CONCLUSION

In late 1996 and again in 1998, Australian journalists subjected those who were promoting the claims of ritual abuse survivors to a barrage of criticism and ridicule. When reporting on the evidence put before the Wood Royal Commission in 1996 concerning ritual abuse by Satanists at the Sunday School of a Sydney church, for example, journalists wrote that the commission hearings had been "awash with the bizarre", including descriptions of shape-shifting, houses possessed by demons and "geriatric sex romps". Witnesses had also proposed conflicting views about the validity of "repressed, suppressed, compressed and even decompressed" memories (McClymont SMH 31 Oct. 1996; see also Brown SMH 30 Oct. 1996, 31 Oct. 1996).

In 1998, journalists gained access to the "evidence" which Franca Arena had consistently claimed supported her allegations of pedophile networks and a widespread conspiracy to protect them. In their subsequent articles and opinion pieces, journalists poured particular scorn on Arena's decision to include "Miss A's" allegation of ritual abuse in the annexures of her submissions, as well as on Arena's sympathetic attitude towards these allegations. Commentators in the Sydney Morning Herald mocked Miss A's claims about an axe-wielding Satanist judge and accused Arena of "offer[ing] up . . . delusional or malevolent rantings of a fruitloop fringe as the basis for her reckless character assassinations under the cowardly protection of Parliament " (Humphries SMH 19 March 1998; see also Carlton SMH 21 March 1998). Comparably critical letters to the editor and derisive cartoons were also published (see Fig. 4). At the same time, The Daily Telegraph reported that its journalists had telephoned the Supreme Court in an attempt to ascertain the identity of another Satanist judge who had supposedly been murdered in a Sydney park. The report noted that no judges were missing (The Religion Report ABC 2RN 22 July 1998).
The expression of such forthright scepticism by these journalists is somewhat ironic. The Telegraph had previously provided very strong support for Arena's campaign to uncover pedophiles in positions of power and influence, and in 1990 the Herald had itself published a series of highly credulous articles about ritual abuse. The first of this series—"Annie's Agony: The Scream That Must Be Heard"—had appeared on the front page of the "Spectrum" section of the paper and was accompanied by a lurid graphic illustration (Preston SMH 8 Dec. 1990). The claims made by "Annie" in this article were very similar to those later made by Miss A.

Fig. 4. Cartoonist Tanberg's derisive view of Miss A's accusations against an axe-wielding Satanist judge (Sydney Morning Herald 21 March 1998)
The attitudes expressed in these various articles encapsulate the panic about ritual abuse in Australia. They also reveal the similarities between this contemporary Western panic and the witch beliefs and "witch finding" activities described by anthropologists and historians. I have argued that the question of whether ritual abuse "really happens" is an essential part of any anthropological or sociological approach to this issue. I have openly stated that I do not believe that ritual abuse "really happens" in Australia, and I have sought to justify my scepticism. I have argued that claims of ritual abuse are consistently improbable and frequently impossible. I have shown how claims of ritual abuse could not be substantiated when investigated by Australian police, scholars and journalists, or when tested in the courts and by other official bodies. I have also examined the ways in which survivors, therapists and other activists accused these investigators of themselves being perpetrators of ritual abuse, of having connections of various kind to perpetrators or of being involved in other kinds of conspiracies.

I have in addition argued that allegations of ritual abuse typically arise in the most problematic fashion. Disclosures of ritual abuse by "child victims" and recollections of it by "adult survivors" generally follow periods of intensive and suggestive interrogation or therapy. Beliefs about the need to subject children and adult women to such interrogation and/or therapy, and perceptions of their efficacy in facilitating "disclosure" or the "recovery" of memories, are themselves based on some very controversial theories. These were developed to explain why children who had allegedly been sexually abused failed to disclose the abuse or retracted any accusations, and why adults who had suffered abuse in childhood were not able to spontaneously recall this abuse--especially if it was severe and sustained. These theories were based on very problematic data and were mostly formulated by therapists and others who were already convinced that child sexual abuse--including abuse of the most severe kind--was very common. I have argued that, in practice, many therapists actually subjected survivors to forms of "mind control" similar to that supposedly used by abusive Satanic cults.

