

Accumulation and Archives: Sophie Calle's *Prenez soin de vous*

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French project artist Sophie Calle has become well known for her iconoclastic performance art that blends the visual and the textual. Beginning with *Les Dormeurs* 'The Sleepers' in 1979, in which she invited twenty-four strangers to sleep in her empty bed and photographed them hourly, through her project of following people around Paris and photographing them like a private detective in *Suite vénitienne* (*Suite venitienne: Please Follow Me*), Calle has blurred the boundaries between private and public, between photographer and photographed, and between viewer and participant. Michael Sheringham discerns in Calle's work "an insistence on the hands-on, grass-roots level, on practical steps geared to the accumulation of data" (*Everyday Life* 390-91). In this article, I look at the accumulation that Calle stages in her recent exhibition, *Prenez soin de vous* (*Take Care of Yourself*).¹ The title comes from the last line of an email received by Calle in which a lover ended their relationship. Rather than respond to, file, or simply delete the message, Calle decided to give a copy of it to 107 women and to ask them each to respond to it from the perspective of their different professions. Thus singers sing it, a philosopher writes a piece in response to it, a DJ raps it, actors perform it, a sexologist analyzes it, a typesetter corrects it, and so on. Calle brings together well-known figures, such as Miranda Richardson, Jeanne Moreau, Christine Angot, and Eliette Abécassis, and everyday female professionals. Each woman is photographed reading the email and her response to it is exhibited next to this photograph. The result is a mixed-media exhibit consisting of texts, photographs, films and recordings. In this article, I analyze this exhibition in terms of the accumulation that it stages, not just in terms of how this pluralized, collective response blurs individual self-narrative but also how it functions as an alternative archive within the site of an archive.

This exhibition was originally staged for the Venice Biennale of 2007 but was subsequently exhibited in France in the former main campus of the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, rue Richelieu, which now primarily holds archival documents. The exhibition booklet asks, "accueillir Sophie Calle dans le berceau historique de la Bibliothèque nationale de France, un paradoxe? Une provocation?" (n.p.) 'hosting Sophie Calle in the historic cradle of the National Library of France: is this a paradox, or a provocation?' and emphasizes that the Richelieu houses some of the library's oldest collections, including "les arts du spectacle, cartes et plans, estampes et photographies, manuscrits, monnaies, médailles et antiques" 'performing arts, maps and plans, prints and photographs, manuscripts, coins, medals and antiques.'² The writer of one of the articles in the booklet, Anne Picq, highlights how this particular exhibition symbolizes the juxtaposition of the old and the new, insisting that "il faut casser l'idée que le moderne se trouve à Tolbiac, laissant

l'ancien à Richelieu" 'we must break the impression that the modern is found in Tolbiac, leaving the old in Richelieu' and that "une chose est sûre, les artistes contemporains s'invitent à la BnF" 'one thing is for sure, that is that contemporary artists are coming to the National Library.' Shirley Jordan has written on the importance of the fact that this exhibition was staged in the reading room, the Salle Labrouste, and that the viewer was thus invited to reinvent her or his notion of reading through the exhibition. What I want to explore here is that the Richelieu site is also the site of an archive, of traditional holdings and of older materials as the quotations above highlight. The accumulation that Sophie Calle's exhibit stages is therefore a double accumulation: a textual-visual archive of female professionals' writings, artwork and performances, within a national archive.

The positioning of Calle's work within an archive can be no coincidence, given the enormous popularity of what has even been named in an adage, "the archival turn." Pierre Nora wrote in his introduction to the monumental work *Lieux de mémoire (Realms of the Past)* that "l'obsession de l'archive ... marque le contemporain" (xxvi) 'the contemporary is marked by ... obsession with the archive' as the closing decades of the twentieth century occasioned enquiry into the ways in which the past is represented amidst postmodernism, nostalgia, and *fin-de-siècle* malaise. Historians questioned the practices of the archive, artists incorporated archival forms and artifacts into their work, museum studies courses problematized the position of the curator and the site of memory itself, and so on. As Adina Arvatu states in "Spectres of Freud: the Figure of the Archive in Derrida and Foucault," "society as a whole was seized by an archival frenzy bordering on compulsive hoarding" (142). Derrida's *Mal d'archive (Archive Fever)*, published in 1995, interrogates the origins of the archive and its psychoanalytic underpinnings in order to probe its function in contemporary society and, as I hope to show here, may cast light upon Calle's self-consciously archival project. Here, I read Calle's archive in terms of four major parts of Derrida's theorization: its juridical origins, its ordering principle, its institutionalization of the archivable event and the "mal d'archive" of his title.

