

The Poetics and Politics of Desire: Eroticism in Luz Argentina Chiriboga's *Bajo la piel de los tambores*

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Sexuality is one of the most problematic areas in the literary representation of Black women because the image of the loose woman – exotic, uninhibited, and predatory – haunts the pages of African American, Caribbean, and Latin American literatures. To counter the negative stereotype, early African American women novelists, such as Frances Watkins Harper and Nella Larsen, shaped a discourse of reticence about Black female sexuality and they created a bourgeois model of respectability – the genteel, fair-skinned mulatto – whose sexuality was repressed or thwarted but seldom celebrated. This model of respectability, however, seldom appears in Afro-Hispanic literature, where the hot-blooded *mulata* is the predominant figure. As Ann Venture Young and Claudette RoseGreen-Williams have pointed out, the Afro-Hispanic woman has been defined and constructed, traditionally, in terms of a reductive sexuality; the primitive exotic is at once desirable (an object), useful (a commodity), and dangerous (a predator). Contemporary women writers, however, unlike their predecessors who were constrained by social mores and literary conventions, celebrate female sexuality, represent sexually daring subjects, and explore themes such as incest, lesbianism, and autoeroticism which were once taboo. In the pages of their sometimes polemical and often polemic works, female sexuality often becomes a feminist metaphor for woman's independence and autonomy.

In her first novel, Afro-Ecuadorian writer Luz Argentina Chiriboga explores the complexity and ambiguity of the Black female experience, treating female sexuality as a metaphor of resistance to the ideology of domination. *Bajo la piel de los tambores*, a narrative which subverts the orthodox construction of race, gender, and class in Hispanic society, signals the emergence of Black women's prose fiction in Afro-Hispanic and Latin American literatures. Traditionally, Afro-Hispanic novels recount the adventures of male protagonists such as Ascensión Lastre and José Antonio

Pastrana, while female characters – depicted as mothers, wives or lovers, who are relevant primarily in terms of their relationships to men – are invisible or marginal. Many male-authored novels and short stories describe violence toward women; in works like "Martes de Carnaval" and *Toque de queda*, rape and "violation of the feminine body [form] part of a larger discourse of violence, such as that of a dictatorship, integrating it into the repressive mechanisms of *de facto* governments" (López Morales 128). In such polemical texts – where women serve as metaphors of the political body and of the body politic (Hunt) – woman's pleasure is either absent or misrepresented, as Juyungo's rape of María de los Angeles demonstrates:

A caressing bite on the shoulder elicited from her a gesture, a mixture of pain and *acquiescence* at the same time. She *yielded* gradually, finally *letting him kiss her*. . . . Having felt that white girl *tremble, enjoy, sigh*, palpitate beneath him gave him more aplomb... (*Juyungo*, 49-50, emphasis added)

Male desire (especially when accompanied by force) does not automatically result in female pleasure. The notion that María could feel, under such circumstances, a "certain primitive and feminine curiosity for this tall and strong Black," and that she could "acquiesce," "yield," and "enjoy" rape by this stranger is a male fantasy rather than an accurate representation of female desire. Curiously María's "pleasure" is filtered through the mind of Juyungo: "Having felt that white girl ... beneath him."

Argentina Chiriboga's novel, which examines the sexual desire of an Afro-Ecuadorian woman, is a subversive text because it challenges the construction of female sexuality in patriarchal societies, where women, historically, were/are denied a right to their bodies through repression of their sexuality, the threat of sexual violence, and the denial of reproductive rights. Although not a *roman à thèse*, the novel deals, tangentially, with controversial themes such as marital rape, male libidousness, miscegenation, and birth control; and it undermines prevailing codes of social and literary propriety by representing female desire as a form of social and aesthetic resistance to ideologies of the family, school, and church. These institutions have traditionally repressed female sexuality outside the context of marriage, insisting that single women preserve the "priceless gem of virginity." As Espín points out, the precepts of the Catholic Church and the Hispanic concept of honor mandate female chastity (151-53).

