

Reading Against the Gore: Subversive Impulses in the Canadian Horror Film

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"No one ever thinks chicks do shit like this. Trust me, a girl can only be a slut, bitch, tease or the virgin next door. We'll just coast on how the world works." -Ginger, *Ginger Snaps*

To a large extent, contemporary genre films owe their existence to the films that have come before them. Without a canon of previously established genre conventions, mores and audience expectations, there would be no genre with which to continue the legacy. In the horror film, genre rules are quite firmly set. It is not difficult to link contemporary horror cinema to generic examples from the last one hundred years. It is expected that a vampire film will feature blood, bites and gothic costuming, and that most of the rules of the vampire film remain firmly set. And, the slasher film almost always includes the nubile female virgin who will, if she remains virginal, survive the carnage as well as the killer, who is undoubtedly a psychologically monstrous human deviant (whom the film often inexplicably anoints with superhuman strength and agility). Jonathan Lake Crane, who has written extensively on the horror film genre, states, "Over time, generation upon generation of retroactive films come to constitute a massive family tree in which every descendent bears a strong resemblance to its predecessors." In this vein, by definition, the horror film is consistent in its reluctance to change, and, it could be argued, is stale in terms of its themes. Perhaps that is why horror films are consistently among the worst reviewed and most easily dismissed by film critics and academics. Why study the same old game?

This reluctance to embrace the horror genre is also consistently linked to the exploitative, repetitive and silly storylines (one of the most popular horror movie franchises is the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series, in which monstrously disfigured dead burn victim Freddy Krueger hunts and kills people in their dreams!), as well as the abundance of disturbing and arguably disgusting imagery. Where is the value in seeing a half-naked woman being chased through the woods and then stabbed to death? Especially when this scene can be found in dozens of similarly themed horror movies? However, what is being missed when these films are ignored critically is that, often times, this carnage is the point. People are attracted to horror movies not for characters, actors or directors, but to see the creative ways stock characters can be stabbed, sliced, impaled. And, when horror films are made intelligently and with psychological and thematic depth, these themes can be subverted and speak truths about the world in which we live. The aforementioned exploitation is also important. Horror films are known for being sexy and scary, for showing deviant behaviour both sexually and in terms of violent acts. So, then, how are these excessive texts important?

In his book [Dark Romance: Sexuality and the Horror Film](#), David J. Hogan expands upon this idea for almost three hundred pages. He reads horror movies as explicit points of study for the intersection between sex, violence

and death. "Besides being the most purely entertaining of all movie genres, the horror film warrants serious study because it is also the most vivid and unrestrained. If motion pictures in general reflect our dreams and fears, then the horror film liberates the dreams and beats back those fears." Although it is easy to disagree with Hogan's claims about the entertainment level of horror films in comparison to other films (that is a matter of taste, and even the most ardent horror fan is aware of the limited audience appeal of some of the extreme visuals these films make their mandate), it is difficult to argue with his observations of horror's link to sex, fear, and the meeting point between the two. "Because the genre is predicated upon an awareness of the inevitability of death, its exploration of sexuality has been unavoidable. Sexual behavior and its ultimate purpose, children, are quite clearly the antithesis of death. If one is to examine death, then, one must examine sex." To Hogan, the horror film becomes an invaluable looking glass in which to see important sexual and cultural representations of society reflected in.

On the most basic levels, it has been established that horror films are saturated in repetitive storytelling loops. And, it has also been shown that within the horror genre we have an important showcase to examine important psychosexual issues. What we have here seems to be somewhat of a lost opportunity. Horror, as a genre, is concerned with exploring fascinating psychological, physiological and pathological avenues of human sexuality, while the actual products of this genre (re: the filmic texts themselves) are repetitive and often exploitative while rarely taking advantage of the seemingly endless psychosexual reservoir of possible themes.

However, when Canadian horror films are examined, the opportunity appears to be somewhat recovered. David Cronenberg's *Rabid* (1976) and *The Brood* (1979) and director John Fawcett and writer Karen Walton's *Ginger Snaps* (2000), all Canadian horror films, are subversive examples of the horror film and all three films take extensive advantage of Hogan's reading of horror films as complex and meaningful cultural texts. And, when examined in tandem, these three films offer an interesting analysis in terms of the horror clichés, female as monster and female sexuality as dangerous. What follows is a brief analysis of the subversive nature of these two Cronenberg horror texts and a close analysis of *Ginger Snaps*. Cronenberg's oeuvre has been studied and deconstructed at length by other scholars, so the analysis of those two films will act as a jumping-off point and will establish significant recurring themes for the closer look at *Ginger Snaps* (which has been almost completely ignored in terms of critical and theoretical analysis thus far).