Turning to the exhibition, one of its most striking elements is that only two photographs of Calle herself appear in it, one of which became the cover of the visitors' booklet. Displayed in large format at the beginning of the exhibition, they augur Calle's reflection on the power and authority of the archive. As she stands or sits on a desk in the reading room, papers scattered above her head, her provocation towards the authority of the archive is evident. The columns tower over her head as she looks up towards the old roof, visible through the sheets of paper strewn mid-air, and both photographs display her in the foreground with the imposing architecture in focus in the background. Her emphasis on the place is unmistakable. One of the most important aspects of Derrida's theorization of the archive is his insistence on the space itself. Whereas Foucault's version of the archive is a discursive entity removed from the physical site of the archive, Derrida's study is

founded upon its historical place. He shows that the root of the word “archive” is the Greek term *arkhe*, which refers to both beginning and to the principle of commandment; the law is “là où les choses commencent—principe physique, historique ou ontologique—, mais aussi le principe selon la loi, là où des hommes et des dieux commandent, là où s’exerce l’autorité, l’ordre social, en ce lieu depuis lequel l’ordre est donné—principe nomologique” (11, author’s emphasis) ‘there where things commence—physical, historical or ontological principle—but also the principle according to the law, there where men and gods command, there where authority, social order are exercised, in this place from which order is given—nomological principle’ (1). Derrida locates the root of the archive in the *arkheion*, the house, domicile, or address of the *archons*, who lived among the documents and who were awarded the power to interpret and shape laws from them. Derrida’s understanding of the archive is thus a place not just of authority but of the law; this is a juridical concept that interrogates how law becomes institutionalized. Viewing Calle’s archival installation in light of Derrida’s analysis raises more specific questions regarding her rebuttal to authority and the function of the archive in contemporary culture. Calle is clearly intent on performing the undoing of an edifice—standing on it, sitting on it, introducing new media, new material, and new voices into it. She firstly calls on authority figures themselves—a diplomat, an accountant, a Talmudic exegete, an anthropologist, a politician, an editor—and performs this undoing of the master’s tools within the master’s house. On one level, an array of interpretations of the email at the root of the project undoes the notion of a stable, solid archive that holds the key to any concept or event. It furthermore shows how education—broadly speaking, since some of the women are schooled in performance, others in professions—brings forth different interpretative skills. Calle is careful to avoid any hierarchical judgment of the responses, thus setting them all on the same level and presenting them as equally valid. On another level, of course Calle’s exhibition draws attention to the absence of women in the institutionalization of the law; if the archons interpreted the documents and these interpretations became law, Calle’s female archons underscore how the history of the legal system is clearly gendered. Indeed, the only male voice in this archive is that of Monsieur X, and he or his voice could hardly be construed as a source of legal authority. Edward Welch notes Calle’s preoccupation with what he calls the “blindspots” of contemporary life, as Calle returns to the question of whether and how evasion and invisibility are possible amid current surveillance. The questions of being, of technology, and of control over one’s life are recurring motifs in Calle’s work; in *Prenez soin de vous*, she takes this to a different level as she pluralizes and historicizes these questions, pointing specifically to the long-term consequences of women’s absence from institutional practices.

One part of the exhibit highlights the place of the law in this archive: a photograph of a lawyer with her letter assessing the email as a legal document. Caroline Mécary, a practicing lawyer and former professor at Paris I and XII,

