

TRANSIENCE

This glass sculpture investigates the fallibilities in and malleability of memories. This topic has been an area of particular interest, as I was in a major accident two years ago and had to start over. I do not store memories the way I used to and have to retrain my memory system. Researching and exploring this topic has allowed me to discover truths about my memory and, through this, a part of myself.

I have learned that memory can be edited and manipulated over time through social interaction and/or personal reflection. Anytime memories are accessed, little details are altered—an inevitable fault in the system. I have discovered it to be a beautiful error; we are able to absorb other details from experiences that are not our own, allowing for a larger bank of diverse information when it comes to making decisions and living our lives.

If the details change slowly but surely over time, how much of the memory remains factual after decades of minute adjustments? Our memories are not meant to be storage bins for all the factual evidence of an experience. Rather, it adapts to become useful to our everyday life and identity, whether that be staying in a factual format or becoming emotional experiences.

Lauren

THE FALLIBILITY OF OUR MEMORIES
Can you trust your memory?

Lauren



As I reflect on that beautiful fall morning, I cannot remember if I was wearing a red dress. That morning feels like the color red to me, I think because of the short red lockers that lined the hallway, but was the dress I was wearing also red? Or pink, blue, green, or yellow? This memory of my first day of preschool I can see so clearly in some areas. I remember the entire hallway and the walk down it with my mother and grandmother. I am clinging to my yellow lunch box that is in my hand as I run down the hallway ahead of my mother, leading her to the beginning of my education. I remember my teacher's face and some of my classmates' faces too. This moment has stuck with me for years. For all my life I have heard this story anytime I am starting a new adventure. My mother talks about that day in a reminiscent tone, as she had to let me go that day. I ran down that hallway away from my mother not looking back, excited for all that I was going to learn and ready to begin my life. This moment is a significant marker on my timeline as my parents have helped to build a part of my identity from this moment. This is the moment that my mother knew I was going to be adventurous and unstoppable if I just put my mind to something. It was characterizing and yet, I cannot remember if my dress was red or how my hair was done?

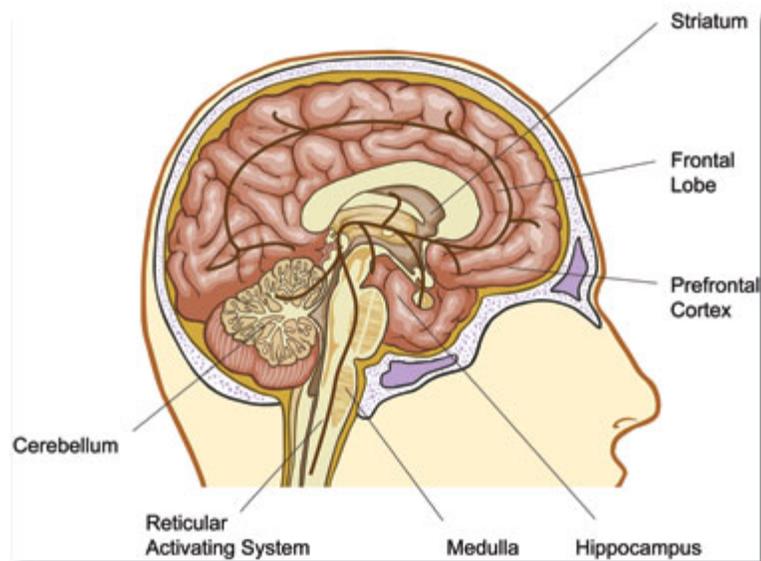
INTRODUCTION

I have heard this story many times. My mother always says, “I remember Lauren, when I took you to preschool for the first time and you just walked off so confidently, ready to face the world.” This moment is pivotal in my timeline, and how I developed parts of my identity and character. My parents have reflected on this day throughout my life and re-told it to me as a young child. I grew up believing facts about my character, such as my independence and need for new situations that started with this memory. As I reflect, there are details I am missing that I once knew. I find myself afraid of the possible inaccuracies that I may have about this memory. Is it possible that I was not wearing a dress at all? Did I have my hair down or up? I feel like I had my hair in pigtails or maybe braids. These little details may not be significant to forget one at a time, but if over a decade of the memory slightly changing even in just small details, how much of what is left truly factual? Can my memory be trusted? What is editing my memories? In this essay, I intend to investigate my own personal memories to expose the malleability of them through personal narratives. Then I will interview others who would have experienced the same memory to gather differing opinions on certain significant events on my timeline and transcribe their stories. Through my research I have become aware that by discussing my memories, I am contributing to the possible re-writing/editing of the specific moments, as I will demonstrate in this essay.

