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Lucía Bausela Buccianti, University of Salamanca, Spain

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Feminist Solidarities and their Limits in the Decolonial Landscape of Sole Otero's *Walicho*

ABSTRACT
This article analyses the graphic novel *Walicho* (2023) by Argentinian comics artist Sole Otero, as it intertwines space theory, feminist critique, and decolonial perspectives through visual storytelling. Structured as an anthology, the narrative follows three Spanish witches whose migration to Buenos Aires in the eighteenth century catalyses social and colonial transformations within Mapuche land. The work explores Buenos Aires as a colonial and postcolonial space shaped by hybrid epistemologies, drawing on indigenous cosmology, Catholic imagery, and European witchcraft. Through characters across historical periods, Walicho criticises enduring colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist structures while interrogating the possibilities and limits of feminist solidarity.

KEYWORDS
comics; migration; space; decolonial; Latin America

1. Introduction

By the end of the twentieth and beginnings of the twenty-first century, the "age of migration" emerged as a result of the dismantling of colonial empires which, due to complex globalisation and neo-imperialist processes, triggered technological, economic, political, and social shifts (De Haas et al., 2014). As contemporary history is shaped by migration, the medium of comics has often portrayed these movements and their significance from different perspectives, either as autobiographies, biographies, or narrating the lives of fictional characters who are migrants, refugees, or racialised people[1]. Latin American comics, in particular, often present similar stories, where shared political and economic processes are thematised, but these are "filtered by the particular characteristics, history, social qualities and economic realities of each country" (Fernández et al., 2023, p. 2).

[1] Although a thorough review of the literature exceeds the scope of this chapter, many scholars have explored comics which thematise migration. I can highlight monograph of Serrano (2021), Davies & Rifkind's book (2019), or Nabizadeh (2019).

Lucía Bausela Buccianti, Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Facultad de Filología, Universidad de Salamanca, Placentinos, 18. 37008-Salamanca, bauselabuccianti@usal.es, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8116-7018

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With comics serving as a powerful medium for exploring themes of identity, history, and power, Sole Otero's *Walicho* (2023) is a remarkable combination of transnational storytelling, feminist discourse, and postcolonial critique by means of visual elements regarding specific features of Argentinian society.

Comics artist, illustrator, and textile designer Sole Otero has built a career deeply shaped by her involvement in collectives of women artists and a transnational approach to storytelling, and she has frequently discussed issues of migration, Argentinian identity, and female agency in her works. Otero began publishing comic strips on her blog in the early 2000s and joined the Latin American collective *Historietas Reales* in 2009, followed by her participation in the international women's comics group *Chicks on Comics* (2010–2017). Her work gained international visibility from 2015 onwards, with publications in Spain and the release of *Poncho Fue* (2017) and *Intensa* (2019), the latter produced during her residency at the Maison des Auteurs in Angoulême. Her subsequent graphic novels, *Naftalina* (2020) – which received multiple awards in Spain and France – and *Walicho* (2023), consolidated her international reputation; notably, although *Walicho* was created in Angoulême with European funding, it engages critically with contemporary Argentina as a culturally heterogeneous society in which indigenous languages and beliefs persist.

Her latest graphic novel, *Walicho*, consists of nine different stories which take place at different times in history, but the characters and their plotlines are connected around three sister witches who, at the end of the eighteenth century, migrate from Europe to Spain. Even though they are at the core of the story – and the history of Buenos Aires –, they are never the direct protagonists, and since all the other characters and events orbit around these witches, Otero uses them to portray past colonial practices and their present after-effects in Argentina. Connecting contemporary protagonists to colonial land appropriation, the forceful imposition of economic and ideological systems, and the selfish subjugation of the land and its peoples for personal gain, the different protagonists of all these stories weave a cryptic tapestry of abuse, fear, and oppression whose perpetrators feel atemporal and ever-looming (Table 1).

Table 1. The stories of *Walicho*

Nº	Title	Time Setting	Main Events
1	(untitled)	1776	Three mysterious women arrive by ship to the port of Buenos Aires with a goat and steal a baby boy.
2	Lo bueno de esa época	2020s	A man tells his best friend how he has witnessed a sex ritual involving dancing naked women and a goat and this has negatively impacted his relationship and libido.

