DOORS AS DIALECTICS: SPECULATIVE FUTURISM AND THE REIMAGINING OF COMMUNITY IN MOHSIN HAMID'S *EXIT WEST* (2017)

Dr. Sania Gul,
Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Swabi, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.
Corresponding Email: sania.shah@uoswabi.edu.pk
Aziz ur Rehman,
Assistant Professor of English, Higher Education Department, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

Abstract
This paper is a re-reading of the Exit West (2017) by Mohsin Hamid by applying the concept of speculative and critical futures studies to contend that the novel cannot be simply interpreted as a story about migration or refugee trauma but rather as a speculative diagnosis of twenty-first century global systems. Although the current literature has generally taken Exit West (2017) as a subject of analysis focusing on border studies, humanitarian discourses, and stories of affective displacement, this paper believes that these approaches have the potential to hold the novel itself within the very political imaginaries that it aims to challenge. The paper shows how Hamid builds a laboratory of narratives by speculatively predetermining the magical doors in the novel, as well as its temporal elasticity, and post-national horizon, which undergoes a stress-test on the logics of the nation-state, globalization, and mobility. The article is based on speculative futurism, critical future studies and intimacy theory and develops dual-track analysis, which looks at planetary systems and intimate transformations at the same time. It interprets the doors as the literalization of the logic of infrastructures of globalization, London as speculative projection of the conditions of mass mobility, and Marin as a provisional experiment of post-national belonging without sovereignty but in care, slowness and co-presence. The essay reveals the ways in which crisis temporality has been displaced with the speculative approach used by Hamid to present long futures, quiet continuity, and relational survival through close textual analysis. Finally, the article suggests that Exit West is based on the premise that migration is not an emergency but part of human history and future. Combining speculative estrangement with politics of intimacy allows Hamid to transcend the presentation of displacement to the theorization of community as such in the future. The novel becomes diagnostic and prophetic, calling on the readers to move beyond not just territorial boundaries, but the exhausted political imaginaries of the modern nation-state, and to start thinking new modes of belonging that are sufficient to an age of planetary flux.

Keywords: *Exit West,* Marin, Hamid, Community, Doors as Dialectics, London, speculative

Introduction:

     Exit West (2017) by Mohsin Hamid has been read, most commonly, as a humanitarian novel of global displacement, a work which offers an ethical empathy by making refugee experience an allegory, affect, and restraint. The securitization of mobility and the violent performativity of boundaries (Mainwaring and Brigden 1), the psychic cost of dislocation and the unhomely of Nadia and Saeed (Bhabha 9), and the loss of identity in circumstances of forced migration have been highlighted in the existing scholarship (Ng 142). Although these strategies are used to bring out the ethical urgency of the novel, they mostly make *Exit West* a realist or quasi-realist philosophizing of crisis. By so doing, they under-theorise the most disruptive aspect of the novel, the speculative form.

     This paper claims that *Exit West* (2017) is not a refugee story that steals fantasy tropes to make an allegorical point, but a speculative futurist work that employs estrangement to diagnose the political, affective, and infrastructural rationales of modern migration. The so-called doors in the novel, those portals, which move bodies across continents in no time, have often been interpreted as metaphors of displacement or narrative excusations that make the process of crossing the border softer. Such readings open the doors to symbolic apparatus and ignore their main role as speculative infrastructure. The doors are treated not as metaphor,

they rearrange the terms of mobility, belonging, and community and reveal how global mobility is organized not so much by geography as by unequal systems of access, recognition, and care.

Based on the theory of speculative fiction, critical future studies, and feminist thought about intimacy, this paper interprets *Exit West* (2017) as a narrative laboratory where the political imaginaries of the nation-state, humanitarianism and liberal cosmopolitanism are put under stress and can be alienated. In accordance with the idea of Darko Suvin on the novum, the doors are the devices of cognitive estrangement that make the established system of globalization visible in new ways (Suvin 64). They physicalise one of the main paradoxes of neo-liberal modernity: movement speeds up and at the same time, belonging is violently controlled. Migration, speculatively framed, becomes not an extraordinary crisis but a defining feature of life on the planet.