The thematic impulses and fictive devices of *Bajo la piel* elaborate a rhetoric of insubordination which challenges these doctrines, while the novel

deconstructs religious and racial archetypes. A White priest and nun (Father Cayetano Santacruz and Sister María de la Concepción) are sensual and passionate in spite of conventional representations of the clergy as asexual; and Black women (Sister Inés, Adela, and Nidia), stereotypically depicted as lusty, are asexual. These ironies are not lost on Rebeca. As she passes from adolescence to adulthood, from innocence to experience, she laments her "involuntaria virginidad," questions the prohibitions against female sexuality – represented textually by the "Pórtate bien" of maternal authority figures – and challenges conventions of female decorum which require modesty, passivity, and chastity.

The iconoclasm of the novel is apparent to literary critics such as Alfredo Rodas Reyes, who writes that it is a "[n]ovela de carácter social, personal y psicológico, talvez un poco cruda," perhaps "crude," in his opinion, because it is the work of a woman. Invoking the discourse of the body, Argentina Chiriboga writes honestly and frankly about sex and rites of desire without using what feminist scholars like Suleiman call "male language" – the four-letter words and explicit vocabulary that characterize the writing of a Peri Rossi or of an Ntozake Shange. As the author points out, "En cuanto al vocabulario que utilizo, no incluye 'malas palabras,' aunque considero que ninguna palabra es mala" ("Primera"). Neither, however, is hers a "discourse of reticence," characterized by "ladylike" language: euphemisms, circumlocutions, and coded words. She describes, for example, several female biological rituals: using sanitary napkins during menstruation and douching with lemon water for birth control. According to López Morales, "menstruation ... has generally been silenced by masculine discourse" because male writers ignore bodily functions that are different from theirs (128-29). Argentina Chiriboga uses words like *los senos*, *el aborto*, *los preservativos*, and *el irrigador* – what Molly Hite calls the conventionally repressed "language of corporeality" (132) – to underscore the biological facts of womanhood and to affirm Rebeca's identity as a female subject. In terms of its subject, language, and themes, then, this novel is very much a feminist text.

On another level, *Bajo la piel* can be read as a sentimental novel which employs the rhetorical patterns and narrative strategies of romance fiction: a clandestine affair, the element of danger, a sense of risk and helplessness, fear of possession, and attraction to someone of a different age, race or class. In the romance novel, however, sex is customarily legitimized within the bonds of marriage. Argentina Chiriboga has written a first-person linear narrative, divided into three parts, which traces the social, sexual, and racial coming-of-age of Rebeca González, a young Black woman

who leaves her coastal village to attend a parochial boarding school in Quito, where she encounters racial prejudice, confronts class privilege, and experiences a sexual awakening. Eventually, she returns to Orquí, marries an alcoholic, womanizing White man, has a brief affair with a priest, and discovers the identity of a mysterious lover. Her interracial marriage is, in part, an act of rebellion against her mother and the ethics of sexual conduct and of domestic deportment that the mother represents: "Odié a mamá y la forma que me había educado..." (122). In spite of her rejection of the "maternal destiny" of other women – her mother, Nidia Araujo, a former teacher; Adela Okú, their housekeeper, who observes African cultural traditions; and Sister Inés de Rosario, a Black nun and activist, who organizes women laborers – Rebeca is mired in a conventional romantic script. She seeks fulfillment and completion in the arms of a man because she has internalized the feminine values of her society; she defines herself and tests received conventions through her erotic relationships with men. After begging Millton to marry her, Rebeca surrenders control of Sikán, the successful ranch that she has established, to her husband, confessing that she was once "dispuesta a hacer feliz al hombre que el destino me pusiera en el camino" (141).

Rebeca is a complex and ambivalent woman whose identity is fragmented and shifting; she is a woman divided and in constant battle with her conflicted selves. The granddaughter of an African, she denies her racial self; the daughter of a modest rancher, she hides her rural self from her class-mates, the daughters of doctors, bankers, and generals, while she tells her parents that "Estas relaciones cuestan, pero son importantes para mi posición futura" (92). She is an "emerging" woman, who tries to free herself from other women's social scripts. On one hand, she is a daring and unconventional heroine, who sets out on a journey of self-discovery – a literal journey from Orquí to Quito and a figurative journey from silence to voice – but, on the other hand, she is hesitant and self-doubting. The novel's narrative strategies undermine the voice of the heroine, at the same time that they reinforce her sense of alienation, isolation, and powerlessness. Her first-person narrative does not begin with a strong and assertive "yo" but with a series of collective, first-person plural verbs, such as "disfrutábamos," "éramos," and "gozábamos," which dissipate the individual self into an amorphous collective group. The self first appears as the direct object pronoun *me* rather than the subject pronoun *yo*, indicating that the process of self-objectification has begun. Paradoxically, Rebeca is both the subject and the object of her discourse; as subject, she narrates the story of her sexual rite of passage, but, as object, she is "acted upon" as