I thus sought other explanations for claims of ritual abuse and the widespread acceptance of such claims in the late twentieth century. I argued, following La Fontaine,
that the panic about ritual abuse more closely resembles a “witch craze” than a “moral panic” (Jenkins 1998: 15ff.; La Fontaine 1998: 12ff., 156ff.). Perpetrators of ritual abuse were conceived as committing fundamentally transgressive, “witch-like” crimes. They were supposedly motivated by Satanism or comparably unorthodox religious beliefs, and some theorists even proposed that perpetrators could--like witches--perform marvellous feats and facilitate the activities on Earth of evil supernatural entities.

Like the witch crazes in Africa and early modern Europe, the panic about ritual abuse arose at a time of dramatic change in the United States. In the 1980s, Americans became receptive to ideas initially proposed by fundamentalist Christians and “anti-cult activists”--then taken up by social conservatives, feminists, child protection activists and mental health professionals--about the crimes of those whom Douglas might call secret “internal enemies” (Jenkins 1998: 121, 171ff.; see Douglas 1970: xxvi-ii). Many theorists of ritual abuse actually reprised ideas about “witchcraft” that had first been made in the early modern era, although they used supposedly scientific rather than religious methods of detecting Satanism and frequently proposed scientific explanations for perpetrators’ more incredible activities and abilities. These ideas were spread by influential books, articles and seminars, and later by sensational stories in the mass media. Accusations of ritual abuse were subsequently made by adult “survivors” and--supposedly--very young children. Some survivors even made what were essentially confessions of ritual abuse.

Accusations of ritual abuse were--like accusations of witchcraft--made against members of unpopular minority groups or people whom their accuseds could credibly depict as secretly immersed in evil. Those making accusations sought to achieve various political, professional and even psychological ends. By attacking the supposed perpetrators of the worst kinds of sexual abuse, accusers attempted to initiate more general changes in a society they believed was misogynistic and oppressive. Therapists and child protection workers--like Inquisitors and witch finders in the past--promoted the status of their professions and developed their own careers and practices. They also championed particular ideas about the nature and signs of evil in the world. Survivors made accusations as they found themselves enmeshed in
interminable problems and disappointments, and as they battled to achieve adult independence and autonomy.

In the later 1980s and early 1990s, ideas about ritual abuse--as well as allegations that it was occurring--"migrated" from the United States to other Western countries. As they did so, these ideas--like those spread through different regions of Africa and early modern Europe during witch crazes--underwent some important changes. The countries in which "migrating" ideas about ritual abuse were accepted had particular governmental, legal and law enforcement structures, as well as distinct national historical and cultural characteristics. Different ideas therefore emerged about the identity of perpetrators, their motivations and the exact nature of their crimes. The ways in which the authorities in different countries dealt with accusations of ritual abuse also varied.

The 1990 Herald article "Annie's agony ..." provided the Australian public with an excellent introduction to ideas about ritual abuse and the argument that it "really happens". The journalist Yvonne Preston uncritically accepted claims that horrendous "witch-like" crimes--ritual rape, incest, torture and human sacrifice--were being perpetrated in this country by devil-worshippers masquerading as respectable middle class churchgoers. Preston noted the strong similarities between Annie's claims and those of other survivors "across the world", and she implied that similar crimes had recently been perpetrated at a preschool on Sydney's Northern Beaches. Preston accepted the arguments of various ritual abuse "experts", and she proposed that perpetrators had somehow precipitated "multiple personalities" in Annie. The article concluded with an emphatic call for action to put a stop to the abuse of "horrendously tormented and terrified" Australian children.

Obviously, these attitudes to ritual abuse were subsequently challenged--by Preston's journalistic colleagues among many others. Almost as soon as "migrating" ideas about ritual abuse arrived in Australia, local sceptics were able to draw attention to failed overseas investigations and prosecutions and to the results of official inquiries in Britain and the United States. Sceptics effectively attacked the credibility of therapists and child protection activists, and they criticised the ways in which
supposed cases of ritual abuse were typically identified and allegations were precipitated. Sceptics were as insistent as those they criticised, and the language they used was equally intemperate.

