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The Circulation of Memory: Semprun, Goethe, and Carola Neher, from Buchenwald to Stalinism and the Bosnian Genocide

> Thus the sons
> Of Tantalus, with barbarous hands, have sown
> Curse upon curse; and, as the shaken weed
> Scatters around a thousand poison-seeds,
> So they assassins ceaseless generate,
> Their children's children ruthless to destroy [...].
> (Goethe 2015 [1779], 42)

Soon there will be no one left who has a personal memory of the Nazi concentration camps and so the question arises of how we should recall what no one can still recall, and which genres and media will serve best to keep the memory alive. In the years after the Second World War, some survivors felt that fiction could never and should never play a role in representing the Holocaust;[1] but second and third-generation witnesses, increasingly distanced from the experience of life and death in the camps, need to combine imagination with historical research if they are to continue to talk about the unspeakable. Moreover, eye-witness memory of the Holocaust may be dwindling, but the post-war history of atrocity rages unabated in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Ukraine, and on and on. How can we speak about these matters, should we treat them separately, as unique and unrepeatable, or should we attempt to conceive of them together as markers of a terrible historical continuity?

These issues are, I suggest, at the core of memory studies today. Some of the most powerful work in the field addresses two key questions: how do later generations recall and live with the experiences of their traumatised forebears, and how can we understand the connections and differences between separate historical atrocities? Marianne Hirsch's influential concept of *postmemory* illuminates the fraught endeavour of later generations to come to terms with the traumas of their parents and grandparents. She describes, for example, how Art Spiegelman's *Maus* played an important role in enabling the work of postmemory in the 1980s

1 Elie Wiesel (1987, 49), for example, insists that there can be no such thing as a novel about Auschwitz.

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and 1990s (Hirsch 2012, 40). *Maus* portrays a son's attempt to reconstruct, understand and represent what happened to his parents during the Second World War. Its dual focus is on past experiences and their continuing impact on the children of survivors. The son wants to share his parents' experiences the better to comprehend his own situation, as he explains to his wife: "I know this is insane, but I somehow wish I had been in Auschwitz with my parents so I could really know what they lived through!... I guess it's some kind of guilt about having an easier life than they did" (Spiegelman 2003, 176).

Although the term *postmemory* initially applied to those who had some biographical connection with the Holocaust (Hirsch 2012, 4), it can also be extended to include people who are not the descendants of survivors but who nevertheless feel implicated in traumatic histories. One prominent example of this is the author Jonathan Littell, who was born in 1967. His grandparents were Russian Jews who emigrated to the United States, but he does not identify as Jewish, and he has no immediate family connection with the Holocaust. Yet his novel *The Kindly Ones* (2009, *Les Bienveillantes,* 2006) is, I would hazard to claim, the single most powerful literary work to have been written about the Holocaust so far in the twenty-first century. Narrated by an unrepentant Nazi perpetrator, it takes its reader into a massively disturbing encounter with the heart of evil. In Jan Assmann's (1997) terms, "communicative" memory is now giving way to "cultural" memory, as the role of preserving, transmitting and interpreting memory passes from direct testimony to other cultural forms and media (Hirsch 2012, 32–33).

The waning of direct memory of the Holocaust comes together with the challenge of understanding how different atrocities may be interlinked, either in historical causality or in our memorial practices. Hirsch warns against the risk of comparative approaches, in which "comparison can slip into problematic equation and distressing competition over suffering" (2012, 19). At the same time, she acknowledges the urgency of exploring what she calls "affiliative structures of memory beyond the familial" (Hirsch 2012, 21). It is not only personal histories that can be traumatic, but also the fluid, anguished interconnections of private, collective, intergenerational, and international pain. As Gabriele Schwab puts it, memories are "always already composites of dynamically interrelated and conflicted histories" (2010, 30). One of the most productive strands of academic study has consequently been the exploration of how memories of different historical atrocities interact with and inform each other in ever-changing constellations. Major works such as Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory* (2009) and Max Silverman's *Palimpsestic Memory* (2013) have shown how the recollection of atrocities is complex and layered, and in particular how the memory of the Holocaust has become imbricated with subsequent histories of decolonisation. The danger here is that incomparable events are levelled down, and so work in this field consistently strains

to maintain the tension between difference and similarity, finding connections without obliterating the individual nature of each atrocity. Rothberg's *multidirectional memory* focuses on "a differentiated collective memory capable of holding together similarity and difference and of mobilizing remembrance in the service of political responsibility without relativizing or negating historical specificity" (2009, 211).[2] The Holocaust has sometimes been conceived as utterly singular and therefore incomparable to other historical atrocities.[3] How can we respect that singularity whilst also endeavouring to understand the inner relatedness that lies beneath the long history of violence?

