

Alternative Libraries as Heterotopias: Challenging Conventional Constructs

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Introduction

This paper presents the results of a preliminary exploration of the forms and objectives of physical, digital, and abstract alternative libraries by evoking Foucault's (1984/1967) notion of heterotopias and by examining a sample of archetypal websites. Alternative libraries, such as the Reanimation Library in Brooklyn, NY ("Reanimation Library," 2010), are here defined in a relational sense, positioned as decidedly not-conventional in their operational mission. These alternative libraries perform one or more of three functions: a) providing services that are typically left out of or deliberately excluded from the services of conventional libraries, b) serving as a space for the refiguring, reuse or repurposing of books and other media in ways that libraries do not offer, and c) presenting libraries as alternative spaces in contrast to conventional institutional notions.

The evolving role of libraries in a digital age is being debated in both the professional and scholarly literature (Budd, 2005; Billings, 2003; Dilevko, 2008; Boyce, 2006; Ross & Sennyey, 2008). Within this discourse, there exists a contingent conversation on how to define libraries and how libraries are constructed in terms of their social and organizational functions and responsibilities. One under-studied context for this discussion is found in libraries that could be called alternative, radical, or outliers (see also Radford, Radford, & Lingel, 2010). These libraries proffer a challenge to pivotal presumptions about the role and practices of libraries as institutions and librarianship as a profession. Their existence has the potential to unsettle librarian stereotypes, challenge notions of the library as an institutional authority of knowledge, and acknowledge the potential pluralities of social spaces in terms of the multiple ways these libraries are used.

The Library as Heterotopia

The authors propose that alternative libraries are an example of what Michel Foucault (1984/1967) has termed “heterotopias.” The concept of heterotopia was presented by Foucault in a lecture delivered to an audience of French architects in March 1967. Heterotopia is concerned with space and, more specifically, with “real places – places that do exist” (para. 11) rather than idealized utopian spaces created by the imagination. As people, we all reside in a physical space. However, this space is never neutral or value-free. Physical spaces are bound up in a number of oppositions that make sense of where we are, and our role within that particular space. Such oppositions include that between private and public space, family and social space, leisure and work space, and so on. As Foucault notes, “We do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things . . . we live inside a set of relations which delineates sites which are irreducible to one another” (para. 8). Our placement within a given physical space is also our placement within a contingent set of relations which enable us to identify the space as a specific social site such as: the street, the café, the cinema, the beach, the house, the home, the bedroom, the bed, the school, the university, the prison, the church, and so on. Each of these sites is imbued with particular expectations, rules of conduct, and power relations that tells us who we are in this space, how we should relate to this space, and how we should relate to others who are sharing this space with us.

The heterotopia is a particular kind of site that has “the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (para. 9). Foucault describes them as

“something like counter-sites” in which other real sites can be “represented, contested, and inverted” (para. 11). The alternative library acts as such a counter-site. They are real spaces which “represent” the space and functions of the traditional library (they have books, catalogs, classification systems, and so on). However, they simultaneously “contest” and “invert” these functions.

The heterotopia is more than a physical arrangement of space, however. It is also the basis of a particular experience that is made possible in that space. The space of the heterotopia gives rise to “a sort of mixed, joint experience” (para. 11) which Foucault describes by asking us to consider the experience of looking at oneself in the mirror. Foucault writes, “In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface” (para. 11). In one sense, the place of the mirror is a placeless place (“I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent” [para. 11]). However, the mirror is also a heterotopia because it exists as a real place. The mirror is there and it is able to exert “a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy” (para. 11).

When one finds oneself within the space of the heterotopia, one experiences the counteraction, the feeling that one is here and also somewhere else and that one is being transformed by the space in which one finds oneself. Examples of such spaces include the psychiatric hospital and the prison, places which contain people whose behavior is considered deviant to the norms required by the culture. Standing within the confines of the prison or the hospital, one experiences the possibility of difference because one is standing within a physical testament to the fact others behave differently and with standards and expectations different from

our own. One becomes aware of the person in the non-place “behind” the mirror who is made possible by our own presence and our overwhelming sense that “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” Foucault also cites the theatre (the “rectangle of the stage” [para. 19]) and the cinema (a “very odd rectangular room” [para. 19]) as examples of heterotopias; spaces with the potential to juxtapose several sites that would be incompatible in any other space. Tonkiss (2005) notes that:

each of these [heterotopias] has a touch of the uncanny. Some involve their own rules of order, divisions of space and regulations of practice. Many are places out of the ordinary, where to enter is to take on a different kind of bearing, to put oneself differently. They involve conventions of noise or of silence, of restraint or abandon, of attention or distraction. And they contain the potential to subvert, to caricature, to distil or to perfect ‘real arrangements’ of space (p. 133).