Australians were in any case always less likely than Americans to become panic-stricken over the activities of Satanists. The idea that devil-worshippers were perpetrating child abuse as a way of providing aid to supernatural entities--let alone that they were successfully bringing such entities to Earth--made little sense in this religiously indifferent society. Australians have, in fact, historically held deep-seated suspicions about the sexuality and attitudes towards children of certain zealous Christians. There were also very few people in this country who openly professed Satanist religious beliefs, and the short history of Australian settler society weakened the influence of imported occult folklore here.

By the mid-1990s, therefore, Australian journalists were expressing--and reflecting--a general wariness about claims of ritual abuse. When allegations of ritual abuse were openly and unambiguously expressed--and thoroughly examined--in legal and official forums in the later 1990s, journalists ridiculed the claims of survivors and pilloried those who promoted them. They failed, however, to acknowledge the role played by their own publications in precipitating the panic about ritual abuse and, especially, the witch-like activities of high-ranking and well-organised pedophiles. In this they actually resemble the very people that they criticise who, as I have argued, increasingly modified their claims about ritual abuse--or, at least, the forms in which such claims were presented to the public. Activists also blamed others for promoting preposterous ideas about the widespread practice of Satanism, the sexual abuse of children as a form of religious devotion and massive conspiracies.

Having rejected claims of ritual abuse, sceptical journalists--again like many survivors and activists--continued to make sensational claims in their stories about horrendous crimes (or possible crimes) perpetrated by other dangerous "outsiders". In 1998, detailed newspaper reports were published in which journalists speculated about the fate of the missing toddler Jaidyn Leskie, reported a possible conspiracy to protect the murderers of Stockton teenager Leigh Leigh and suggested that a serial killer was
responsible for the disappearance of female hitchhikers on the Pacific Highway since
the 1970s (Mercer SMH 18 March 1998; Bearup G SMH 17 March 1998; Hannnan
SH 22 March 1998; “Jaidyn’s mother . . . ” SMH 25 March 1998). That same year, as
I have discussed, many reporters seemed strangely thrilled by the possibility that the
mutilation-murder of former NSW MLA Frank Arkell may also have been perpetrated by
a serial killer.

The reasons journalists made these sorts claims are somewhat similar to those that
had motivated ritual abuse survivors and their supporters. All made accusations as
they sought to achieve what were, for them, vitally important short-term goals.
Australian survivors attempted to achieve reasonable autonomy and separation from
their parents by means of accusations which shattered stifling familial bonds. Activists
sought to alert an oblivious society to what they believed was the true nature and
extent of sexual crime in this country and to achieve urgently needed law reforms
(Jenkins 1998: 128, 218, 224-5; see also Report LCSCPPE Vol. 3 (Transcripts)1998:
44ff.; Scott 2001: 189ff.; Whistleblowers Network 1997). For their part, journalists
aimed to sell newspapers or achieve high ratings figures by creating panic--and a
degree of titillation--about the activities of evil “others” (Littlemore 1996: 181-2).

The accusations of ritual abuse made by survivors and their supporters--and the later
attacks by journalists on those who continued to make such claims--were also part of
the continual process by which certain groups are held responsible for crises or
ongoing social problems, the values of such groups are denigrated, and people who
feel themselves to be vulnerable to stigmatisation attempt to assert their status (see
Crawford 1994). By making accusations of ritual abuse, Australian survivors and
activists attempted to demonise certain people. Providers of commercial child care were
portrayed as attempting to exploit parents financially or gain sexual access to young
children. Fundamentalist Christians were made to appear suspiciously secretive and
as having an unhealthy preoccupation with sex. Men of a certain age and background
were presented as obstinately clinging to oppressive patriarchal attitudes and
practices. Survivors also sought to dissociate themselves from identities and values
which they had come to reject, while activists promoted themselves as a vital part of
the social and cultural order.
Australian journalists similarly attempted to disparage certain "outsiders". These included murderers, pedophiles and neglectful single-mothers, but also credulous, overzealous therapists and campaigners against sexual abuse. At the same time, journalists sought to reinforce their own role as those who expose and debunk folly and to mask their own past role in promoting it.

Newspaper articles which essentially declared claims of ritual abuse incredible--and which ridiculed those making such claims--also reveal certain similarities between the end of the panic about ritual abuse in Australia and the end of the witch craze in early modern Europe. While far from unanimous about the precise reasons for the end of the witch craze, historians agree that there was no general abandonment of the belief in witches in the mid-seventeenth century. Sceptics were not then raising new objections to the belief in witches, and there was continuing credulity about witches among some members of the elite, among inquisitors and witch finders and among the general population (Mulhern 1991; Thomas 1982 [1970]: 170ff.; Trevor-Roper 1967 [1956]: 168-9). Accusations were at this time actually growing more numerous (Mulhern 1994: 270; Trevor-Roper 1969 [1956]: 97).

