

"The Future of Sex"  
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July 25, 1967

By Marshall McLuhan and George B. Leonard Sex as we know it may soon be dead. But the surprising future will be far from sexless. Generations to come may find all of life more erotic than now seems possible.

# THE

"WELL, IT FINALLY HAPPENED," Michael Murphy of California's Esalen Institute recently said. "A young person came up to talk with me, and I couldn't tell if this person was a man or a woman. Now, I've seen plenty of young people of both sexes dressed in slacks, sweater and long hair, but I'd always been able to find *some* sexually distinguishing clue. This time there was *no way for me to tell*. I admit it shook me up. I didn't know exactly how to relate. I felt it would take a new kind of relating, no matter if it were a boy or girl."

The episode is extreme, but it points to a strong trend. In today's most technologically advanced societies, especially urban Britain and America, members of the younger generation are making it clear—in dress and music, deeds and words—just how unequivocally they reject their elders' sexual world. It is tempting to treat the extremes as fads: perhaps many of them are. But beneath the external symptoms, deep transforming forces are at work.

Sex as we now think of it may soon be dead. Sexual concepts, ideals and practices already are being altered almost beyond recognition. Marriage and the family are shifting into new dimensions. What it will mean to be boy or girl, man or woman, husband or wife, male or female may come as one of the great surprises the future holds for us.

We study the future the better to understand a present that will not stand still for inspection. Today, corporations, foundations and governments are asking a new breed of experts called "futurists" to tell them how things are going to be. These futurists tend to limit their predictions to things rather than people. Their imaginations and their computers fight future wars, knit future systems of economics, transportation and communication, build future cities of fantastic cast. Into these wars, systems and cities, they place people just like us—and thereby falsify all their predictions. By default rather than design, most futurists assume that "human nature" will hold firm. They ignore the fact that technological change has always struck human life right at the heart, changing people just as it changes things.

This may be especially true of sex. A history of mankind in terms of sexual practices would make wildly variegated reading. Many ancient civilizations, for example, encouraged varying degrees of incest, and the Ptolemies, successors to Alexander the Great, practiced marriage between brother and sister for some three hundred years

with no obvious ill effect. Modern anthropologists have brought back stories of present-day primitive tribes whose sex customs confound our traditional notion that there is only one "natural" pattern of relationship between the sexes.

In early man, just as in most of the higher mammals, males and females lived rather similar lives, with little specialization except where child-bearing and childrearing were concerned. Life for every member of a primitive hunting tribe was integral, all-involving: there could be no feminist movement, nor any special class of homosexuals or prostitutes. But when mankind turned from hunting to farming, and then to creating cities, empires, pyramids and temples, men and women were split apart in ways that went far beyond biology. Many men became specialists—kings, workers, merchants, warriors, farmers, scribes—in the increasingly complex social machine. Most women fell heir to less specialized, but separate, domestic tasks.

With the coming of writing, it was the manly virtues that were recorded and extolled. As Charles W. Ferguson points out in *The Male Attitude*, men have kept the records of the race, which may explain why history is a chronicle of war, conquest, politics, hot competition and abstract reasoning. "What survives in the broad account of the days before the modern era," Ferguson writes, "is a picture of a humankind full of hostility and inevitable hate." (LOOK researchers were surprised to find that, until relatively recent times, female births and deaths often were not even recorded.) Ancient writers exaggerated the biological as well as the social differences between the sexes, with the female coming off very badly indeed.

The Romans invented the word *sexus*, probably deriving it from the Latin verb *secare*, to cut or sever. And that is exactly what civilization has done to man and woman. The cutting apart of the sexes rarely has been more drastic than in the industrial age of Europe and America, the period that was presaged by the invention of printing around 1460, and that is now changing into something new right before our eyes.

Throughout the Middle Ages, there had been less separateness between men and women. Privacy, for example, was unwished. Houses had no hallways: bedrooms served as passageways and sleeping places for children, relatives and visitors, along with married couples. Under such circumstances, the sexual act merged easily with the rest of life. Language now considered intimate or vul-

gar was part of ordinary conversation. Childhood did not exist as a separate category. At about age seven, children simply moved into the grown-up world: paintings of that day depict the young as scaled-down adults, even to the matter of clothing.

After printing, however, human life became increasingly visual and compartmentalized. Architecture took up the idea of visual enclosure, with private rooms connected by hallways. It was only when this happened that childhood separated out from the rest of life. At the same time, sexual activity went underground. Hidden and mysterious, it receded into a realm apart from ordinary existence, becoming more and more fraught with a special intensity, a vague anxiety. Indecency, pornography and obscenity came into being as a result of specialist stress on separate parts of the body. By the time of Queen Victoria, the split between sex and the proper life was complete. Any wedding night, after a five- to ten-year engagement, was likely to be a trauma.