Of importance to this paper is the fact that Foucault includes the library as an example of a heterotopia, ascribing to it a number of characteristics. For Foucault, the library is a space “in which time never stops building up and topping its own summit” and which is defined by “the idea of accumulating everything” (para. 21). The space of the library embodies “the will to enclose in one place all times, all forms, all tastes” (para. 21) and “the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages” (para. 21). Finally, the space of the library embodies “the project of organizing . . . a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile space” (para. 21). These are grand claims, and are echoed by Ophir (1991) who writes that the library should not be viewed as a social space that happens to contain books. The library is a space of knowledge in which social space loses its grip; “the former did not contain the latter, any more than a book contains within its volume the space of its fiction, or an observatory, the sky observed in it” (p. 164). The library as heterotopia contains

within it all the sites of its surrounding culture but presents them as a potential mirror image (“I am over there; there where I am not”) which comes into being when the library is entered and encountered as a physical space. The library building itself is a message. As Thomas (1996) suggests, “an experience of library architecture. . . is not simply a neutral backdrop for library services which engages or fails to engage a user in some aesthetic response. On the contrary, it constitutes part of a semiotically loaded communicative moment” (p. 27). The experience of the library as space is also described in Radford and Radford (2001) and Radford and Radford (1997).

Types of Alternative Libraries

If the library is a heterotopia within a society, then the alternative library is a space which can be considered a heterotopia for the library. Within Library and Information Science (LIS) scholarship, research on alternative libraries can be divided into two main categories, the first with roots in activism and social justice and the second in technological change, as depicted in Figure 1, below. Regarding the former, libraries emerged primarily in the 1960s and 1970s that were aimed at specific user populations, typically underserved or marginalized communities.

The latter category stems from focusing on (or arguing for) institutional change in terms of embracing technological development and affordances. A dividing concept between these two can be thought of in terms of institutional change as either proactive, where libraries work towards building a collection or developing services for a particular group, or reactive, in that libraries are responding to technological change, particularly through digitization efforts and the incorporation of Web 2.0 applications into archives, services and programs.