David Cronenberg is one of Canada's most accomplished auteurs, even when the genre he is arguably best known for, horror, is brushed aside. It could also be argued that it is psychological and technological

transformation stories that Cronenberg now tells. Films like *Spider* (2002), *Crash* (1996) and *eXistenz* (1999), while featuring aspects of the grotesque, clearly eschew the strict characteristics of the horror film and would most likely be described as art cinema. International critical acclaim and attention at prestigious film festivals like Cannes reinforce this. However, Cronenberg's earlier films, like *Rabid* and *The Brood* (as well as *Shivers* (1975) and *The Dead Zone* (1983), among certain aspects of others) can be classified as belonging to the horror genre. Both feature a monster, bloody deaths, and both are quite harrowing viewing experiences. Dark cinematography, suspenseful editing and typical horror movie acting styles strengthen this interpretation. However, these films are concerned with a lot more than typical thrills and chills associated with the horror film. When examined more closely, their psychological depth, and (as will be argued, problematic) obsession with the dangerous effects of female sexuality are revealed.

Rabid begins with a bang. Rose, a beautiful young woman, is traveling with her boyfriend through the country on his motorcycle. A sudden car crash and subsequent motorcycle explosion render Rose unconscious and in desperate need of medical attention. Because it is doubtful that Rose will make it to a larger, urban, hospital in time, she is taken to the Keloid Clinic for Plastic Surgery, where Dr. Keloid performs emergency surgery on her. Keloid, who has been experimenting with "morphogenetically neutral" tissue, repairs the comatose Rose, and she is placed in a hospital bed to recover. When Rose awakens, there is a horrific byproduct of the radical surgery - the only thing that will sustain her is other people's blood. Through the healing process, Rose has developed a new organ for the extraction of this blood, complete with new consequences that arise from her unwanted self-transfusions. William Beard, author of [The Artist as Monster: The Cinema of David Cronenberg](#), describes the organ as "a kind of organic spike that 'lives' behind a puckered fleshy orifice in her armpit, and which she can drive into her victims while embracing them. If effect, she is a vampire. Her food sources then develop their own catastrophic side-effect: terminal rabies, which they spread to others by biting them in uncontrollable raging fits." These rabid victims develop "rheumy eyes and puffy yellowish complexion, green froth foaming from the mouth, and a gleeful and vicious appetite for flesh," and must be shot in the head to be killed. Eventually, the rabies spreads throughout Montreal and Rose, realizing the carnage she is, although somewhat indirectly, responsible for, arranges for her own death. The film concludes with sanitation workers piling bodies (including Rose's) into the back of a truck.

Although the film utilizes many of the established conventions of the horror film, including the zombie, the vampire and much gore, Cronenberg uses these to make larger cultural statements. Most obviously, especially when examined alongside some of Cronenberg's other films, *Rabid* is a cautionary tale denouncing untested and risky medical experimentation. Rose's condition is directly related to the experimental cosmetic surgery she

undergoes at the hand of Dr. Keloid, and even he fears what might happen to her upon awakening. The result is a citywide plague and thousands dead. No cosmetic surgery can possibly be worth that. The film also plays with ideas of predatory male desire and the medical danger of unfettered sexual experimentation and promiscuity. However, exactly what Cronenberg is getting at is complicated by his representation of the female monster.

