

# *War and culture studies in 2016: putting 'translation' into the transnational?*

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# War and Culture Studies in 2016: Putting ‘Translation’ into the Transnational?

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The first issue of the ‘Journal of War and Culture Studies’ in 2008 mapped out the academic space which the discipline sought to occupy. Nearly a decade later, the location of war, traditionally associated with the nation-state, is being challenged in ways which arguably affect the analytical spaces of War and Culture Studies. The article argues for a reconceptualization of the location of war as broader in both spatial and temporal terms than the nation-state. It identifies local ‘contact zones’ which are multivocal translational spaces, and calls for an incorporation of ‘translation’ into our analyses of war: translating identities, including associations of the material as well as of subjective identities, and espousing a conscious interdisciplinarity which might lead us to focus more on the performative than the representational. The article calls for the discipline of translation studies to become a leading contributor to War and Culture Studies in the years to come.

**KEYWORDS** contact zones, transnational, translation, interdisciplinary, multivocal

In the inaugural edition of the *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, Evans (2008: 47–49) heralded the new journal as embracing a different type of war studies:

It is about both representations and experience. It trains its critical sights on the creative interface between war, history, sociology and cultural studies. It promotes the exploration of multiple disciplines and different types of evidence to produce a more comprehensive and cumulative history of war (49).

Debra Kelly, in the same edition, provided a further gloss on the academic space which the discipline of War and Culture Studies, as defined by the *Journal*, was

seeking to occupy: ‘the relationship between war and culture during conflict and its aftermath, the forms and practices of cultural transmission in time of war, and the analysis of the impact of war on cultural production, cultural identity and international cultural relations’ (Kelly, 2008: 4). Now, nearly a decade later, how have these academic spaces, these interfaces, as imagined in 2008, changed and developed? What new pressures and paradigms are challenging the conceptual and analytical terrain of War and Culture Studies? Where is War and Culture Studies in 2016?

### Shifting borders, uneasy spaces

Any academic study which engages with war inevitably reflects, at least to some extent, the contemporary context of conflict and war-making, often reading back from current events to re-evaluate the cultures of past wars from newer perspectives. Twenty-first century coalition invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and their immediate aftermaths arguably stimulated a renewed academic interest in very specific issues like the cultures of military coalitions (for example during the First World War, Heimburger, 2012), the nature of interrogation and torture in war (Andrew & Tobia, 2014), and the often asymmetrical interactions between occupation and relief (for example in the aftermath of Second World War in Europe, Humbert, 2015). More fundamentally, over the past decade, the very frontiers of nation-states, the borders over which conflicts are so often fought, have been seen to be at one and the same time both key to any analysis we might make, and also infinitely shifting and malleable. What was once a more or less given in our work — the primacy of the nation-state — is a matter of very present reinterpretation and dispute. I would argue that there has been an increasing uncertainty over the past few years about the location of war — where exactly the conflicts we seek to explore are actually positioned geographically in relation to the nation-state.

To begin with, and perhaps surprisingly, the ‘cultural turn’ in war studies which Evans discerned some years ago has now migrated to the military themselves in what has been in effect a ‘weaponizing’ of culture (Rafael, 2007) in the service of the nation-state or of nation-state coalitions. This military cultural perspective is very different in intent and style from the propaganda uses of culture which have long been a staple of War and Culture Studies (for example Welch & Fox, 2012). The fact that a ‘cultural turn’ has reached into the very core of Western defence thinking represents a quite remarkable change in traditional military ideology. From the 1980s through to the late twentieth century, Western military understandings of war were framed by what was then termed a ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’ (RMA), a trope which placed high-level technology at the apex of capability, and imagined future conflicts as battles which would be fought from an optical distance, far away from any on-the-ground, face-to-face encounters — the 2003 invasion of Iraq, ‘Shock and Awe’, stands as a classic example of this representation. In RMA, technological superiority was presumed to ensure a ‘safe’ victory, and

above all, one at a considerable distance from the enemy. By the late 1990s, however, with peace-keeping in the Balkans, and particularly in the wake of 9/11, it became evident that troops would be entering foreign space on foot. They would be occupying territory for quite considerable periods of time, and fighting enemies who were highly unconventional in military terms, who did not follow the so-called ‘normal’ rules of military encounter. In this situation, the received orthodoxy of technology and distance seemed irrelevant, and it was at this point that ‘culture’ entered decisively into the arsenal of military thinking. Spearheaded by Lieutenant-General David Petraeus, ‘cultural awareness’ for the army was conceived as a ‘force multiplier’ (Petraeus, 2006: 2–12, 2). Effective counter-insurgency demanded, it was claimed, an informed understanding of the local foreign culture, and thus, in terms very similar to those traditionally used by academics in War and Culture Studies, environments would now need to be read culturally:

The bottom line is that no handbook relieves a professional counter-insurgent from the personal obligation to study, internalize and interpret the physical, human and ideological setting in which the conflict takes place [...] to borrow a literary term, there is no substitute for a ‘close reading’ of the environment. (Kilcullen, 2007)

Epistemologically this acculturation of military thinking was framed at least initially by the discipline of anthropology. In the army’s imaginary, the cultural space of war was essentially an informational one in which details about and products from human populations could be harvested to aid future military operations. These would then be summarized in a series of etiquette-type formulations to prepare soldiers before deployment, with e-learning ‘do’s and don’ts’ (Arab Cultural Awareness 58 Factsheets, 2006), and online feedback in the form of ‘Culture Risk Meters’ (LineCo, 2009), in some ways an updated version of the handbooks for soldiers which had been produced in previous wars (see, for example Constantine, 2013). Despite the presence of clearly foreign interveners, the space of war was conceived as unchanging, with cultures largely defined within Manichean nation-state parameters, characterized by stasis and immobility, in a pre-lapsarian world in which cultures are approached via ‘culture general competences’ (Sands, 2009). The putative intimacy imagined in this weaponizing of culture was one almost wholly dependent on the visible — on what could be seen by the soldiers. Indeed most participants on the ground of war were positioned as mute observers, transformed, as Derek Gregory suggested, into innocent and virtuous bystanders (Gregory, 2008). Although some effort was made in military training programmes to relativize soldiers’ perceptions of the foreign space in which they found themselves, the cultural imaginary was one, as Patrick Porter has argued, which was framed by a type of military orientalism, inhabited by ‘othered’ exotic objects (Porter, 2009: 193). Whilst this particular version of weaponized culture has in practice offered relatively little help to the military in achieving their specific objectives (see, for example Martin, 2014), the parameters of the space imagined — nation-

state actors in a landscape largely devoid of cultural fluidity and admixing — has tended to reinforce nation-state boundaries, with soldiers taking their nation-state with them, as it were, into the foreign domains of conflict.

If this military weaponizing of culture has reinforced a type of travelling nation-state ontology, the 2015 refugee crisis has had the contrary effect of refocusing attention on the impermanence of these very same national borders. In a real sense, our spatial maps have been redrawn by the long and painful passage of thousands of refugee travellers, crossing over the Mediterranean or the Aegean, and then traversing, often on foot, vast swathes of continental Europe — Macedonia, Bosnia, Hungary, Serbia, Croatia, Austria, Germany, and Sweden. Rather like the pilgrimage journeys of medieval times, the world now appears to be lined with recognized refugee routes: the West Balkan route, the East Mediterranean route, the Central Mediterranean route, the Albania to Greece route, the Black Sea route, the West African route, and so on. This crisis has been one essentially marked by movement, both of the refugees themselves, and of the borders they cross which have oscillated uneasily between being suddenly open and invisible, and then, just as suddenly, being closed and highly visible, marked by hastily erected walls and impregnable bureaucratic barriers, with refugees often displaced into a no-man's land between border crossings. And all along the way, peoples of different cultures have been meeting in an unusual intimacy of encounter which has called forth local responses well beyond the mute observational stance of the military's weaponized nation-state cultures. Thus for example in Croatia, when refugees, frightened by recent negative experiences in Hungary, were too afraid to use main roads and struck out through wooded and remote areas which still carried the traces of landmines from the late 1990s, it was local people, with the help of voluntary groups, who speedily translated notices into a range of languages, warning refugees about these lethal dangers on the Serbian/Croatian border.<sup>1</sup>

And of course, with the innocent refugee, journeying over the long European pilgrimage routes, have come other deeply unwelcome travellers — terrorists — who, as in the atrocities of Paris, Beirut, and Kenya, can apparently cross highly permeable borders with ease, acting in the name of a new nation-state empire, the caliphate, and provoking a speedy reinforcement of Western borders in the interests of protecting home populations.