3	Walicho	1800	Ailín arrives at an estate to work for three Spanish women. They claim to be doctors but they are accused of witchcraft. Ailín struggles to reconcile Catholic and 'pagan' views.
4	Un poco más normal	2020s	Belén is an agoraphobic woman who works from home. She meets a man named Darío and they chat almost every day. Darío confesses that his family is complicated and dangerous and that his mother and aunts are witches.
5	No nos dejes caer	Twentieth century	Ana is an orphan girl of native origin who's admitted into a Catholic orphanage. She is unfairly accused of being a seductress, and her epilepsy is seen as signs of demonic possession. She's adopted by one of the witches and rescued from the orphanage.
6	No te metas	2020s	Paula, Darío's sister, is trying to find a flat away from her family's influence, but her mother and aunts own most of the buildings in the area.
7	Graciela quiere saber	1994	Graciela went to primary school with Paula and Darío, and she had a crush on him. Told in an epistolary way through a young girl's diary, this story further exposes how Darío's family is 'weird' and problematic.
8	La ley primera	2020s	The male victims of the witched rituals share their account of what they remember. The witches' goat is killed.
9	Yo lo que quiero es divertirme	2020s	Anita and her friends are talking and catching up on each other's lives. Even though they don't personally know the witches, the stories they tell fit the patterns of all the previous characters.

The tacit connection between women from different centuries who have had to face struggles stemming from an oppressive patriarchal system reads as a historical revision aimed at finding there the roots of contemporary struggles which, in so doing, reveals what Acevedo (2020) calls a "feminist genealogy" (p.7). Feminist genealogies in comics are usually stories which can be read independently jump back and forth in time, and even though they have a certain narrative independence from one another, they match as puzzle pieces to ultimately configure a general picture of the present day.

As *Walicho* combines witchcraft, animism, sorority, colonial secrets and contemporary fears, this analysis explores this graphic novel as an Argentinian feminist genealogy which highlights and questions the lingering effects of colonial appropriations on female identity and agency. In order to do so, this chapter first explores the arrival of the three Spanish witches in Buenos Aires and how their migration is framed, arguing possible reasons for their journey and analysing the nature of their magic. Then, the discussion shifts to Ailín, a woman of Mapuche origin who is hired as a maid by the witches in the nineteenth century, and whose connection to the land is deeply affected by these

colonisers. Finally, this chapter refers to the echoes of these past events in the lives of women in the twenty-first century.

2. Arriving in the New World: Colonialism and Witchcraft

The port of Nuestra Señora María del Buen Ayre was not a very important enclave at first (1500s–1690); it was only in 1776 that Buenos Aires was designated by the King of Spain as the capital of the newly created Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata. Therefore, in the mid-eighteenth century, Buenos Aires was not the preferred destination of the European aristocracy, including the Spanish, and the economy of this colonial enclave, though active, relied mainly on local industries, such as tanning (Luna, 2002, p. 64). Since social status in Buenos Aires depended on personal achievements rather than lineage, no surnames or aristocratic connections guaranteed prosperity; rather, it was a matter of individual merit and success. Otero effectively conveys these social dynamics in the opening story of *Walicho*: set against the backdrop of a dark ocean, a ship – accentuated in red – arrives at a small port in the Americas (Figure 1). On board, a wealthy woman expresses disdain at having to travel alongside individuals of lower social standing, which reflects how Buenos Aires, initially, was not a city where aristocratic lineage held significant importance, as mostly people of little means migrated there. More importantly, the reason for the danger foreshadowed in the first panel takes shape in the figure of three women and a male goat, who disembark swiftly and silently, taking with them the rich lady's son – something she does not realise until it is too late. The reasons why they steal this boy are as ambiguous as their character: on the one hand, in the following stories of the anthology, the witches systematically save children from abusive environments, but they also take advantage of men

Figure 1: The witches arrive © Sole Otero (Salamandra Graphic, 2023)

to perform esoteric rituals that lengthen the witches' lifespan. The destiny of this particular child is not explicit, and this serves as a rhetorical device to further the suspicions on these women's self-serving goals.