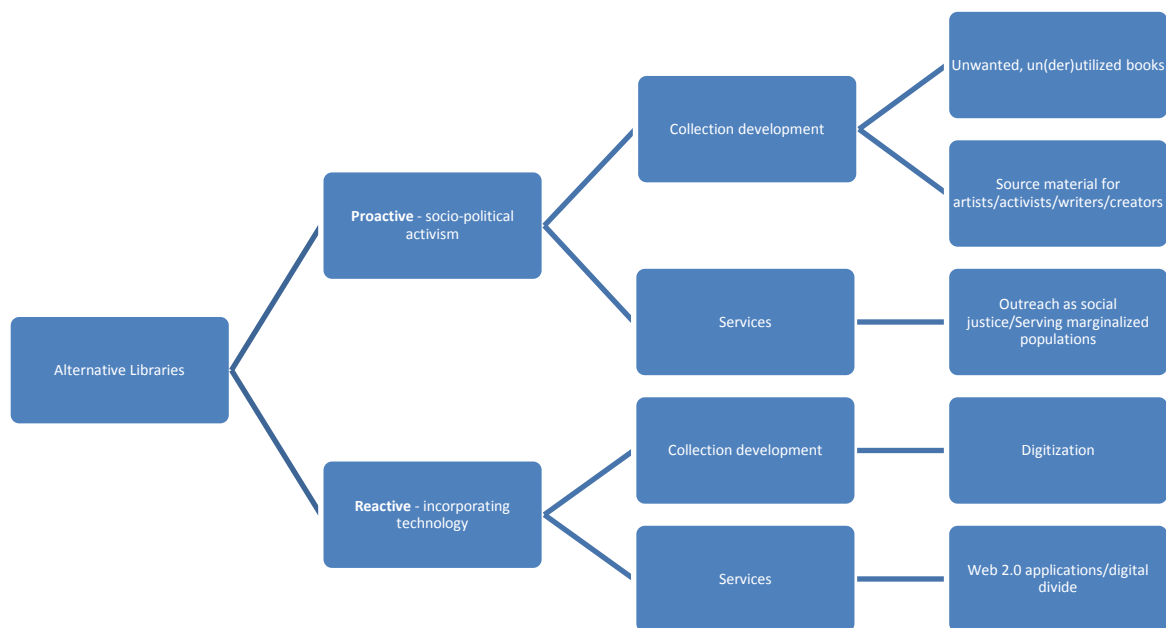


Figure 1 Taxonomy of alternative libraries as proactive and reactive

Alternative libraries and activism

In their article on socially responsible librarianship, Morrone and Friedman (2009) provide a survey of librarian activism in the 1960s and 1970s. Responding to a period of sustained social upheaval, a number of libraries sought to provide resources, services and meeting spaces for feminists, the queer community and people of color, among other groups. The authors argued that contemporary libraries can similarly address contemporary issues of social justice through outreach services geared specifically towards underserved and marginalized populations, as well as using materials acquisition to “develop space for underground materials” (p. 380). In addition to community outreach, Morrone and Friedman emphasize the potential for libraries to incorporate underused or outsider materials, which is a key function for the alternative libraries addressed in this paper as places where abandoned texts are reincorporated into library spaces. Focusing specifically on the issue of sociocultural politics and collection

development (and specifically on the collection of James Danky), Dilevko (2008) effectively provides both a call to action and a pragmatic blueprint for an “alternative vision” of acquisition policy that sees social justice as a core component of a library’s collection. Again, this conception of collection development as a library function with social, cultural and artistic possibilities will prove to be an important issue for the alternative libraries discussed and analyzed here. A nuanced perspective on the librarian culture at work in terms of activism is offered by the collection *Revolting Librarians Redux* (Roberto & West, 2003). The Roberto and West (2003) volume features articles by a number of authors who participated in the “daring anthology of provocative essays” (Samek, 2006, p. 137) entitled *Revolting Librarians* (West & Katz, 1972). *Revolting Librarians* revisits controversial issues covered in the 1972 volume such as feminism, intellectual freedom, social justice and community inclusion and both books are published by Booklegger Press, “the first women-owned American library publisher” (Samek, 2006, p. 126).

Alternative libraries and technology

In contrast to the proactive nature of alternative libraries and librarian activism, technological change has provoked a different strand of scholarship about alternative libraries. As technological innovations continue to present critical opportunities for new services and collections, libraries have struggled to keep pace with user demands for affordances such as digitization, online access to digital collections and web-based services such as virtual reference and mobile access. In an early and prescient article for *Library Journal*, Robinson (1989) argued that among the challenges facing public libraries were technological changes that would require serious changes in terms of traditional library services, such that libraries should take it upon themselves to consider how they might alter their institutional identities. Billings (2003) has

suggested that for academic libraries, these changes will result in “punctuations” of change and development, similar to biological evolutions. Budd (2005) argued that academic libraries will “have to respond to alterations of purpose and operation because the library exists to provide optimum services to its community (which itself is subject to change)” (p. 289). Budd suggest that librarians should resist a totalitarian universalized approach to library services or information objects and instead focus on access. Furthermore, Budd encouraged an openness or flexibility in construction definitions of the library as an institution. These tensions are echoed by Boyce (2006), who pointed out that “literacy/library spaces are technologically and culturally mediated, and they are imbued, therefore, with the potential for different sets of social relations and cultural subjectivities – conventional, virtual and luminal” (p. 30). This important theoretical turn addressed the extent to which the arrival of new technologies has provoked something of a teleological crisis as far as what purpose(s) libraries are mean to serve within and for their communities. Driven by technological change, there has been an opening up or introduced fluidity as far as a library’s institutional definition.