she acquiesces to the textual and sexual desires of others. She does not present herself as "I" until the fourth page of her narrative, and then only within the context of her mother's desire for the daughter's domesticity:

Yo, consciente de que en el internado tejía la urdimbre de mi destino, oía lejanos los consejos de mamá que sólo dejaría de suspirar cuando me viera casada. (12)

Narration and description predominate in this novel, while interchange between characters often takes the form of indirect discourse ("Amelia nos había dicho que en el amor todo era permitido."). Dialogue is enclosed in long, run-on sentences without the orthographic conventions – dashes and indented paragraphs – which differentiate speakers. In the following passage, this narrative strategy masks the speech of Julio Martínez, while it suppresses Rebeca's voice within a masculine discourse:

A medida que nos alejábamos, Sikán humedeció mis ojos, Por qué lloras, escuché con acento extranjero al desconocido, persona como vos no debe estar triste. (14)

Dashes, however, frame the powerful voice of Amelia Roca, the student-prostitute, during her interrogation by the police. Amelia speaks with confidence and authority, while Rebeca whispers about silence, entrapment, fear, and invisibility. Words and phrases such as "callamos," "sin comunión," "encerrada," "asomada," "asustada," and "de no verme" underscore the Afro-Ecuadorian's insecurity and self-doubt.

The language of the text – its words, figures, and images – shapes a poetics of desire that reinforces, dialectically, the structure and meaning of the novel. The fictive universe of the narrative is evoked through sets of erotic images – masks, mirrors, and enclosures – which frame a dialectic of covering and uncovering, of masking and unmasking, and of closing and opening. "Sexuality," as Carole S. Vance explains, "is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency" (1). Rebeca experiences, particularly in her relationship with Father Santacruz, the erotic tension between these two concomitant aspects of sexuality: when she is in the confessional with the priest, she describes a feeling "oscilante entre el placer y el daño" (55). It is the passionate Zaragozaan priest, the man of the warm breath, seductive *ceceo*, and black velvet mask, who arouses the young woman and introduces her to sensual pleasures – the scent of delicate perfumes, the touch of pearl rosaries, and the texture of lace mantillas – even as he claims her body:

Sus manos por mi cintura, sus manos por mis glúteos, sus manos por mis senos, sus manos, sus inquietas manos, arrimados a la pared sentí multiplicados sus dedos. (65)

Caught between the sexual orthodoxy which she has been taught (ironically, by the sisters of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe) and the desire which she feels, Rebeca inhabits an eroticized world of dark passages, hidden gardens, and deserted mansions – a sexualized landscape where the boundaries between reality and fantasy are blurred. Reality is fragile and tenuous, while appearances are deceptive: a female student is a man, another is a prostitute, and Julio Martínez turns out to be an historical figure.

The shifting identities of characters like Julio Martínez, Adela Roca, Vicenta Páez, and Father Santacruz reinforce the enigmatic and ambiguous texture of Rebeca's erotic world. On her journey to Quito, in the penumbra of a dark bus, she meets a mysterious stranger, dressed in blue jeans, boots, and a beret, who is one of the most tenuous but important characters in her narrative. As they whisper in the dark, she falls passionately in love with the handsome man, who becomes the idealized subject of her erotic fantasies. Rebeca discovers, on the last page of the novel, that Martínez, from whom she has received only one postcard and the promise of a rendezvous, is really the Cuban revolutionary, Che Guevarra. That revelation evokes, in the reader, a visual image of Alberto Korda's famous photograph of Che, "Guerillero Heróico," which adorns books, posters, and even buildings: Che of the deep, penetrating eyes and sensual mouth, his hair, long and dark, blowing in the wind. The illusory Julio/Che, a figment, perhaps, of Rebeca's inventive imagination, illustrates the way in which characterization – like theme, language, and structure – reinforces the erotic context of the narrative.