Another subversive element unique to *Rabid* can be located within the film's casting. Rose is played by Marilyn Chambers, one of the first large-scale celebrities associated with the pornographic film industry of the 1970s. As William Beard has observed, "Diegetically, Rose is basically innocent and suffering and humanly sympathetic. Supra-diegetically, Marilyn Chambers is creating havoc with her horrifically powerful sexuality." Marilyn Chambers, then, is known for her sexual prowess and powers of seduction, and, in *Rabid*, her character becomes the carrier to a fatal and mysterious virus. Chambers' link to sexuality and, especially pornographic sexuality, can be broadened within a closer examination of Cronenberg's construction of the film. During her bloodlust, Rose becomes a predator, and approaches victims who, almost comically, represent clichéd characters from pornographic narratives. A police officer, a truck driver, a young womanizer and a beautiful young woman in a hot tub all become casualties to Rose's uncontrollable appetite. Thus, the presence of Chambers is acknowledged through the situations and framing of the film, and the link between the sexually promiscuous woman and disease is made clear. Cronenberg suggests, through intertextual irony and his choice of Marilyn Chambers as the lead, that female sexuality is a very dangerous thing. It is the woman who has the power to spread the disease, the woman who is the monster.

The Brood, another of Cronenberg's early horror works, also plays with forms and conventions of the horror genre for its own subversive goals. And, not surprisingly, also frames female sexuality and female powers of reproduction as something to be feared and ultimately, destroyed.

The Brood centers around Nola, who is a patient at the Somafree Institute of Psychoplasemics, a therapy clinic. There, she is undergoing extreme therapy in which her repressed internal traumas can be "worked through to the end." During this therapy, patients develop welts and sores, literal representations of the internal issues they are dealing with. Nola is in the midst of a divorce from her husband Frank, complete with custody battle over their young daughter, Candy. Meanwhile, small, dwarf-life creatures are on the loose, killing those who have mistreated Nola. "When one dies an autopsy reveals that it is a child without teeth, speech, retinas, sex or a navel. According to the doctor, the 'creature has never really been born'." It turns out that these murderous quasi-children are "physical manifestations of her enraged psyche who have been born directly out of her body. They are connected to her mentally and carry out her unconscious desires, but because her rage is short-lived, so too are the creatures." After several murders, Frank confronts Nola at the institute

and it is revealed that she has grown a sac on the side of her stomach and that this is the origin of the deadly brood. Frank strangles Nola and she and her brood die.

Despite a plot that seems somewhat unconventional in terms of the horror genre, *The Brood* is very much a horror film, supplying the audience with much blood and gore as well as a mystery, as the reveal of who is committing the murders occurs quite late in the film (just like any of the Friday the Thirteenth films, we have to wait until the last reel to find out for sure "who-done-it"). In her book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Barbara Creed draws the connection between the grotesque and the female's natural functions of sex and birth. Creed reads representations of the female in *The Brood* as subverting feminist concerns and as largely negative. By featuring a woman in isolation, completely removed from her husband, the implication "is that without man, woman can only give birth to a race of mutant, murderous offspring." As well, Creed argues that the film shows female maternal function as abject, unclean and bestial. While her analysis may bend Cronenberg's vision to fit her own sensibilities (she declines to mention that Nola's brood kills her own father and the Freudian implications that act offers up), Creed is spot-on in her analysis of how this horror film uses its ability to present unreal events as reality. "An extreme, impossible situation - parthenogenetic birth - is used to demonstrate the horrors of unbridled maternal power. Parthenogenesis is impossible, but if it could happen, the film seems to be arguing, woman could give birth only to deformed manifestations of herself." Viewed alongside *Rabid*, these films present a problematic representation of the female in the horror film. These women are shown as slaves to their gender, within a paradigm that denies them the opportunity to transcend it and which firmly implies difference, and not in a good way. Instead of falling slave to sexual difference, *Ginger Snaps* allows subtle ambiguities and the experimentation with gender roles to sneak into the narrative, thus producing a more complex, and, as will be argued, more sympathetic portrayal of the female monster in the horror film. And, instead of the female monsters in Cronenberg's filmic world, the monster in *Ginger Snaps* uses her power to challenge firmly set yet negative societal standards.

On the surface, *Ginger Snaps* is a movie about werewolves. Set in Bailey Downs, a fictional small Ontario suburb, the central characters are Brigitte and Ginger Fitzgerald, two sisters who reject the strictly set paradigms of suburban life. Upon introduction, the girls, bored outsiders who are obsessed with death and, more specifically, their own suicides, are putting together a school project, cheerfully titled, "Life in Bailey Downs." It is a photo project depicting the girls posed in bloody and realistic tableaux of suicide aftermath and is the first hardcore indication that *Ginger Snaps* will not be a typical teen movie. One night when the girls are out, Ginger is bit by a mysterious dog-like creature (really a werewolf) and dragged deep into the woods. Ginger and Brigitte manage to escape from the beast and dash across the highway.