With these suggestions of openness to institutional definitions in mind, a point of convergence between proactive and reactive alternative libraries can be posited in terms of institutional purpose. Shared by both categories of alternative libraries is a fundamental question of what it means to be a library or the sociocultural discourses surrounding librarianship as a profession and libraries as institutions. What are the obligations of libraries in terms of serving their surrounding community? What services should be provided? What kinds of collection development policy provide the best (or most needed?) materials? With these questions in mind, the authors can now turn to the alternative libraries that are the focus of this paper. These libraries are proactive in that they have directed goals for their collections, often rooted in

creating a space for materials that have been ignored by or removed from traditional libraries. Alternative libraries are also reactive, however, in that their recent emergence as institutions has led to a smoother and more natural incorporation of digital technologies than institutions with longer histories and, consequently, legacy collections and services, as well as legacy conventions about institutional roles. Emerging alternative libraries operate at liminal boundaries, not only in terms of their collections, but in their very institutional aims. At a moment when libraries are struggling to merge traditional functions and social roles with contemporary questions of who to serve and how best to serve them, alternative libraries have positioned themselves as sites of material as well as institutional play. It may in fact be that it is precisely because librarians have had to grapple with questions of their organizational purpose that new archives have emerged with singular and experimental definitions of what it means for an institution to call itself a library.

Examples of Alternative Libraries as Heterotopias

To explore and understand these tensions surrounding libraries as institutions in terms of emergent and divergent conceptualizations, this paper offers a discussion of alternative libraries in terms of their collections, services, and institutional aims, based on an examination of their websites. A literature review and Web search resulted in identification of numerous alternative libraries.ⁱ For this preliminary exploration, five examples of archetypal alternative libraries, chosen to represent a range of these different types, are presented below. These alternative libraries offer some insights on how these entities work both with and against standard understandings of the library.

The Reanimation Library

An example of a proactive library heterotopia is the Reanimation Library which was launched by Andrew Beccone as a website in 2005 and housed in a physical location in Brooklyn, New York, since 2006. The central project of the Reanimation Library is the “reanimation” of deaccessioned books; that is, bringing them back from a state of disuse and placing them in conditions where their usefulness can be recognized and implemented (Beccone and Walker, in press; Reanimation Library, 2010). The website states:

To reanimate means to restore life. More often than not, library collection development policies recommend discarding the type of material that comprises the Library’s Primary Collection. From this perspective, the books of the Primary Collection are dead to most libraries because they aren’t kept, maintained, or valued. The Reanimation Library finds, acquires, catalogs, and provides access to this material: it reanimates.

Although the Reanimation Library has a teleological interest (i.e., relating to design or purpose) in being open to how people use (or reanimate) the assets, one explicit aim of the library is to encourage use of the collection as source material for artists, either directly as scanned or copied images for collages or indirectly as inspiration for illustration. Thus, the Reanimation Library displaces standard notions of the library by offering texts as a catalyst for a creative endeavor rather than as a source of information. The books certainly contain information, but the information is entirely secondary to the artistic creativity the text might inspire.

The Public Library of American Public Library Deaccession

Another example of a proactive alternative library heterotopia can be seen in The Public Library of American Public Library Deaccession. Over a two-year period, artists Julia Weist and

Maayan Pearl documented the deaccession practices of public libraries in the United States, resulting in a 2007 installation inspired by and consisting of books that had been deaccessioned from libraries (Weist, 2010). The project culminated in a searchable database of texts that had been withdrawn from the collection, thus creating a meta-collection of deaccessioned monographs. In some ways, Weist and Pearl did something similar to Beccone's Reanimation Library: they reclaimed deaccessioned books and allowed them to operate in a new discursive formation.

In Weist and Pearl's project, the contents of the books in the new collection are less important than the fact they are deaccessioned. It is the book's discarded status which makes one view its value in a new way. An interview with Weist ("NY Arts," 2007) describes her process of "alternative research," which "included months of reading only withdrawn public library romances while writing and traveling." A novel, *Sexy Librarian*, was written while Weist was touring the country with her installation. She told the interviewer that her "plan for the future is to get the book into the New York Public Library and then wait for it to be withdrawn."

