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Negotiating Trauma and Empowerment: A Comparative Reading of Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Abstract

Trauma and empowerment continue to be themes of focus in modern women's writing, given the challenges of oppression, survival and transformation. Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* offer strong and interesting stories of women who suffer physically, emotionally and socially, who are trying to find themselves and their dignity. The novels, despite their distinct settings and time periods, show striking similarities in their depiction of gender discrimination, sexual violence, exploitation and the domination of men. This comparative reading explores how both writers portray trauma not as a victimization experience but as a transformative process that helps grant access to resilience, self-discovery and empowerment. The analysis also examines how the protagonists challenge oppressive structures, how they begin to construct themselves in a new way, and how they challenge society's norms and expectations that aim to silence them. The comparison of these two texts emphasizes the common experiences of women in different cultures and the timeless power of books to depict human strength, hope, and the struggle for freedom.

Keywords: Trauma, Empowerment, Women's Resilience, Identity, Patriarchy, Gender Oppression, Female Agency.

Full Paper

The reality of violence, oppression, and survival faced by women in various social and cultural settings has become a growing site of exploration in contemporary women's literature. In modern times, many women writers do not simply represent women as victims; they highlight women's ability to face challenges, manage identity and change self-definition in a society. These writers tell compelling stories of suffering and resistance, revealing the intricate connection between trauma and empowerment, as the experience of

suffering can sometimes be a catalyst for self-awareness, resilience, and transformation. In these literary depictions, structural inequalities are not only made apparent but the capacity of women to reclaim their agency in the aftermath of constant oppression is also celebrated.

Trauma has been identified as a transformative story-telling rather than a story of suffering. Cathy Caruth suggests that trauma has been known by its long-term psychological effects and how people re-make the meaning after suffering severe loss and violence. Cathy Caruth in his book, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma*, "Trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also fundamentally, an enigma of survival" (58). This perspective is useful in appreciating the travels of the female main characters in *On Black Sisters' Street* by Chika Unigwe and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker.

Recent critical study demonstrates the significance of trauma and identity in the two novels. Saraswati and Sanjeev Niraula's study of *The Color Purple* examines the representation of trauma and the ways in which walker's narrative mediates Celie's painful experiences, providing an important perspective on the relationship between suffering and psychological transformation. Similarly, Deborah Ndidiamaka Umeh's study of *On Black Sister's Street* examines the relationship between migration and identity, highlighting the ways in which the experiences of African women in the diaspora contribute to the transformation of their identities. These studies provide a useful foundation for a comparative examination of how traumatic experiences influence women's movement towards self-awareness and empowerment.

Chika Unigwe and Alice Walker are two of the most important contemporary black writers today whose works focus on women's lives in patriarchal societies. Their fictional works deal with similar themes of gendered violence, discrimination, exploitation, emotional anguish and struggles to achieve dignity and to reclaim their agency despite being from different geo-cultural backgrounds. *On Black Sisters' Street* is a book about the lives of four African migrant women who are trafficked into Belgium as prostitutes under the guise of economic opportunity. The novel follows the intertwined stories of Sisi, Efe, Ama, and Joyce, who discover the strength of solidarity through the shared experiences they have in the face of poverty, migration, and sexual exploitation. Unigwe does not simply portray them as victims, but as people who continually negotiate hope and survival and identity in the face of the unrelenting harshness that surrounds them. When these four women characters try to move from the state to isolation, resilience, there have the chance "They move no longer four isolated women in a foreign house. They were sisters, to reclaim their female agency bound by grief that gave them the strength to standup" (*On Black Sister's Street* 271)

The Color Purple by Alice Walker also depicts an intimate account of the lives of women in the American South who are affected by racial discrimination, domestic violence, and the oppression of men. Walker traces Celie's remarkable journey from silence and fear, to confidence and self-realization, in the epistolary voice of the character. The novel shows how empowerment can be gained through education, emotional support, the friendships of women and the strength to stand up to oppressive relationships. Walker's focus on personal development and community assistance presents a strong story of resilience, a testament to the possibility for healing when women take back their voices and their identities. Sofia is talking to Celie about her history throughout her life, resisting male chauvinism and gendered violence throughout her life, "All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my uncles. A girl child ain't sate in a family man. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house." (*The Color Purple* 41)