Rulers in continental Europe were, however, attempting to restore order in the wake of the Thirty Years War and had come to see witch hunting as contributing to contemporary chaos rather than restraining the activities of those causing it (Mulhern 1994: 270; Nelson 1975: 342). Rulers had also ceased to exclusively rely on their legitimacy on their role as God's agents on earth. They were less motivated to have those supposedly attempting to undermine the Kingdom of God rooted out and destroyed (Larner 1984: 90; Trevor-Roper 1969 [1956]: 58, 169ff.). They therefore restrained witch hunting activities in their territories, while instituting legal reforms which removed some of the measures by which acceptable confessions and additional accusations had formerly been precipitated and convictions accomplished (Larner 1984: 90; Nelson 1975: 342; Thomas 1982 [1970]: 163ff.). Rulers received support in these measures from officials, jurists and clergy who may previously have believed that witches were active--and in other circumstances may even have hunted witches--but who noted that accusations were increasingly being directed against people like themselves (Trevor-Roper 1969 [1956]: 97).
Mulhem’s (1994: 270) description of the end of the European witch craze is strangely applicable to the end of the panic about ritual abuse in Australia:

In case after case, there was simply no corroborative evidence for the... florid descriptions of the sabbath and the... numbers of the accused... Faced with the threat of social disintegration, the witch-hunters were forced to recognise that the conspiratorial cult was a story, not an event...

There were Australian activists who, in the late 1990s and beyond, continued to insist that ritual abuse occurs and survivors who continued to make accusations. The sorts of arguments that journalists were trumpeting in the later 1990s about the absurdity of ritual abuse claims—and the problematic ways that ritual abuse was uncovered—were by no means new. Yet the cumulative results of the examinations of claims by police, the courts and other official bodies undermined the capacity of ritual abuse activists to precipitate wider concern and action—and even shook the wholehearted belief in ritual abuse by those who had previously proclaimed it. Some activists responded by proposing that survivors were actually reporting forms of child abuse that were in some ways similar to ritual abuse but that accounts of ritual murder, ceremonial orgies and Satanic worship should not be taken literally.

The pursuit of supposed perpetrators of ritual abuse was thus restrained by legal mechanisms whose provisions are in some ways the legacy of the reforms instituted at the end of the witch craze (see Thomas 1982 [1970]: 163-4). Although activists continued to complain that abusive Satanists and high-ranking pedophiles were still “getting away with it”, it was no longer in the interest of politicians or the media to seek out these particular evil-doers. Political leaders and journalists certainly benefited by periodically precipitating popular panic over the activities of certain groups. They were, however, reluctant to support activists who responded to criticism—and to the adverse findings of investigations initiated at their request—by making accusations against their erstwhile official supporters and/or those who conducted the investigations.

A widespread belief continued in Australia that serious misdeeds were being perpetrated by evil “others”—much as the belief in witchcraft persisted in early modern Europe and other sorts of charges were directed against unpopular individuals and
groups (see Mulhern 1991: 270; Russell 1980: 103; Thomas 1982 [1970]: 170ff.). Australians continued to respond to the warnings of sexual assault and child protection activists, provided these campaigners did not condemn popularly accepted activities and ways of dealing with children. Activists could still present pedophiles as having certain “witch-like” characteristics—a high degree of secret organisation, for example, and a desire to undermine fundamental codes of behaviour—but they had also to ensure that they did not make allegations of ritual crime or use language too reminiscent of that of the “fruitloop fringe”.

Since 2001, of course, Australians have focused their fear and rage on secret internal enemies of a very particular different type—and have been strongly encouraged to do so by their political leaders. Panics have thus ensued about foreigners who seek to gain entry to this country by treating their children in ways that violate "the natural limits of human behaviour", gangs of resident primitives who feel justified in raping unveiled and unaccompanied local women, and homegrown religious outsiders who openly praise foreign terrorists and who surreptitiously plan acts of murder and sabotage (see La Fontaine 1994: 20; Poynting et al. 2004; Report SSCOACMI, 23 Oct. 2002).
Appendix 1: Australian Cases Involving Allegations of Ritual Abuse

The following are Australian cases in which allegations of ritual abuse were made and which were tried, officially investigated or in other ways brought to public attention.

