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The Californian “Trash World”: Crisis and Catastrophe in Philip K. Dick’s Novels

ABSTRACT

Philip K. Dick – both in his function as a science fiction and Californian author – infused his novels with dimensions of crisis and catastrophe. Crisis being defined by an individual, often psychological state; and catastrophe being defined by a cataclysm that happens society-wide but is mythical rather than psychological. Crisis and catastrophe were also constants in Dick’s life. Along with contextualizing the manifestation of crisis and catastrophe in his life story, this article aims to elaborate upon – and contextualize – three different manifestations: political crisis, spiritual crisis and apocalyptic catastrophe. How do crisis and catastrophe find their place in Dick’s homegrown vision? And how does this relate to other facets of his work, like the concept of alternate realities?

The greater context is Dick’s vision of his home state as a “trash land”. This article will also touch upon the ramifications crisis and catastrophe as constants in Dick’s novels have upon the literary understanding of the state of California. And, by default, the rest of the country.

KEYWORDS

California; Philip K. Dick; crisis; catastrophe; science fiction

1. Introduction

Crisis and catastrophe are two of the numerous core constants ascertainable in the science fiction of California author Philip K. Dick. While both constants are closely related and constitute cataclysms, they stand apart while at the same time reinforcing each other dualistically. Both are influenced by forces identified by Dick scholar Lejla Kucukalic as “life as existence controlled and determined by forces larger than the individual, understood as destiny, or the power of god” (Kucukalic, 2010, p. 69).

Crisis refers to a cataclysm more psychological in nature and frequently manifested in individuals; while catastrophe refers to cataclysms of a societal and/or apocalyptic nature. Using two straightforward examples from *The Simulacra* to briefly emphasize the difference: crisis occurs when the populace learns the President of the United States is an android; catastrophe commences with the civil

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war at the end of the novel. Kim Stanley Robinson contextualizes crisis as part of “the Dick plot in its purest form: a web of characters, linked by personal and business relationships, react in their different ways to a social crisis impinging on them all” (Robinson, 1984, p. 71). In the “pure” form of the plot, catastrophe is most often the logical result of the crisis unabated. Though in some cases, catastrophe precedes the story itself.

The primeval source of crisis and catastrophe was Dick’s life, beginning with the death of his infant twin sister Jane due to parental negligence. While Dick was an infant at the time, the psychological coping mechanism of his mother – to shift the blame onto her son – ensured that the memory of Jane and her death was an eternal constant in his life in the form of crisis. An example from Kyle Arnold’s psychobiography recalls how Dick’s mother would insinuate that he had drunk all the breast milk. As Dick said to his fifth wife, Tessa, decades later: “I heard about Jane a lot and it wasn’t good for me. I felt guilty – somehow I got all the milk” (Arnold, 2016, p. 14) Arnold summarizes the effect this had on Dick’s paranoia as follows: “Directly and indirectly, [Dick’s mother Dorothy] communicated to Dick not only that she wished he had died, but that in a fundamental moral sense he *should* have died. In other words, his existence itself was a moral transgression. By the mere fact of living, the die messages said, Dick killed his sister. *His life was inherently homicidal*. He was better off dead” (p. 14)

The catastrophe of Jane’s death matured into a lifelong manifestation of crisis existential in its ramifications. With the example from *The Simulacra* in mind, crisis in its Phildickian form functions both as a personal crisis and as a crisis of humanity. This has its source in Dick’s father’s stories of the First World War. As Dick recollected: “what scared me the most was when my father would put on the gas mask. His face would disappear. This was not my father any longer. This was not a human being any longer” (p. 17) The subversion of humanity – usually represented by the android – became psychologically synonymous with crisis. Again, from Arnold: “[R]eaders may notice that when writing of these motifs, I do not always sharply distinguish between Dick’s life story and his fiction. Core psychological threads tend to run through all levels of a life, macro or micro, fact and fiction. Dick lived the same themes he wrote about” (p. 12).

