

HORROR AND GOTHIC MEDIA CULTURES



Edited by Madelon Hoedt and Marko Lukić

Re-Imagining the Victim in Post-1970s Horror Media

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Horror and Gothic Media Cultures

The *Horror and Gothic Media Cultures* series focuses on the influence of technological, industrial, and socio-historical contexts on the style, form, and aesthetics of horror and Gothic genres across different modalities and media. Interested in visual, sonic, and other sensory dimensions, the series publishes theoretically engaged, transhistorical, and transcultural analyses of the shifting terrain of horror and the Gothic across media including, but not limited to, films, television, videogames, music, photography, virtual and augmented reality, and online storytelling.

To foster this focus, the series aims to publish monographs and edited collections that feature deep considerations of horror and the Gothic from the perspectives of audio/visual cultures and art and media history, as well as screen and cultural studies. In addition, the series encourages approaches that consider the intersections between the Gothic and horror, rather than separating these two closely intertwined generic modes.

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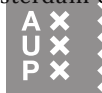


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Introduction: Theorising the Victim

Marko Lukić

“Be my victim...” (*Candyman*, Rose, 1992)

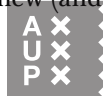
It is with these words that the mythical figure of Daniel Robitaille, better known as Candyman, beckons Helen Lyle to submit herself to him and to accept him as her killer. While this particular moment will become an anthological point of reference within the horror genre due to the sheer power of the conveyed image, further strengthened by the metaphoric cultural and social meanings imbued within it, what strikes a particular chord is the established and emphasised relation between the two characters. This mythopoetic moment becomes synonymous with both the (re) affirmation of Candyman as the source of the monstrous, the urban myth come to life, and the particular position of Helen as an (in)voluntary victim. As the narrative steadily progresses and the audience becomes aware of Candyman’s tragic history and vengeful nature, the focus slowly starts to shift from the initial antagonist to Helen, who now, through Candyman’s doings, becomes reimagined as the actual source of the monstrous. This shift in purpose and functionality within the narrative becomes once more confirmed in a climactic scene at the very end of the film, with Helen becoming/replacing Candyman himself, but now, devoid of the burden of Daniel Robitaille’s tragic history, rises as a violent urban myth in her own right. This is a key moment, along with many examples in recent decades, where the initial premise of the victim is challenged as a possibly fluid category and it becomes evident that the position of the victim is not a powerless one, as explored, for example, in the seminal work done by Barbara Creed (*The Monstrous-Feminine*, 1993, and *The Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, 2022) or Carol J. Clover (*Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, 1992).

While both authors position their work within theoretical readings of gender and sexuality, with particular attention towards women as the most

common victims within the genre, they also articulate two rather different theoretical paradigms. Whereas Barbara Creed observes women being “represented as monstrous” (*Monstrous-Feminine* 7) and subsequently argues that the now monstrous-feminine functions as a subversion of patriarchal power and the symbolic order, Carol J. Clover, through her concept of the Final Girl, argues the absence of a clear gender binary with the Final Girls/victims being in fact “boyish” (*Men* 40). As she states, “Her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance set her apart from the other girls and ally her, ironically, with the very boys she fears or rejects, not to speak of the killer himself” (40). Both authors therefore propose a different theoretical reading, but the united effect of these analyses is the acknowledgment of a deep metaphoric and semiotic value of the victim within the larger social and cultural context, as well as the significance of the victim which now surpasses its narrow outlines and becomes a multidiscursive and a subversive theoretical presence within the genre. However, as will be elaborated within this volume, the problematisation of the theoretical and practical position of a victim is not by any means constrained by the initial analytical paradigms proposed by Carol J. Clover or Barbara Creed. As will be shown, the multidiscursive nature of victims within the horror genre becomes subject to a stream of different theoretical explorations, ranging from the work of more generalised cultural theorists such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva and Bruno Latour to more specific genre-oriented authors such as Robin Means Coleman (*Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present*, 2011), Alexandra Heller-Nicholas (*Found Footage Horror Films: Fear and the Appearance of Reality*, 2014), Catherine Lester (*Horror Films for Children: Fear and Pleasure in American Cinema*, 2021) and Bernice M. Murphy (*The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, 2009). Beyond texts directly related to horror studies, authors have drawn on a myriad of other academic fields, including, but not limited to, criminology, (eco)Gothic, sociology, (trans)gender studies and thing theory.