These first pages of the graphic novel introduce visual cues to important features which will shape the future configuration of Argentinian society: female influence, spiritual beliefs, and violence. The three enigmatic women in red are later revealed to be sisters, who buy a finca and settle in a rural area near Buenos Aires, with the goat always alongside them. They perform sexual rituals with men they have tricked to extend their life span, nurturing their soul and bodies with energy they extract from the land. Given that, in the eighteenth century, "[t] e European bourgeois woman was [understood] as someone who reproduced race and capital through her sexual purity, passivity, and being homebound in the service of the white, European, bourgeois man" (Lugones, 2010, p. 743), their lack of male companions, their active scheming to fulfil their own goals, and their self-serving sexual freedom establish a new or modern perspective on the forces that have shaped Argentinian history. These witches establish themselves as the ladies of a colonial estate and have little to no desire to dismantle the Spanish occupation; despite the fact that they face social backlash for being unmarried women and they refuse to blindly obey any male figures of authority, they do not overtly defy the system and avoid conflict and confrontation. The finca is secluded enough to grant them their necessary isolation, but within this microcosm, they stand as bourgeois figures of authority and land owners who employ *mestizo* workers and surveil their every move.

These women cannot – and will not – be tamed: as almost textbook examples of Ahmed's (2010) "killjoys", they refuse patriarchal, reproductive, and moral scripts, so it is more than likely that they fled their homeland for being labelled as disruptive, sinful, or destructive to social harmony. In fact, European witch hunters were so preoccupied with affirming male supremacy that they alleged women held supernatural powers which challenged God due to a pact with the devil, which is, in essence, a further way to make them subservient to a male figure in a perverted marriage albeit how powerful these women might have been (Federici, 2004, p. 187). Otero's nod at these superstitions is realised through the witches' most valuable companion, the male goat, a well-established European symbol of the devil. However, their connection to the devilish goat is more akin to a business partner or an absolutely essential resource than a husband or a master. The goal of their rituals is to extend their own lifespan, as opposed to the male-centred narrative that aimed at turning sex into work, a service for men, and procreation. Having escaped from Europe, a place in which male figures of authority devised a marital analogy to the devil to justify female knowledge or ambition, the Spanish witches are nothing if not the masters of their power and their own destiny, so it is possible to read the witches' monstrosity as a projection of patriarchal discomfort

after refusing male-centred sexuality and Christian moral order (Ahmed, 2010). Therefore, what a male gaze may perceive as bestial and sinful, Otero depicts as free and natural, serving nothing but these women's own aims and having absolutely nothing to do with procreation, and everything to do with self-preservation.

Even though *Walicho* weaves a complex narrative of female empowerment and independence, the witches purposefully build their finca on sacred Mapuche grounds to take advantage of the "energy that was there" (Otero, 2023, n.p.). They also strongly defend the old mode of existence in which you are either with them or against them, and they enforce a colonial economic system which reduces indigenous women to the condition of servants working as maids and weavers. These witches, powerful, free, and victims of the patriarchy in their own way as they are, still act as colonisers, imposing European magic which consumes the harmonious nature of the rural landscape. This is particularly evident when the witches realize that Ailín, one of their maids, has a sensitivity for the supernatural as well, as it is explained in the following section.

3. The Spirits of the Land: Mapuche Animism

As Buenos Aires started to gain political and economic importance, not only Europeans moved there: many indigenous people left their homelands and moved to this city and its whereabouts to try to make a better living, too. With this, *Walicho* problematises whether the Mapuche who assimilated into colonial society and moved to cities such as Buenos Aires were voluntary migrants, thus joining a trend in contemporary comics which challenges "official histories" that portray displacement as national community-building and recover marginalised and minority voices to represent personal, political, social, and historical peripheries (Vuorinne & Kauranen, 2023, p.13). In this sense, Anzaldúa's (1987) conceptualisation of the New World as a colonial borderland, where identities are fractured and hierarchies are violently imposed, is extremely helpful to understand Buenos Aires in the eighteenth century as a zone of collision of cultural, political, and spiritual forces which do not necessarily depend on geopolitical lines.