After obtaining records from and making visits to libraries, Weist and Pearl constructed a database of texts that had been removed from libraries throughout the United States. Blogger Paddy Johnson (2007) describes his experience of using the deaccessioned database:

A less poetic aspect to the piece, but of inestimable value is the fact that the library actually works. Almost inevitably, the user should find results to search terms they actually find interesting; witness my 374 search results for the term "Art." While most of these books seem to be either written by someone named Art or about "art" of something else, which in and of itself is rather amusing, I like that at least in theory, the results

should give us an idea of what kind of art is deemed inaccurate, outdated or is simply unpopular with the residences of a particular city.

The Public Library of American Public Library Deaccession makes a political statement about weeding policies, collection development and archival culture. By individually gathering a catalog of texts that had been institutionally discarded, Weist and Pearl set up a reflexive paradox of worth, where a challenge has been issued to the processes of rendering judgment on texts as applicable or not applicable to a collection, or useable or not useable by library patrons. This paradox calls attention to a re-examination of the traditional library practice of privileging certain texts over others, particularly in the deaccession or weeding process (see also Radford & Radford, 2005).

The Prelinger Library

Another example of a proactive heterotopic library is the Prelinger Library, which is an “appropriation-friendly, browsable collection of approximately 40,000 books, periodicals, printed ephemera and government documents” (Prelinger Library, 2010). Developed by Megan Shaw Prelinger and Rick Prelinger, and opened in 2004, it has both a Web presence and a physical location in downtown San Francisco, California. It features a growing collection of print books and other materials organized by subject, over 3,700 downloadable digital books, and approximately 500 periodical runs.

The website proclaims that this project is in direct response to trends engulfing traditional libraries that erect barriers to access and browsing:

Though libraries live on (and are among the least-corrupted democratic institutions), the freedom to browse serendipitously is becoming rarer. Now that many research libraries

are economizing on space and converting print collections to microfilm and digital formats, it's becoming harder to wander and let the shelves themselves suggest new directions and ideas. Key academic and research libraries are often closed to unaffiliated users, and many keep the bulk of their collections in closed stacks, inhibiting the rewarding pleasures of browsing...And finally, much of the material in our collection is difficult to find in most libraries readily accessible to the general public (Prelinger Library, 2010).

The library is also interested in making digital and print materials available to those who are not members of “protected academic environments,” especially “artists, activists, and independent scholars.” (Prelinger Library, 2010).ⁱⁱ Users are invited to download any of the digital content, and to bring their digital cameras to the physical location to take photographs of documents if desired, as all materials are in the public domain. Print materials do not circulate, but are easily browsed and can be used on site, although the library has only limited, but regular, hours of physical access. The resemblance to a traditional library is highlighted by the use of physical stacks and subject organization (albeit loose). The digital library offers browsing and access through title and author Web indexes. In addition, there are links to other digitization projects such as “Project Gutenberg” (<http://www.projectgutenberg.org>).

Library Thing

Library Thing is an example of an alternative library that is reactive in nature, incorporating technology such as Web 2.0 applications and offering an alternative to traditional library access to books and professional cataloging and organizational tools. Library Thing (2010) is “a cataloging and social networking site for book lovers.” As an application, it allows users to “create a library-quality catalog of books.” Library Thing was created by one

individual, Tim Spalding, a Web developer based in Portland, Maine. It has no collections, but offers a number of rather traditional library services in an untraditional way. Instead of librarians cataloging books and offering standard cataloging subject headings and bibliographies, Library Thing invites users to catalog their own personal collections and assign self-generated “tags” that describe book content.

According to its Web page, Library Thing has over 1.1 million users who have cataloged over 55 million books and generated over 68 million tags (Library Thing, 2010). It offers bibliographies, book recommendations, and book reviews that are written and compiled for users by other users. Statistics for collections, tags, and authors are available, as are a calendar of author events and readings and a copious amount of author and book information. Library Thing also features a blog, mobile applications (including a search widget), a wiki, and an RSS feed. It also has active message boards and group forums for book lovers with similar taste who want to engage in reading/recommending group discussions. For those who catalog up to 200 books, Library Thing is free, but for larger collections a small fee is charged (\$10 per year or \$25 for lifetime membership).