The article builds this argument based on a three-layered analysis of the main spatial formations in the novel. First, it explores the doors as speculative infrastructure which reveals inequalities of mobility and precarity. Second, it interprets London as an exaggerated prophecy about fortress Europe, a city restructured by fear, abandonment, and affective segregation, in which "the authorities did not come" (Hamid 152). This is not a mimetic image but a hypothetical accentuation of modern nationalist and anti-migrant thinking, which identifies the dystopian implications of exclusion on scale (Jameson, Future 199). Lastly, the article is followed by Marin as a place of slowed down time and ethical experimentation where temporary communities and non-possessive intimacies can practice other ways of post-national belonging. The relationship between Nadia and Saeed here becomes a kind of attachment "connected by a thread of tenderness" (Hamid 209), which is an example of an ethics of care that is not compulsive, not here to stay, and is not possessive.

This article interferes with some of the prevailing critical paradigms by reading *Exit West* (2017) through the prism of speculative futurism, which favors trauma, border violence, or ethical witness, but which still stays entrenched in the crisis temporality. Such concerns are stretched in a speculative approach because it prefigures systemic dynamics and long futures, which permits the novel to perform the roles of diagnosis and rehearsal at the same time. Utopia does not have to be in the form of prescriptive solutions as it can be used as a mode of exploring the emergent forms of social possibility (Levitas 153). In *Exit West* (2017), Hamid performs such exploration both with intimate relations and with urban and planetary systems, and asserts that migration future cannot be disenfranchised of the future of community.

Finally, this paper argues that *Exit West* (2017) transforms the idea of migration not into a problem to be addressed but into a state that requires the emergence of new kinds of relational, civic, and ethical imagination. In the combination of the speculative estrangement and the politics of intimacy, Hamid transcends the depiction of the displacement in the speculative estrangement, and theorizes the future of belonging itself. The novel challenges readers to leave not only the territorial boundaries but also the weary political imaginaries and to start fantasizing the possible ways of cohabitation sufficient to an era of planetary translocation and changeability.

Mapping the Critical Terrain in *Exit West* (2017)

Published in 2017, Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) has gained considerable academic interest in the works of various disciplinary viewpoints, which is due to its thematic depth and formal novelty. One major line of the literature perceives the novel as a humanitarian story that anticipates displacement, trauma, and identity crisis. As an example, the studies of the social and psychological aspects of migration help Hamid make readers understand the emotional nature of the migration process as he introduces the themes of

xenophobia, multicultural integration, and cultural attachment and detachment (Hussain and Khan, 2019). Equally, Masroor, Malik, and Shah (2020) use Critical Discourse Analysis to analyze forced displacement and xenophobia in the text and claim that the novel is an expression of psychological and social violence against both migrants and host populations.

To supplement these trauma- and displacement-related readings, some critics have understood *Exit West* (2017) through the prism of postcolonial theory, especially gender and power dynamics. Yasmeen and Ahmad (2018) offer a postcolonial feminist reading offering an interpretation of the way gendered roles and the patriarchal order of things affect the experiences and agency of women in the context of global dislocation relying on the previous postcolonial feminist theory, including the idea of the subaltern offered by Spivak (1988). The other intervention of the postcolonialism examines the dehumanization of refugees on grounds of environmental and human exploitation and indicates that the migration narratives are perceived to intersect with ecological issues in the global capitalism. These works firmly locate *Exit West* (2017) within the framework of postcolonial criticism, but they are largely preoccupied with the image of suffering and violence as opposed to the real situation of mobility as such.

The other school of thought places the novel in the literary traditions like the magical realism or allegory. An example would be Khalil, Shah, and Qureshi (2019), who interpret the fusion of reality and fantasy through Hamid as a kind of magical realism that can be used to comment on politics of the borders, identity fragmentation, and belonging, with the doors serving as a symbol of change and escape of the nation-states. This interpretive act is consistent with other readings which dwell on the role of the fantastical elements of the novel as rhetorical works to merge narrative and socio-political criticism. Also, other critics consider wider thematic issues like cosmopolitanism and postmodern identity, and make *Exit West* comparative with other modern novels to determine how transnational movement redefines the ideas of selfhood and belonging.