Arguably, the location of war — within or beyond the nation-state — has seldom seemed as problematic as it now appears in 2016. On the whole, our analytical responses to this challenge of location have generally been to reconstitute the space in ways which prioritize comparisons, or which concentrate on the travels and connections across these borders. Studies of both the First and Second World Wars have provided new insights by setting Western national experiences alongside each other and reading across them. Most often, this has been a comparative exercise (Lagrou, 2008; Winter, 2016). Following in the footsteps of Werner and

<sup>1</sup>Recounted to author by volunteer translator, 24 September 2015.

Zimmermann (2006), another approach which explicitly overrides borders has directed attention towards the notion of cultural transfer, sometimes called ‘transculturalism’, or ‘histoire croisée’. Rather than starting with the nation-state, this perspective explores meeting points and the passage or transfer of cultures, the circulation of ideas, the key categories of cultural travellers, and their overlapping cultural spaces (Schmale, 2010). Against this, proponents of transnational approaches have sought to recognize the nation-state as the basis of analysis, but from a starting-point which assumes a priori its positioning within a much wider world setting (Tyrrell, 2007). In this disputed analytical terrain in which conceptual borders are as uneasy and oscillating as the nation-state frontiers they seek to challenge, the semantic field is wide and generous. Often the new ‘buzzwords’ of our conceptually uneasy terrain – ‘transnational’, ‘global’, ‘crossing of borders and generations’ – are mixed together in a hopeful, if rather arbitrary, way as synonyms of somewhere ‘beyond the nation-state’, illustrating the problems we face in deciding the location of the wars whose cultures we propose to study in 2016.

### Where is war?

There is a very real dilemma for us in incorporating the oscillating impermanence of actual and conceptual nation-state frontiers into our current imaginings of the spaces of war and culture without losing the ‘creative interface’ and cutting-edge stimulus which Evans envisaged nearly ten years ago. I want to argue that our work in War and Culture Studies needs to engage overtly with a reconceptualization of the location of war as broader in both spatial and temporal terms than the nation-state.

Firstly, spatial distinctions between war and peace, between quiescent and violent zones, are surely invalid. As John Keane argues:

For citizens living in the so-called democratic zone of peace, alas, the world is not so neatly subdivided into peaceful and violent zones. Nor can it become so, thanks in part to the links between the two worlds forged by global arms production and the violence-ridden drug trades. Mass migrations, pauperization and prejudice also ensure that rootlessness, ethnic tensions, and violent lawlessness are features of nearly every city of the developed world. (Keane, 1996: 4)

Surely this same spatial blurring of the artificial borders between war zones and peace zones is equally true when we look at wars past. Shrabani Basu’s recent book on Indian soldiers on the Western Front in 1914–18 (2015) makes abundantly clear that the ramifications of that Western war zone spilled out into the apparently peaceful continent of India, into the lives of millions of Indians thousands of miles from the fighting who had not necessarily sent relatives to the Army there at all, but who would find themselves personally affected by events in the war zone. This inevitable linkage of war and peace is of course something which diplomatic



international historians have often examined — one thinks of the abundant writing in this vein on the Spanish Civil War (for example [Alpert, 2004](#)) — but it has perhaps figured less insistently in the consciousness of those of us who examine the ‘culture of war’ — even the name of our disciplinary focus, ‘War and Culture Studies’, arguably implies a different and parallel culture of peace. Spatially though, war and peace are in a continuum.

Secondly, the spaces of different wars are themselves linked together. Are we still really able to call some wars ‘Western’, and others not? When Odd Arne Westad set out to write a book about the motives and decisions of the Cold War superpowers in their Third World policies, he found that: ‘During the research [...], the subject of the book turned into something broader: [...] What had started out as a book about interventions increasingly became one about Third World processes of change. Its perspective shifted south’ (2007: 1). We do not necessarily have to buy into Westad’s overall hypothesis that all post-1945 wars are related to the globalization of the Cold War to see how a perception of the interconnectedness of wars can radically shift our perspectives south, or at least in directions far away from our own traditional spaces.