One of the indigenous peoples whose identity and structure were deeply shaped by colonialism in the nineteenth century in Argentina are the Mapuche, who are defined by shared social, religious, and economic traits as well as a common language, Mapundungún. At the time of Spanish arrival, they inhabited much of the Argentinian Pampa and Patagonia, as well as Southern Chile. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, Mapuche groups were forced westward to the Andes mountains, and those who remained in Spanish-ruled areas mingled with the Spanish during the colonial period, forming a *mestizo* population that combined identity and cultural traits.

Ailín (Story 3) embodies a perfect example of a migrant *mestiza* in this culturally, politically, and religiously convoluted context. Of Mapuche origin and

raised as a Christian, she moves to the witches' *finca* on the outskirts of Buenos Aires to work as a maid, and she speaks in a creole of Spanish and Mapudungún. Scholars in Latinx studies have identified characters like Ailín as part of a long-standing strategy employed by Hispanic authors and artists to represent cultural transformation without erasing cultural specificity. Positioned "between cultures", such figures do not reflect an impulse toward assimilation but rather an "acquisitive and adaptive culture, ready to use the tools at its disposal to forge new identities" (Espinoza, 2021, p. 177). However, despite assimilating into colonial society, Ailín sees the natural world through the eyes of a Mapuche, finding spirits in nature and connecting with the land to seek for advice or help.

In Mapuche mythology, the Ngen are nature spirits which maintain balance and order between nature and human beings. Otero depicts Mapuche tradition and religious practices in the way Ailín, as a mestiza, interacts with these spirits. The Ngen limit their action exclusively to the wild natural environment; and they usually interact with people only when the latter try to make use of the natural element in their charge. Consequently, the Mapuche who contacts a Ngen must engage in a respectful and affectionate dialogue with it. Ailín, in particular, engages with two of them: Ngen-mawida, a forest spirit, and Ngen-kütral, a fire spirit (Figure 2). Considered the owner of the house who resides in the hearth, Ngen-kütral is summoned with a breath, lighting up the fire to give warmth and hot food to the family. In the same way that the witches' magic is highlighted in red, the spirits of the land are also revealed with this colour, symbolising that the river,

Figure 2: Mapuche animism © Sole Otero (Salamandra Graphic, 2023)

the trees, and all other elements of her natural environment are alive and have a magic of their own. Meaningfully, magic and life persist despite colonial —and capitalist—action, which can be seen, for instance, in a canalised river where Ailín connects with the spirit of the water (Figure 2). As opposed to the colonising witches, Ailín belongs in this land and is part of it; therefore, her connection to nature is harmonious and peaceful, and she is often aided by these spirits.

Figure 3: Witchcraft © Sole Otero (Salamandra Graphic, 2023)

What Anzaldúa (1987) associates with *mestiza consciousness* is realised through the cultural contradictions Ailín daily confronts, her linguistic hybridity and the epistemic tension that Otero builds between the witches' self-serving magic rituals and Mapuche animism (Figure 3). When Ailín sees a supernatural being which does not naturally belong in her land, the devilish goat, she cries "*walicho*" in horror, an expression from Mapundungún that Argentinians still use today. In a positive sense, 'walicho' can entail having fallen in love with a person, but in a negative one, it means 'curse'. It may seem ironic that, being so closely connected with nature and believing in Mapuche mythology, she condemns supernatural forces that are not Christian, but this is because the concept of witchcraft was alien to Andean societies such as the Mapuche. Still, her special sensibility for natural balance allows her to recognise the threat of this foreign power and its harmful potential.

However, when people from the city find out that Ailín, a *mestiza,* believes in these spirits and invokes them, she is persecuted just as if she were a European witch: a violent mob breaks into the finca and burns the entire area to ashes. Going back to Ahmed (2017), Ailín is punished not because she is powerful, but because

she refuses the sanctioned world view: her belief system functions as a feminist refusal of hegemony, which both exposes the social power structure and costs her being perceived as a threat. The Spanish in Buenos Aires target both the practitioners of the old religion and the instigators of anti-colonial revolt, while attempting to redefine the spheres of activity in which indigenous women could participate. Taking into consideration the fact that the New World was described by missionaries as 'the land of the devil' (Federici, 2004, p. 233), it is poignant that Story 2 takes place in rural Buenos Aires. The ambiguity of the setting not only contributes to the mysterious tone of the story, but it also informs of a vast lack of borders. There are no clear delineations between *here* and *there*, *mine* or *yours*. There is just *land*, and the characters live *here* – in the finca*,* at the *house*. The intrusion and violation of boundaries, in many different ways, is caused by a violent mob, not necessarily because of physical trespassing, but by their ignorant brutality and their destructive impulse.