brings her legal expertise to bear upon the message. She writes in the letter to Calle that appears beside her photograph that she considers this to be sufficient evidence for prosecution on two grounds; first, the claim that X is a writer may be disproved by structural anomalies, such as the “*caractère factice de l’écriture*” ‘artificial style of writing’ and other stylistic features and thus renders him guilty of “*escroquerie*,” ‘fraud’ or ‘swindling’ according to article 313-1 of the penal code. Second, Mécary writes that X would likely be found guilty of “*tromperie*,” ‘trickery’ according to article L213-11 of the “*code de consommation*” ‘code of consumption’ on the grounds that “*le commerce de l’amour ... [est] fort ancien*” ‘romantic commerce ... [is] age-old’ and he would be liable for a sentence of two years in prison and/or a fine of 37500 Euros. Interestingly, the lawyer concludes that X would be convicted “*avec des chances raisonnables*” ‘with a reasonable chance,’ but ends her letter with “*avant même le Procureur de la République, vous restez juge de l’opportunité des poursuites. Ne serait-ce pas accorder trop de crédit à X que de lui donner un rôle sur la scène judiciaire ?*” ‘you remain the judge of the opportunity for prosecution, before the Public Prosecutor. If you were to give X a role on the judicial scene, wouldn’t it be giving him too much credit?’ She therefore highlights the discrepancy between the law and the utility of its application. This might be the leitmotif of this exhibition; the archive sets down a historical understanding of the law but this may be patriarchal, incomplete, poorly interpreted, or badly applied. Calle’s exhibit therefore questions the law and its utility as well as its origins, and replaces the documents of old with the voices of the new, the experts, in an undoing of the archive from within the edifice itself.

In addition to the space of the archive as the foundation of the law, Derrida interrogated the way in which artifacts are gathered within it. The archive as a site of hoarding that functions as the repository of national identity and consciousness is structured, for Derrida, according to the notion of consignation: “*La consignation tend à coordonner un seul corpus, en un système ou une synchronie dans laquelle tous les éléments articulent l’unité d’une configuration idéale. Dans une archive, il ne doit pas y avoir de dissociation absolue, d’hétérogénéité ou de secret qui viendrait séparer (secerner), cloisonner, de façon absolue*” (14, author’s emphasis) ‘*Consignation* aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration. In an archive, there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or *secret* which separate (*secerner*), or partition, in an absolute manner’ (3). There are two parts to Derrida’s point here; first, that consignation gathers together signs that form an order, and second, consignation is synonymous with reserving, with putting things on reserve. This is to say that the archive is based upon both ordering of information and removal of it from general circulation. In terms of Calle’s archive, the order is at once physically disturbed by the transformation of a silent reading room into the site of a multimedia exhibition that sits on top of, around and among its tables and

book cases. The first thing that one notices upon entering is the noise, not only of people moving around and discussing the works but of the works themselves, many of which are video installations that play simultaneously. What is most interesting about the artifacts that comprise this exhibition is that they are pairings of photography and text or photography and film; the artifact that each woman produces is displayed next to a photograph of her reading the email. The visitor to this reading room is thus invited to ponder the act of reading, and also to listen and to view, thereby engaging with this living archive on a different level. This calls attention at once to the subversive, potentially transgressive act of reading; after all, each reader creates something on the basis of her reading. Moreover, the photographs of the women that accompany their textual or visual response all show them in specific places. Most are either in their homes or in their places of work; Françoise Héritier sits in front of a bookshelf, for example, the typesetter sits in front of her computer, the composer in front of a piano, Miranda Richardson sits on her sofa stroking her cat. Most of the women sit by a window, many explicitly, having been photographed seated at a window, others implicitly, as they are inside a room and the light of a window shines on them. Others still are outside. In this sense, no single building takes center stage, and the links between the interior archive and the exterior reality are incorporated into the narrative that the exhibition stages. The consignment that Derrida signaled as the founding order of the archive is thus rejected on both levels—the order, the homogenous structural principle, and the separation, the notion of putting things on reserve. Calle breaks free from a concept of the archive as a set of signs that orders interpretation and identity and insists instead upon the creation that reading heralds. As such, Calle's alternative archive, the accumulation of readers and their ensuing creations, serves as an allegory of re-inscribing and of re-reading through its specific mode of revisiting the discursive structure of the archive.