In addition to these thematic strands, newly developing scholarship is paying attention to intertextuality and narrative form in the novel. Iqbal and Malik (2021) reflect on the way the commentary of the text within the religious, political, and mythological allusions enhances the discussion of migration and interconnectedness in the world. Using a Habermasian (1989) theory as a guide, Waheed and Ahmed (2021) implement a dialogic analysis with the purpose of examining systematic pressures and surveillance in the communication among migrants and prefiguring the interaction of the lifeworld and institutional structures of the migrant experience. Such diverse approaches indicate the depth of interest in *Exit West* (2017) and indicates that the critics are starting to see beyond the superficial parallels of displacement to more nuanced ways that narrative, power, and subjectivity are explored.

Although such a plurality of interpretations exists, there is still one general drawback: most readings do not focus on speculative aspects of the story, especially the magic doors, as formal operations that restructure the circumstances of movement and belonging. Works that focus on magical realism or allegorical readings are usually aimed at genre hybridity, or emotional appeal at the cost of addressing the systemic logics that are being played out by Hamid in his speculative form. On the same note, although postcolonial and feminist critics are concerned with structural violence and identity politics, they seldom discuss the novel as existing in the genre of speculative futurism, which predicts the ways that narrative structure challenges extant political imaginaries and projects alternative social formation.

The thematic richness of the *Exit West* (2017) is, then, not critically lacunar, but is under-theorized in its speculative project, that is, how the formal resources of the novel

diagnose the mobility of the twenty-first century and practice the probable futures of the same, and not merely indicative of present injustices. This paper fills this gap by placing *Exit West* (2017) at the intersection of speculative fiction theory and critical future studies, and presenting the speculative operations in the novel as the main object of intellectual purchase and not a decorative or metaphoric one.

Methodology: Speculative Reading as Diagnostic Practice

The qualitative, interpretive approach to this article is based on the close analysis of the texts and informed by the theories of speculative fiction, critical future studies, and feminism theory of relationality. Instead of making a genre-based distinction between speculation as a genre marker or a stylistic flourish, the article engages in a different use of speculation as a methodological procedure, as a means of reading literature as a place of the active imagination, testing and contesting of social, political, and ethical futures.

The key idea of this method is the concept of the novum developed by Suvin (2016) according to which speculative devices are considered to be the mechanism of the cognitive estrangement and reorganization of the familiar aimed at revealing underlying structures. The analysis can be conducted by reading *Exit West* (2017) as a novum to avoid being a metaphor, instead to be focused on infrastructure and how instantaneous mobility reveals the imbalance of power, recognition and belonging in the creation of neoliberal globalization. This speculative reading is also partly informed by the work of Jameson on utopia and dystopia as forms of diagnosis, especially his point that speculative narrative demonstrates the boundaries of current political imaginaries by taking their internal logics to extremes.

The paper also relies on future critical literature to make *Exit West* (2017) diagnostic and rehearsing. After the formulation of utopia-as-method by Ruth Levitas, the novel is not considered as a blueprint of the way to change society, but as an experimental domain where alternative structurings of community, intimacy and coexistence can be tried out temporarily. The analysis of the novel in this framework is highly applicable to the shift of the dystopian extrapolation of the London to the slower, more provisional dystopian social formations of Marin in the novel.

On the intimacy/affect level, the methodology includes both the feminist speculative thinking of Haraway (2016), where she argues to stay with the trouble, and that of adrienne maree brown, where she writes of emergent strategy. Such frameworks enable the article to understand the changing relationship between Nadia and Saeed as not just a subplot of a purely personal nature but a micro-level re-enactment of post-national ethics. The playful reading of intimacy and community reads interdependence ahead, the methodology of the interdependence of structural and relational changes in migration discourses.

Methodologically, the paper follows a three-part analytic framework: the initial one being, a close reading of the doors as a speculative infrastructure, and the second, London as an extended space of affective government and fortress reason, and the third, Marin as a location of slow futurity and ethical experimentation. In these passages, the detail of the text is read in a way that it is integrated with theoretical background whereby the formal strategies of the novel contribute to the formulation of the conceptual assertions, not just their presentation.

This methodology allows *Exit West* (2017) to be situated as a literary laboratory of theorizing migration that is non-temporal to the crisis. It views literature not only as a representation place but as a place of enquiry with diagnostic capacity that is able to offer future relational possibilities that are open, contingent and ethical.