**Wahroonga case, 1988.** Allegations were made by children enrolled at a northern Sydney preschool in 1988. Allegations included physical and sexual assault, and threats of violence. No charges were laid. The police investigation was re-examined by the Wood Royal Commission in 1996.

**Seabeach case, 1988-99.** Also popularly known as the "Mr Bubbles" case. Allegations were made by young children in 1988 against the proprietor and two female staff members of a Mona Vale (NSW) preschool, as well as the husband of the proprietor. According to one Australian magazine, the parents of the children believed that Satanic sex rituals and animal sacrifices had been conducted at the kindergarten. Police allegedly told journalists that abuse involving "witchcraft" had been perpetrated and that child pornography had been produced. The case was described in the NSW Parliament as one in which "sexual, physical, ritualistic and emotional atrocities" had occurred. The NSW Director of Public Prosecutions withdrew 54 charges at the committal hearing at the City Local Court in 1989. The investigation was reviewed by the Wood Royal Commission in 1996. The proprietor and her husband were awarded $800,000 after successfully suing the NSW Government for defamation in the Supreme Court in 1998. The husband of the proprietor was stripped of his compensation ($350,000) by the NSW Court of Appeal in 1999. The case attracted considerable media attention, overwhelmingly hostile to the defendants and to the husband of the proprietor in particular.
**Sydney Sunday School case, 1989-96.** Allegations were made in 1989, mostly by the mother and step-father of two young children, against members of a Sydney fundamentalist Christian Church. It was alleged that the Satanists among the congregation had marked out a pentagram on the floor of the church and conducted sexual orgies. Children were allegedly abused during rituals. It was also alleged that children had been murdered and their bodies ritually dismembered. Certain adults had allegedly been drugged to prevent them from witnessing activities of the Satanists. The allegations were investigated in 1990 by NSW Police Child Mistreatment Unit and then by Police Task Force Disk. No charges were laid. The case was re-examined by the Wood Royal Commission in 1996.

**Nar Nar Goon case, 1990-1.** Allegations were made by young children in provincial Victoria against a local couple in 1990. They were supposed to have been members of a Satanic cult. The man was arrested in 1991, but not prosecuted due to lack of evidence. It was alleged that local children had been physically and sexually abused during rituals. Cult members had also allegedly performed a human sacrifice, cooked and eaten fetuses, and drunk human blood. The case attracted considerable media attention, overwhelmingly hostile to the accused couple.

**Mornington case, 1991-2.** Allegations were made in 1991 by young children against the proprietors of a child care centre on the Mornington Peninsula, Victoria. The allegations included the bizarre physical and sexual assault of young children. It was also alleged that children had been removed from their child care centre, pornography had been produced and a firearm had been discharged. No charges were laid. The centre was deregistered in 1992 following a hearing by the Victorian Office of Preschool and Childcare. The proprietors unsuccessfully sought to have the deregistration overturned by the Supreme Court in 1992. The case attracted considerable media attention, overwhelmingly hostile to the proprietors.

**Wollongong case, 1993-4.** Allegations were made in 1993 by two young children in the Illawarra region of NSW against their father. It was alleged that he sexually abused the children in bizarre ways, gave them hallucinogens and produced child pornography. It was also alleged that he was a Satanist who had practised animal
sacrifice and had taken his children to Satanic gatherings where human sacrifice occurred. The man was convicted in the NSW District Court in 1994 of two counts of sexual assault of a child, and sentenced to 42 months imprisonment. He was released later that year after his conviction was overturned by the Court of Criminal Appeal. The case attracted considerable attention by the local media.

**Bunbury case, 1993-4.** Allegations were made in 1993 by two women in Western Australia against their father, brother, uncles and deceased grandfather. Allegations included rape by multiple perpetrators, torture, sexual assault with various work tools and forced bestiality. The women's father was originally committed to stand trial on 129 charges. He was acquitted of 15 charges in the Western Australian Supreme Court in 1994, and the jury was unable to reach a verdict on a further 57. No retrial was sought by the WA Director of Public Prosecutions.