This chapter explores the stakes of memory, postmemory, multidirectional memory and palimpsestic memory by examining one literary work, Jorge Semprun's play *The Return of Carola Neher* (*Le Retour de Carola Neher*, 1998).[4] I follow the lead of Schwab's *Haunting Legacies* (2010) and suggest that the circulation of memory is linked to the return of ghosts.[5] The dead return because trauma remains unresolved. Ghosts come back to tell us of past and future pain and, in Semprun's play, to suggest a possible end to the history of violence.

Two models of haunting

Semprun was born in 1923 in Spain and in the 1930s he went into exile with his Republican, anti-fascist family, ending up in France. As a member of the Communist Resistance in occupied France during the Second World War, he was captured, tortured and sent to Buchenwald. After the war he became a leading member of the Spanish Communist Party, engaged in clandestine missions in fascist Spain, until his expulsion from the Party for political reasons in 1964. He went on to become a major literary figure, writing mainly in French, with novels, screenplays and memoirs to his name. After the end of fascism in Spain he served for a while as Minister of Culture in the first Spanish socialist government; he died in 2011. Semprun was a quintessential European intellectual, immersed in the languages, cultures and politics of his native continent.[6]

2 For discussion and further development, see Sanyal 2015, 7; see also Schwab 2010, 272 and Silverman 2013, 4.

3 For discussion, see for example Rothberg 2009, 8.

4 Throughout this chapter translations of French material are my own.

5 See for example Schwab "While we can foreclose mourning by burying the dead in our psyche, those dead will return to us as ghosts" (2010, 2).

6 The secondary bibliography on Semprun is now substantial. For an overview of his life and work, see Ferrán and Hermann 2014. On the importance of Europe in Semprun's work, see espe-

The principal argument of this chapter is that mnemonic migration is conveyed in Semprun's play *The Return of Carola Neher* through the theme of haunting, with ghosts returning to speak to one other and their audience about past and future atrocities. To clarify the role played by ghosts in this play, I distinguish between two models of haunting. The first is what I have called elsewhere the "unfinished business" model (Davis 2007, 3). In this model, ghosts return because the proper processes of bereavement, burial or mourning have somehow been derailed, as the body of a deceased person has not been buried appropriately, or a crime has gone unacknowledged or unavenged. Something has gone wrong, and it needs to be put right. In the first century of the common era, Pliny the Younger (1963, 204) described a haunting that led to the discovery of human bones; a dead person had not been buried according to the appropriate rites, but once those rites had been carried out, the haunting ceased. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet* the ghost of Hamlet's father returns to demand revenge for his murder. The dead cannot rest until their souls have been calmed, until wrongs have been righted, the truth acknowledged and justice done. We have to settle our debt to the past before we are free to create the future.

The significance of this model of haunting for Holocaust narratives is not hard to see. Holocaust testimony and fiction are replete with ghosts. They remain amongst us because their stories remain untold, misunderstood, neglected, or disbelieved. Survivors sometimes identify with ghosts even though they themselves are not literally dead. They feel as if part of them has died, as if they are alive in appearance only, their true lives having ended in the camps. The survivor is a *revenant*, a ghost who returns but also does not return, who lives on but who has also died. The verb *revenir*, from which revenant derives, means to come back, to return; revenants are beings who come back, but who also in a sense do not come back because they are no longer fully alive. Auschwitz survivor Charlotte Delbo plays on this ambiguity in the title of her *None of us will return* (1968, *Aucun de nous ne reviendra,* 1965) for example. Delbo would not be able to recount her tale if she had not returned, but her testimony insists that none will return; so, she has both come back and not come back, she has returned precisely as a revenant, the returner who does not return, the living being who is also dead. One of the survivors to whom Delbo gives voice, a woman named Mado, insists that contrary to appearances she is not alive: "I died in Auschwitz, and no one sees it" (Delbo 1971, 66). Semprun echoes this when he describes the days after the liberation:

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cially Tidd 2014. My understanding of Semprun's work is particularly indebted to the research of Avril Tynan (2016). Some critics prefer so spell Semprun's name in the Spanish way, with an accent on the final vowel (Semprún); for discussion, see for example Tidd 2014, 11. In this chapter I use the spelling that appears on Semprun's French texts and their English-language translations.

"We are not survivors, but revenants…" (1994, 99). Revenants have survived without surviving. They return because the past has not passed, and it will not have passed until we have fully come to terms with it, if we ever could.

The second model of haunting is associated with Jacques Derrida and especially, though not only, his book *Spectres of Marx* (1993). In this model, haunting is as much about the future as the past. The famous opening sentence of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1983) states that "A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism". This spectre is not something that returns from the dead, but rather it is a foreshadow of what is to come: communism is declared to be the future of Europe, not its past. The ghost in this case is something that comes and speaks to us from a position of radical otherness, to question us and demand our attention. It is not, then, a revenant, something that returns, but what Derrida calls an *arrivant*, a word left untranslated in English editions of his work. *Arriver* in French means to arrive, but also to happen, to occur. So an *arrivant* is not something that returns from the past; it is something that arrives, that happens, that appears unexpectedly as an event which is more about what could be than what has been. This ghost cannot be anticipated or turned into an object of knowledge. It does not deliver a message that will allow it to be laid to rest once the message has been deciphered and properly understood. As Derrida says, "The arrivant must be absolutely other, an other that I expect not to expect, that I do not expect, for whom expecting consists in not-expecting, an expecting without what in philosophy is called the horizon of expectation, when a certain knowledge still anticipates it and deadens it in advance" (1996, 21). This ghost does not announce the return of what we did or could have known. Instead, it is an envoy from alterity that throws the familiar into confusion.

What is at stake in these two models of haunting is whether the ghost *returns* to re-establish what has been lost, be it an item of knowledge, or justice or both, or whether it *arrives* to destabilise the present and foreshadow a possible future. To test the borders between these two models, I want to look at Semprun's play *The Return of Carola Neher* (1998), which is a work about haunting and is also itself a haunted work, one that is full of ghosts. It is possessed by and negotiates with literary monuments and spectral figures from the historical and mythical past. Through the issue of haunting, we can see the underlying question of how memory survives and circulates. The ghost returns from the past to tell us of what has already happened; but it also speaks of what is to come, and of the need to create a viable future that escapes our history of violence.

The return of Carola Neher

The Return of Carola Neher was first performed in 1995 in the Soviet Military Cemetery in Weimar, Germany. The location is already redolent with significance, and it belongs to a dense historical, political and literary network upon which the strange power of this play, and Semprun's writing in general, depends. Weimar was the place where German literary culture flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but it is also close to the site of the Buchenwald concentration camp, where Semprun was imprisoned. Weimar/Buchenwald thus brings together the high point and the low point of German history and culture. It is a place of pride and a place of shame. The key figure in Weimar classicism was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and he is also one of the principal ghosts who appear in *The Return of Carola Neher*. Some of the exchanges recorded in Johann Peter Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe* (Eckermann 2022 [1836]) took place on the site where Buchenwald would later be constructed. Another of the ghosts who appear in Semprun's play is Léon Blum. He was a French Jewish intellectual who published his *New Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann* in 1905, in which he imagined what Goethe's view of Europe might be at the time of rising antisemitism that was epitomised by the Dreyfus affair. In the 1930s Blum would go on to be the first and only socialist Prime Minister of the French Third Republic, and its first and only Jewish Prime Minister. In the 1940s he was imprisoned in Buchenwald, albeit under favourable conditions.