But beyond the geographical locations of different wars, and of war zones and peace zones, there is a broader transnational temporal context. If our spatial perspective widens to include wars and conflicts from across the world, it will inevitably end up comprising other imaginings of time, as well as very different chronologies. The conflicts of the late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries — the Iran/Iraq war, Lebanon, India/Pakistan, Ethiopia, and the Horn of Africa — each bring with them a chain of pre-events and aftermaths which challenge us to examine more critically our own Western chronologies of war. The chronology of war on the Western Front in 1914 which I had been taught as a student was severely challenged when I looked at the letters which Indian soldiers on the Western Front had received from their relatives and friends at home. My perspective on the temporal location of the events of 1914–15 bore little relation to the chronologies being lived and experienced by villagers writing from the Punjab.

There is also of course something in this temporal stretching of the location of war that is deeply experiential. Much has been written, and will hopefully continue to be written, about memory and war: public memorialization, the representation of memory, the memory wars of individual countries. However, there is also, I think, what we might call generational traces, memory in the blood if you like, which goes on from generation to generation. For the sixtieth anniversary of the Liberation of Europe in 2004, there was a major national commemoration exercise led by the UK’s Imperial War Museum (IWM). With fifty million pounds of public money, the IWM mounted a vast commemoration project, *Their Past Your Future*, specifically focused on the veteran experience, crucially positioning British veterans of the Second World War as living documents of war who could be ‘read’ by a new generation of youngsters ([Tinker, 2013](#)). In the *Heroes Return* element of the programme, veterans were sponsored by the IWM to go back to the sites of their wartime activity

in order to meet local people and reimagine their past, creating, as it were, new communities of inter-generational memory on the very sites of former military encounter. A new generation of youngsters (and the feedback forms from them are both explicit and moving) were given the living memories of individual participants. The point I am making here is not the veracity of the information the young people received, or the political agendas of those financing the project, but rather the fact that individual/experiential war was now part of these young people's personal experience across time.

Very often, this sort of temporal location of war crosses physical boundaries too — the war in the blood of diasporic communities who were refugees/exiles of war, and whose children and grandchildren carry the memory whether they like it or not. Marcia Tambutti, the Mexican/Chilean granddaughter of Salvador Allende, recently made a film about her own family (*El País*, 2015), documenting its fortunes in the wake of the 1973 Pinochet coup, and portraying a generation that continues to bear the scars of their forced diaspora — one daughter, Beatriz, who sought refuge in Cuba, became clinically depressed and committed suicide, and a grandson of Allende killed himself as the documentary was actually being put together.

### Putting 'translation' into the transnational

This transnationalism of war, in space and time, is an inevitable framing for the local in conflict. The 'on the ground' encounters of war take place in transnational spaces, what Pratt (2008) in her work on Empire called 'contact zones', 'the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict' (8). Pratt's argument is that the term 'contact zones':

shifts the center of gravity and the point of view. It invokes the space and time where subjects previously separated by geography and history are co-present, the point at which their trajectories now intersect. The term 'contact' foregrounds the interactive, improvisational dimensions. [...] [it] emphasizes how subjects get constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations [...] not in terms of separateness, but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, and often within radically asymmetrical relations of power. (Pratt, 2008: 8)

The discipline of War and Culture Studies surely has a particular insight into transnational contact zones which are, by definition, multivocal spaces in which identities are translated and communication attempted. I want to argue that these are fundamentally translational spaces, and that we would do well now to consciously incorporate the key notion of translation into our analyses. Helen Underhill, in her work on protest and the Arab Spring (2016), speculated recently on the relative lack of recognition accorded to translation in work on relations in

conflict/diasporic zones: ‘Despite the inherent if implicit “trans” dimension of diaspora, translation [...] remains unrecognized in our understanding of diaspora politics’ (48). Defining translation, as Baker does, as ‘the mediation of diffuse symbols, experiences, narratives and linguistic signs’ (2016: 7) enables us to see it as vitally constitutive of the transnational spaces of war and conflict, of the ways in which identities are constructed and exchanged in the transnationalism of war.