It is within this dynamic formed between the initial theoretical premises and their later elaborations—between the potential ambivalences of the monsters and the victims, the victims themselves and a more comprehensive understanding of their position and function, as well as their potential and actual evolution within the genre—that the research proposed within this volume resides.

Recent scholarship on the horror genre has (un)covered a myriad of different topics, ranging from new (and old) theoretical paradigms, alternative



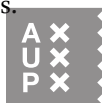
interpretations of familiar narratives and tentative readings of new ones to the progressive expansion and relocation of the genre in recent years within a larger interdisciplinary context. Nevertheless, despite this discursive abundance, some basic premises within the genre remain either unexplored or inadequately and partially explored. One such issue or concept is the notion of the victim. Predominantly explored through the prism of a protagonist, its position within the narrative, its function/purpose within the framework of the genre, or its role within the larger cultural or social context, the paradigm of the victim opens endless interpretative possibilities. Traditionally, while being an unavoidable part of the genre narrative from its earliest endeavours, the metaphoric ambition of the victim is to embody, articulate and finally project all the fears and anxieties (introduced by the narrator/writer/director) towards its target audience. The audience in turn catalyses and identifies with the projected trauma while simultaneously enjoying the suspension of disbelief. This dynamic, although simplistic, functions as a prolific interpretative context confirmed through decades of highly focused research. However, the developed binary system bonding the readers/viewers with the imaginary (but doomed) victim remains, although logical, a rather uneven one, with the analytical focus being placed on the thoughts, experiences and reactions of the viewers. The (fictitious) victims consequently retain a symbolically blank role, prone to inscriptions of meaning in accordance with a more generalised overarching narrative.

While this initial theoretical premise and the already existing body of research indicated a solid and meaningful reading of victims and victimhood within the genre, it was also clear that, for the most part, the starting analytical point for a large segment of this research relied on specific, although very impactful, theoretical premises. The work done by Barbara Creed and Carol J. Clover, as well as other authors over the years, created a polyvalent theoretical basis for all future readings. Although crucial, the research remained to a certain extent limited due to the lack of analytical discourses problematising issues such as intersectionality (the influence of race, sexuality and class), the question of victims/victimhood outside film media and the reception of the presented narratives among various audiences. Since the publication of this work, both the landscape of horror as a genre and horror studies as a field have altered dramatically, their focus shifting to include more contemporary representations developed in accordance with new media, new themes and new subgenres; the evolution of victim archetypes; and the development of a more global/non-Americanised perspective, which Clover and Creed would have been unable to address. At the same time, the parameters presented in these works have endured,



and different developments of critical discourse now coexist with, for example, the still flourishing theoretical premise of the Final Girl. The concept presented by Carol J. Clover was articulated over the years by a series of authors. Jack Halberstam, for example, in his analysis of Tobe Hooper's film *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (1974), challenges Clover's reading of the Final Girl by explaining how the character of Stretch "represents not boyishness or girlishness but monstrous gender, a gender that splatters, rips at the seams, and then is sutured together again as something much messier than male or female" (143). Isabel Cristina Pinedo echoes these thoughts in her text *Recreational Terror: Women and Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (1997) by questioning the masculinisation of female characters and warning about the potential risk of creating "a male-dominated discourse where power is coded as masculine, even when embodied in biological females" (81–82). Yet another critical approach to the necessity for a more contemporary understanding of Clover's idea of the Final Girl can be seen in analysis presented Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, who by analysing the first three films of the *Scream* franchise states how the movies, created within such a different cultural moment and context, form a distinctive type of Final Girl. As Karlyn explains, "The *Scream* trilogy taps into issues of particular concern for teen girls: (1) sexuality and virginity; (2) adult femininity and its relation to agency and power; (3) identity as it is shaped by the narratives of popular culture; and (4) identity as it is shaped by the family of origin—in particular, a daughter's relationship with her mother," all elements that allow for the development of a completely different type of Final Girl (101–02).