THE MEMORY SYSTEM

Our brains and, in particular, our memory are incredible works of design. Most people claim that their timeline of memories begins around three years old. For some, it may start younger. The part of our frontal lobe and hippocampus does not begin growing until we are eight or nine months old; those parts of the brain are responsible for our long-term memory (Shaw, 2016). The memory system is divided into three parts (Frontino, 2010).

The first part is the working memory, which is stored in the prefrontal cortex. The working memory is a limited yet important part of the memory system. It is in charge of holding and processing information for a short period of time. It is often used as another name for short-term memory even though they are separate functions. The working memory could be referred to as “the short term memory buffer” as it is helpful in the making of decisions and holds information for short periods of time to guide behavior. In contrast, the short term memory is just the storage bin before it gets converted into long-term memory.



The second part of our memory is our skill memory, which is housed in the cerebellum. Our skill memory consists of everything that we can do and perform with and without thinking about it such as, remembering how to walk, talk, and ride a bike.

The third part of our memory is our long-term memory, which is controlled in the hippocampus and frontal lobe. Our long-term memory is a dusty room that holds hundreds of filing cabinets that do not get opened very often. After we sleep, the memories from the previous day get converted into files that are stored in our long-term memory.

Our long-term memory gets divided into two parts: the procedural memory and the declarative memory. The procedural memory makes it possible for us to retain information on how to perform motor skills, perceptual skills, and cognitive skills. The declarative memory holds all of our beliefs and facts we carry with us about the world, such as knowing that the sky is blue, or that we like vanilla ice-cream.

Every part of our memory has some part in helping to develop our identity and our understanding of ourselves. That being said our memory is not a factual resource: “Memory is well understood as a reconstructive process replete with distortions, and at times, gross inaccuracies” (Brown, 2012). It is greatly malleable and susceptible to inaccuracies due to: creating emotional attachments to certain moments, and developing a narrative through reflection and from social contagions as well. I will discuss this all more in-depth as we move through this essay. The following is believably my earliest memory.

Memory #1

Presumed Date: 2001

I am being carried by my father and my mother walks in front of us. My mother turns around for a second and I can see that she is pregnant with what would be my sister, Hannah. We walked up to the front entrance of a big house. There is a tan stucco wall that leads up to dark french doors on the left hand side of my father. We reach the doors that had a beautiful knocker that glimmer in the sunlight and then we are let into the house by someone that I cannot see. On the right hand side of my mother and father there is a significant amount of leaves and tropical bush that makes the entry way feel like you are about to enter another land. My parents move forward to enter the house and I am still in my father's arms. When we get into the house I am able to survey the interior and it is beautiful. The front entrance has two dark hardwood steps that lead down to the rest of the hard floor. Straight in front of my eyes is a large staircase that leads up and twists to the left. It is dark and shining and it seems as smooth as the first freeze on the lakes in the winter. I look to the left of the staircase and I am able to see the kitchen just past a wall that juts out from the stairs. The shining dark wood floor makes the kitchen look farther away than it probably is. It looks like the kind of floor that would prompt my Mom to yell after us kids, “Take your socks off!” so that we would not slip. Farther to the left of my vision before it becomes peripheral, there is a sunken living room. I can see the back of a couch and the white carpet that sits just below the two dark steps it would take to hit the ground. This little sitting room seems like the brightest place in the whole universe. I can feel the sun coming through all the windows. The whole house feels like the sun lives next door. The hardwood floor

and the kitchen granite that is off in the distance is glowing from the sunlight. It is a place of immense peace. The kind of peace where you feel all the problems melt away into the quiet and you become aware of your own heart beating and the particular rhythm of breathing that you require.