Argentina Chiriboga creates an exotic *mise en scène*, which seduces the reader and pulls her into the text. As the author explained in a recent interview: "[La novela] tiene un erotismo que fluye del texto, de su estructura, de ese ambiente juvenil en que se desenvuelve la vida de la protagonista" ("Primera"). The first page, for example, describes, in sensual and lyrical language, the seductive weekend rituals of the students. Words and images, such as the following, evoke a poetic landscape:

los límites de lo prohibido
la proximidad de la seducción
el atractivo de los amores fugaces
la época de disfraces
como cuerda de guitarra

It is a landscape without boundaries, illusory and timeless, where lovers engage in a circular dance, like the rhythm of the sea, "como olas que venían y se iban." The novelist's considerable gifts as a poet are evident in the skill with which she crafts her introduction; she describes an intimate terrain, presents the passionate players, establishes a languorous rhythm, and creates a sensual tone through her use of erotic images and figurative language. Her novel reveals the same graceful language and circular rhythm that characterize the poetry of her *La contraportada del deseo*:

En la cama
me crece toda la risa
que afluye de mis vendimias
íntimas.
Desarreglo el silencio
y voy hundiéndome (88-9)

The structure of the novel – the linear narrative and circular poetic form – reinforces the sexual tension of the pleasure-pain continuum. The first sentence prefigures the dialectical structure – the "partida doble" – of the text: "Disfrutábamos la vida por partida doble: éramos estudiantes internas del colegio ... y gozábamos las ilusiones que nos brindaba el antifaz" (9). On a literal level, the narrative recounts the subject's search for identity, while, on a figurative level, the imagery structures a poetics of desire. Images, according to Houston Baker "allow us not only to map a topography of intimate human space but also to follow moments of human consciousness to the very functions ... of intimacy and protection" (51).

The primary image of *Bajo la piel* is the mask, which charts the intimate terrain of Rebeca's consciousness: the tension between her desire for sexual fulfillment and her longing for social acceptance. The mask represents her division into subject and object; it signifies the psychic split between her inside self – the vulnerable, interior, hidden self – and the outside self, the façade that she presents to the world. Before engaging in erotic adventures with men, Rebeca and her friends, under the tutelage of a libertine and procuress masquerading as a student, don red velvet masks whose color and texture symbolize passion. The *antifaz* is both a protective device that hides the vulnerable feminine self and an outward, visible sign of sexual desire, which Rebeca puts on whenever she is aroused:

Cuando el *deseo* ascendía con urgencias me daban ganas de ir por mi *antifaz*. (128)

Apelé al *antifaz*, con el que sentía más fuertes mis caudales y tenía la sensación de ocultar mis *deseos*. (134, emphasis added)

Rebeca conceals her sexuality behind the "mask" of femininity. Femininity, according to Irigaray, is prescribed by man and does not correspond to woman's desire, "which may be recovered only in secret, in hiding, with anxiety and guilt" (30). Ironically, that secrecy, with its attendant guilt and anxiety, is also a stimulus to the erotic imagination. One of the most provocative scenes in the novel illustrates how the mask functions as both sign of desire and symbol of protection. When a donkey becomes sexually aroused by her scent, Rebeca trembles at the sight of its erect organ and dons her mask before surrendering to Milton Cevallos in her first sexual encounter.

... lentos rodamos por la hierba, sentí el vapor de la tierra mezclado con la baba del burro, los dedos de Milton deslizaron mi antifaz en tanto la tarde apagaba los trinos. (135)

Such scenes evoke, obliquely, the sexual fantasies of women: sex with an animal (the donkey), a stranger (Julio Martínez), and another woman (Vicenta Páez), but Rebeca verbally rejects such fantasies. When, for example, Vicenta Páez, a man dressed as a woman, propositions her, she comments: "En Sikán los caballos montan a las yeguas, pero nunca las yeguas hacen el amor entre ellas" (17). Homoeroticism, in her mind, is not a viable option.