On Black Sisters' Street and *The Color Purple* show distinct historical and cultural contexts but both novels have an underlying theme of women's resistance to systems of domination. Through the experiences of the female protagonists, it has been discovered that trauma is not limited to physical violence but also psychological abuse, social exclusion, economic exploitation and emotional deprivation. The stories highlight the ways in which women's bodies, choices and identities are controlled and oppressed by various social formations and structures, forcing women to deal with many types of suffering in their lives. In parallel, both writers deny stories of perpetual victimization, highlighting the resilience of women in their attempt to move beyond their hardships and to build new, significant lives.

A comparative analysis of these two novels provides a scope for understanding the universal aspects of women's experience and at the same time reveals the particular social and cultural contexts that affect women's struggles. This study aims to examine the similarities and differences in how oppression and empowerment are experienced by women, as well as the differences in how they are experienced, by putting Unigwe's account on African diasporic women and Walker's account on African-American women next to

each other. This distinction emphasizes the universal aspect of human experiences, such as suffering, endurance, and hope, in literature, which transcends regional boundaries.

The present study thus explores the role of trauma not only as a traumatic experience of suffering but as a catalyst of self-discovery, resistance and empowerment. The paper discusses the connection between violence, identity, resiliency, and female agency in light of a comparative reading of *On Black Sisters' Street* and *The Color Purple*. The protagonists' stories of going from silence to self-assertion are analysed, and the study suggests that both Chika Unigwe and Alice Walker redefine empowerment as a process of negotiating with adversity, rebuilding identity and asserting human dignity. Through their novels, they have made an impact on the ongoing discussion of women's resilience, and the strength of literature to inspire social awareness and personal transformation.

At the outset of the novel, *color purple*, Celie has been forced into absolute silence, she has expressed her traumatic experience by writing letter to God. Her turning point takes place when she discovers to hidden letters from her sister, Nettie, which breaks her illusion to helplessness. In Antwerp four women characters are initially reduced to silence and they are objection as commodities under the dominance they trafficable Dele and Madam.

The literary work of both Chika Unigwe and Alice Walker have garnered attention from scholars for their powerful depictions of women's experiences, social inequities, and their quest for dignity. Their fiction has been analysed from feminist, racial, migration, gender and cultural identity points of view. While these studies have made valuable contributions to the comprehension of the authors' literary accomplishments, there are comparatively fewer studies available that examine the process of trauma as a means of empowerment by engaging in a comparative analysis of *On Black Sisters' Street* and *The Color Purple*.

A growing body of literary criticism has focused on the role of women's narratives in recovering suppressed voices and experiences, thereby questioning the patriarchal structures. According to M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar female writers must try to dismantle patriarchal representations to form an authentic identity, noting that, "a life of feminine submission contemplates purity". Women writers often "reconstruct" a female identity by challenging culture's stereotypes. Is a life on silence, a life that had no pen and no story (75) the madwoman in the attic. It is helpful to them that they offer a context for the way Unigwe and Walker depict the fight to achieve dignity and expression by women.

Likewise, bell hooks contend that feminist writing reveals the interlocking mechanisms of oppression that limit women's freedoms and imagines ways to resist and to empower, "Implicit in his simplistic definition of women's liberation is a dismissal of race and class as factors that, in conjunction with sexism, determine the extent to which an individual will be discriminated against, exploited to oppression" (18). Her argument brings to light the experiences of the female protagonists in both novels, who illustrated how resistance can be expressed in the manner of self-awareness, solidarity, and a quest to challenge oppressive social structures.

The focus of the research on Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* is on migration, human trafficking, prostitution and exploitation of African women in Europe. Unigwe exposes the harsh realities of illegal migration, reveals how poverty, unemployment and false promises of economic prosperity compel women to enter into exploitative circumstances. Success has also been achieved in the novel for depicting prostitution as a choice rather than a consequence of the social-economic inequalities which exist in a wide context. Meanwhile, critics note that Unigwe does not allow her female characters to be helpless victims. Rather, the novel focuses on their emotional strength, unity, and resolve to endure the difficult situation.