Psychology is naturally indispensable when studying Philip K. Dick and his fiction in any capacity. But the study of Dick as a Californian author requires an interdisciplinary approach that, among other integrated focuses, requires myth; the mythical connotations, manifestations and ramifications that define California’s existence from its “coining” to the present day necessitate this lens. As California historian Kevin Starr (2015) pointed out: “At times, California seemed imprisoned in a myth of itself as an enchanted and transformed place” (p. xi). A myth with negative as well as positive connotations: “Such a utopian expectation also brought with it, when things did not go well...the common complaint that California had

been hyped beyond recognition: that for all its media-driven pretenses to glitz and glamor, California was...just another American place, and sometimes even worse than that" (p. xi).

If crisis is psychological in its manifestation, catastrophe is mythical: myth scholar Laurence Coupe summarizes the fundamental reliance American culture – and Dick by default – has on myth: “[the settlers’] descendants, even if secularly inclined, perpetuated their apocalyptic way of thinking, which in times of crisis would take on a religious form” (Coupe, 2009, p. 183). Dick, incidentally, converted to Episcopalianism in the early-1960s and the trilogy considered to be his magnum opus – the *VALIS* trilogy – is his work most noticeably influenced by American apocalypticism. Californian apocalypticism, however, is never free from the utopian expectations mentioned by Starr (2015). This is its core difference.

Dick’s novels, in contrast, are free of them; and he was conscious of it. As he explained to Stanisław Lem in a 1973 letter: “you see, Mr. Lem, there is no culture here in California, only trash. And we who grew up here and live here and write here have nothing else to include as elements in our work ... I mean it. The West Coast has no tradition, no dignity, no ethics – this is where that monster Richard Nixon grew up. How can one create novels based on this reality which do not contain trash, because the alternative is to go into dreadful fantasies of what it ought to be like; one must work with the trash, pit it against itself ...” (Dick, 1993, p. 298). For his part, Lem (1984) regarded trash as the primary sustenance of science fiction as found in the “sci-fi ghetto” (p. 46). A variant of the common colloquial observation that a pigeon in the city fed only on trash will be trash by virtue of the saying “you are what you eat”. For Dick (1993), it isn’t a question of genre but of region: in his view, all American literature is inherently regional and California (and its myth) are the trash.

Even with a foundational event as catastrophic as the Gold Rush, the California myth has made little to no room for catastrophe in its popular manifestation, with the noteworthy exception of the romanticization of earthquakes. When summarizing the Schwarzenegger era, Starr (2015) refers to California as “a society that had only recently begun to internalize in its myth of itself what the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno called the tragic sense of life” (p. 343). Even so, Dick recognized catastrophe as fundamental to the fabric of his home state. A constant that, like crisis, found its way not only into his fiction but his greater fictional structure.

2. The Nature of Crisis and Catastrophe in Dick's Novels

This article will analyze three primary themes of crisis and catastrophe ascertainable in Philip K. Dick’s novels: political crisis, spiritual crisis and apocalyptic catastrophe. The analysis will focus on *The Man in the High Castle*

and *The World Jones Made* for political crisis; *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* and *Galactic Pot-Healer* for spiritual crisis; and *Dr. Bloodmoney* for apocalyptic catastrophe.

2.1. Political Crisis

Political power struggles are a constant in the fiction of Philip K. Dick from his first novel, *Solar Lottery* (2003), to his posthumously published dystopia, *Radio Free Albemuth* (1999). Dick's political perspective is not inclined to share the optimistic directives of the plot; many stories rely on power plays from the relatively petty (*Martian Time-Slip*, *Dr. Bloodmoney*) to aspirations for total control (*Solar Lottery*, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*) and even cosmic control (*VALIS*, *Radio Free Albemuth*). As Umberto Rossi pointed out, most of his novels are not dystopias even if they can be called "dystopian" (Rossi, 2011, pp. 173–174).

Rossi attributes this to Dick's focus on the individual rather than the collective through the eyes of the individual. (Such as with George Orwell's *1984*, the world of Big Brother being observed through Winston's experience). Two novels Rossi recognizes as contributions to dystopian literature are: *A Scanner Darkly*, and *Radio Free Albemuth*. (*Flow My Tears*, *The Policeman Said* is a third) The former, alongside *Ubik*, realizes the "trashy California" condition in its purest aesthetic form; while the latter reveals and reacts to the source of Dick's political angst in his later years: Richard M. Nixon. In his letter to Lem, Dick draws a direct connection between Nixon's "monstrosity" and the trash environment of California (Lem, 1993, p. 298). Indicating the political crisis as a Phildickian literary facet has its roots in California's trashiness.