The structure of the archive is indeed a key element of its function throughout history. It was Foucault who theorized the archive as an ordering principle that governs the production of knowledge. For Foucault, the archive has the power to regulate and to dictate what has been said and what can be said, and by whom and about whom it may be said. Derrida's notion of the structure of the archive goes a step further, in the sense that he emphasizes the specific place of the archive and that material practices of archivization constitute "*l'institution même de l'événement archivable*" (36) 'the very institution of the archivable event' and, more, that "*le sens archivable se laisse aussi et d'avance co-déterminer par la structure archivante*" (37) 'archivable meaning is also and in advance codetermined by the structure that archives' (18). In this way, the structure of the archive decides what can be archived and how history and memory are shaped by this process; form, protocol and standard practices thus determine the content, meaning, and functioning of the archive.

Prenez soin de vous raises an obvious challenge to what may constitute an archivable event by Calle's choice of the melodramatic, hyperbolic email; whereas the archive is traditionally thought to be the repository of important documents that hold key information about events of historical importance—wars, discoveries and the like—Calle places the break-up and the email signaling this as the historical event at the heart of this archival collection. Such an event, since it is of importance to an individual, since it is a matter of private, intimate life, and since its main piece of evidence is devoid of literary or philosophical merit, casts doubt over the traditional archive's relevance, importance, and value to the individual.

Calle further challenges what may be archived through her inclusion of the multimedia materials. Although artifacts are clearly part of an archive, and elements such as photography and film have long had their place in archival collections, Calle extends this to incorporate such elements as SMS language, a crossword puzzle, and performance pieces that question artistic representation. One particular aspect of the exhibition is the emphasis upon different modes and genres of writing. Through the inclusion of such a variety of written responses, Calle appears intent on highlighting the breadth of what "writing" can be. The SMS language translator demonstrates one mode of writing by rewriting the email in text-language. A translator shows another. There are several pieces in languages other than French, including Arabic, English, Russian, German, and Italian, and one in Braille. There are several handwritten pieces and several typed. Some are letters, some are formal essays, some are prescriptions, others are lists of costs (in the case of the accountant). Furthermore, Calle insists upon incompleteness; several of the women's pieces are shown in draft stage, thus dramatizing the creative process itself. Several of the women are actual writers—but not in the same way, since some produce children's books, others novels, others poetry, others music—and show in their responses the process of writing as well as the product at its end. In one example, Christine Angot responds to the email in a way that highlights Calle's undoing of the standard archival structure. Next to the photograph of Angot reading the email is a written piece in response to it that she has self-edited, underlining and circling words and expressions to rephrase in a later iteration. Moreover, she writes in this piece specifically about writing; how she was inspired to write her piece on the basis of a conversation with Calle, how she dislikes certain writing styles ("je déteste l'éloquence ... je déteste la démonstration" 'I hate eloquence ... I hate showiness') and how certain writers approach writing ("je déteste les gens qui pensent ce qu'ils écrivent" 'I hate people who think what they write'). Next to this, however, is a photograph of the written pages torn into pieces, as Angot apparently lost faith in the project and decided to abandon it. This non-response becomes this writer's response, and the viewer is instead directed towards the dynamic process of creation rather than the created product itself.

The installation's emphasis upon incomplete pieces, drafts, and the process of creation pushes the viewer to look at the project behind the exhibit

as much as at the exhibit. Johnnie Gratton emphasizes in regards to other of Calle's exhibitions that some elements of her work, especially photographic elements, should not be viewed merely at face value but as vehicles to draw attention to the project that led to them, and that may link them to other projects, in a "documentage" style. In a similar way, Calle's records of the stages of creation, such as the example of Angot's response, emphasize the process of preparing the materials for the exhibit. As a corollary, the viewer/spectator/reader is therefore invited to question what kind of event and what kind of record of it is "archivable," what kind of writing is acceptable for archivization—incomplete, in draft form, handwritten, abandoned—and what kind of memory this produces. Both the archivable event and the appropriate archivable response are thus called into question by this chaotic, metamorphosing archive that insists upon its incompleteness and upon the fact that there will always be something more to add to it.