In response to *Memory #1*, I asked my parents to tell me, in as much detail as they could remember, their version of this memory. I have found that my estimated date of 2001 is inaccurate and that my parents believe this occurred much later in 2002 before we moved away from Texas. My parents both mentioned that when reflecting on the memory of this house, the visuals that they both imagined are much more tied to the emotions that they had felt when touring the house. Overtime the factual visual information that they absorbed has been exaggerated and the emotions have become the memory in a way. When my parents visited this house it was a stark change from their current living situations so this house felt beautiful and peaceful to them and those emotions have become more of the memory than any visual information. My mother mentions that she believes she found pictures that they had taken when touring the house and the reality of what the house looked like is grossly inaccurate to how we all remembered it. This particular memory exposes how much our personal reflection on certain memories can distort them and how our emotional state when the memories are being developed and converted into long-term memories can affect the reality of what occurred.

Memory #1

Dale and Ginger Reynolds interviewed by Lauren Reynolds

11/25/2016

LAUREN: *I'm wanting to share a little bit of some factual details of this memory and I'm wanting you guys to tell me what you remember or just talk and have a discussion about this memory. I've come to the conclusion that I believe this memory occurred when you guys were looking at houses in Texas. The house I am thinking of is the one you visited in your last ditch effort to stay in Texas. What can you describe about walking into that house and what it looked like?*

DALE: *I can. It was a kind of small-ish. Open room. There was a staircase straight ahead of you that curved around straight up the stairs to the left of the door. You couldn't really see much into the house. But if you took a left, you went up into this very nice kitchen that was well appointed.*

There was lots of great furniture and the house moved further forward away from the front door to a kind of sitting area with some big windows that you could see out towards where the golf course was behind it. I don't remember the full layout of the house but I think there was a dining room, right near the entrance way with some fancy furniture. So that's about all I can remember about walking in.

GINGER: *You know what is interesting for me? Is that you and I [Lauren] just came across these pictures and my memory of the house is not quite as detailed as Dads, but again my memory based on how I felt and I remember feeling, it that this was really pretty house. I remember feeling that it just felt so put together and pretty. But we found the pictures and we started going through them and I was like 'Oh this is a really ugly house.' I didn't like any of their decor.*

DALE: *Maybe it wasn't the same house.*

GINGER: *Oh it was. Now, isn't that interesting?*

LAUREN: *Did you guys bring me along? Would I have been there?*

GINGER: *Of course.*

LAUREN: *Would you have been pregnant with Hannah?*

GINGER: *No, Hannah was already born.*

DALE: *No, this was all happening in the year after, we had about a year there after I had my hemorrhage where I was not working and we were trying to decide if we would stay.*

LAUREN: *What else do you remember about the entry, the exterior, and the front door?*

GINGER: *It had pretty landscaping when you walked up. It looked like a single level house from the front but not in the back.*

DALE: *It was a well presented house. It had a brick façade and a large Texas style architecture and it had a lot of trees. I don't think it was all that visible from the front just how big it was. It was a pretty big house and it sat on the golf course. Somehow it felt really nice. So we were thinking about getting into it but the thing is it had fancy furniture and it was well decorated and there was no clutter. It just felt like the opposite of how we were living. So we were pretty vulnerable to that type of a presentation.*

GINGER: *I think we were just looking for something to feel good because nothing felt good at the time.*

LAUREN: *I remember the house being very light. Dad was carrying me and I could have sworn mom was pregnant but she must not have been. I also don't remember anything on the right side of the house.*

DALE: *Yeah I don't either.*

LAUREN: *But I remember this whole left side. It was all very light and pretty and I feel like it is that house.*

DALE: *It sounds similar. That house was all up to the left of the door when you got in; the rest of it I can hardly remember.*

SOCIAL CONTAGION

It can be observed from the conversation between my parents and I, and in my original writing of my memory of the house, that the emotions that my parents were feeling when they were looking at the house reflected in how we all stored that memory. I did not have the capacity to feel those emotions with that context at the time so it was contagious emotions/ideas that I picked up on from my parents. My parents felt like this house was so beautiful and peaceful compared to their current living situation that they did not remember the house in visual facts. Their feelings toward this house infected the way I visually remember this house. This is a concept called social contagion. The definition of social contagion is the idea that concepts are spreading through people and social interactions. In terms of memories, it would be classified as “repetitive storytelling from different sources.” Every time we interact with others, or reflect on memories, small details in our memories and stories are being changed. Through collective storytelling our individual memories become vulnerable to the loss or incorporation of “extra” details in our memories that we did not actually experience (Brown, 2012). Studies have shown that social interactions have a strong effect on shaping our memories, through repetitive storytelling or emotional expression towards certain memories (Brown, 2012). In our current

society, we have many ways of communicating and sharing what we are up to, such as social media. The internet and social media have become a pool of collective memory sharing. You can see what all your friends have been doing and you can share what you have been doing hence making all your memories public through various social media outlets. This form of social interaction is at the heart of it, social contagion. The following quote is from a journal article that was discussing the idea that we retain details from other people's memories and how they can become woven into our own memories.