Deborah Ndidiamaka Umeh specifically examines migration and identity in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sister's' Street*. Her study highlights the relationship between the women's migration experiences and their changing sense of identity. The movement from Nigeria to Belgium expose the characters to unfamiliar social and economic conditions, forcing them to negotiate within a new environment. Umeh's discussion is particularly relevant to the present study because migration forms an important context through which the women's experiences of exploitation, trauma, and survival can be understood while her study primarily emphasises migration and identity.

Similarly, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker is regarded as one of the most important pieces of contemporary American literature. It has been studied by literary critics, who have discussed it in terms of racial discrimination, domestic violence, patriarchal oppression, and psychological effects of abuse. Many

of the studies emphasize the remarkable transformation of Celie from a shy young woman who was silent to an independent woman who becomes confident because of education, a strong sense of community, and earning a living. Walker's celebration of female friendship and emotional support, too, is recognized as a critical element for personal development and healing.

Numerous scholarly comparative studies investigated women writers in different contexts and identified a pattern of oppression and resistance. These studies indicate that, while there are historical, geographical, cultural, and other differences, women have similar patterns of discrimination and social exclusion. Comparative literary analysis, in turn, offers the chance to gain insight into how various writers approach topics of universal interest within the context of their own cultures and situations. Most comparative studies that have been done on Chika Unigwe and Alice Walker, however, have focused on either feminism, gender inequality, race or identity; the relationship between trauma and empowerment has not been extensively studied.

The critique of the last decade has begun to acknowledge the role of trauma as an element of literary history, both in the lives of the individual and in social relations. Today, critics do not always view trauma as an event of suffering, but instead often see it as a journey of struggling with painful memories, re-constructing divided selves, and finding strength. This is especially important for women's writing, as the female characters are frequently subject to multiple forms of violence and are also challenging the very systems which oppress them.

The present study adds to the research on the topic by comparing *On Black Sisters' Street* and *The Color Purple* in terms of the overlapping themes of trauma and empowerment. The study does not just explore themes of oppression, but also examines how both writers create narratives of suffering into narratives of resilience and self-realisation. The paper's formatting of these novels in dialogue makes evident the ways in which empowerment is not something that happens overnight, but rather is a gradual process of facing trauma, regaining identity and challenging oppressive social systems. This approach opens up a broader comparative analysis of both books, and helps to show their ongoing significance in today's debates about women's literature and human resilience.

Trauma is a central theme in *On Black Sisters' Street* and *The Color Purple*, serving as a more than personal experience of pain. Trauma is a result of entrenched social systems that perpetuate inequalities, violence and discrimination toward women in both novels. Chika Unigwe and Alice Walker show how traumatic events are influenced by economic hardship, male domination, racism, and the neglect of females' independence. In both books, the writers demonstrate that oppression can take many forms, including those of the emotions, psychology and society.

According to Lois Tyson, literature is an essential tool for examining oppression and resistance considering that it shows how social institutions perpetuate unequal power relations, supports this knowledge of trauma. In interpreting the experiences of the female protagonists, Tyson's observation can serve as the lens to explore the suffering that isn't only due to their individual circumstances, but to larger systems of social inequality.

Tyson's feminist lens further sheds light on the structural aspects of women's trauma. She describes her understanding of how patriarchal social frameworks create inequalities of power in which women are often marginalized and treated differently, oppressed and controlled. In the context of *On Black Sister's Street* and *The Color Purple*, the protagonists' suffering is not just the result of their own situation, but is also affected by systems of power, such as those of patriarchy, economy, and society. Tyson's critical perspective therefore has the potential to highlight the relationship between personal trauma and the wider socio-institutional aspects that limit women's freedom, dignity and agency.

In *On Black Sisters' Street*, Unigwe's characters of Sisi, Efe, Ama, and Joyce portray the brutal truths of human trafficking and migration. Every woman starts their trip from their country, with the hope that the process of migration will bring them financial security and a better future. Instead, they are victims of exploitation in an organised system which trades women's bodies. Sisi's belief that "The only way to a better life is education" (Unigwe 18) expresses her desire for economic mobility without resorting to illegal means. But her opportunities are few and it becomes clear that migration may be the only option that is available. Unigwe thus shows how poor people, limited opportunities, and false promises leave women vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation. They suffer, but not because they have failed themselves, but because they are caught in a cycle of abuse due to structural inequalities.