Let us turn finally to the main premise of Derrida's argument about the purpose and function of the archive, which is the "mal d'archive" of his text's title, and which was translated poetically but somewhat problematically as "archive fever." Derrida's interrogation is psychoanalytic; he argued that Freudian psychoanalysis functions like an archive and that therefore, "la théorie de la psychanalyse devient alors une théorie de l'archive et non seulement une théorie de la mémoire" (38) 'the theory of psychoanalysis becomes a theory of the archive, and not a theory of memory' (19). Derrida viewed the archive as a symptom of the repetition compulsion which is in turn connected to the death drive. This, in Derrida's thought, leads to a paradox; the death drive leads us to wish to destroy and is therefore "anarchic," yet the repetition compulsion drives us to conserve. This is the "mal d'archive" that Derrida diagnosed: an uncomfortable, contradictory mixture of preservation and destruction that leads us to attempt to conserve memories and tempts us to discard or to burn them. Derrida writes that the archive therefore "travaille toujours et à priori contre elle-même" (27) 'always works, and *a priori*, against itself' (12). In *Prenez soin de vous*, Calle displays her own contradictory and competing desires, her tension between wanting revenge, public humiliation and destruction of her lover at the same time as she wills preservation—at least of the email, and maybe even of the relationship itself. She insists upon repetition, as each actor reads the email aloud in her performance, many singers sing it in its entirety, and many of the written pieces quote the whole email and write around or on top of it, to the extent that the viewer leaves almost with the ability to recall the whole email verbatim. Yet of course, the exhibition also serves to destroy X and his email, and to destroy the pain of the relationship for Calle; she is clearly intent on taking care of herself, as X urged her to do, in this public way of achieving closure and catharsis.³ It is perhaps not a coincidence that in the book that was published of the exhibition, the last artifact that is presented is that of Brenda the parrot destroying the email by crunching it up in her claws and eating it—which is of course ironic, since the email will undoubtedly have been

preserved electronically and will thus escape destruction. In addition to the concrete example of the tensions between two opposing forces, duality is the central motif of Calle's exhibition and gains fuller resonance in light of Derrida's formulation of archival desire. We have seen that the exhibition rests upon a dual movement of each woman reading and responding, of the visitor both reading and viewing, upon the juxtaposition of textual and visual artifacts, upon the irruption of the new into the old, the contemporary into the traditional, and ultimately upon the difference between the public and the private. To push this further, Calle herself is only discernible in two sections of the exhibition, and in both a doubling occurs. In one, she is sitting in a car with a film director, playing herself in a short film written in response to the email. In the other, Calle is presented in a taped sequence of a *séance de médiation*: a relationship counseling session between Calle and the phantom Monsieur X. A photograph of a relationship counselor is juxtaposed with a video of Calle sitting across from an empty chair on which a copy of the email has been placed. The counselor asks questions of both parties and Calle continually answers, giving vent to her anger, disappointment, and frustration with Monsieur X's behavior. The camera moves from a screen of the two—Calle and the empty chair—to close-ups of Calle and of the email on the chair. In addition to being highly comedic, this highlights how the final duality is that of presence versus absence, insofar as Calle is present (although mostly obscured) yet the ex-lover is entirely absent, a remnant of a finished action that now belongs to the past and that Calle can ascribe to her personal archive of significant events.

The presence of Calle herself in this sequence also raises a further question: what is the place of self-revelation in this performance by an artist whose entire oeuvre has been an interrogation of self-reflexive narrative? Anna Kemp has shown that Calle's earlier works focus upon "the pleasures of self-invention" whereas certain later works are "marked by the fear that her self-created persona may become appropriated and consumed by others" (309) and Shirley Jordan has noted Calle's tendency toward "deflecting attention from herself as autobiographical centre" (252). Jordan has argued in relation to *Prenez soin de vous* that Calle is "the orchestrator of a circus, a cabaret, a great theatre" (253) and that, in another example of the duality at work in this exhibition, she "at once owns her project and relinquishes authorship" (258). While it is true that Calle is never pictured reading the email, as are the other women, she does in fact comment upon it through this episode with the counselor. She claims that she would have preferred a different mode of ending, that she did not appreciate the tone of the letter and that she would have tried to change things had she been given the opportunity; her insinuation that X is a cowardly, egotistical individual who persistently refused to communicate with her is obvious. Moreover, in the book that was published of all the artifacts together, this appears first, so Calle in this version opens the dialogue and literally has the first word. Of course, this is a very humorous, tongue-in-cheek performance that prevents us from knowing whether Calle is