In terms of translating identities, we are used of course in War and Culture Studies to recognizing and giving value to the traditionally invisible actors of war — women, ethnic groups, civilians — and recuperating the micro-narratives and memories of war confined to previously marginalized groups. I wonder now, though, whether we need to be translating more overtly some of the material actors which have received relatively less attention, but which are arguably vital to the relationships which develop on the ground of war. As Donna Haraway said many years ago: ‘all of the actors are not human and all of the humans are not us’ (1992: 67). Let me give an example from my own work on how contact zones could be revised and opened out by translating a different range of identities and associations. Some years ago I wrote a book on *Living with the Liberators* (Footitt, 2004) which tried to explore Allied/French meetings on the ground during the Liberation of France in 1944–45. Looking back at this now, I realize that whilst I was certainly interested in how the Allies and the French represented each other in different spatial and temporal contexts during these meetings, my investigation tended to stay within a relatively restricted circle of actors. How wide did my gaze actually go? What were, to quote Sarah Whatmore, ‘the interference of “things”’ (2002: 4) in the geographies of people’s experiences? One of the themes I did pick up in the book was the importance of food and supplies in these relationships: ‘[The Americans] are wasting vast quantities of food, leaving bits of *mortadello* for the dogs, throwing coffee in the streams’ (158). I wonder now whether there is not a great deal more to say about this — what were the relationships between the different cartographies of food and the intimate geographies of consumers? I suspect that there is a much more interesting book struggling to get out of this project — one which might for example take as its theme ‘the feeding of Liberation encounters’, and follow the food chains which were developed from the USA and the UK across Liberated France and into local communities which were themselves redeveloping their food production potential, studying the emotional as well as the physical value attached to different sorts of foods. Food as a local symbol of transnational cultural relations.

If, as Benedicte Grima suggested, ‘Emotion is culture’ (1992: 6), what ‘emotional regimes’ are established as touchstones of personal reality? How, in William Reddy’s terms, is ‘the navigation of feeling’ managed (2001)? Rather than seeing encounters as taking place discursively between individuals and groups, is there interest now in looking, as Bruno Latour does (2007), at different associations, at procedural habits, at the sounds and smells, the senses of encounter, at what Shotter calls ‘the practical knowledges and vernaculars of everyday sense-making’ (Whatmore, 2002: 162)? Should we be shifting from a discursive to a performative register which allows

for an emphasis on corporeality and hybridity as modes of contact (Whatmore, 2002: 147)?

Recently, I was involved in a workshop at the BBC's Monitoring Centre in Caversham (AHRC, 2015) which brought together people who had worked as monitors, listening to and transcribing foreign radio broadcasts as a means of accessing open intelligence. In cultural terms, there is much to say about the discursive positioning of this operation, about its representation now and at the time, both within the discourses of Cold War relations, and within the much less understood relations between words and intelligence analysis. What struck me however more forcibly was the performative nature of BBC monitoring, the praxis of listening if you like. The monitors were positioned in a complex chain of listening and reproducing this listening which involved an intricate process of considering the subject under discussion, the commentator's view of the subject, the audience for which the broadcast was intended, and the desired response to the broadcast. Once monitors had assessed the broadcast in this way, they then had to reconstruct the report for the intended consumer in the UK/US. This meant assessing the likely response and understanding of the consumers to each passage of the report. Following the production of a broadcast summary from the arrival of a monitor in the morning (to a shared listening office, with a rota of broadcasts to be listened to), through to the radio with its often poor reception, to the final production of a report was an extraordinary journey of the apparently ordinary performance of listening — as one monitor warned: 'You only hear what you already know'. Following the performance of the 'ordinary', assembling and translating paths of connection, may reveal chains and relations which are both wide and fruitful for future research.