Walker takes a different social perspective of trauma, but with the same emotional level. In *The Color Purple*, Celie has suffered constant physical and emotional abuse from her own family and later her husband. Her silence speaks of fear and powerlessness of a large number of women living under a system of patriarchy. "You better shut up and get used to it" (3) becomes the tool used to propagate patriarchy's oppression. Walker portrays Celie's perspective to show how abuse can damage one's self-esteem, self-identity and their capacity to envision an alternative existence to pain.

Trauma is more an experiential condition that is shared, both authors depicting it as such in the novels, even though their settings are different. The female characters are linked in common narratives of oppression thus allowing readers to identify patterns of violence in different cultures. Unigwe stresses the emotional connections between migrant women, and Walker notes the metamorphic relationships between Celie and Shug Avery, Sofia and Nettie and Nettie and Celie. These connections illustrate how women can gain strength from each other through understanding and solidarity.

A further trauma aspect in both novels is the concept of identity struggle. The main characters are consistently objectified and treated as mere objects not deserving of dignity and respect. They feel split up into their emotional parts and psychologically vulnerable because they are kept to worship in the context of patriarchy, they feel exploited in the economy and they feel expected to fit into a specific social role, based on gender, sexuality and social position. But Chika Unigwe and Alice Walker don't allow their female protagonists to be trapped in such predetermined roles. As the characters' stories unfold, their own awareness of self slowly evolves, they start to suspect their oppressors and to define themselves in their own ways. The transformation is from silence and dependence to confidence and self-assertion, a step away from the social oppression that might have been the defining element of identity, and a step towards recomposing identity through resilience, self-reflection and a desire to reconnect with one's humanity.

The narratives also contradict the premise that trauma invariably leads to permanent victimhood. Rather, both novels portray suffering as a point of self-reflection and a catalyst for women to challenge the oppressive power systems they inhabit and to find their own liberation. These experiences show they can become resilient by enduring, reflecting on their experience, and taking the courage to look at uncomfortable memories. As a result, trauma is not just the story of oppression, but the building blocks for empowerment to be slowly constructed on.

Unigwe and Walker depict women's suffering in a realistic and sensitive manner which leads the reader to rethink the concept of victimization. Their novels suggest that in a landscape of violence and exploitation, women can still strive to overcome, reconstruct their identities and imagine a life beyond oppression. This depiction of trauma sets the stage for the protagonists' transformation that is the focus of the next section on empowerment and resilience.

Trauma is a constant experience in women's lives in both *On Black Sisters' Street* and *The Color Purple*, but neither novel end on a bleak note. In contrast, empowerment is presented as a slow, unfolding process in which women face their own trauma, regain their voices and reconceptualize themselves in the work of Chika Unigwe and Alice Walker. Their empowerment is not simply a moment of liberation but a process of resilience, reflection, relationship and resistance to the structures that have long been silent of their voices. Both novels, therefore, make victimization stories into stories of courage and self-assertion.

On Black Sisters' Street, the act of empowerment is mostly manifested in the fact that Sisi, Efe, Ama, and Joyce unite as a group. Each woman brings her own memories of suffering and exploitation to Belgium but little by little a sense of understanding and emotional support emerges. They share stories and information about migration and trafficking, and minimize the loneliness that often comes with trauma. They are no longer seen as rivals, but as fellow companions, and facing their emotional wounds together. Unigwe therefore proposes that healing can take place when there is a shift from silence to dialogue and when personal stories are recognised in an empathetic group of people.

Alice Walker's notion of Womanism honours the emotional toughness, the communal support, and the individual growth of women in the face of difficult conditions (In Search xi). Looking at this point of view, it becomes clear that the bond of female solidarity is an effective mechanism of healing and empowerment within the supportive relationships displayed in *On Black Sister's Street* and *The Color Purple*.