Masks and other forms of covering – disguises, sunglasses, scarfs, wigs, and clerical habits – are signs in a semiotic code of sexual transgression, while acts of masking become elaborate mating rituals. According to Rolfe and Shalleck, masks are signs of freedom, which liberate, empower, and mystify, freeing people from inhibitions and permitting respite from social and moral laws. The evening and weekend trysts of Rebeca and her friends have the seductive magic of masked balls and carnival celebrations, as couples engage in elaborately staged rituals of seduction, marked by scenery (river banks and patios), special effects (music, dancing, and liquor), costumes and make-up (short skirts, black bikini panties, and Chanel No. 5). Bakhtin explains the significance of these Bacchanalian rituals:

During carnival time life is subject only to its own laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. (7-8)

Her mask permits Rebeca to participate in forbidden acts of pleasure, while it allows the priest to take on a new persona – sensual and sexual – with greater presence and power. As Rebeca notes, “sin el pelquín y sin el antifaz [el padre Cayetano] era una persona distinta” (37).

Other forms of masking are evident in the novel. Single women cover their faces with their hands and mantillas; nuns “take the veil,” as they assume the mask of devotion, or, in the case of the hot-blooded Sister María de la Concepción, mask their passions; and men hide behind dark glasses, which are emblems of their social status and symbols of their deprecation. In literature, the mask functions in various ways: in feminist texts, like Lucía Guerra’s *Más allá de las máscaras*, it encodes the social conventions which thwart female sexuality, while in racial discourse, such as Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask” and Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, it signifies the dissimulation of Blacks in their relationships with Whites. Rebeca also uses the mask to conceal her racial identity. Ashamed of her grandmother, Lunda Uyanga, and of the African culture of her village, where she grew up hearing invocations to Changó and stories of runaway slaves, Rebeca at first rejects her racial and cultural identity, but, finally, embraces her Africanity:

... ya no me dolió aquella raíz que antes, equivocada, deseaba esconder. Me sentí parte de la abuela, su consecuencia, oyendo sus tambores sonar bajo mi piel. (104)

She discovers, slowly and painfully, the connection between sexual exploitation, racial discrimination, and class distinctions in the duplicity of men who desire her sexually but reject her socially. Disillusioned, Rebeca learns that she is merely a commodity: “yo era un supermercado donde podría [Fernando] adquirir todo lo que deseara” (91). At his mother’s insistence, Fernando Ponce, a medical student, abandons Rebeca “por ser negra y por ser mona [costeña],” while Milton Cevallos calls his wife a “¡Maldita negra puta!” The words *negra* and *puta* link race to sexuality, blackness to immorality, as Milton evokes the negative stereotype of the loose woman, while “mona” or “montubia costeña” (coastal woman) alludes to race and class. The pejorative term “coastal” connotes the social distance between the urbanites of Quito, located in the mountains, and the rural peasants of the coast, many of whom are descended from escaped African slaves.

Devastated by Fernando’s racism and crushed by Milton’s emotional abuse and violence, Rebeca retreats into silence and invisibility:

... retorné al silencio de antes, tan lleno de amarguras ... Frente al espejo tenía la sensación de no verme, sino de ver una mujer distinta y lejana. (136)

Her silence discloses the fissures in her relationships with men, while her mirror reveals what the mask conceals: her feminine self. As Rebeca gazes at herself, she sees an imaginary other – distant and different – and feels the disassociation of her body from her consciousness. Like the heroine of Parente Cunha’s *Woman Between Mirrors*, she is fragmented, split, and broken in two. The mirror, like the mask, permits the reader to trace the development of Rebeca’s consciousness and to “map the topography of [her] intimate human space.” Whenever Nidia Araujo looks in the mirror, she sees her daughter; this double image suggests that, no matter how much Rebeca rebels, she is destined for her mother’s fate – marriage and domesticity. Narcissistic and self-absorbed, Rebeca undresses and gazes on her youthful body:

Por las noches ante él [mi espejo de cristal] me desnudo, observo complacida mi cuerpo azucarado, pido a la vejez que haga excepción conmigo. (44)

Looking into the mirror, she sees herself *as* body – with her wide hips, firm behind, and narrow waist. In this text however, the woman is more than the sum of her sexual parts, more than the eroticized female body described in *la poesía nalguista*; she is a whole body, composed of arms and feet and hands. She pleases herself as well as those who desire her when she dresses in short skirts and revealing sweaters; she walks seductively with graceful, undulating movements (so unlike the rigid body language of the nuns) “para que los hombres exclamaran un acentuado ¡Ay! a [su] paso” (10).

