THE GEOGRAPHY OF DISCIPLINARY AMNESIA: ELEVEN SCHOLARS REFLECT ON THE INTERNATIONAL STATE OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

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As an interactionist “promoter” (Maines, 2001), who is neither an American nor working in a sociology department, I hold negative sentiments toward discussions of the past, present, and future of symbolic interactionism (SI) based on the assumptions that SI is nothing but an American sociological perspective and that its evolution ought to unfold according to the conditions of American sociology. This is a problem for at least two reasons. First, from a disciplinary perspective, these discussions fail to take into account that SI is at its very core an interdisciplinary perspective founded on principles of intersubjective communication as culture (Carey, 1989; Denzin, 1992) and that as such the application of theoretical principles of SI has taken place across several disciplines. Second, and from a geopolitical perspective, those reflections fail to consider that contemporary SI is the global outcome of intellectual forces as diverse as evolutionism, Scottish moralism, American pragmatism, German idealism and (Simmelian) formalism, European continental phenomenology.
and existentialism, Polish social ecology, functional psychology, and even
Greek philosophy (Helle, 2005; Lopata, 2003; Prus, 2003; Reynolds 2003).

Sociology-centric and Americo-centric discussions do nothing to combat
the loss in global relevance of SI. Furthermore, they involuntarily (but
inexcusably) strengthen the very conditions that have led to the dissolution
of interactionist ideas across American sociology (Maines, 2001) and to the
progressive “theoretical amnesia” toward SI, typical of the attitude of
British and European sociologists (Atkinson & Housley, 2003).

Drawing upon personal correspondence with 11 scholars who work
outside the USA, in this article I reflect on the state of SI across the world.
Summary of such correspondence yields the conclusion that SI suffers from
what I call “poor brand recognition” across the world. This is because, in
part, of its own state of disciplinary amnesia. Disciplinary amnesia – a
concept related to but broader than that of “theoretical amnesia” (Atkinson &
Housley, 2003) – is the symptom observed amongst those symbolic
interactionist “promoters” and “utilizers” (Maines, 2001) who have
forgotten about both the interdisciplinary nature and the global relevance
of this perspective, as well as neglected to work toward fulfilling its potential
for international and interdisciplinary growth. In what follows, I discuss the
characteristics of disciplinary amnesia and the features of the contexts in
which it has emerged. I conclude by identifying possible solutions to
combating it and consequently to increasing SI’s “brand recognition.”

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM’S
GLOBAL DIVERSITY

Both the history and the historiography of SI show that multiple “different
definitions and boundaries” have been applied to the subject of study
(Atkinson & Housley, 2003, p. vii). Yet, despite the commonly agreed-upon
understanding of SI’s heterogeneity, in practice the institutional and
disciplinary core of SI unmistakably resides in its American heartland.
For instance, Reynolds and Herman-Kinney (2003a, 2003b, p. ix) preface
their fine Handbook of Symbolic Interactionism by aiming at making it
“a fine addition to the sociological literature” (my emphasis). Maines (2001,
2003) himself – the most visible critic of the dissolution of SI – focuses on
the growing invisibility of interactionism across American sociological
theory and research while Fine (1993) and Sandstrom and Fine (2003,
p. 1041) find that the “glorious triumph” of SI is due to its successes in
“social psychology, medical sociology, deviance, social problems, collective behavior, cultural studies, media studies, the sociology of emotions, the sociology of art, environmental sociology, race relations, social organization, social movements, and political sociology” – hardly an interdisciplinary outlook.