"Studies have shown people alter their own recollections when they compare experiences with others. We take on the memories of others as our own, intentionally or not, and whether the details are accurate or not. They're contagious." (Shaw, 2016)

Is there anything we can do to stop social contagion from affecting our memories? If just having a shared memory with my parents can make me remember something differently or with a filter over the memory, and if just hearing about other people's stories or talking about mine, will begin to edit and change my memories, are my memories ever actually safe? Are there any memories that are ever solely mine?

The following memory I felt would be obscure to my mother, but it is a memory I can picture very clearly. It demonstrates the emotional value that some memories hold, as well as how that adjusts the importance.

Memory #2

The sun is baking everything around us on this July day. It is the kind of heat that makes your stomach hurt a little, and makes all the air feel like there is an immense current of energy, like a tidal wave rolling over the earth. The best way to combat these kinds of days as children is to play in the sprinklers. The five younger siblings and I are coping with the arrival of hell's heat by spraying each other with a garden hose and making mudslides in the grass with the sprinkler. We had been soaking ourselves and letting the heat evaporate from our bodies, when I could feel a significant shift in the energy that is currently swirling around us. I look up at the sky and can see the arrival of the dark storm clouds. I start yelling at the kids that we need to "Clean up!" and "Get inside!" before whatever was coming could get to us. We have to bring all the water activities inside. I look up at the sky again and take in the power of this storm. I think to myself that we may have to hide in the basement. All the little kids run into the house as my mom comes out onto the deck and tells all of us that a very bad storm is coming and that we need to get inside. I follow quickly after the little kids, soaking wet, into the house.

I am sitting around the dining table eating spaghetti that my uncle brought to us right before the storm hit. As I am sitting here the storm is raging on. After sometime it begins to quiet itself. I can hear my parents talking on the phone to my other family members. My grandmother was trapped in the basement of a store for the duration of the storm and she will be heading over now that it has calmed. I look at my siblings, we are all in clean, dry clothes now, hastily eating our dinner so we can go play again.

Memory #2

Ginger Reynolds questioned by Lauren Reynolds

11/25/2016

LAUREN: *I think it was 2011, it was in the summer and we were playing outside. It was very hot and this huge storm came rolling in. We all had to come in and all sorts of people were here. Kevin [Uncle] was here and then grandma, and grandpa showed up, and it was a bad storm where we had a tornado warning and grandma was stuck in a building, the fabric store or something. She joined us once the storm had calmed and we had spaghetti from Olive Garden.*

GINGER: *Oh, when you said Olive Garden, that triggered a memory, but I can't put the memory together. I know that something happened like that, but I can't piece it altogether. I cannot remember any facts from the event at all. I do remember there was a time when we would have all been there and had that food but why would Kevin have been there?*

LAUREN: *He was there, I am certain of it.*

GINGER: *I think that is what's interesting about memories. I think experiences, depending on our age and how we experience them, sometimes are more important and must get catalogued in our brains differently than things that are less significant and just a part of daily life. And so for you, as a young child, I can see why some storm would have been a bigger event that sticks out in your mind. What is really interesting is how you said that one thing and I am listening to the facts of your event and I cannot place it but then that triggered something. I know in my brain that something like that happened but I still don't remember the event. I cannot place it in my timeline.*

THE IMPLANTATION OF FALSE MEMORIES

It is being demonstrated that as we were collectively trying to recall this memory certain things such as mentioning that the food was from Olive Garden, seemed to be marked as something significant in my mother's memory. She admitted though that she was not sure if she was thinking of the same memory that I was trying to get her to remember as we both have memories from other times in which we had eaten food from Olive Garden. Through mentioning that detail, I was most likely planting a false memory: "Studies have shown people alter their own recollections when they compare experiences with others. We take on the memories of others as our own, intentionally or not, and whether details are accurate or not. They're contagious" (Shaw, 2016). It is hard to know whether what my mother was recalling was her remembering a fact from that memory or if I was aiding in the false recollection of that memory. We are all subject to the false recollection of memories through simply discussing them and sharing details. Even from just hearing about other people's experiences we internalize those details and they migrate into our own memories.