But this translation of identities also impacts on our own academic self-representation. Interdisciplinarity has of course been a hallmark of our work, indeed the Call for Papers for the recent Group for War and Culture Studies anniversary conference situated it, 'across an extremely diverse range of disciplines: cultural history, modern languages, sociology, media studies, literary studies, art history, fine art, cultural studies, memory studies, as well as in the more traditional fields of military and political history' (GWACS, 2014). What is perhaps less clearly and overtly articulated is the process by which these academic 'contact zones' are formed, the reciprocal cultural mixing of disciplines, and indeed the mixing of academics and practitioners. Many of us are 'bandita' researchers, Linda Singer's intellectual outlaws (1993: 22) who raid the texts of others and take what they find most useful, and I for one count myself proudly in this bandita tradition! But perhaps we have now reached a point when examining the local within the broader transnationalism of war requires us to design our academic hybridity in a more purposeful way, to be what Nigel Thrift called 'self-consciously interdisciplinary' (2008: 20). In his discussion of a 'non-representational theory of the ordinary', Thrift argued:

I have tried to avoid any particular disciplinary tradition in the arts and humanities and social sciences and to take inspiration from them all — or at least a

good many of them. There is an important sense in which any politics of ordinary moments is bound to transgress these disciplinary boundaries since it involves so many different elements of discipline and indiscipline, imagination and narrative, sense and nonsense [...] But each of these disciplines can be bent towards my overall goal. (20)

Seeing the sites of war as translational spaces within the transnational involves above all a commitment to linguistic cultural transfer, to translation in its primary language-related meaning. As I have argued, if war is understood to be spatially transnational — war and peace zones are inter-related, and Western wars and wars elsewhere were and are interconnected — this space must inevitably be multilingual, filled with cultural products and cultural analysis from a much broader range of sources than those we normally encounter. The problem in hearing this chorus of voices is obviously one of accessibility, and above all, of translation. The discipline of War and Culture Studies must surely now have the ambition to occupy an intercultural academic space in which the cultural products and academic reflections of our non-anglophone colleagues on wars which we have often omitted to notice will increasingly be available to hear and discuss. In this imagining, translation in the linguistic sense is not an optional extra, something useful to have in selected areas, but a project central to our future understanding of war and culture. The challenges translation studies poses, and the analytical frameworks it develops — issues of re-translation and re-narration — are surely key to an intercultural understanding of war. In short, there is a strong case for the discipline of translation studies to become a leading contributor to War and Culture Studies in the years to come.

This translational space also has implications for the ways in which we understand our own academic spaces, the means we employ to express and transmit the multivocal voices we hear. How do we translate the local in War and Culture Studies in our own academic work so that it humanizes and challenges the broader transnational contextualizations of war? The ethnographic historian [Dening \(1994\)](#), with a style which mixed narrative and reflective chapters, sought to be open to the performance of history, not as some kind of antiquarian re-enactment, but as what he believed was ‘presenting the past’ — finding ways of expressing, of catching processes, not just change, but the changing process too. Perhaps this ‘storying’ approach, this bringing alive and translating into the present the contact zones of war, may be achieved by continuing to be open-minded about our definitions of academic contributions to the field of War and Culture Studies. All of these would be characterized by the academic rigour, accuracy and research which we rightly prize, and would be capable of adding to the mainstream development of the field, but they might also be expressed by drawing on different types of creative imagination — Dening’s mixture of narrative and reflective, exhibitions, novels, ethnographic history, poetry, artistic installations, posters.

In 2016, I think we cannot avoid the transnational, the uneasily oscillating borders of the nation-state. We can, however, ensure that we engage with the local in this space by translating — translating identities, including associations and networks of the material as well as of subjective identities. The subjects of our research would be translated by a conscious interdisciplinarity which might lead us to focus more on the performative than on the discursive and representational. Putting translation into the transnational would lead us to open out the spaces of War and Culture Studies to other wars and different cultural studies traditions. Above all, we would reaffirm the essential humanness of our endeavours by exploring ways of ‘storying’ the contact zones, marking the transnational with the diverse voices and forms of cultural production which may take us, as scholars, beyond our traditional academic comfort zones.

This is a space in which translation and translation studies are key components, and in which the local, down to the personal, is the touchstone of our interest. In War and Culture Studies we perhaps have no need for a manifesto of the sort which Stephen Greenblatt so memorably prepared for ‘cultural mobility’ (2010), but we might collectively want to assert that the transnational contains translation at its core, and that translating the local in the context of uneasy nation-state borders may, in 2016, provide at least some of the ‘creative interface’ in War and Culture Studies which Evans so rightfully celebrated in 2008.

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