Coming to terms with SI’s heterogeneity in practice, rather than in principle, is necessary if there is interest in widening the global and interdisciplinary recognition of the SI brand. Let me make this clear: it is unfair to criticize someone for who they are, and I do not want to come across as suggesting that American sociologists who do SI should not reflect on the history of SI as a perspective within American sociology. My argument is different, hopefully more insightfully critical, and twofold: (1) I am advancing the claim that most symbolic interactionists who do work in American sociology have made very few efforts at learning about SI theory and research taking place outside the USA; and (2) outside sociology; and therefore they have done very poorly at recognizing the centrality of that body of knowledge for the historical intellectual development of the perspective. This is a case, in my mind, of disciplinary amnesia. This state of disciplinary amnesia makes it difficult to agree with the idea that “we are all interactionists now” as Atkinson and Housley (2003, pp. 144–175), and similarly Maines (2001), have argued. In fact, the use of the pronoun “we” in that statement and in related attitudes is symptomatic of the fact that “we” are after all a very small group of people and that at the very margins of “our” movement lie interactionist utilizers and promoters – let alone unaware interactionists – who “we” have either never truly listened to or spoken with, or sometimes even explicitly muted. In an attempt to listen to and speak with interactionist sympathizers who work away from the hallways of American academia, I have corresponded with 11 scholars whose work is of clear relevance to the interactionist project. Despite their differences, these 11 scholars agree that SI’s amnesias are worthy of interest, concern, and for some, even preoccupation. Conversations with these scholars clearly show that the definition of SI is highly dependent on the historical and political particulars of contexts defined by nation state and supranational regional boundaries. An analysis of these particulars yields the conclusion that the recent evolution of SI in the USA has followed a somewhat unique trajectory. Rather than a struggle to carve acceptance in a context – that typical of American sociology – dominated by positivist and realist empiricism, across the world SI finds itself struggling to gain visibility as an analytical perspective distinct from qualitative or humanist research writ large. In large part, this is due to the
fact that whereas in the USA SI has evolved on the basis of its strength as an “American perspective,” elsewhere SI has to cope with lower historical and institutional visibility as a distinct perspective.

For example, Carol Grbich comments that in the Australian context, struggles over the definition of SI’s essence or values pertinent to theoretical or methodological purity count much less than potential for practical applicability (personal communication). In Australia, the true divide is between applied and theoretical disciplines (Grbich, personal communication), and as a medical sociologist working in an applied arena, for Grbich: “theory has to link to and be reflected by practice” and thus in her field SI theory is used “very lightly and regard[ed] it as a useful way of identifying particular cultures [...] in a hospital ward or in explaining the interactions between people and among groups.”

Different conditions exist in Canada where a rather orthodox Blumerian tradition, fostered amongst others by Prus (1996), has been institutionalized in the yearly meetings of the Qualitative Analysis Conference (QAC). According to Deborah van den Hoonoord (personal communication), scholars who have gravitated toward the core of the QAC have emphasized in their research the importance of “generic social processes” – a concept which is not as central in American scholarship (D. Van den Hoonoord, personal communication). As Van den Hoonoord reports (personal communication), Canadian interactionism is also distinctly different from region to region, with limited presence in Quebec and a strong presence in central Canada, a solid tradition begun in Atlantic Canada by Nels Anderson – who taught at UNB later in his career – and a more diffuse presence in the West. Other qualitative Canadian scholars – such as the IIQM in Alberta and the institutional ethnography group – have instead strayed away from SI by blending an interactionist and ethnographic agenda with a, respectively, diffuse qualitative and critical, feminist, and emancipatory one following the charismatic leadership of Dorothy E. Smith. Despite the physical proximity to the USA – where almost all of the interactionist conferences have been held over the years – and despite the many similarities between American and Canadian social and cultural conditions, it is not uncommon to hear Canadian interactionists lament of their empirical research being pegged by American colleagues as “Canadian” and thus at best only marginally relevant to American sociology.

British interactionism, as described by Atkinson and Housley (2003), has the disadvantage of having had to grow without a formal or even unofficial school of thought; yet much British qualitative research that is interpretive
and interactionist in nature has accumulated over the years. British interactionists and interactionist utilizers on the other hand have had the advantage of operating in an academic environment in which social scientific work has “become increasingly coloured by the so-called cultural turn” (Atkinson & Housley, 2003, p. xvii). Free from the preoccupation of having to defend itself from positivist attacks, SI could have had fertile ground to grow there, yet “the United Kingdom has rarely named symbolic interactionism as a key tradition, although it has been applied to health, deviance, and education empirically [...] and is a ‘key tradition’ in [some] school sociology” textbooks (Plummer, personal communication). The result is that many utilizers in the UK have come to “define themselves as ‘interactionists’ not ‘symbolic interactionists’” (Dingwall, personal communication) and have liberally adopted elements from the Chicago School, the ethnomethodological tradition, Goffman and dramaturgy. British social anthropology, the qualitative tradition, and in much smaller part even the cultural studies heritage of Stuart Hall without much concern for the purity of the Mead–Blumer tradition (Dingwall, personal communication).