With all this in mind, the current collection aims precisely at revisiting, challenging and further expanding the aforementioned body of work by either exploring more contemporary issues, new media and new versions of the genre or by readdressing old tropes and readings, and proposing them in a different light. As the later outline of chapters will show, together with the actual studies within the proposed chapters, the research follows the stated goals by actively engaging a variety of theoretical debates that aim at expanding the relatively traditional perception of victim and victimhood within the genre. By engaging a range of topics, including modern nostalgia and the rereading of classic narratives, horrific discourses emerging from complex issues such as sexuality or race, and philosophical readings outside the Americanised genre production, or by exploring alternative media narratives and platforms, the presented discussions continue the aforementioned work initiated by Barbara Creed and Carol J. Clover as well as the research on victims and victimhood that followed since the first publication of their ground-breaking analyses.



With the aim and scope of this research in mind, it is necessary to define both the spatial/regional aspect within which this research will be collocated and the temporal frame that will be addressed within the proposed volume. This volume seeks to further explore and improve upon the existing research dedicated to production within the North American context and/or the US, along with the global influence and sheer volume of American writers/directors. And while the focus of the research remains predominantly directed towards the American context, the presented collection allows, although to a lesser extent, insight into a reading of victims and victimhood outside the geographic region of the United States. The decision of positioning the American (horror) experience at the centre of the proposed research is also tied to the temporal focus of the collection, which seeks to re-assess, from the vantage point of the 2020s, some key classic works to advance central theorisations of victimhood built around these films.

By considering the rich history of the genre, as well as the variety of possible approaches to the planned research subject, the decision was made to address only those narratives that were produced from the 1970s onward. This was mostly informed by the pivotal moment occurring towards the end of the 1960s and all through the 1970s, led by a wave of new horror writers and directors whose work not only brought a new energy, but actively pushed previously defined boundaries of the genre. This was succinctly and successfully described by, for example, Rick Worland, who, while referring to film production, states that the movies of this era were “unspooled in an atmosphere consumed with anguish over violence in American culture touched off by the Vietnam War, urban race riots, and traumatic political assassinations,” while the “brilliant, confused, and incoherent, filmmakers tried to respond” (209). During this period European horror films, while often also attendant to contemporary cultural anxieties, channelled horror narrative through long-standing folklore and Gothic traditions,¹ while American writers and directors directly and often quite explicitly confronted the dramatic cultural and societal changes that manifested themselves mostly through political turmoil and unavoidable civil unrest. The consequences of such a setting, particularly those relating to the study of victims and victimhood, displayed themselves in the creation of new aesthetics and stylistic expressions. This in turn led to the evolution of horror tropes such as the concept of the “Final Girl”; the rise of independent

¹ See, for example, the collection edited by Patricia Allmer, Emily Brick and David Huxley titled *European Nightmares: Horror Cinema in Europe since 1945* (2012) or *Euro Horror: Classic European Horror Cinema in Contemporary American Culture* (2013) by Ian Olney.

filmmaking and exploitation cinema, as seen in the work done by directors such as George A. Romero, Wes Craven, Tobe Hooper and others; as well as the development of new subgenres like slasher horror (*Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, *A Nightmare On Elm Street*), psychological horror (*The Shining*, *The Thing*) and supernatural horror (*The Exorcist*, *The Evil Dead*). Obviously, these cinematic expressions by a variety of American horror directors were not developed within a cultural vacuum but instead were preceded, and on many occasions inspired by, the literary work of both American and non-American writers such as Clive Barker, William Peter Blatty, Stephen King, Ira Levin and Peter Straub, along with a lengthy list of others. Their ideas, styles and forcefulness, shaped by the (lack of) conventions of the genre, defined not only the postulates of the period, but their work also coincided with the artistic wave occurring in horror cinema, with writers creating new subgenres, adding psychological complexity as well as social/cultural awareness and critique to their narratives. Their influence and the body of work that was produced from the 1970s onwards continue to be mirrored in endless contemporary articulations, often functioning as a mythological substructure of the genre while simultaneously embracing new and alternative narrative venues and media, assuring its ongoing presence in this way.