4. A Decolonial Narrative: Atemporal Forces and Sorority

Even though a thorough analysis of each of the stories in *Walicho* far exceeds the limits of this chapter, Ailín is not the only *mestiza* of whom the witches take advantage, and they keep on holding control over the land and performing their life-extending sexual rituals until the twenty-first century. Otero's exploration of Argentina's colonial past and how it has shaped the land and the lives of racialised women and their descendants is a reflection, a critique, and an acknowledgement of forces that have always existed and belonged to the land. This aligns with what Mignolo and Walsh (2018) understands as a modern, decolonial perspective, embedded into the very praxis of living (p. 109). *Walicho* argues that territories are connected to the people, and the violations carried out to the environment have repercussions whose after-effects turn into ripples that can be felt across time. Although the idea that nature is ripe with or consists of invisible spirits – be they shades, demons, fairies, or fates – may belong to mythology and folklore nowadays, philosophical perspectives that ascribe agency and responsiveness to the natural world remain prevalent.

The natural world and supernatural forces are, as it was previously mentioned, systematically portrayed in red. This colour is used to highlight danger in the ship in which the witches arrive, their tunics, and the devilish goat (Figure 1), foreshadowing their intention to disrupt the natural order of these lands and to impose themselves as a Western, dominant force, much like other European colonisers (De Sousa Santos, 2015, pp. 218–219). However, as the comic progresses, this same red is repurposed as an expression of uninhibited sexual passion (Figure 3), and of the unique connections established with nature (Figure 2). While the chromatic scheme and the deliberate use of red initially mark the witches as alien to their environment and emphasise their lack of assimilation, the threat they pose does not arise from

hegemonic or patriarchal power structures, and their witchcraft is chromatically parallel to Ailín's animism. As Venturini (2023) argues, comics are a particularly ripe medium for representing sociocultural diversity and the culturally marginalised, as the combination of word and image opens the door to expressing feminist concerns and providing personal or new understandings of history, so being able to narrate the past from a non-hegemonic point of view transforms notions about the present and the future (p. 63). Indeed, the presence of nature depicted in red is systematic, and even urban environments feature remnants of red energy that can be interpreted as animism, witchcraft, or both.

The first picture in Figure 4, when the rich lady from Story 1 finds out that the witches have stolen her baby, shows a red clap of thunder which echoes the woman's horror and welcomes her to a land that is alive, powerful and, as of that moment, haunted. In the second picture (Story 5), a *patio* at a boarding school run by nuns includes trees whose red trunks connect with the solace that a *mestiza* student finds in nature before finally engaging in witchcraft once the witches rescue her. And last but not least, the third picture in Figure 4 shows the last page in *Walicho*, in which Anita (Story 9) mentions that her boyfriend mysteriously disappears every night: unbeknownst to her, the witches' influence has reached her. This terrifying last panel zooms out and abstracts readers from the context of the character, flaunting the vortex of energy that persists in the world, or Buenos Aires, to this day. Despite everything.

The witches are complex and enigmatic figures, characterized by a blend of light and darkness, who pursue their own objectives and engage in frightening acts of violence. Thus, categorizing them strictly as 'heroines' would be misleading. However, labelling them as outright villains would also be unjust, as many conflicts arise in response to aggression or threats posed by those in positions of power. Indeed, one of the most interesting aspects of Otero's work is how she overlaps and contrasts female agency and oppression, as all women are in one way or another victims of the patriarchy, and indirectly connects with an issue that Lugones (2008) explores in her review of gender and decoloniality: if gender is not determinant in social hierarchy, what are the forces that facilitate domination and how does the West impose itself by material means? (p. 33). On the one hand, the witches are a perfect example of sisterhood, not only because they lose their powers when they separate, but also because they have an interest in protecting women: they take in little Ana (Story 5) when they find out that she is abused and discriminated against at the boarding school, and they accuse the nuns of failing her sisters, other women.