revealing her own feelings or simply playing a provocative, comedic role; as Sheringham points out in relation to other exhibitions, “we are never sure to what extent the Calle ... we encounter in these objects coincides with the real person, and indeed this indeterminacy is crucial to what is being explored and illuminated” (343). Nevertheless, it still locates “her” in this project; not at the heart of the exhibition, but explicitly referenced on its margins. Autobiography is indeed displaced by performance and by theatricality, as the collectivity, a “we” replaces the “I” of any individual response. Yet, the self has not disappeared. Kemp notes that “Calle ‘the person’ may have vanished, but as an artist, her fingerprints are everywhere” due to the unmistakable signs of her style (321). I add that the two photographs of her and the two videos of her show that she is only obscured and nonetheless discernible, at the sides of the work perhaps, but still within it. Instead, this work resembles a game of ‘hide and seek’ in which the viewer/spectator is invited to place herself in Calle’s position and ask what she would do in response. This is perhaps the final duality of this exhibition, that of the sender and receiver, in the sense that Calle sends this archivable event to us and we are invited to consider its process and its product and to ponder how we would respond. The exhibit is thus, in this reading, based upon two co-conspirators, a knowing pair of women who read and respond, who do not share any common identity other than their femaleness, and who do not know each other beyond professional association, but who recognize each other and thus forge a different kind of interaction and creative moment. And this of course leads to a further accumulation, since there are not only multiple readers of the email in the exhibit, but multiple readers of the readers’ responses in the viewers who attend the exhibition.

It should be remembered, however, that *Prenez soin de vous* was not originally staged in an archive; as mentioned in the introduction, it was first displayed in the 2007 Venice Biennale. The visitor’s booklet to the Paris display even contains a photograph of the exhibition, packed up in wooden boxes with “Sophie Calle” stamped on the side, being transported on a boat with the panorama of Venice in the background. It is unclear whether the exhibit is on its way there, or on its way back to France. Whether this project was originally conceived for eventual display in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* is unknown. Nevertheless, this origin of the exhibit, and the reminder that Calle gives us through this photograph, add a further dimension to this reading. First, this archive is transportable; rather than being fixed in one place, in one archival institution, this is a moving, morphing archive, and the fact that it is displayed in boxes surrounded by water adds to this impression that it is free of constraint or limitation. Second, this archive is international, even universal. The traditional notion of an archive is based upon one nation: one national history that is contained within artifacts and documents that in turn produce a national identity, consciousness, and narrative. By contrast, Calle’s exhibition is compiled of artifacts that bring together not “nationals” or “citizens,” but “women.” Throughout, the project insists upon the women’s

diversity; they have different socio-economic backgrounds, cultural heritages, professional trainings, opportunities and, as mentioned above, they speak and write in different languages. This archive that moves physically across national borders and that is comprised of such diversity thus underscores the limitations of the traditional archive and presents a utopian version of a universal history, narrative, and identity. Third, it highlights that the archive can be dismantled, packed away, and rebuilt. The exhibition refuses any notion of an archive that is so bound by institutional authority that it cannot be touched or moved, that it is an integral being in and of its own right and that only the highest authority figures may influence it. An archive is no more—and no less—than what humans make it; *Prenez soin de vous* thus asks who makes it, why, and how.

Taken together, therefore, the textual and visual artifacts of this exhibition become an accumulation within a site of accumulation. Read or viewed in terms of the *Bibliothèque Nationale* that housed it, this performance pushes Calle's innovation further, beyond the re-inscription of female subjectivity, the play between seeing and being seen, and the blurring of the public and private for which she is already celebrated. This accumulation project is the first of Calle's to take a specifically historical and institutional approach to performance, posing a series of challenges to how we conceive of archival collections and how these conceptions color representation. Although highly comedic, *Prenez soin de vous* warns us of the dangerous nature of the woman who reads and of the dangerous nature of the patriarchal archive. The email at its heart may be humorous, but Calle's application of it becomes an allegory of re-inscribing and re-reading that reminds us that the institutional power of the archive is no laughing matter.

Notes

1. Following the exhibition, Calle published a book of the same name in which all of the photographs, performances, and materials used in the exhibit are reproduced. For the purposes of this article, I refer to the exhibit, quoting from the published (non-paginated) book.
2. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
3. There is never any doubt about the veracity of Monsieur X's existence. Indeed, he is rumored to be Calle's former partner, the writer Grégoire Bouillier.

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