If British scholars have fused interactionism with the project of cultural sociology and qualitative social research broadly defined, Italian and German interactionists also have unique local adaptations of SI. Perrotta (2005), for example, has combined classic interactionism and dramaturgy with the theatrical tradition of Pirandello, whereas German scholars – introduced to the work of Mead by Joas, amongst others – have often blended SI with the interpretive tradition of Weber, Dilthey, Simmel, and Schutz and the German Verstehen tradition in the social sciences (Helle, personal communication; also see Helle, 2005). In the Italian case, despite the presence of a solid interpretive current embodied by sociologists like Perrotta, Ferrarotti, Gherardi, Strati, and Ciacci, interactionism itself is both “out of fashion” (Gobo, personal communication) and “a hidden but spread-out reality” as its principles are “a koinê, a way of thinking which almost everyone shares without mentioning symbolic interactionism [...] like a language which almost everyone [knows] in a tacit way without knowing where it comes from” (Gobo, personal communication). As Gobo, and Maines (2003), opine this is evidence of the success of SI, but at the same its main weakness is “because nobody recognizes SI as an autonomous and self standing theoretical perspective” (Gobo, personal communication), distinct from qualitative research.

A cultural, symbolic, and interactional view of society has deep roots in Polish sociology. As Elżbieta Halas (personal communication; also see Halas, 2006) has pointed out, this has “resulted in the strong orientation of
humanistic sociology as articulated by Florian Znaniecki and his principal
of the ‘humanistic coefficient’ both for theory and methodology of cultural
sciences, including sociology” (personal communication). Despite unfavor-
able restrictions imposed during the Soviet era, this tradition has survived
and even flourished since the 1980s (Halas, personal communication) due to
the cultivation of affinities between the Polish and American tradition. Yet,
even though SI is represented in departments of numerous universities
across the country, “symbolic interactionism, is by no means the major
current” (Halas, personal communication). Thus, despite a surge of
sociological interest following the postcommunist transformation in
dynamics such as negotiated order, identity constitution, and other “themes
either originating from symbolic interactionism or akin” investigation has
often proceeded “without much care about the symbolic interactionist
perspective as such” (Halas, personal communication).

From New Zealand, Chris Brickell laments conditions similar to other
countries. As he rightly points out: “one of the strengths of symbolic
interactionism is the applicability of its insights to a wide range of types of
inquiry and disciplinary situations” including history, yet due to the low
recognizability of symbolic interaction, misconceptions and misunderstand-
ings about its identity and principles often take shape. For example, asks
Brickell: Why do some theorists whose work is obviously congruent with
interactionist principles fail to acknowledge its theoretical influence? Brickell
holds that old and new scholars find SI’s principles valid and useful when
they are finally introduced to them in seminars and conference rooms, while
classrooms seem to have never known about SI. “Who is hiding SI from the
world?!” – poignantly asks Brickell (personal communication).

In France, SI has been experiencing considerable interest since the 1990s.
A solid core of interactionism-friendly scholars like Henri Peretz, Jean
Peneff, and Jean-Michele Chapoulie have done research that is interactionist
in nature, but as Jean-Michele Chapoulie (personal communication)
describes:

In France, there are few groups of sociologists with an explicit intellectual affiliation
now. There is no association such as Society for the Study of Symbolic interaction, etc.
[...] What the label means for young sociologists seems to be: analysis grounded on
fieldwork, sometimes observation in situ, with attention to details in the relationships
between people under study. But very few of them have read Blumer and have an idea of
the meaning of “interaction” in Park’s or Blumer’s work.

There is good fieldwork in France, fieldwork that draws from the Chicago
School tradition and SI, and that in line with the French ethnographic
tradition in sociology has been markedly “realist” (Chapoulie, personal communication).

Israel also is witnessing a clear growth of interest in SI. Perhaps due to the close relation between American and Israeli universities, and perhaps due to the fine editorial lead of *Symbolic Interaction* by Simon Gottschalk who has lived in Israel for a number of years, more and more interactionist work is appearing amongst Israeli social scientists. Despite this, “Symbolic Interactionism today has little impact on Anthropology anywhere; and is weak in Israeli curricula” – finds Don Handelman (personal communication).