Luckily, a passing van kills the beast dead. Over the next twenty-eight days, Ginger, under the transformative powers of the werewolf bite and her own physical progression to womanhood (the scent of her first menstruation attracted the beast in the first place), becomes a werewolf. She begins to kill classmates and school employees while awakening to the power of her newfound sexuality. Brigitte discovers a cure for Ginger, but it is too late. During a bloody chase through the girls' bedroom, Ginger, now fully transformed, accidentally impales herself on the knife shakily held by her sister and dies.

Before undergoing a close analysis of *Ginger Snaps*, it is important to point out a subtle yet vital difference between the three films. A central characteristic of all these horror texts involves the female monster. It is important to note that instead of the monsters in these films being fully formed creatures from the outset of the narrative, the characters become monsters either by accident or completely against their own will. In *Rabid*, Rose suffers a horrific motorcycle crash and lapses into a coma. While unaware of what is happening to her body, radical plastic surgery is performed on her, and the result is a vaginal slit hidden in her armpit, armed with an organic, phallic spike that attacks her victims in a quest to satisfy a bloodlust unbeknownst to Rose. *The Brood's* Nola also begins as a victim. She has enrolled in an experimental and controversial therapy program called psychoplasms, in which patients revert back to a child-like mentality in order to work through their repressed traumas. The side effect of psychoplasms is that this repressed rage expresses itself on the patient's body, usually in the form of welts, sores or bruises. Because of Nola's extreme mental state, her trauma manifests itself as eyeless, sexless, toothless children who carry out her unconscious anger on those who have wronged her. Again, for much of the film, she is unaware that she is the cause of such extreme acts of violence. Ginger in *Ginger Snaps* initially suffers a similar fate. On a nighttime revenge mission with her sister Brigitte, Ginger suddenly realizes that she has begun to menstruate for the first time. Before she can do anything at all, the scent of her menstruation attracts a werewolf, and she is dragged deep into the woods where the beast claws and bites her. Ginger, shocked and traumatized, is in denial about what has happened. When her wounds begin to heal faster than humanly possible and she sprouts coarse hairs on her chest and legs and begins to snack on neighbourhood dogs, Ginger does not like what she is doing and perceives it as a part of her transformation into womanhood. This narrative similarity must not be read as a coincidence, but again suggests the power of the female's sexuality within the horror genre, even when the subjects themselves are unaware of the extent of said power.

However, in *Ginger Snaps*, the female discovers that she is a monster earlier than the characters in Cronenberg's films. This allows for more subversive possibilities as the filmmakers, using the monster as a poetic license, fully engage with the thematic possibilities. And, *Ginger Snaps* is the only film of the three to present what is happening to the female as monstrous as opposed

to the simplification of the woman as monstrous - an important difference that begs further examination. With the audience's suspension of disbelief secured through familiar horror genre territory, the film deals subversively with issues of idealized location, female sexual maturation, gender-based sex roles, aggressive male desire, the effects of sexual promiscuity, and the female as monster.

Ginger and Brigitte live in what should be teenage utopia - a clean, crime-free, well-kept suburb. The girls go to a good school and live firmly within a secure nuclear family unit. However, in *Ginger Snaps*, the suburbs are portrayed as the complete opposite of paradise. Come nightfall, the streets of Bailey Downs fall prey to the "beast of Bailey Downs," and mutilated dogs litter the backyards and sporting fields of the community. The opening frames of the film reinforce this theme. The nearly silent sequence begins with idyllic shots of rows upon rows of perfectly manicured homes and gardens. A woman is shown raking up leaves in her yard while her young son plays in his sandbox. A close-up of the young boy, smiling and pattering in the sand is followed by the boy looking at an object in his hand with confusion and trepidation. He scratches his nose and leaves a bright red streak of what appears to be blood on his otherwise spotless face. The woman smiles and lackadaisically approaches to see what her son is up to. She finds the severed paw of a dog in his hand and frantically tosses it aside. Seconds later, she finds the corpse of Baxter, the family dog, and begins screaming. These suburbs are anything but safe and secure. As well, the girls' lives are anything but ideal before Ginger snaps. Both girls are considered "ugly," "losers," and are self-proclaimed outsiders. They share a mantra, "out by sixteen or dead in this scene, but together forever," and consider school, family and even venturing out of their bedrooms to be torturous and pointless. Most horror films set in suburbia show the perfect lives of the characters shattered by the sudden arrival of the monster, but in *Ginger Snaps*, the monsters are multiplied and the environment begins as anything but perfect. By denying a recognizable status quo and showing a dystopic vision of suburban life that only gets worse, the film subversively hints at what might be lurking behind those white-picket fences and perfectly manicured rose bushes, and it is not pretty.