However, the witches are self-serving and they do not care about what happens to other people as long as they are able to continue with their life-prolonging rites. The fact that the witches are united sisters is not enough in an updated understanding of feminism and decolonial discourse, and this is what *Walicho*

Figure 4: Red nature © Sole Otero (Salamandra Graphic, 2023)

argues by means of the contemporary characters, who suffer the repercussions of the witches' doings in Buenos Aires. The three witches perpetuate colonial dynamics, a landscape in which true sorority is impossible, for there will persist oppression and violence (Ahmed, 2017). For instance, Paula (Story 6), is never able to lead an independent life free from the influence of her aunts, the witches: she is trying to buy a flat with her boyfriend, but the witches either own or control somehow all real estate in the area. Since these women appropriated the land in the 1700s and still hold control over it, *Walicho* highlights a form of systemic violence which results from political and economic systems whose normal operation often involves subtle coercive mechanisms that sustain exploitation and domination (Žižek, 2008, p. 9). The case of Belén (Story 4) is more indirect: she is a young woman who lives alone with her cat; she is agoraphobic, and has social anxiety. When she starts texting one of the men that has been abducted by the witches, she starts having terrible nightmares and accidents start happening in her house. The mere possibility of Belén intruding in the witches' business triggers threats against her stability, her peace, her home and what she holds dear.

Therefore, sorority does not work if there is still an interest to preserve colonial dynamics, which are fuelled by capitalist beliefs. In that way, so-called sorority and feminism are not enough. The punchline is, nevertheless, rather disheartening: as it was mentioned, the women in present-day Buenos Aires are completely unaware that these witches are the perpetrators of the abuses which affect them. *Walicho*, therefore, denounces that feminism by itself is not enough if the systemic problems which configure Argentinian society are not accounted for while trying to break down female oppression. Following Freire (2005, p. 49), "[i]n order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which

there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform". Anita and her friends (Story 9) are completely unaware of the role of these witches in the development of their neighbourhood and their partners' involvement with their rituals. However, their influence is everywhere, and it affects them even if they are not the direct descendants of Ailín or other girls at the boarding school in Story 5.

5. Conclusion

Walicho is an anthology of seemingly individual stories which blend mystery, horror, and social commentary. They are all connected by three Spanish witches who migrate to Buenos Aires in the late eighteenth century, and, on a formal level, operate as a narrative device to link the past and the present, thus exposing the persistence of colonial hierarchies in contemporary Argentina. In a more thematic sense, these witches foreground the dynamics of power and oppression related to gender and cultural identity, particularly in connection with the mythology and animism of indigenous Mapuche culture. As Porras Sánchez (2022, p. 10) argues, migration comics represent a facet of reality which overlaps with other important issues in contemporary culture, such as vulnerability, poverty, identity, trauma, memory, and their connection to ethnicity, race, gender, and social class, so their discussion of migration far exceeds a mere story of journeying and family ascendance. By juxtaposing native worldviews about the nurturing role of nature with European witchcraft that draws power from it, *Walicho* highlights tensions between colonial and indigenous ideologies on the use of space.

Moreover, all the stories in *Walicho* depict the three witches as a counterpoint, almost a resistance, to the attempts to corner women throughout history. This graphic novel engages with the complexities of feminist discourse within postcolonial contexts. The depiction of the three witches incorporates elements of female empowerment while critically examining how, in some cases, this empowerment has come at the expense of indigenous identities and cultures. The narrative offers a compelling insight into how these women, once oppressed by a patriarchal system, later assume roles as oppressors in the so-called New World. Otero skilfully reflects the cultural heterogeneity of contemporary Argentina, foregrounding indigenous cultural roots.

Weaving together feminist critique, postcolonial discourse, and impactful visual storytelling, *Walicho* challenges hegemonic narratives in terms of male-dominated and Eurocentric discourse. Otero's work not only examines the enduring impact of colonial and patriarchal structures, but it also contributes to the evolving landscape of Argentinian comics. Through its intricate narrative and layered artistic techniques, *Walicho* provides a compelling critique of how historical power structures continue to have an influence of the life of women and the descendants of migrants and mestizo peoples.

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