In his earlier works *What a Beautiful Sunday!* (1982, *Quel beau dimanche!* 1980) and *Literature or Life* (1997, *L'Écriture ou la vie*, 1994), Semprun had already explored the interpretative possibilities of the links between Goethe, Weimar, Buchenwald, and Blum.[7] One of the central obsessions of Semprun's work is when apparent coincidence should be interpreted as meaningful correspondence. In *What a Beautiful Sunday!*, Semprun refers to Goethe, Weimar, and the Weimar Republic that was founded in Germany after the end of the First World War, speaking of "a series or sequence of events of which the mutual relations, the reciprocal influences, the obscure links – if they at first appear to be contingent, even improbable – later prove to be strongly structured, so that in the end they reach such a degree of determined coherence that they attain the semblance, however illusory it might be, of being obvious" (1980, 18–19). The key question for Semprun and his readers is the network of connections between events, places and people that might seem to be utterly disparate. Is it mere coincidence that Buchenwald

7 For discussion, see Kelly 2010 and Tidd 2014, 149–155.

was constructed close to Weimar? Semprun asks us to consider that more meaningful historical, cultural and political factors may be in operation.

Semprun's *The Return of Carola Neher* summons back the ghosts of Goethe and Blum to discuss the state of Europe, democracy and totalitarianism. In the play they are accompanied by a kind of chorus of Muselmann prisoners from Buchenwald.[8] These prisoners are themselves ghosts, revenants, hovering between life and death, not quite dead and not quite alive. They are described in the play as being "beyond life, beyond the will to live" (Semprun 1998, 46). There are two other important figures in the play, the Survivor and the Actress. The Survivor, who is clearly to some extent linked with Semprun,[9] reveals himself to be the last living witness to the camps. This is his final day on earth, and he is impelled, he says, to call back all his ghosts: "I must summon all my ghosts" ["Il me faut convoquer tous mes fantômes"] (Semprun 1998, 35). It seems that the whole play is his dying dream, populated by Goethe, Blum and the Muselmänner, and also by the Actress. Why must he bring back these ghosts, and in particular the Actress? Three times, the Actress asks him why he has made her return. Why must the ghosts come back to Weimar, to the Soviet Cemetery, and to Buchenwald? In posing this question, Semprun's play raises one of the issues described earlier in this chapter: how will we remember the camps when everyone with personal memories of them has gone?

The Actress in the play is identified as Carola Neher, the figure named in the play's title. In his Preface, Semprun explains how he first discovered Neher through a poem by Bertolt Brecht (1998, 11–12). Neher was a German actress in the 1920s and 1930s for whom Brecht wrote important roles. With the rise of Hitler, she fled Germany and settled in the Soviet Union. Denounced as a Trotskyite, she was imprisoned, then her husband was executed and she died in prison in 1942. The play quotes from a letter she wrote in prison to the orphanage that her son

8 The word *Muselmann* is German for *Muslim.* Various explanations have been proffered for why the word was used to refer to some prisoners in Auschwitz and other camps, but there is little agreement on its origin; for discussion, see Agamben 1999, 44–45. The Auschwitz survivor Jean Améry (born Hanns Chaim Mayer) describes the Muselmann in *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities:* "The so-called *Muselmann*, as the camp language termed the prisoner who was giving up and was given up by his comrades, no longer had room in his consciousness for the contrasts good or bad, noble or base, intellectual or unintellectual. He was a staggering corpse, a bundle of physical functions in its last convulsions" (1980, 9; quoted in Agamben 1999, 41). A Muselmann plays an important role in Semprun's *The Dead Man We Needed* (*Le Mort qu'il faut,* 2001). In that work, Semprun describes the Muselmann as being "between life and death" and "beyond life and survival" (2001, 35).

9 Kelly refers to the Survivor as "Semprun's double" (2010, 27), and Tidd refers to him as "co-extensive" (2014, 153) with Semprun.

was living in, asking about his well-being. Her son received the letter 26 years later, in 1967, only then discovering who his mother was and when she had died. Neher was a victim of both Nazism and Stalinism, a fitting ghost to haunt a Soviet Cemetery and a German concentration camp.