Perhaps the most blatant issue dealt with in the film is the linking of female sexual maturation to the monstrous. Horror theorists have noticed that adolescent viewers are often most responsive to these types of films and perhaps subconsciously link the bodily changes of puberty to the macabre transformations present in these texts. Aforementioned theorist Crane makes several references to these concepts, "all images of scary fiends are generated by society to calm adolescent anxiety over sexual maturation... as sexual desire grows, or, more accurately, ceases to be successfully repressed or sublimated, the adolescent finds him- or herself overwhelmed by some very powerful and very mystifying urges. Society answers this confusion with appropriate instruction in how to deal with nascent sexual desire via the

mythic horror film." Significantly, Crane sees horror movies as texts in which adolescent viewers can find a safe haven from reality, and see something to really worry about. Who can stress about a pimple when there is a zombie knocking down your front door?

In *Ginger Snaps*, this concept is largely subverted. The scene in which Ginger is attacked begins with Ginger and Brigitte discovering a mutilated dog in the middle of a children's playground. Brigitte notices some blood on Ginger's leg, Ginger lifts her skirt to inspect, and responds, "I just got the curse... kill yourself to be different and your own body screws you." Seconds later, Ginger is gone, her screams echoing through the woods. Brigitte and Ginger are now separated in both physicality and location. In this scene, the onset of menstruation is shown as overwhelming, scary and solitary - a surprise attack. A final return to Crane's ideas reinforces this, "once adrift in the agony of adolescence, our earliest fears are summarily reawakened when our bodies cease to be our own. We must have some explanation for the singularly peculiar experience of losing the able and unblemished flesh that so faithfully carried us through our halcyon childhood days." The scene brilliantly juxtaposes symbols of childhood, the swings and jungle gym of the park, with the terror of bloodshed and the unknown woods. Later in the film, Ginger continues to gush blood from her vagina, and it is unclear whether it is the werewolf bite or her own perfectly natural pubescent progression that is the culprit. Ginger also sprouts strange hairs on her body and suffers wild mood swings, and again both causes are left ambiguous. Before she realizes that she is becoming a werewolf, Ginger is offended by Brigitte's implication that her changing body could be abnormal, "I just got my period. I've got weird hairs, so what? That means I've got hormones, and they may make me butt-ugly, but they don't make me a monster." For the viewer, the film might not be plausible throughout, but because Ginger's transformations are concurrent, the safe haven of earlier texts is denied.

The film also critiques the support systems in place for young women in the process of negotiating the potentially scary time of adolescence. When Ginger pays a visit to the school first aid office, the nurse, with a Stepford-smile, says, "I'm sure it seems like a lot of blood; it's a period! Everyone seems to panic their first time. A thick, syrupy, voluminous, discharge is not uncommon. The bulk of the uterine lining is shed within the first few days. Contractions - cramps - squeeze it out like a pump. In three to five days, you'll find lighter, bright red bleeding, that may turn to a brownish or blackish sludge that signals the end of the flow... expect it every twenty-eight days, give or take, for the next thirty years." Ginger's trip to the nurse does nothing to ease her menstruation anxiety, and guidance from her clueless mother fails to help either. Authorities of feminine crisis are framed as terrifying in their own way - there is nowhere for Ginger to turn for advice or a real, empathetic guide through the "curse" of womanhood. The film, thus, subverts the idea that there is anything natural or easy about this rite of passage.

