaiting us and our progeny emerge

from and respond to the accumulatory logic of contemporaneity—indeed, I argue that the

megatext is an emergent form native to the digital age. But unlike these uncritical examples that

embrace a horizonless perpetuation of their neoliberal present, *The Familiar* rigorously and

complexly dramatizes how the dark accumulation of the neoliberal era applies to our experience

of time as well, and thus is able to profoundly question the stories we are currently able to tell

ourselves about our present and future. Twenty-first-century control societies overwhelm their

subjects with multiplying, conflicting, incoherent temporalities: from the idiocy of tweeting

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[23] Mark Z. Danielewski, "Danielewski Returns with a Long, Sideways Look at *The Familiar*," interview by NPR Staff, *All Things Considered*, NPR, May 10, 2015, http://www.npr.org/2015/05/10/404917355/danielewski-returns-with-a-long-sideways-look-at-the-familiar.

[24] For a compelling call to stop pursuing Deleuzian expansion, see Alexander R. Galloway, "Peak Deleuze and the 'Red Bull Sublime,'" *Culture and Communication* (blog), November 5, 2017, http://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/peak-deleuze-and-the-red-bull-sublime.

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world leaders absorbing the smallest increments of our attention, to the horrors of climate change extended millions of years into the future, such timescales easily upset even our most optimistic thinking. In terms of its aesthetic and technical decisions, *The Familiar* suggests that narrative has become unstuck from its ability to make sense of time in contemporaneity and that time has come roaring back as an important category of our daily lives after postmodernism. *The Familiar* also modestly offers itself as a solution: by expanding and transforming what we think a print narrative can do, how it inhabits time materially, formally, and thematically, we might gain insight into how better to navigate the multiplying temporalities of the twenty-first century. If nothing else, *The Familiar* presents us with a longform project invested in the future, which requires the future, *a* future (though not *any* future) for its perpetuation. It might be enough if we can learn even the simplest lesson from Danielewski's quixotic undertaking: that there might be a reason to put such future-oriented investment into other projects and institutions as well.

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