The biggest system of social contagion, currently, is social media. We are all sharing the various activities that we are doing in a public manner, and through that, other people are absorbing our memories and details and we are doing the same. This is a fundamental fact about the nature of our society and how it is affecting our memories. With the ease of technology and having social media as such a large platform, it has made it easier to absorb large amounts of information in a condensed period of time, which, of course, has its positives and negatives. Our

memories have never been safe from contagion and editing and never will be. There was a psychological study done on the natural malleability of our memory and how that shapes our collective memories and our social identity. In this journal they make a comment on the possibility of false memories: “Although the implantation of false memories often occurs from exposure to a social stimuli, studies directly examining how the effects of social interactions on memory have shown that social interactions are particularly effective methods for shaping memories” (Brown, 2012). It is a fact that our memories are malleable, by nature. If we can agree that everything that makes an individual begins in our memories and our perception of ourselves based on pre-established facts from our past, then what can we deduce about our identity? If our identity is made from our memories, and our memory can be changed and contaminated through a variety of different social contagions then how much of our identity is based in facts? What things do we know about ourselves that could be inaccurate? Can we preserve our memories?

Memory #3

I hopped out of the car and stood waiting for my grandmother and my mother to get out of the car and join me. It is a sunny day and there is a bubbling of excitement that is radiating from my head all the way my toes. It is my first day of preschool. The leaves have just started to change their shade, which means the impending winter. In this moment, I feel warm from the sun and the excitement brewing in my stomach. My mother takes one of my hands and my grandmother takes the other. We start walking to the entrance of the preschool. It is called Rainbow Preschool and accurately so as the place is just exuding with colors and life. It has to be the happiest place on earth. There are short red lockers that line the long hallway that we begin to walk down. When we pass another open classroom door, my heart keeps filling with excitement. There are lots of kids my age running around keeping their respective parents on their toes. I want to be friends with all of them. I am ready to play, learn new things, and to begin my never-ending desire to learn everything. We finally reach my classroom and I take in all the marvelous colors that cover the entire room. The door is in the far left corner of the room and as I turn to the right, I take in the size of the classroom and all of the objects that are covering the surfaces. It is the best playground to ever exist. The alphabet is written out on the carpet and the far wall is lined with hundreds of books. I want to read every single one. I let go of my mother's hand and took my first steps into the beginning of my education and boy, was I excited.

Memory #3

Ginger Reynolds questioned by Lauren Reynolds

11/25/2016

LAUREN: *Mom, in as much detail as you can remember, can you talk about my first day of preschool school and dropping me off?*

GINGER: *This is going to be hard for me because I am having problems in my memory. I remember one thing... I remember this moment where I looked over at you, and you just walked right off away from me and you went over in the corner to play and I think it was like a climb-y thing. You went over there and you were just as*

happy as could be. You had this beautiful smile. I was dropping you off and you were perfectly fine. You were not afraid. You were excited. I remember looking at you and knowing that everything was going to be great and you were good. It was really a good feeling as a Mom, because you want your child to feel good and I remember having this feeling. It was profound. It has been this feeling that I have carried forward as you've grown up, 'Wow she's going to go and do something big.' There was a humble confidence in you. It was really neat to see.

LAUREN: *Do you remember any visual details about the preschool?*

GINGER: *I do. I remember how colorful it was. I don't remember what you wore the first day. I would have to go back and see a picture but I can just imagine your smile. You were so excited. You did really well. You were far more mature and more ahead than most of your peers. You could just tell that you wanted to explore everything. There were all these little boxes of things and all the colors in the room were so pretty.*

LAUREN: *Any specific colors stick out?*

GINGER: *Green, yellow, blue, red, and orange. It was just a bright happy room with big windows and the teachers were so excited.*

LAUREN: *Do you remember my hair at all?*

GINGER: *I think, I'm having to guess but I think you probably had shoulder length hair. I would imagine you probably had bangs. I would have to see a picture or two.*