The final aspect that had to be defined to establish the scope of this volume was the media within which the concept of the victim will be addressed, which would define, in turn, the theoretical approaches to the subject. While the instinctual reactions were to focus either on the literary production or, alternatively, the cinematic exploitations of the topic within the genre, it almost immediately became obvious that such a narrow scope would surely produce an inadequate study of the proposed topic. The 1970s, together with the extremely prolific 1980s, created a cultural sedimentation within the genre, assuring a strong base for future creative endeavours. Following this, other media such as television and (digital) games started to exploit and build upon the existing genre-bound cultural artefacts. The movement of horror into these other media results in changing dynamics between the material and its audience. The shift from the communal movie theatre to the more intimate setting of watching on-screen horror at home is the first of these, with the difference becoming more marked still when discussing the interactivity of games and even streaming media. Both analogue and digital games offer prepared content but require players to engage with these potential narratives and actualise the action. As Marie-Laure Ryan has argued, this necessary participation ultimately “connects two narrative levels: the story to be discovered, and the story of their discovery”



(16). The active role of the player allows for a story which is interacted with, discovered, explored and pieced together, unfolding as the player progresses. When seen in relation to the topic under discussion, it creates the potential for the player to not just enact a story but to actualise victimhood, perhaps even their own.

The response and analytical feedback received from authors was extremely gratifying, as it showed many of the possibilities of unsettling the previously mentioned binary by challenging the perspective of the target audience through a reevaluation, and therefore re-reading, of the concept of the victims and their perspectives. The various chapters within this volume use different theoretical and disciplinary approaches as analytical prisms, which allows the authors to reframe the position, role and meaning of the notion of victim and victimhood within the horror genre ranging from the post-1970s period all the way to current articulations, regardless of the medium used by these narratives to articulate their stories. The result of such an endeavour was a distancing from existing trends of examining the victim as a reflection of the audience and their imagined responses, and a thus more active engagement with the concept of the victim, now perceived not as a monolithic category but instead as an almost endless reinterpretation of the trope in accordance with a particular subgenre. John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) or Wes Craven's *Scream* franchise (1996–), for example, might problematise the idea of the Final Girl where, as debated by Isabel Christina Pinedo, the surviving female of the slasher film “may be victimized, but she is hardly a victim” (87), and she instead goes on to question and challenge the patriarchal order, but more contemporary alternative narratives such the recent videogame *Martha is Dead* (LKA, 2022) approach the idea of the victim not as a challenging entity but rather as a (non)subtle journey between victimhood, violence and mental illness. From a discursive and analytical point of view, each of these categories now open new questions about who may be regarded as a victim, how they might inhabit that role and how existing types might then be (re)categorised.

These questions are reflected in each of the contributions from individual authors, displaying the myriad answers and approaches available to engage with victimhood. The chapters by Lindsey Scott, Todd K. Platts and Irena Jurković, which open this collection, offer new perspectives on what could be defined as well-known types of victims (children, Black and transgender characters), but each has been reexamined and reconfigured within their specific context. The first chapter of this volume focuses on the position of children as presented within the Netflix original series *Stranger Things*



(2016–) and their role as either a passive victim, a monstrous threat or a layered amalgamate of these two categories. In addressing these various aspects, which are further enhanced by the nostalgia of the 1980s, Scott focuses on the polarised position of children within the narrative as well as on the subsequent adult fears over the child's growing social power, knowledge and autonomy. The author continues by arguing that *Stranger Things* makes a self-conscious effort to avoid these ideological traps, and in the process initiates a reflective and critical shift from the long-established position of the child as a victim of horror to an active participant in the ongoing horrors.

Todd K. Platts's research is directed towards slasher cinema and the often overlooked trope of the (early) death of Black characters. The chapter explores a specific sample of slasher films from the 1980s and in the process asserts that although the claim of these early deaths might not be completely accurate, it does not absolve such films of problematic racial constructions. The essay centres on a qualitative analysis indicating how Black victims and survivors within the sample play into anti-Black stereotypes. As Platts points out, such stereotypes can be seen as part of the justification for the character's deaths, reflecting a broader social pattern of trivialising the suffering of Black victims; in addition, he demonstrates that even those characters who make it out alive are not immune to such tropes and preconceptions. The research presented in this chapter is therefore crucial, as it shows that trends in film content correspond to contemporary socio-cultural changes and that cinematic images have the power to shape viewers' thoughts, perceptions and opinions.