Rebeca feels the intensity of the male gaze, but she, too, looks at men with desire: she has “los ojos puestos en los hombres.” Boldly, she asserts her right to look at men and to participate, voyeuristically, in their private rituals, even the intimate act of urinating in the woods:

Tras aparearse Milton escuché un chorro, no debía descubrirme, yo ya había dejado de ser aquella muchacha, lo había visto en aquel acto íntimo. (18)

In another passage, full of erotic tension, Rebeca and Juan Lorenti, the father of a classmate, gaze at each other in the rearview mirror of his car. Aroused by the ocular *pas de deux*, she looks at him and then lowers her eyes, coquettishly, while imagining the pleasure of seduction.

Juan arregló el retrovisor de tal manera que sentí pegados sus ojos a los míos [y] yo dirigía mis ojos al retrovisor, se unía su persistente mirada con la mía... Nos miramos... imaginé que iba desnudándome:

primero desabrochó mi blusa, escurrió mi falda, pasó sus dedos por mi espalda, sentí arder mi sangre, me quitó el brassiere... (99)

Rebeca wants to define the terms of her sexuality, but she is hampered by internalized prescriptions of conventional femininity. Patriarchal societies, according to Michel Foucault attempt to control female sexuality through social sanctions, oppressive institutions, and repressive laws. Ironically, women often enforce the mores of patriarchal societies: thus, Inés, Adela, and Nidia are society's arbiters in the control of the young woman's sexuality. Rebeca is constrained by the "Pórtate bien" of older women – authority figures – who mandate virginity before marriage. When she fantasizes about an affair with Julio Martínez, she laments, "El Pórtate bien de mamá frenó entonces mi deseo..." (36); later, Sister Inés warns the girl, "Pórtate como una pebeta culta." Rebeca does not want to pay the price – marriage and childbearing – exacted of women for sexual expression, but she also understands that sexual transgression costs a great deal. Her fear of pregnancy is a serious deterrent to sexual expression, because she recalls all too vividly her visit – under the aegis of Sister Inés – to Virginia Méndez, a former student who was incarcerated for killing her illegitimate baby.

As a virgin, Rebeca can only imagine herself as a desiring woman – "a representation which [challenges] sexist notions of female sexual passivity" (hooks, 1989 136). She discovers early, however, that she is a desirable woman, the object of the male "outsider who experiences the sexed woman as an object of desire" (Hite 21), because Páez exposes himself to her, Santacruz fondles her, Ponti wants her, and Lorentí tries to seduce her. Two things finally release her from her inhibitions: the first experience of sexual pleasure and the knowledge that she is not pregnant. When she realizes that her lemon water douches have been effective for birth control, she yields to desire, first, with Milton Cevallos and, later, with Cayetano Santacruz, whom she embraces with complete abandon: "Sin intentarlo deslicé mis labios hacia su máximo punto de atracción ese instante lo sentí vibrar, gemir..." (145) – a subtle allusion to fellatio. But Rebeca is not completely free; in the final analysis, she is the product of her socialization.

Although Rebeca achieves a kind of sexual freedom, she does not attain that wider freedom of the mind and spirit that will allow her to realize her full potential as a confident, secure, and independent woman, who calls into question her socially constructed identity as a middle-class, African-ancestored, Ecuadorian woman, but who eventually surrenders to a

bourgeois femininity because she has internalized the socially-sanctioned values of a patriarchal society. Trapped in the conflicts between sexual orthodoxy and erotic pleasure, between received conventions and individual aspirations, the protagonist embodies the paradoxes and contradictions of the text: the representation of woman as both subject and object; the dialectical structure of a narrative that is both linear and circular; a poetics of *dédoublement* with images – masks and mirrors – that both reveal and conceal; and a feminist politics that is subsumed by a feminine ideology. On one level, *Bajo la piel de los tambores* is a subversive work which attempts, through innovative rhetorical strategies and fictive devices, to undermine masculinist structures of representation, but, on another level, it presents female sexuality as essentially receptive and passive.

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