When the Actress first appears in Semprun's play, she is seen preparing to perform the role not of Neher but of Corona Schröter, who is herself preparing to perform the role of Iphigenia in Goethe's play *Iphigenia in Tauris.* This suggests another set of intertwining histories. In 1779 Schröter appeared in Weimar as Iphigenia, with Goethe himself playing the role of Orestes. *Iphigenia in Tauris* is the most important literary intertext in *The Return of Carola Neher*, and it creates another connection between Goethe, Weimar, Neher, and the Soviet Union since Neher had performed the role of Iphigenia at a house party in the Soviet Union in 1935, as we are informed in the play. Throughout Semprun's play Goethe and the Actress recite passages from *Iphigenia in Tauris*, and the themes of Goethe's work resonate powerfully with those of Semprun. In Greek myth, Iphigenia is the daughter of Agamemnon, who is called upon to sacrifice his child in order to obtain fair winds so that he can participate in the Trojan war. On his return from Troy, he is murdered by his embittered wife, Clytemnestra, who is in turn killed by their son, Orestes. Some versions of the story of Iphigenia end with her sacrifice, but Goethe draws instead on earlier variants of the story, and on a play by Euripides also known in English as *Iphigenia in Tauris*, in which Iphigenia is secretly saved by the goddess Artemis (or Diana in Latin versions) rather than being killed, and is taken to be her priestess in Tauris. There, it is her role to sacrifice foreign intruders, the latest of whom turns out to be her brother Orestes. At first Iphigenia does not recognise him, but when the king insists that she must kill her brother, a plan is formed that might allow her to escape her terrible destiny. Iphigenia belongs to a cursed family, the House of Atreus, in which fathers kill daughters, wives kill husbands, and sons kill mothers. As Goethe's Iphigenia puts it in the passage used as an epigraph to this chapter, "as the shaken weed / Scatters around a thousand poison-seeds, / So they assassins ceaseless generate, / Their children's children ruthless to destroy". What is at stake in the play is whether this murderous cycle can be broken, and in the end it is, when the King of Tauris ultimately allows Iphigenia to depart with Orestes.

There are clear resonances here with the issues of Semprun's play. Iphigenia is supposed and believed to have been sacrificed by Agamemnon, and so she is someone who has in a sense survived her own death. In this she resembles the returning dead, the undead, of Semprun's play: Goethe, Blum, Neher, and the Muselmann prisoners who are suspended between life and death. Semprun's play also reflects the unstoppable cycle of violence that afflicts Iphigenia's family. This is the point of the connections between Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union, as realised

in the fate of Neher, who flees from Nazi Germany only to die in a Soviet jail. And on this point of connection, the play reserves a final twist. One of the Muselmann prisoners is younger than the others and does not belong in the Survivor's memories. When questioned by the Survivor, he explains that he is indeed a Muselmann in the literal sense of the word, as he is a Muslim. Rather than a Muselmann from the Nazi camps, he is in fact a Bosnian Muslim, a victim of the Bosnian genocide. He was put in a camp when he was twenty years old, the same age as the Survivor when he was imprisoned. Written and performed in 1995 whilst the war in Bosnia was still being fought, the play insists on the terrible parallel between contemporary events and atrocities committed half a century earlier. The cycle of violence depicted in the mythical story of Iphigenia and her family is reflected and repeated in the genocides and purges of twentieth-century Europe, in Nazi Germany, the Stalinist Soviet Union, and then Bosnia.

These links between Greek myth, Nazi Germany, Stalinism and Bosnia clearly resonate with Rothberg's multidirectional memory or Silverman's palimpsestic memory. Different events and time periods are recalled and reinterpreted in the light of what comes before and after them, while our memory of the past is continually and dynamically revised through changing circumstances and new interpretative contexts. The danger this creates is the temptation to compare, and to see similarities that might simplify and distort singular events. Semprun's Bosnian Muslim warns of this danger: "Oh, I know that we must not compare, I have been told it often enough! But I have no intention to compare [the Bosnian genocide]… Neither with Hitler's camps, nor with Stalin's… Nor with any massacre from the past…" (Semprun 1998, 53–54). Kelly refers to the "Semprunian leitmotiv" (2010, 30) whereby Semprun warns against comparing different historical events before proceeding to make implicit or explicit comparisons. This ties in with the acute awareness in the work of the most sensitive exponents of memory studies that exploring the links between different atrocities should not make us forget the singularity of each of them. The difficult line to negotiate here is to establish connections between past and future atrocities without reducing them to being the endless repetition of the same event. Every murder is different, every death is unique.