As much as various nation states have their own unique peculiarities, what truly distinguishes an “overseas” (speaking from my North American point) approach to SI is its higher transnational interdependence. Even though such interdependence tends to be international, rather than interdisciplinary (Atkinson & Housley, 2003), the value of cross-fertilization is nonetheless high. This point is forcefully captured in the following statement by Gobo (personal communication):

Most of the US sociologists live in a world apart. They do not read other languages than English so they miss completely all international sociological work (that is the European sociological production, the Asiatic one, the Latin American one, the African one and so on). They have a colonial way of thinking and they think to be international even if they are just belonging and deeply rooted in the close cultural boundaries of one country. So the main difference between US and my country is that we have a more international breath in our sociological work because we read French, German, UK, US, Spanish sociologists.

However, despite instances of cross-influence and (very few) cases of international collaboration and coauthorship, infrastructures directed at facilitating dialog are sparse at best and nonexistent at worst.

TOWARD SYMBOLIC INTERACTION STUDIES?

SI is a highly heterogenous perspective. As Plummer (1996), Atkinson and Housley (2003), and Reynolds (2003) have remarked, SI has an identity for as many interpreters. Plummer (1996, p. 225) captures this phenomenon elegantly in arguing that “if the world is as the interactionists depict it, then we can assume that (1) there is no one fixed meaning of SI; (2) that ‘accounts’ of its nature and origins will change over time, and indeed be open to renegotiation; and (3) that what it ‘means’ will indeed depend upon
the definitions of the significant others whose interaction constitutes its meaning.”

In light of its diversity, can we coherently speak of such a thing as “symbolic interactionism?” My correspondence shows that indeed we can, but my conclusion is that we must first be prepared to abandon any notions of “core essence” or “purity” and “orthodoxy.” As Halas (personal communication) puts it: “The symbolic interactionism has never existed, being rather a pluralistic set of proposals – sometimes headed as interpretive interactionism, structural interactionism, cultural interactionism or – only postulated – synthetic interactionism.” Similarly, and with an eye to the empirical world to which SI directs its attention to, Plummer (1990, p. 159) finds that “the empirical world exists through endless negotiations and interpretations via joint actions in a ceaseless flux of emerging and emergent meaning. There is no core, no centre and no linear development. The empirical world will not reveal an absolute truth....”

Indeed, the “endless negotiation” of the empirical world – or in Park’s words, interactionists’ tendency to get “the seat of [their] pants dirty in real research” (in Hammersley, 1990, p. 76) – is what truly distinguishes the interactionist strategy. After all, if there is no pure empirical reality, where should there be a pure analytical lens for it? Thus, despite their numerous differences, all scholars contacted agree that analytical eclecticism is a necessity and a central feature of the interactionist approach to empirical data. For example, while Grbich recognizes that what makes SI useful is its value for applicability in applied contexts, in her research Deborah Van Den Hoonard admits the following “Howard S. Becker’s idea that we look for theories that help us understand our data” and argues that “if it’s not in the data, we can’t [talk about] ‘it’” (personal communication). Similarly, Chapoulie (personal communication) finds that despite their differences, all interactionist approaches ultimately share an “idea about research in sociology, good documentation (notably from field work), analysis and writing, essentially critical against functionalism and the positivist conception of science.” Brickell – with an eye toward interdisciplinarity – states that what is truly “appealing about SI’s reflexivity is its emphasis on both the symbolic and the interactive. As this reaches well beyond the limits of sociology” SI’s “insights need to be put to broad use, and not confined to a particular sociological approach out of some idea of theoretical or methodological purity” (personal communication). His views are echoed by Helle who also finds that an interactionist approach needs to be hermeneutic and multifaceted as “the object under study must be assumed to have a genuine perspective on reality and to hold certain value
preferences which the researcher is to find out and respect [and] [t]his implies an interactive process between the researcher and his or her object” (personal communication).