The presence of political crisis, however, precedes both Nixon's presidency (if not his political career) and Dick's apparent consciousness of "the trash". While Dick recognized the work of the latter retrospectively, other manifestations of political crisis require elaboration.

To recollect Rossi: political crisis is a primarily individual experience. A character representative of "the little guy" will be pursued by a mysterious force beyond his comprehension. (Though the reader also tends to be privy to the story of a character with power who is often, though not always, the antagonist) *The World Jones Made* and *The Man in The High Castle* are distinct in that they do not eschew collective, societal dimensions of catastrophe, although they reflect those phenomena differently. As Laurence A. Rickels (2010) observed: "When we encounter [Jones] he specializes as fortune-teller in 'the future of mankind; he doesn't do 'personal futures'" (p. 191). While Dick's dystopian fiction might be too individualistic for Rossi to count as contributions to the dystopian genre, it would be premature to rule out a total dearth of collective concerns on Dick's part.

Floyd Jones, the titular character and one of Dick's first precogs, leads a populist movement against the reigning ideology/anti-ideology of Relativism: a worldview that, according to biographer Lawrence Sutin, "deadens the human spirit by denying all ideals that cannot be objectively proven" (Sutin, 1989, p. 293). Relativism possesses a dual function: while it identifies Jones as a Hitler-like antagonist, it also exposes Fedgov's attempt to pose as an un-idealistic actor removed from the human experience. While Fedgov rules over a "trash world" like California, Jones, even with his clairvoyant foresight, possesses no solutions apart from reliving the entire year he alone is able to see and taking power in a coup d'état. Even so, his movement is a human movement by virtue of its rejection of Relativism; Rickels identifies the Relativists as Marxists and Jones as Hitler (Rickels, 2010, p. 192) – "trash pitted against trash", as Dick explained to Lem (Dick, 1993, p. 298) – while Rossi suggests McCarthyism (Rossi, 2011, pp. 237–238).

Like *The Simulacra*, *The World Jones Made* transitions from political crisis to political catastrophe. But the crisis is not strictly political. As Sutin almost too casually observed, Jones' hometown – Greeley, CO – is his mother's hometown as well (Sutin, 1989). While it may be little more than a coincidence stemming from spatial familiarity, it is tempting to speculate as to whether or not Dick was covertly referring to his mother as a populist, Hitlerian figure.

The collective ramifications of the Jones revolution and the Fedgov reaction are relatively abstract in the sense that we see little of the direct effects of Relativism or Jones' populism on any one social group, demographic or populace. The only implication indicator is a metaphorical conveyance by way of a roughly-symbiotic subplot where humans are raised in a Refuge (in San Francisco) to prepare them to settle Venus by acclimatizing them completely to Venus' atmosphere. When the future Venusians – and protagonist Doug Cussick, with his wife Nina – travel to Venus to escape the ensuing political catastrophe, their escape is as much a new beginning as it is interplanetary exile. But as they are not conditioned to live in Venus' atmosphere, the success of their escape from the ills of Earth is questionable.

In *The Man In The High Castle* (2015), the occupation and partitioning of the United States by the Axis victors – Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan – differs in that it automatically implicates every American in the story by virtue of military occupation. For Frank Frink, Juliana Frink, Robert Childan and other American characters, the state of Americans under Japanese rule - in particular as second-class citizens - is a crucial component of the political crisis they face. But if ongoing occupation is the crisis, the legacy of conquest is the catastrophe. In *High Castle*, they are one and the same. But easily segmented and separable realities aren't the norm in Dick's oeuvre: as Kucukalic (2010) explains with *A Scanner Darkly*, "The two realms [Southern California and the drug realm] are not established

as a duality, but instead, Arctor's personal demise is set against a structure that intertwines the drug world and the straight world, showing that they operate under the same rules" (p. 120). This also reflects what we know about Dick's life, as elaborated by Kyle Arnold.