At the beginning of this chapter I outlined two versions of haunting. In *The Return of Carola Neher* there are plenty of ghosts of the first kind, ghosts who return from the past, returning as diminished versions of themselves, surviving their own deaths. These are the ghosts of Goethe, Blum, the Muselmänner and Neher, and maybe also of Iphigenia and Orestes, ghosts who call on us to respect a debt to the past. They inhabit the Survivor's dream as he summons them on his final day lest they be forgotten. To continue to hear these ghosts is important to

Semprun and his alter ego, the Survivor, and important to us also, as we live in a time when there will very soon be no more living survivors of the Nazi camps.

The Bosnian Muslim, however, is a different kind of ghost. He does not belong to the Survivor's memories or his dream. He is more like the second kind of ghost described earlier, an arrivant rather than a revenant, a ghost who comes from a place of otherness to question and to unsettle, rather than to deliver a message or an injunction from the past. He is not part of the Survivor's story, but he throws open the meaning and resonance of that story. He does not belong in the Survivor's dream but he has a place there, as the Survivor acknowledges: "I have found in a dream the ghosts of my past… And you entered into my dream… I bear you no grudge!" (Semprun 1998, 55). This ghost asks questions rather than delivering answers, and his question here is crucial: "What can I do for you?" (Semprun 1998, 55). The ghost has no message to deliver; he does not demand acknowledgement and does not offer to restore truth or justice. The question is not what does the ghost want of me, why has it returned, what message does it have to deliver, and what must I do to put right what has gone wrong? Rather the question is now what do I want of the ghost, what can it do for me, and how can it redeem my world? When he is asked what he wants the ghost to do, the Survivor responds: "Remember…" ["Vous souvenir…"] (Semprun 1998, 55). This act of remembrance is crucially different from that of survivor-witnesses who speak of what they have seen; it is rather a haunted memory, someone else's memory, a memory of something that is not one's own, a memory of something that one has not witnessed or experienced. The survivor of one atrocity calls on the victim of another to preserve the memory of violence. And I would suggest that we as the audience are also among the future ghosts that Semprun's dying Survivor addresses here. Reading, studying, interpreting, and re-interpreting are forms of the remembering that the Survivor appeals for. At a time when the primary witnesses are dying, we are being called upon here to keep alive the memory of that which we do not remember.

Haunting in Semprun's play is first of all a matter of recalling the past, of not letting the memory of Buchenwald and the death camps disappear once their last primary witnesses have died. But haunting is also a matter for the unknown and unformulated future, and on this point the relation with Goethe's *Iphigenia in Tauris* is once again vital. The key issue in that play is whether the cycle of violence can be broken. As a priestess of Diana, Iphigenia is called upon to sacrifice her brother, Orestes. The play revolves around the hope that the cycle can be brought to an end. *The Return of Carola Neher* suggests that the cycle goes on, from the curse of the House of Atreus, to which Orestes and Iphigenia are bound, to the murders in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, Bosnia, and beyond. However, the play itself, in calling back the ghosts of Goethe, Blum and Neher, and in drawing

on great works of Western culture stretching back to Goethe, Euripides and earlier stories, is a remarkable document of confidence and faith in European culture as something that is of immense value. That culture is a place where ghosts roam and appalling cruelty is recalled, but where there still lingers the shaken conviction that something of what we left behind is worth preserving. *The Return of Carola Neher* is a play about haunting, and it is also a play that is itself haunted by Goethe's *Iphigenia in Tauris*, by its hope that telling and retelling the stories of the past – always in different ways – is important, even if those stories speak only of atrocity and pain; and it is haunted by Goethe's hope that, against the odds, the cycle of violence might sometime be broken. In the final words of *Iphigenia in Tauris*, the King releases Iphigenia and Orestes and offers them the prospect of a future that in spite of everything may escape the repetitive violence of the past: "Fare thee well!" ["Lebt wohl!"] (Goethe 2015, 90).

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