**“Northern Sydney family” case, 1993-5.** Allegations were made in 1993 by a young woman against her parents, uncles and grandmother. Allegations were subsequently made by the woman's younger siblings and cousins, although the sister of the original complainant later withdrew her allegations. Allegations included physical and sexual assault, cruelty to animals, abuse during quasi-medical operations, forced abortion, and drugging. An investigative police task force was formed, and the parents and grandmother were charged with 67 offences. All charges but one were dismissed at the committal hearing in 1995 on the grounds of lack of evidence and unreliability of evidence. The final charge was subsequently withdrawn by the NSW Director of Public Prosecutions. Extensive media coverage of the case was critical of the Department of Community Services and the Director of Public Prosecutions.

**Case of “Miss A”, 1998.** Allegations by a young woman against a prominent judge became public in 1998 during hearings of the NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on Parliamentary Privilege and Ethics Inquiry into the conduct of MLC Franca Arena. It was alleged that the judge was a high ranking Satanist who perpetrated horrendous physical and sexual abuse on “Miss A” and others. He was alleged to have committed numerous murders, and there were a multitude of dismembered corpses allegedly stored at his Melbourne residence. “Miss A’s”
allegations had been included among the documents supplied by Arena to the
Legislative Council in support of her claims about a pedophile conspiracy in NSW.
The allegations were examined by NSW Police Commissioner Peter Ryan. No charges
were laid. The allegations attracted considerable media attention, universally hostile to
Arena in particular.

“Evil in the Woods” case, reported 1999. According to a 1999 Sunday
newspaper report, “up to 30 youngsters [were] ritually abused by pedophiles and
Satanists operating in an organised network” on the NSW Central Coast (Wood and
Chulov SH 8 August 1999). The abuse allegedly occurred four years before. The
group was also alleged to have engaged in sexual orgies in the children’s presence
and conducted animal sacrifice. There were no follow-up reports by the newspaper,
and the journalist was unable to give me any further information about the case.

No new cases of ritual abuse have been reported in the Australian media
since 1999.
Appendix 2: First-hand Accounts of Ritual Abuse

I attended the following seminars, meetings, rallies and court cases where detailed first-hand accounts were given by self-described Australian survivors of ritual or other organized abuse, parents of children alleged to have been ritually abused, those who believe themselves to have been falsely accused of perpetrating ritual or other organized abuse, and ritual abuse counsellors/therapists.

Hearings of the "Paedophile Inquiry" of the Wood Royal Commission into the NSW Police Service. August, 1996.


Interviews were conducted with the following politicians, activists and witnesses.

Associate of Seabeach defendant Louise Bugg. 3 December 1998.

Northern Beaches local government activist and witness to public meeting following Seabeach arrests (Dee Why Salvation Army Hall). 19 February 1999.

Deidre Grusovin, Member of NSW Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly. 11 February 2002

Dr. Yolanda Lucire, forensic psychiatrist. 27 March 2002 and 18 July 2002.

Member of (and former office-holder in) the Australian False Memory Association. 6 May 2002.

Dr. Meredith Burgmann, President of NSW Legislative Council (and Chair of the Legislative Council Standing Committee on Parliamentary Privilege and Ethics). 3 June 2002.
The following documents, videotapes and media reports contain first-hand accounts by self-described Australian survivors of ritual abuse, parents of children alleged to have been ritually abused, those who believe themselves to have been falsely accused of perpetrating ritual abuse, and ritual abuse counsellors/therapists.

Advocates for the Survivors of Child Abuse (ASCA) 2002 Healing from Ritual Abuse also known as Organised Sadistic Abuse, (Information Package). Quorrobolong (NSW).


Beyond Survival, A Magazine on Ritual Abuse, Trauma and Dissociation incorporating Us Littlies Only, A Magazine for Children and Child Alters that have been Hurt by Adults) 1996-1997.


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Ritual Abuse Survivors and Supporters Australia (RASSA) 2000 “Acceptance and Validation”, “Aims”, “Belief in its Existence”, “Indoctrination”, “Main Issues”, “Ritual Abuse Cults and Organizations” and “What is Ritual Abuse?”

www.geocities.com/australiarass

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