Likewise, in *The Color Purple*, Celie's metamorphosis starts when she slowly realizes that her life doesn't have to be lived in fear and submission. Her friendships with Nettie, Shug Avery, and Sofia inspire her to

take a stand against patriarchal authority and see herself as a good person. The support and companionship of others, particularly of women, gives Celie the courage to tell others about her life and to dream of a life of her own. As she slowly comes to terms with her fear, she begins to understand that no amount of oppression can take away her dignity and sense of self-worth. Walker shows how "empowerment" is not something that can be gained by isolation, but by the caring of one another, self-discovery, and the courage to challenge oppressive social norms.

Economic independence is another aspect of empowerment that is also portrayed by both authors. The women's migration is driven by the desire to escape from poverty in Unigwe's novel but as the women quickly find, they are not free if they merely manage to survive financially under harsh circumstances. However, their experiences help them mature emotionally, and gain insight into their own humanity. Similarly, Walker shows that economic independence gives Walker's characters a sense of confidence, as self-reliance enables the characters to make choices for themselves and to withstand oppressive relationships. Both accounts tell of empowerment as more than just money; it's about psychological freedom and personal autonomy.

It is also significant that the protagonists have changed in some ways as well because of their different definitions of identity. In both novels, the role of women has been defined in terms of obedience, sacrifice and silence from the start. The protagonists then start to reject these externally imposed identities and start creating them based on self-respect, resilience and personal choice as narratives unfold. They have shown that they can build up their identity despite traumatic experiences and through perseverance and self-belief.

In the end, both Unigwe and Walker make a point of saying that empowerment doesn't cure trauma, it helps women live in spite of it. They have been victims of violence and exploitation and have endured the emotional trauma of these experiences, but they are not their future. The novels highlight the resilience of women, not their victimhood, and emphasize how they find strength in their suffering and how they express themselves through silence. This shift is to equate empowerment with the act of taking one's life back in spite of trauma.

Resilience also is not constantly shown to be a natural dependency, but a realization that can happen over time and repeated trauma in *On Black Sisters' Street* and *The Color Purple*. While Chika Unigwe and Alice Walker write from different cultural and historical angles, they each portray women who will not bow to oppression. Their protagonists suffer violence, emotional pain and social isolation, but overtime gradually take courage to change what defines their lives. Therefore, resilience is portrayed in the novels as a continuous process of negotiation rather than an instant triumph over hardship.

One of the most significant similarities between the two texts is the emphasis placed on the role of other females to deal with trauma. Sisi, Efe, Ama and Joyce develop emotional connections as they share their sufferings and experiences in *On Black Sisters' Street*. Through their friendship they provide a space and a place for fear and loneliness to be overcome, for understanding and support to be offered and for love and hope to fill the voids left. While their stories of anguish differ, their strength combined allows each woman to protest against the brutalities of migrating and being exploited. Similarly, Celie comes to know about her own value through her relationships with Nettie, Shug Avery and Sofia in *The Color Purple*. As they begin to express their feelings, Celie's silence gives way to confidence, liberating her to express her feelings and exercise choices. Female solidarity is a key place of strength and self-development of both novels.

Another major difference is that the protagonists are all seeking identity. In both the novels, at the first glance the women are characterized by the expectation that is being put on them by the patriarchal society. They are not given sufficient autonomous space for their own decisions and choices. They are not afforded enough autonomy to make choices and decisions. The narratives, however, begin to challenge these limiting roles in the course of the storylines and create identities that are grounded on dignity and self-respect. Both Unigwe's characters are victims of dehumanising experiences of human trafficking, and Walker's is a struggle against domestic violence and emotional enslavement. Both stories highlight the importance of perseverance and self-belief in restoring identity.

On the other hand, the concept of empowerment is also variously represented in the authors' work. Unigwe's theme is empowerment acquired as a result of shared suffering and solidarity amongst migrant women. The women gain strength and courage from each other, despite the negative surrounding circumstances. In Walker, however, there is an increased focus on transformation as an activity for the individual. Throughout the novel, Celie will gain strength through self-expression, through relationships, through economic

independence, and the things they can't stop her from doing, which is her involvement in life. The power that is gained by Celie will empower her to say no to those who took control of her life, through self-expression, through relationships, through economic independence, through life itself. The various ways of presenting the story reveal that empowerment can manifest itself in a number of different ways based on the social and cultural context in which women are negotiating their lives.