In *High Castle*, political crisis is amplified by a void in American identity – an historical disjuncture, as others have phrased it directly or synonymously – severed by occupation and partition not only from the pre-1945 independent American state with a defining Constitution but indigenous production as well. (A theme Dick would also touch upon in *Dr. Bloodmoney*) Christopher Palmer recognizes the chronological disruption generating this void: "Most of Philip K. Dick's novels begin with the characters separated from their past history by a disastrous break or a process of decline and disintegration. The social narrative is in ruins. There is neither shared past, nor shared project" (Palmer, 2003, p. 112). In the Japanese-controlled West Coast, at least, new American-made handicrafts do not exist until Frank Frink agrees to create them.

There is one difference with *High Castle* that sets it apart not only from most of Dick's novels, but similar novels with occupier themes like *The Game Players of Titan*. Protagonists becoming "enemies of the state" is a routine component of Dick's plots; but unlike other novels where the relationship between "the enemy" and "the state" is generally unambiguous – like Doug Cussick working as an employee of Fedgov – the American protagonists in *High Castle* don't have a strong, comparable connection with the Japanese state ruling over California. The Japanese control California; but the Japanese and Americans stand apart.

Another lacking phenomenon in *High Castle* is the West as a frontier. While the frontier had been "closed" for some time already in keeping with Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier hypothesis, the West itself has also ended in this alternate reality. As Turner (2008) explained: "The West... is a form of society, rather than an area. It is the term applied to the region whose social conditions result from the application of older institutions and ideas to the transforming influences of free land" (p. 39). California has become "the East" not only by way of occupation by "the East;" but by being transformed from "West of the West" into "East of the East".

It has been frequently observed that despite their alliance with Nazi Germany and the legacy of Imperial Japan in the United States, the depiction of the Japanese in *High Castle* tends to be positive in contrast to both American historical memory and an historical understanding of Imperial Japan's comfort with brutality. As Darko Suvin (1975) aptly put it: "the assumption that a victorious Japanese fascism would be radically better than the German one is the major political blunder of Dick's novel". I would argue, however, that that was not the point.

The trendiness of Japanese culture in the 1950s and 1960s explains Dick's positive perception to a degree, including his own personal interest in the *I Ching*;

but California as a land of trash is an equally compelling explanation as well. As Dick explained to Lem, California lacks ethics, tradition and dignity. And in this scenario, we have a very ancient civilization take root in the land that lacks it.

It was necessary for the Japanese to be the opposite of what California represents even as Imperialists. Rickels – with Carl Jung, Ludwig Binswanger and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* in mind – observes: “Mr. Tagomi’s encounter with our alternate reality fits the projective medium of delusion rather than the escape chute into the light” (Rickels, 2010, p. 94). It is not, after all, an aesthetically pleasing San Francisco Tagomi experiences in the alternate reality, nor is it friendly; much attention is drawn to the Embarcadero Freeway and the Americans he meets are bigoted and hostile, in contrast to the wealthy Japanese who in his reality are fascinated – albeit with questionable sincerity – with Americana. Tagomi’s journey into the alternate reality of our timeline may not allow him to escape into the light. But instead of beholding a delusion, what Tagomi sees instead is California for what it really is; the “trash land” Dick saw in his reality.

2.2. Spiritual Crisis

As Christopher Palmer (2003) assessed: “Dick’s writing situates itself on territory contested between politics and religion” (p. 6). And indeed, a constant is objectively resonant from *Solar Lottery* to *VALIS*. When a crisis emerges in either form, however, the political and spiritual can merge. Tagomi’s transportation to an alternate reality vis-à-vis the handcraft is one such example: not only is Tagomi’s expectation of the handcraft’s artistry spiritual; his journey leads to the climactic moment when, against all political incentive, he saves Frank Frink’s life.

A convergence can also be seen in *Radio Free Albemuth*, albeit with relatively less seamlessness. Most of the plot and story is dystopian: the protagonists (including the author himself) resist the dictatorship of Ferris F. Fremont. But the battle between Fremont and the underground resistance movement Aramchek is in fact an extension of the battle between Valis and Absolute Evil. (Fremont’s abbreviated name becomes FFF; by being the sixth letter, his name means 666) Political crisis becomes a mask for the greater spiritual crisis. A similar masking effect can be found in *Martian Time-Slip*.