I. The Doors as Infrastructure: Speculative Novum and the Reorganization of Mobility

What is formally disturbing about *Exit West* (2017) is not the mere fact that it introduces a magic device into the otherwise identifiably modern world, but refuses to accept it as an exception to it. The doors are not the aberrant incursion which cracks the realist surface of the novel. They become normalized near instantly, they are discussed, and they are discussed, as matter of fact, as mobile phones, militias, or power outages. This normalization in the story is very important. Evacuation of wonder has made Hamid force the reader to meet the doors not as something of fantasy but as something of system. By doing this, the novel carries out one of the key tasks of speculative futurism: it makes visible the hidden logics of the present, making them literal.

The doors transformed the migration process postulating the urge to read through the idea of the novum of Suvin (1979). The doors themselves are no longer used as instruments of migration but are treated as speculative infrastructure that restructures it. They kill the geographical distance without destroying the hierarchies of access, security, and recognition. Migration has ceased to be a journey but a condition, a condition that reveals the uneven distribution of mobility under neoliberal globalization that is highly controlled. The doors do not generate a utopia of free movement; they calculate precarity afresh.

The initial passage through a door is also presented in a way "both like dying and like being born" (Hamid 72). Such picture is an indication of ontological break as opposed to spatial movement. Migration in this case is not the conceptualized as moving along a straight path but as a bloody redefining of the self. However, the novel is keen on not enacting the dramatic pain that is often linked to refugee narratives. The crossing of the sea, the barbed wire fence, the desert march are not there. By eliminating the dramatics of suffering, Hamid denies the reader the kind of moral justification that frequently follows observing suffering in a comfortable setting. What is left is a coming in without being oriented, motion without absorption.

It is in this that the doors do their most incisive speculative labour. Globalization does not erase the boundaries as Saskia Sassen suggests but reorganizes them creating new inclusion and exclusion regimes. This reasoning is literalized by Hamid through his doors. They multiply like mushrooms (Hamid 96) creating black markets, monopolies and inventing new ways of exploitation. The mobility is commodified and unequal and it is revealed that the crisis of migration is not a crisis of movement, but a crisis of belonging, recognition and power. When Saeed watches his father staring at him quietly, "We have moved, but where we have arrived I do not know" (Hamid 115). The doors provide bodies, not social worlds that are able to take them.

By making speculative mobility an infrastructure, instead of a metaphor, *Exit West* transfers the issue of border-less migration to that of community-less migration. When movement is inevitable, the novel raises a harder question that can only be posed by it: how do societies react to the inability to maintain a certain distance to ensure exclusion? The question that the narrative answers is this, and it is this question that the narrative elaborates in the extrapolated vision of London.

II. London as Fortress Extrapolation: Fear, Abandonment, and Affective Governance

Should the doors reveal the structural paradox of the global mobility, London enacts its social outcomes. The city is no longer a mimetic portrait of a refugee metropolis, but a speculative projection, an extension of current trends until their political and ethical consequences becomes quite clear. London is disjointed and divided. Migrants are taking over the deserted neighborhoods and parks and long time residents are forced to withdraw into fortified enclaves. The chilling refrain of the narrative, "the authorities did not come"

(Hamid 152), suggests the appearance of the territory of abandonment when the civil society loses its civil duty.

What Hamid creates here is an autoimmune and not an invasion story. The city is not responding to the influx of new persons by increasing its systems of care; it is contracting them. Fear reorganizes space. Anxiety hardens boundaries. The exclusion turns into a government. This hypothetical London quite literally brings the metaphor of swarming and contamination to life that is used to incite anti-migrant rhetoric throughout Europe, specifically in the case of Brexit. The novel reveals the self-destructive logic of these metaphors by transforming them into spatial arrangements. The menace of being run over brings not safety but unrest; not harmony but disintegration.

The violence that breaks out between migrants and militias is not presented as being inevitable. It is demonstrated to comprise the result of a political decision and affective orientations. There is fear with the bodies and there are more suspicion and justification to abandon. In this regard, *Exit West* (2017) fits with the demands of affect theory that emotions are never personal conditions, but social powers that define the collective life. London turns into the map of the affective government, where nervousness creates walls and aggression turns into the city planning method. Better to conceive social collapse than a structural transformation, better to see the end of the city than to see the end of exclusionary nationalism, as Fredric Jameson puts it.