But despite their differences, both novels end with a message that is identical: that the word resilience is linked inextricably with the word hope. The protagonists will not give up when faced with violence and injustice repeated. Rather, they include doing justice to the self-awareness they lost and to the dignity that the oppressive social systems tried to rob them. Their experiences show that empowerment is attained by refusing to let trauma dictate one's destiny rather than by forgetting painful experiences.

Comparative reading of literature allows for the discovery of common interest areas among humans and differences in cultural contexts that influence the experience of each human. This is especially applicable to Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, which are both geographically, historically, and socio-culturally based novels that tackle the lives of women suffering, resilient, and empowered. When read together this is a way of highlighting that the form and nature of trauma vary, but that the protagonists' efforts to claim dignity, selfhood and freedom each offer points of resonance. These experiences thus demonstrate the resilience of women across culture and geography, but also the extent to which social contexts remain important to women's experiences.

In the comparative analysis, Chika Unigwe and Alice Walker present complementary images of women's strength and empowerment. The protagonists must deal with two different oppressions, but both authors demonstrate the Universality of the struggle for Freedom, Self-determination and dignity. In depicting women who embody not only a spirit of courage but also one of unity and tenacity in overcoming trauma, Unigwe and Walker make a significant addition to the field of modern women's writing and uphold the timeless power of stories to celebrate resilience, optimism, and human will.

Trauma and empowerment are closely interwoven experiences in women's lives as revealed in the comparative reading of two works: *On Black Sisters' Street* by Chika Unigwe and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. Both writers depict women who suffer physical, emotional and social abuse in different settings, both set in different cultures, but in the same time periods, but both women begin slowly to assert their identity and dignity. Their stories show that the trauma they experience goes beyond the personal and is implicated by larger constructs of oppression, such as patriarchy, poverty, racial discrimination, and social inequality. This reveals and scrutiny of these stark truths expose how structural factors contribute to the marginalisation of women and also highlight their resilience and transformative power.

The study also highlights: Empowerment is not a simple and unconditional process. Rather, it is a series of incremental stages which consist of acquiring self-awareness, emotional coping mechanisms, nurturing relationships with others, and the willingness to question oppressive systems. Solidarity amongst migrant women helps them to fight against exploitation and to restore humanity despite the difficulties in their human living. The term "*The Color Purple*" describes Celie's path from silence to self-expression, proving that despite many years of violence and emotional abuse, personal growth is still possible. In both novels empowerment is thus redefined as an action of negotiation with an adverse situation, and not an escape from it.

Another significant finding of this study is that both authors reject the portrayal of women as passive victims. Their female leads take an active part in negotiating their situation, make hard decisions, begin to build up their selves. In these stories, Unigwe and Walker show that recovery from trauma does not mean that the experience shall fail to be shared; it's about making of it, about making it their own and doing so in a way that empowers them to move forward. All the novels then question the traditional view of victimization as a female condition, introducing viewers to women who resist, thrive, and have hope.

As Cathy Caruth suggests, narratives of trauma are ultimately concerned with survival, memory, and the reconstruction of identity (11). This is echoed by the experiences of the female main characters in *On Black Sisters' Street* and *The Color Purple* who are able to use the hardships and tragedy of their lives as learning 'experiences' of a sort in which to experience self-discovery, resilience and hope. Through experience they unlock trauma as a rich opportunity for growth and empowerment.

On Black Sisters' Street and *The Color Purple* are both important works which highlighted the fight for dignity, freedom, and selfhood in modern women's literature. The novels are in vastly different cultures and in widely different historical settings, yet they display many recurring themes of oppression, resilience, and resistance which influence women's experiences of injustice and living in societies. In the light of these two novels, this study compares and contrasts trauma as somatic as a state of suffering and as transformative a process for women's reclamation of their identities and agency. The present study highlights the continued importance of literature in understanding women's lives, sensitizing, challenging, and engaging in empathy with them, providing opportunities for critical reflection and hope pointing for social change.

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