As Halas (personal communication) insightfully remarks, if interactionism is to become more relevant it has to get “out of the walls of Chicago” since its orientation in actuality “emerged out of a broader” (e.g., the Columbia tradition; see Halas, 2006) and “international current of thought” exemplified by scholars such as “Znaniecki, MacIver, and Sorokin who came to American from Europe” (Halas, personal communication; also see Halas, 2001). Halas adds: “Symbolic interactionism does not have one progenitor […] It might be refreshing to look critically at the foundational myth of symbolic interactionist orientation, in other words, to look reflexively through symbolic interactionist lenses at the constructed identity of this very perspective.” Doing so will reveal that “spatial metaphors of the field” and that past and current notions of “boundaries” are “inconvenient for they lead easily to the idea of the struggle over it and the legitimacy of its guardians” (Halas, personal communication). Skepticism toward orthodoxies and “schools of thought” is also evident in the published work of Chapoulie (2001) and in my correspondence with him. It is a risk to use “labels” as a way to exert “intellectual legitimacy” (Chapoulie, personal communication), but the “demarcation” debate is the positive sign of a “theoretical zeal” (Halas, personal communication).

Since “there was never a single school of interactionism” (Atkinson & Housley, 2003, p. vxi) and probably there will never be one, it might be wise to abandon pretensions of unity. Such approach could gain from a continued dialog with its historical origins, not only for “historical reconstruction” and a “better understanding of the key problems constituting the perspective” but also for the potential of fulfilling “the possibilities of its creative elaboration” (Halas, personal communication). This perspective, which I like to refer to as “Symbolic Interaction Studies” might extend an explicit welcome to “tertiary interactionists” (Katovich, 2003, p. 58) – those who eclectically mix SI with other congruent ideas – rather than subtly marginalizing them as outsiders (Katovich, 2003). Symbolic Interaction Studies could finally shed its image as a “loyal opposition” to American sociology, and focus instead on befriending, albeit with a distinct identity of its own, international and postcolonial qualitative inquiry. It could become a way of seeing “SI as a much more critical humanist tradition” marked by attention to “the development of humanistic inquiry: a humanistic method, seeing the world through a humanistic imagination, adopting a humanistic politics and researching ‘human’ issues”
(Plummer, personal communication). It would maintain its emphasis on “down to earth empirical tools” by shunning “any pure abstract form” and by looking “at the creation of meaning and the emergence of social life as interactive” with “a focus on stories and narratives” (Plummer, personal communication), “social action, language, and social identities... and the embodied character of social life” (Atkinson & Housley, 2003, p. xvi), rituals (Handelman, personal communication), “discourses and, broadly defined, culture” (Halas, personal communication).

ENDING THE INVISIBILITY OF INTERACTIONISM

Ending the invisibility of SI will require a “re-branding” plan. “Brand” refers to a whole of images and ideas associated with a producer of goods or services. Brands often entail systems of symbols such as names, logos, styles, and designs. When their brands are easily identified by consumers – a phenomenon known as brand recognition – companies often enjoy acceptance, esteem, trust, and positive sentiment across markets. On the other hand, poor brand recognition may result in low company visibility and ultimately in failure to grow.

SI’s disciplinary amnesia must end through concrete practice directed at increasing SI’s brand recognition across disciplines and across the world. The “market of interactionists yet to be tapped and incorporated into SSSI opportunities and operations” is “tremendous” (Maines, 2003, p. 14). Any such endeavor takes time and effort, but through organized, planned, concerted action SI can both continue to exercise influence and increase its visibility. While it is unadvisable to put too much trust in the probability of short-term success, some of the actions I briefly sketch here may yield immediate positive results. Others will pay off in the long run. Nonetheless, rebranding SI should aim at the following goals:

1. Distinguishing SI from local and global “competitors;”
2. Increasing the visibility of the relationship between research of interactionist nature and the SI tradition;
3. Increasing the perceived use-value or applicability of SI theory in both empirical and applied research, as well as in social and cultural criticism;
4. Attracting international attention to SI research and activities;
5. Making the activities of SSSI-sponsored events easy to recognize;
6. Increasing the visibility of classic and contemporary SI research and theory in the classroom so that it is easy to recognize.
The following strategies might be useful for meeting some of the goals outlined above:

1. Increasing the number of explicit SI publications. For example, by launching a series of edited books on subdisciplinary topics which feature original essays written by junior and senior interactionist scholars;

2. As editors and reviewers, enforcing the recognizability of classic and especially contemporary SI research and theory by stressing the need for intertextuality and accumulation of knowledge: not enough people, even amongst die-hard symbolic interactionists, read and cite useful articles published in *Symbolic Interaction*;