A further new reading of well-known types of victims is found in the third chapter, written by Irena Jurković, in which the author argues that there is an absence of academic readings of transgender identities in relation to victimhood by pointing out how discussions of transgender identity in horror films have focused mostly on the problematic association between transness and monstrosity. The author continues by examining how, in the representation of transgender characters in horror films, the dissolution of gender boundaries often coincides with the conflation of victimhood and villainy. Using established theoretical readings in relation to the Final Girl and the monstrous feminine, Jurković analytically explores three different films—William A. Fraker's *A Reflection of Fear* (1973), Robert Hiltzik's *Sleepaway Camp* (1983) and Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018)—and in doing so emphasises the movements of transgender characters from victims to monsters while also examining the extent to which these characters complicate a binary approach.



Such efforts of repositioning are continued in the work of Ljubica Matek, Fernando Pagnoni Berns and Marko Lukić; their essays presenting arguments demonstrating the possibility to open up the analysis of the monstrous victim. Using figures that are most often defined as the villain within their respective narratives (the double or *doppelgänger*, the [living] dead and the slasher himself), each author calls for a reappraisal of these particular characters, thus offering further depth to the analysis of what could easily be dismissed as simply “monstrous.” The fourth chapter, authored by Matek, explores Jordan Peele’s second horror film, *Us* (2019), in which the writer/director uses the classic Gothic figure of the *doppelgänger* in all of its complexity and ambiguousness and in doing so distorts and blurs the traditional boundaries separating the double nature of the protagonist(s), specifically the characters of Adelaide and her clone, Red. Using a variety of different theoretical approaches, Matek argues how Peele is successful in inscribing a political meaning to the character of the victim by exploring the issues of systemic oppression and exploitation. This is followed by the argument that the idea of an ideal victim may in fact be an obsolete concept in a world where everybody is victimised by, as Matek states, capital itself. Through this interaction with a socio-economic system, the position of the victim becomes unsettled by the paradox and the accompanying horror derived from the realisation that everyone is complicit in creating such an oppressive society.

The connection between victimhood and capital is continued in the essay by Fernando Pagnoni Berns, who examines the concept of necrovalue. Focusing on Don Coscarelli’s *Phantasm* franchise (1979–98) and Gary Sherman’s *Dead and Buried* (1981), the author discusses narratives in which the dead are brought back to life in an attempt to continue contributing to the economy and produce value. As these narratives show and as the author argues, this interaction between technologies and a new postmortem condition changes dead bodies into living objects. The argument focuses on the process of thingification in which nature (including humans) is objectified to ensure exploitation. In this chapter, the films are read as examples of revictimisation, with necrotechnologies keeping the corpses alive even though the victims scream for release and proper rest.

Pagnoni Berns’s chapter is followed by a further questioning of the possibility of changing positions, although this time from the concept of the killer to the position of a victim. As debated by Marko Lukić, within the boundaries of the slasher subgenre, the protagonist, typically embodied by the figure of a heroine, is confronted in a series of horrible encounters by a two-dimensional, although inventive, antagonist. What Lukić explores within his chapter is a challenge of the default monstrous status by

recontextualising the concept through a spatial paradigm. By exploring well-known and already extensively analysed classic horror film franchises such as *Friday the 13th*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* or *Halloween* through the use of a spatially based heterotopian discourse, the author argues for the possibility of re-reading the status of the antagonist through a prism of victimhood rather than of monstrosity.

Reading beyond a focus on characters and specific figures within horror media, the essays by Peter Turner and Gavin Hurley draw attention to the structure of narratives and their potential impact on (the relationship with) the audience. This move is articulated in the seventh chapter, by Peter Turner, which formulates a taxonomy of found footage horror films to identify the different kinds of camera-operating victim characters. This classification process is further expanded by the author through different theoretical notions such as priming, Murray Smith's structure of sympathy and the articulation of off-screen space within found footage horror films, each of which dictates the potential response from viewers to the camera-operating victims. In dividing camera operators into categories of amateurs, students and cinematographers, as well as identifying the potential slippage between these three as the horror of the narratives escalates, Turner provides interesting insights into the position of film audiences in relation to the depiction of victimhood on screen.