But Hamid is a rebel against utopia. London does not break itself into anarchy. It is instead going into a painful period of negotiation. Work camps are born, where migrants are conditionally given a sense of belonging in exchange of work. These terms are profoundly unequal but represent a transition to a state of absence of inclusion to a state of reluctant co-existence. Interdependence insists, not by ethical awakening but by necessity. The conjectural story therefore reveals the vulnerability of castle mentalities and how they prove to be temporary daydreams which they cannot live on forever.

Nevertheless, this co-existence is also regulated according to rank and authority. The doors have rendered movement impossible to stop, yet it has not changed the social imagination that dictates the belonging. London shows the boundaries of infrastructural solutions and continuing exclusion despite the loss of force of borders. This stalemate is exactly what sets the stage of the latter impasse of the novel the one that ceases to focus on the escalation of crisis and transition to the ethical experimentation.

III. Marin as Post-National Rehearsal: Slow Time, Care, and Relational Belonging

And in the event that London is the speculative depletion of the fortress imaginary, Marin puts forward a change of pace, size, and ethical orientation. In this case, the story sacrifices the accelerated time of crisis and shifts to duration, routine and slow reconstitution. Marin is not shown as a destination or resolution but an accretion, a zone in which life is going on in improvisation instead of urgency. It can also be defined by Hamid as the place where small communities were created and where the small communities produced "rumors which passed themselves off as history" (Hamid 209). In this formulation, history is provisional, no longer monumental or national, and written in common, and contingent.

Marin fails to provide a utopian counterpart of London. Inequality, pre-dispossession and structural asymmetry still exist. It is not the lack of power but rather the type of social organization which shifts. Belonging is a process that arises due to intimacy, nurture, and negotiated living together as opposed to origin, sovereignty, and exclusion. This turn echoes with the idea of utopia as method of Ruth Levitas: the novel does not dictate how things should be, but provides a simulation of other social relations that are still in the process of formation.

This is an experimental reasoning that is applied to intimacy. The relationship between Nadia and Saeed that is created under the circumstances of mutual hazard and nostalgia weakens without falling into loss or betrayal in Marin. Their relationship becomes a non-possessive kinship, which does not obliterate care at the cost of divergence. They are kept "connected by a thread of tenderness" (Hamid 209), an expression which defies the narrative contradiction of a romantic closure. Intimacy in this case reflects community: adaptive, ethical, and not limited by permanence. Bonds are no longer maintained by the holding or the persistence but by the recognition and the release.

Read with feminist speculative thought and the focus of adrienne maree brown on the emergent strategy, Marin is a location of slowness futurity. The change does not occur with a big political break but with little relational changes. Dwelling is reconceptualized as something that has to be practiced and not inherited or even a status of citizenship. In this respect, *Exit West* (2017) reinvents the notion of migration as a planetary state that requires novel grammars of coexistence, rather than enhanced borders or accelerated technologies.

When the novel gets to Marin, the reader has been deceived out of unquestioning optimism. The hypothetical experiment has demonstrated the strength of inequality and flexibility of exclusion. But it has displayed their contingency. In case fear can rearrange cities, so can care. When it is possible to make a border by replicating without using walls, it is also possible to destroy it without the elimination of difference. Marin never resolves the issue that London reveals, but it opens our eyes to an alternative form of coping with it.

Conclusion: The Speculative as Diagnostic and Prophetic

In case London symbolizes the spurious depletion of the castle imaginary, Marin is the prelude to an irreversible change in the tone of narration and moral orientation. Western movement is not a process towards arrival or solution but a process towards slowing down. As the doors have already broken the distance, *Exit West* (2017) is already focused on time, but not on the time as a linear being but on time as lived. Marin is not a destination rather an accretion, a place of progressive reconstitution, where life is still being led without the sense of urgency which dominates earlier phases of displacement. In this, history ceases to be monumental or national and is tentative and communal and made up of "rumors which passed themselves off as history" (Hamid 209). The belonging, as well as narrative itself, becomes contingent, negotiated, and unfinished.