3. Aiming to highlight the unique past and present of the interactionist perspective as a research strategy, and therefore the unique identity of SI as a methodological perspective (Maines, 2003, p. 11);

4. Increasing the number and scope of SI-related events across disciplines. For example, the back cover of *SSSI Notes* lists a number of associations across disciplines, together with their coordinators for “SI activity within” those associations. What is that activity? We need to make those activities regular, accountable, useful, and clearly recognizable. Furthermore, we need to strive to increase the number of associations with whom we coordinate activities;

5. Making SI “cosmopolitan” yet careful to highlight the uniqueness of the local by taking our research across the world (Lopata, 2003, p. 167) and further, by increasing the number and scope of SI-related events across countries and thus by making SSSI a “cosmopolitan invisible college” (Lopata, 1998, p. 386). This can also be done by making the activities of international corresponding editors regular, accountable, useful, and clearly recognizable. For example, we could work together to seek opportunities to host colleagues from other countries for lecture tours, workshops, and seminars. Furthermore, we should strive to translate, publicize, read, and seriously engage with SI literature appearing in countries other than the USA;

6. Similar to what the “Theory, Culture, and Society Centre” has done, interactionists should aim at building an International Center for the Study of Symbolic Interaction. This could be an Internet-based network at first, but it could later gather enough strength to be housed within a university. Such network would facilitate both research and teaching, and perhaps eventually even lay the groundwork for the offering of graduate interdisciplinary degrees in “Qualitative Research with a Specialization in
Symbolic Interaction.” The network could also offer summer workshops, seminars, and later both face-to-face and online courses;

7. Increasing the visibility of SI on the Internet. Both SSSI and Symbolic Interaction have done very little to benefit from the powers of the Internet medium in facilitating dissemination of information and networking;

8. Striving to incorporate more SI research and theory in existing and new courses and in curricula. Just like courses in cultural studies or feminism are regularly offered, so should courses in SI;

9. Popularizing SI by capturing as much as possible the attention of mass media and the general reading public. A critical component of cultural studies’ success over the past two decades has been its fashionableness in the eye of magazines and bookstores. We need to do better at publicizing – not only publishing – SI.

These are just some suggestions that await further debate. Perhaps it may seem pure folly to “brand” and “rebrand” an intellectual tradition like one would with a soft drink or a perfume. Others may dislike the idea of sticking so closely to a label – even a diffuse one like Symbolic Interaction Studies – for their intellectual endeavors. Yet the suggestions I indicated make a good deal of sense if we believe that the label is broad enough to capture different kinds of good social science, and yet distinct enough from alternatives. None of these proposed actions are easy to follow up; they will require focus, dedication, and determination. Some will only be possible over time, even a great deal of time. And some will only be possible if interactionist promoters are willing to roll up their sleeves and do work. Be that as it may; the only alternative is inaction, followed by lamentful discussion, and too much of that has been done already without positive results.

UNCITED REFERENCE

Charmaz and Lofland (2003).

NOTES

1. For Maines (2001), interactionist promoters are the strongest advocate of SI and those who are closer to SSSI and to the journal Symbolic Interaction. Maines identifies two additional categories: interactionist utilizers are those scholars who apply SI principles in an eclectic fashion, and unaware interactionists are instead those who use SI principles and concepts without being aware of doing so.
2. The concept of amnesia has a deep tradition in the social sciences. For illustrations of its relevance, see Sorokin (1956), Merton (1968), and Gans (1989).

3. I initially selected scholars for my sample amongst the international corresponding editors of *Symbolic Interaction*. I added additional names to my list through a loose “snowball sample” selection process in order to reach a higher number of respondents. It was not always possible to successfully contact and initiate correspondence with all the names in my list, which included a total of 24 scholars from all six continents of the world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to express my gratitude to all the 11 mentioned scholars who were kind enough to find the time to correspond with me on this issue, as well as to offer their suggestions upon reading the first draft of this chapter.

As I began revising an earlier draft of this chapter, I also became aware of SSSI President Lonnie Athens’s mission to expand the boundaries of SI in a manner consonant to the one I have outlined here. His effort is something all interactionists should be thankful for.

REFERENCES


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