The definitive crises of *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* and *Galactic Pot-Healer* are inherently spiritual, but without a political crisis convergence. Additionally, both crises feature or are triggered by actual “deities:” Palmer Eldritch in *Three Stigmata* and Glimmung in *Galactic Pot-Healer*. By importing the mysterious Chew Z from another solar system, Palmer Eldritch brings a form of spiritual uplifting vis-à-vis narcotics. Glimmung, seeking professional merit, personally invites the character of Joe Fernwright to join him on a quest along with a random collection of aliens to raise the cathedral on Plowman’s Planet from

the bottom of the ocean. The former seeks imposition over all while the latter only requires the skills of a “blessed few”.

There is no escape from Palmer Eldritch once Chew Z is consumed. Without knowing how to escape, Chew Z traps the consumer with Palmer Eldritch in what may well be perpetuity. As Chew Z consumers are duped into taking it without knowing the consequences – though by acquiring it they do, technically, give their consent – the spiritual catastrophe resulting from Chew-Z consumption is cerebral imprisonment and servitude.

Galactic Pot-Healer takes spiritual crisis in the opposite direction. The crisis for Fernwright isn’t servitude, but individual freedom and its consequences. Glimmung offers both Fernwright and the other aliens freedom from failure on the condition they remain assimilated within him. As a gastropod character explains regarding Fernwright’s girlfriend: “[Mali is] not coming. She’s staying with Glimmung. Because, like the others, she is afraid to return to failure” (Dick, 2005, p. 175).

The role of California in *Three Stigmata* – as a set upon which to project a drug-induced collective vision set in San Francisco while under the influence of the previous drug, Can D – contrasts its depiction elsewhere in Dick’s oeuvre; instead of the “trash world”, California manifests as myth and delusion. The Mars colonists project religious value onto the Can D experience as well, even if their behavior in the drug vision is not typical of conventional religion. And as Rickels notes: “several players can enter into one fantasy figure the layout of the land called California” (Rickels, 2010, p. 336).

Just as the California myth is false, so too is the “religious experience” of the Mars colonists. Everything beautiful projected onto California is just that: projection. For as Rossi pointed out: “Mars *is* California” (Rossi, 2011, p. 103)¹.

2.3. Apocalyptic Catastrophe

As indicated by its subtitle *How We Got Along After The Bomb*, *Dr. Bloodmoney* is Philip K. Dick’s most fundamentally apocalyptic novel alongside *A Scanner Darkly*. It is not the only one: *The Penultimate Truth* and *The Game Players of Titan* as well as *The Man In The High Castle* also have apocalyptic premises, as do many of Dick’s short stories. But *Dr. Bloodmoney* differs in that the catastrophic moment takes place briefly at the beginning; as Rossi explains, it is perhaps the only novel where Dick describes a catastrophe (Rossi, 2011, p. 107).

As the nuclear bombardment renders politics irrelevant (and capitalism, in the view of Frederic Jameson, 1975) there is no political crisis in *Dr. Bloodmoney*; nor is there a spiritual crisis. There is, however, a competition for what Rickels

¹ Rossi (2011) made this observation pertaining to *Martian Time-Slip*, but the depiction of Mars in both novels is similarly “barren” enough to justify a comparative vision of Mars as California.

calls the "omnipotence seat" (Rickels, 2010, p. 152). Here the spiritual crisis fills the void left behind by the liquidation of politics in post-nuclear California. The "trash world" also takes on a different form: while some parts of California remain covered in rubble, *Dr. Bloodmoney* is Dick's most pleasant and organic depiction of California, spatially and biospherically speaking.

Post-nuclear California has been severed from the previous world, much like Americans in *High Castle* are severed from an independent America. For the survivors it is a new beginning, allowing *Dr. Bloodmoney* to function as a creation myth. While Dr. Bluthgeld is the fount from which the new world emerges, others seek to replace him. Referring also to *The Simulacra*, Jameson (1975) writes: "both of these works dramatize the utopian purgation of a fallen and historically corrupted world by some final climactic overloading, some ultimate explosion beyond which the outlines of a new and simpler social order emerge" (p. 32).