Following this examination of found footage horror is Gavin Hurley's analysis of Faustian pact narratives in the fiction of Clive Barker. Drawing on the philosophy of Georges Bataille, Hurley examines the victimised characters within a selection of Barker's work from the 1980s. As stated by the author, these texts provide arenas for Barker's main characters—and readers—to experience a competitive coexistence of self and other, survival and death, and ecstasy and suffering. More precisely, these narratives offer a Faustian-like possibility to the readers to become willing victims through their reading experience. The readers, exposed to the narrative, become engaged with the writer's dialectics by befriending characters (and, by extension, Barker himself) via the text, a consequence of which is the development of a victimhood-friendship, a move that in turn contributes to the effectiveness of Barker's literary rhetoric.

The essays by Michael Stock, Merlyn Seller and Ian Downes push the reconfiguration of the victim further still. Continuing the themes raised by Turner and Hurley regarding the relationship of horror media to their audiences, these three authors introduce the concept of the inanimate in their work and its potential impact on the possible status of victim and



victimhood. The introduction of ideas of interactivity and agency specifically in Seller and Downes points towards the potential of further understandings of victimhood within the context of digital and analogue games. In Stock's perhaps unconventional study of driving safety films, the author examines the unique victims that populated early driving safety films in the United States. Depicting either the clinical, scientific environment of collision experiments with crash test dummies or the emotionally charged, gory aftermath of car crashes, with their actual injuries, pain and death, these films highlight both an interesting binary and an overlap in viewer responses. Aligned with the concepts of Noël Carroll's natural horror and Jeffrey Sconce's paracinema, the films discussed by Stock inhabit a contested space within depictions of victimhood in horror, drawing both on realism and the excessive violence of slasher narratives, where victims are both subject to trauma and virtually indestructible.

The tenth chapter, by Merlyn Seller, shows a further shift towards these tensions between trauma and destruction, reintroducing the concept of thingification, invoked in the earlier chapter by Pagnoni Berns. Moving the concept of the victim away from the anthropocene, Seller argues for a discourse in which the potential victimhood of inanimate objects is incorporated. Framed by theoretical discourses drawn primarily from the fields of game studies and the Ecogothic, Seller proposes an extension of an understanding of what can constitute a victim and what shapes nonhuman victimhood might take. Explored through a videogame case study focused on the boundaries between victim and victimiser, player and avatar, and animate and inanimate, the author draws on the work of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Roger Callois to problematise victimhood, agency and embodiment through what is termed "biolithic entanglements." This is expanded on through a discussion of visual and inert background assets that possess an underappreciated and unsettling centrality in videogames.

The exploration of victims and victimhood continues, and concludes, with Ian Downes, who focuses on ideas of victimhood and agency in horror role-playing games, similarly invoking thingification. Drawing attention to the material objects needed to support play, the author draws on the works of Mel Y. Chen, Bill Brown, Robin Bernstein and Jane Bennett to examine how the material objects are able to change characters into victims. Downes argues that by considering agential things against the ideal victim, the horror genre victim is reoriented in the changing relationship of objects and human subjects. Furthermore, the author argues how these objects, made into things by their power over the game's narrative, reflect similar ideas of agency and subject-object relationships in day-to-day life.



In conclusion, the collection succeeds in its attempt to shed some additional light on a topic that is influential and essential to horror scholarship as a field but paradoxically still remains inadequately explored; it also makes evident the multifaceted complexity of the ostensibly simple notion of the victim within the genre. The concept of the victim in the horror genre does not remain fixed over time. Instead, it changes and adapts to reflect the social and cultural transitions of the era. This central trope remains faithful to the genre by constantly serving as one of the key sources for the creation of critical discourse. With all this in mind, we invite you to metaphorically “be our victims” and join us in this exploration of what lies beyond.

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