More importantly, Marin is not presented as an idealistic substitute of the ills of London. Rather, it brings up another speculative register, which is geared towards what could be referred to as the morality of the everyday. Instead of the melodramatic explosion of crisis, the novel resorts to routines, work, and minor incidences of sociality. Such a time change echoes the speculative feminist thinking, especially that of Haraway (2016), who urges people to remain with the trouble instead of trying to find redemptive solutions. Marin has not yet become purified, reconciled; it is just covered with histories of inequality and dispossession. It is in this rejection of purity that lies its speculative power. Community is a form, not a sameness or consensus but adjacency, bargaining and tending.

The change in the relations between Nadia and Saeed is one of the events that reflect this moral re-calibration best. Their relationship turns shaky in the presence of Marin without falling into despair and betrayal due to the circumstances under which they are forced to unite, sharing a threat of danger and nostalgia. They get to realize that the selves they are growing towards do not need the same kind of attachment. The fact that Hamid positions the two as still being connected, "a thread of tenderness" (Hamid 209), is inexplicable to romantic closure and narrative closure. The intimacy without possession, the care without enclosure, is called tenderness here. Their separation is neither the failure but the adaptation,

which presents a silent survey to romantic and nationalist stories that enforce belonging to permanence, exclusivity, and return.

Combined with adrienne maree brown and her idea of emergent strategy, this refigured intimacy formulates an alternative more speculative ethic. Change is not being planned in big designs but in little small adaptive practices. Attachment is a developing process that discards the outlived and still clings to ethically viable elements. In this respect, the relationship between Nadia and Saeed is transformed into a microcosmic reencactment of post-national belonging one which is not based on collective origin or destiny but rather on selected care. The personal and the collective are therefore working on different levels of speculation, which helps sustain the suggestion of the novel that the future of social life lies equally in relational morality as in political organization.

What *Exit West* (2017) ends up enacting in Marin is never the displacement being resolved but dwelling itself being reframed. It is no longer a matter of inheritance, citizenship, or rootedness but a question of practice of paying attention, keeping one's word, adjusting to it. There are pressing consequences of this reframing on the comprehension of migration in the twenty-first century. In case displacement starts becoming the rule and not an exception, then the concept of belonging has to be redefined as something that is capable of travelling, changing, and redefining itself in contexts. The speculative approach that Hamid has adopted enables this reimagining to remain narrative rather than prescriptional and solutionary.

The doors in the novel are used as estranging devices to reveal the inadequacy of inherited political imaginaries. In Marin, such estrangement is replaced by another form of affective orientation, that of coexistence rather than control and care rather than purity. This change does not nullify the existence of capital and inequality, or historical violence. Instead, it asserts that these forces do not limit the opportunities of human relation. Even in structural constraint, other types of sociality are still conceivable however flimsy and provisional.

In this respect, *Exit West* (2017) fits into the tradition of speculative fiction that has been expressed by Octavia Butler who sees speculative fiction as not making futures but creating new metaphors through which to live in the past. This novel by Hamid is not prophetic in the sense of predicting the future; it is a diagnostic text that shows the stressors that are conditioning the present and futures that are already being rehearsed by using daily decisions, affective alignments, and attachment styles. The novel is an extrapolation of current trends slowed down, making visible the boundaries of exclusionary systems, as well as the ethical work of living an alternative life.

The critical implications of the novel, when one reads *Exit West* (2017) using speculative futurism and critical future studies, therefore, changes. Hamid comes out not merely as an accountant of displacement but also as a theorist of futurity, the one who sees migration as a constituent state of planetary existence instead of an extraordinary crisis. At the macro level, the novel reveals depletion of nationalistic and capitalistic imaginaries. At the micro level, it simulates relational forms which are not enclosed and permanent. These scales cannot be separated and need each other to be mutually constitutive: the ethics of intimacy determine the future of cities, personal relationships are determined by the systems which determine the possibilities of mobility and belonging.

The novel ends with no answers, and this denial is its most drastic act. The hypothetical experiment never concludes on some indisputable standpoint but in an openness. Instead of blueprint, Hamid gives attention; besides mastery, coexistence. The Marin hillside is not lit up with firelight, which leaves the lines of a future, which implies that living together in the conditions of planetary migration will be gradual, collective, and continuous.

In the end, *Exit West* (2017) suggests that the most significant migrations are not necessarily spatial, but also imaginative, to leave behind the inherited ideas of what identity and belonging entail, and embrace new forms of care that would allow people to live in a world that is already becoming mobile.

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