Ginger Snaps also challenges gender-based sex roles. Once bitten, Ginger undergoes a sexual awakening and begins to question firmly set mores of teenage sexuality. This is most clearly shown through scenes set on the field hockey grounds. As part of their mandatory gym class, Ginger and Brigitte are forced to play the game, although they usually spend their time sneakily smoking on the sidelines. During the games, a group of boys sit in the bleachers and objectify the girls playing before them, reinforcing the boys as dominant and predatory players in the larger game of sexual politics. The boys admire Ginger's "rack" and instruct the girls to run past them and showcase their bodies for inspection. Before Ginger's transformation, she is an object to be looked at, nervously turning away when she attracts the gaze of Jason, one of the boys. Later, after Ginger's sexual awakening, she instigates a relationship with Jason and takes control of the dominant, male-centric role. When the couple fools around in the backseat of Jason's car, Ginger treats Jason as the object for her to judge and control. Consider the following exchange between Ginger and Jason:

Jason: Hey, hey, take it easy. We've got all night.
Ginger: Sorry, you just taste really good.
Jason: Just lie back and relax.
Ginger: You lie back and relax!
Jason: Who's the guy here?
Ginger: Who's the guy here? Who's the fucking guy here?

Ginger then proceeds to have her way with Jason, biting his face and neck while pinning him to the seat of the car. Gender expectations are turned on their head and the objectifying male becomes objectified in a feminist, poetic justice, horror-show. Jason is punished for his insensitivity towards women and his aggressive male desire. This punishment deepens when it is discovered that Jason, too, has been "infected" with the werewolf virus. The next day at school, Jason discovers a spot of blood on his trousers and, during a trip to the washroom, finds blood instead of urine when he stands at the urinal. The film, through its fictional werewolf narrative, is able to show the male experiencing what it must be like for a female to discover her first menstruation. Again, gender roles are subversively twisted. This subplot, much like in *Rabid*, also acts as a cautionary tale of the dangers of unprotected sex and the effects of sexual promiscuity.

Ginger as monster becomes a vehicle for a more predatory sexuality. She arrives at school dressed in a short skirt and tight shirt, presenting herself as an object for her own pleasure instead of waiting to be noticed. During an exchange with a group of boys, Ginger ironically flaunts her powers of seduction. She asks the boys if they will be attending a party that night, then rips open her coat to reveal her breasts and says, "I'm in charge of the prizes. You too could be a winner," before leaving the shocked boys behind. The link between Ginger's violence at the hand of her transformation into werewolf is clearly linked to her transformation into woman. After the murder of a school janitor, Ginger tries to explain to Brigitte how it feels to unleash all hidden desires, "It feels so good, Brigitte. It's

like touching yourself. You know every move, right on the fucking dot. And after, it's fucking fireworks, supernovas. I'm a goddamn force of nature." To Ginger, releasing repressed urges most strongly manifests itself in terms of sex and violence, often at the same time. During the final chase sequence of the film, Ginger, fully transformed into a werewolf (read: a mature woman), runs through her house in search of gratifying her urges. During her rampage, a photo of Ginger as a child is knocked from the wall and the glass shatters, completing her transformation and revealing the necessity for the idyllic landscape of childhood to be left behind for good, shattered like shards of glass that can never be repaired.

Finally, *Ginger Snaps* can be read as subversive in terms of film form and other intertextual references. This is a werewolf film that very much knows it is a werewolf film. Early in the film, Brigitte studies old examples of werewolf films, diligently taking notes. The characters in the film are familiar with all sorts of werewolf clichés, from the silver bullet and "howling at the moon" to the actual "technical" name for the werewolf, lycanthrope. Also, when Brigitte is desperately looking for a cure for Ginger, she acknowledges and rejects the cinematic mythology, demanding, "Let's just forget the Hollywood rules." This seditious element of the film helps to enrich and draw out many of the other dissident themes addressed above. It also encourages the viewer to look beyond the established formulas of the werewolf film and see not only the surface, but the subtext as well.

All three of these subversive Canadian horror films reach a similar conclusion, the woman as monster dies. The Cronenberg texts retreat familiar patriarchal and anti-feminist ground and reveal a mandate that reinforces established negative stereotypes of female sexuality. But *Ginger Snaps*, by using the werewolf myth as a metaphor for adolescence, treads into new and fascinating terror film territory. Not only does the female character explore feminist issues, the film subverts gender roles and audience expectations and sets a precedent for the rich depth of possibilities the horror genre can, and should, explore.

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