While Jameson considers *The Simulacra* to be *Dr. Bloodmoney's* closest relative eschatologically speaking, the latter also finds close company with *High Castle* not only in its deep connection to the fate of California but in the subtlety of its tenuous position in the fabric of reality. As Jameson explains: "the point about the atomic cataclysm in *Dr. Bloodmoney* is not merely that Bluthgeld takes it to be a projection of his own psychic powers, but that, as the book continues, we are ourselves less and less able to distinguish between what I am forced to call "real" explosions, and those that take place within the psyche" (p. 32). Even as Kim Stanley Robinson (1984) called it "the only utopian work in all of Dick's opus" (p. 66), *Dr. Bloodmoney* is as much a creation myth of the mind, with post-apocalyptic California being ostensibly as much a delusion as the Can D setting in *Three Stigmata*.

What, then, is the actual apocalypse? The nuclear bombardment, or the trash world of California in front of our eyes? As Robinson explains: "Dr. Bloodmoney is at all times concerned with the relationship of its world to our own, and these continuous comparisons form a rich meditation on our culture. The fiction states implicitly that a postatomic world would be in some ways more human and liveable than the present one; in this way it works as a critique of the current culture..." (Robinson, 1984, p. 78).

Apocalyptic catastrophe, therefore, becomes a process of rebirth and retrospective reflection rather than an ultimate end. It transcends the traditional American custom of apocalyptic messianism and takes on purely Californian qualities as a result. As mythologist Laurence Coupe (2009) makes clear: "literature is a means of extending mythology" (p. 4). In this case, the promise of false utopia in the guise of a creation myth. As Kevin Starr (2015) explains: "In the rise of Southern California, hotels, resorts, and expositions played a founding role. These institutions, it must be remembered, were utopian statements...Disneyland was likewise a utopian statement..." (p. 239).

It is as a utopian statement – or its posing as such – that *Dr. Bloodmoney* stands out as Dick's most Californian novel.

3. Conclusion

Much has been written about Dick's prophetic status as a writer: either as a predictor of dystopia and false realities colloquially, or – like scholar Christopher Palmer – as a harbinger of postmodernism. Given that both Dick and his home state are universally regarded as possessing prophetic capabilities, it is curious that Dick's relationship to his home state is of lesser interest given what must be, at the very least, a remarkable coincidence.

Crisis and catastrophe are useful in understanding more about Philip K. Dick the artist. But they are also several of the numerous threads that comprise the dour yet complex (and academically underrated) relationship Dick had with his home state of California. Its importance to Californian Studies makes it, in turn, important to the rest of the country: for while it does eschew the traditional American apocalyptic messianism, "California", writes Kevin Starr (2015), "had long since become one of the prisms through which the American people, for better and for worse, could glimpse their future. It had also become not the exclusive, but a compelling way for this future to be brought into existence. California, noted Wallace Stegner, is like the rest of the United States – only more so" (p. xiv).

Crisis and catastrophe do much to inform what Darko Suvin (1975) called "Dick's explicitly political anti-utopianism" (para. 11). If Dick's anti-utopian outlook was indeed "explicitly" political, then his relationship to California is an implicit affair. While there is enough evidence to confirm Dick's "trash world" perspective of California as well as the idea that "trash world" California had to hide its trashiness from the rest of the country with glitz, glamor and other fantasies, Dick himself – as *High Castle* and *Dr. Bloodmoney* indicate – found himself doing the same thing here and there; in these cases, with an unusually and questionably sympathetic occupying force in the form of Imperial Japan and a pastoral vision of utopian possibility respectively.

In his letter to Lem, Dick considers Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* to be one such California fantasy. But he also self-identifies with the beatniks by virtue of his former association with Berkeley beat poets like Jack Spicer in the mid-1950s. Dick, therefore, is complicit in the fantasizing of California while at the same time subverting it so as to reveal the barrenness of the California he saw all around him, creating for himself the strongest and most balanced qualifications for a California author alongside William Saroyan and John Steinbeck, authors who are themselves not unfamiliar with the role of crisis and catastrophe in their stories as it pertains to their home state. Suggesting that crisis and catastrophe are not only reinforcements in the construction of his system of alternate realities;

but covert methods in a Disneyland California of preserving, beneath the veneer, Miguel de Unamuno's aforementioned "tragic sense of life" (Starr, 2015, p. 343).

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