Library Thing can be seen as a heteretopia in that it has mimicked traditional library services, while empowering ordinary people to create simple and idiosyncratic organizational schemes (referred to as “folksonomies,” see Spiteri, 2006). This self-cataloging option exists in stark contrast to the rule-governed, tightly controlled, and often esoteric vocabulary and subject headings of standard indexes and cataloging tools. These tools include the Library of Congress Subject Headings (add cite), the Dewey Decimal Classification System (add cite) and rules and procedures found in the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules, 2nd Ed. AACR2 (add cite). Enabling self-cataloging via tags has positioned Library Thing as a heteretopia that “contests” and

“inverts” formal cataloging practices that have occupied professional librarians for centuries. In addition, working from both outside the traditional library profession, yet within library conventions, Library Thing has developed a “Library Thing for Libraries” that provides an opportunity for libraries to offer the social networking and interactivity of Web 2.0 applications to their users (<http://www.librarything.com/forlibraries>). Further, it has conformed to the open access Z39.50 protocol, maintained by the Library of Congress, that allows standardization of access for integrated library systems (<http://www.loc.gov/z3950/agency/>).

Cabinet National Library

An example of an alternative library that exists as an “uncanny” and playful physical library site can be seen in the Cabinet National Library which is both a small journal archive and a play on the word “Cabinet.” According to the library’s website, as part of its spring 2003 issue on “Property,” *Cabinet Magazine* purchased a half acre of land outside of Deming, New Mexico, bought on eBay (<http://www.ebay.com>) for \$300.00 (Cabinet National Library, 2006). In July of 2004, that property became the Cabinet National Library, with the explanation: “What better way to establish your civilization than to create a repository for its organizing documents?” (Cabinet National Library, 2006).

The library currently consists of a three-drawer metal file cabinet, partially buried in a mound of dirt, which can be viewed in physical space for those willing to make the trip to New Mexico, and via the website. The planning and construction of the library, which consisted of building the small mound on the flat property and sculpting the mound to house the file cabinet is detailed on the website and illustrated with drawings and photographs. The collection of paper journal issues of *Cabinet Magazine*, is added to when library users place issues in the middle file drawer. This library thus houses a limited collection of only past issues of one journal run. It

offers no digital access to the issue contents (although this may be added in the future). The top file drawer houses the traditional library point of access of a card catalog along with a guestbook and guest services. Library users or “guests” who come on foot to the library are able to access useful items such as food, water, and boots in the bottom file cabinet drawer, referred to as the “snack bar.” The National Cabinet Library is clearly a heterotopia in its micro scale, lack of a physical building to house the file “cabinet” in order to protect the holdings, lack of a systematic collection development plan, or staff, and in its playful nature. It exists as a deliberate caricature of the traditional library.

Conclusion

The above discussion of the idea of alternative libraries as heterotopias along with selected examples of a range of types are offered to illustrate how this exploration has given particular attention to the ways in which these sites do or do not conform to conventional practices or constructs of traditional librarianship. This paper asserts that the uncanniness of alternative libraries relies heavily on holding up a Foucauldian “mirror” to standard conventions of traditional libraries, upending and subverting stereotypical views by existing as experimental, virtual, radical, activist, and anarchist counterparts. Where conventional libraries can also possibly be read as sites of heterotopias, based on their use by individuals for varying social rituals, alternative libraries can be viewed as heterotopias based on their very existence, their institutional missions, and, critically, by the ways that they perform themselves as libraries.

ⁱ Links to additional alternative libraries (both digital and physical) can be found at The Reanimation Library website (<http://www.reanimationlibrary.org/pages/libart.htm>) and at the Radical Reference website (<http://www.radicalreference.info/altlibraries>).

ⁱⁱ Like the Prelinger Library, Radical Reference exists to serve some underserved or marginalized populations. “Radical Reference is a collective of volunteer library workers who believe in social justice and equality. We support activist communities, progressive organizations, and independent journalists by providing professional research support, education and access to information. We work in a collaborative virtual setting and are dedicated to information activism to foster a more egalitarian society.” (Radical Reference, 2010).

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