LAUREN: *How did you react to dropping me off?*

GINGER: *When I left, I cried.*

LAUREN: *For you, reflecting on this memory is much more of an emotional experience than anything visual?*

GINGER: *Very much so.*

LAUREN: *This has definitely been an identifying moment for me.*

GINGER: *Yes, for me too.*

FAMILY NARRATIVE AND OUR IDENTITY

When I asked my mother if she could describe this day in detail, as I had remembered her telling me, she struggled to remember. The memory has been converted into more of an emotional experience to reflect on than a set of visual pictures for her to recall. I remember throughout my childhood and still to this day, my mother telling me about this moment and how it was such an important moment for her and, because of that, I regard it with the same feelings. This memory has had a strong place in my timeline. The fact that the memory has now been changed into a set of emotions, and a lot of the details are lost, certainly gives me mixed feelings. I remember this day in great detail, but is it my own memory or the memory that my mother told me throughout my childhood. I reflect on this memory as a pivotal moment in the development of my identity, and yet quite a lot of details are missing. My mother's version of the story was probably the main source that I gathered details from regarding this memory. Now, that my mother can not remember many factual details about this day I am forced to question the possible inaccuracy in my memory.

In a study completed at Emory, professors investigated the relationship between the family narrative and a child's sense of self, "Parental communication that is clearly validating and that acknowledges children's perceptions and feelings allows for a sense of value and worth of the individual self, and the feelings of autonomy and self efficacy." Children and adolescents

need affirmation of their narratives, so when kids are raised in families that are a more imposed perspective style of parenting, such as being told differing opinions about events without an open discussion (Bohanek, 2006), these children tend to have more identity problems. Our identity is made up of “facts” and beliefs we have about ourselves and the world around us, including our family narrative. The study states that, “Our results point to the importance of family narrative interaction as a critical site for meaning making and sense of self in adolescence” (Bohanek, 2006). If the beliefs and memories we have about ourselves can be edited then they are not true facts. What can then be said about our identity, which is built from our memory? A group of researchers, studying collective memories and social identity made the following statement in their article entitled, “Memory's Malleability: Its Role in Shaping Collective Memory and Social Identity.”

“...It [the current literature] seeks to examine the cognitive mechanisms underlying how individual memories emerge, spread, and become shared across a community. These cognitive mechanisms often involve memory distortions, but as we shall see, these distortions are often shared across community memories, and as a result lead to shared memories” (Brown, 2012).

Brown argues that in order to develop individual memories they have to be shared and through that he makes the argument that the social contagion of memories is a natural process and is not something we can prevent. Memory distortion is just one of the faults that our memory system has. Our memories are not for us to hold onto and try to protect from the world, but rather they are meant to be shared and through that a family, or a society, will build memories together as well as have individual memories; social contagions are inevitable.

CONCLUSION

Our memories are not designed to be giant libraries that hold everything we have ever seen or detailed descriptions so that we can recall every moment we have ever experienced. Through sharing memories and exposing ourselves to possible social contagions, we are contributing to the memories of others. Within our memory we have small details and bits that we have gathered from the people around us. All the people we have ever interacted with are a part of us in a small way and because our identity is made from our memory, all of our interactions are a part of our identity. Without having everything happen to us as it does, such as experiences or memories, we would not be the people that we are. Our memory is a patchwork quilt and we are all sewn together into the biggest patchwork quilt that could ever exist. The same can be said about our identity. “We like to think that we can recollect things that have happened in the past just to savor the memories, but the real reason for memories is to guide our behavior in the future” (Brown, 2012). With every interaction we have, we are learning new things and taking in new information that we will impact every future decision we make. There is something beautiful about this concept, that thousands of different people that I have interacted with have some small part in everything I do with my life. Elizabeth Stone, an American author, tells us, “Our meanings are almost always inseparable from stories, in all realms of life... family stories, invisible as air, weightless as dreams, are there for us. To make our own meanings out of apart from our families, a way of holding on and letting go” (Wolff, 1993). We are told to develop meanings from all of our memories and interactions so that when we are not children anymore, we are able to make decisions from what we have learned. Our memory is not something that we should be selfish about and try to keep untainted. By tainting

our memory or rather by sharing memories and allowing natural social contagion to occur, we are only making our memory and identity stronger which allows for better and stronger experiences/memories to be made.

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