Freud flushed sex up out of the underground, but he, like his contemporaries, saw it as an explosive, a possible threat to whatever held civilization together. In his time—and even up to the present—the forces of life seemed constantly at odds with one another: since the Renaissance, it has seemed necessary to pen them up in separate compartments. The industrial age built more than its share of these boxes. It split class from class, job from job, profession from profession, work from play; divorced the self from the reality and joy of the present moment; fragmented the senses from the emotions, from the intellect: and, perhaps most importantly of all, created highly specialized and standardized males and females.

The ideal male of the industrial age was "all man." He was aggressive, competitive, logical. This man of action was also an apostle of the abstract. And he feared to show much emotion. The ideal woman, for her part, was emotional, intuitive, guilefully practical, submissive. Maleness and femaleness were separate territories: man and woman shared only a tiny plot of common humanity. The wonder is that the two could get together long enough to continue the race.

When sex—under the influence of Freud, factories, the automobile and world wars—came out into the open to become SEX, a peculiar thing happened: People were *supposed* to be free and frequent with their sexual activity. Women were *supposed* to turn from Victorian propriety to pas-

# FUTURE OF SEX

course may decrease in the future *because of* a real revolution in attitudes toward, feelings about and uses of sex, especially concerning the roles of male and female. What are those young men with long, flowing hair really saying? In what may seem a ludicrous overstatement, they are sending a clear message to all who will listen: "We are no longer afraid to display what *you* may call 'feminine.' We are willing to reveal that we have feelings, weaknesses, tenderness—that we are human. And, by the way, we just may be ridiculing all of those uptight movie males with cropped hair and unflinching eyes. We're betting they can't touch our girls." Indeed, the long-haired boys' appeal is not esthetic, but sexual: not private, but corporate.

Bear in mind that the Beatles' dazzling early success, long before their remarkable musicianship came clear, was conferred upon them by millions of young *females* who were transported by those pageboy hairdos and those sensitive faces. And the Beatles were not the first in a modern lineage of girl-movers. A younger, slenderer, tenderer Frank Sinatra, and then a hip-swiveling Elvis Presley, had reduced earlier sub-generations to squeals and moans. It takes a particularly obstinate blindness not to realize that an ability to free emotions, and not a fragmented "all-maleness," provides today's most compelling erotic appeal.

We might also confess that our reading of the new teen-age "conformity" of dress and hairdo fails to consider the social ritualism of these forms. They express the new desire for depth involvement in social life rather than egotistic eccentricity.

The trend (perhaps without the exaggerated hair style) seems likely to continue. The all-sensory, all-pervasive total environment of the future may be no place for the narrow-gauge, specialized male. Emotional range and psychic mobility may be valued. Heightened intuition may be required. The breed of *hombre* generally portrayed by John Wayne is already an anachronism. "Be a man!" the *hombre* bellows, and the more perceptive of our young laugh.

And if the narrow-gauge male is not laughed out of existence, he may, literally, *die* out. Specialized, competitive man is particularly susceptible to the maladies of the involuntary muscle, nervous and vascular systems. A U.S. male's life expectancy now is seven years less than a female's. Figures on earlier times are impossible to verify, but one thing is sure: the gap has never been greater. Men who operate inside the boxes of fragmented civilization

—whether bus driver, production-line worker or professional specialist—die off at an alarming rate from the heart and gut diseases. Figures for the peptic ulcer are particularly revealing: deaths for white men are four times that for white women in the U.S. But the female death rate, as women have started pushing into the man's world, has been rising. And what about today's younger generation, those under 25? Here are the children of TV and science fiction, the pioneers of the Electric Age, the first humans to sample, even briefly and incompletely, the less fragmented, less competitive, more involving future. What of these tentatively retribalized young men? We may predict that their ulcer rate will decline.

No surprise. In the most isolated primitive tribes, those whose members still operate as free-roving hunters, digestive disorders are practically unknown and the usual civilized heart troubles are rare. Significantly, these people make little distinction between the ideal qualities of male and female. As the noted British anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer writes concerning the peace-loving Pygmies of Africa, the Arapesh of New Guinea and the Lepchas of Sikkim: "Men and women have different primary sexual characteristics—a source of endless merriment as well as more concrete satisfactions—and some different skills and aptitudes. No child, however, grows up with the injunctions, 'All real men do . . . ' or 'No proper woman does . . . ' so that there is no confusion of sexual identity: no cases of sexual inversion have been reported among them. The model for the growing child is one of concrete performance and frank enjoyment, not of metaphysical, symbolic achievements or of ordeals to be surmounted. They do not have heroes or martyrs to emulate or cowards or traitors to despise: . . . a happy, hard-working and productive life is within the reach of all."

It would seem that "being a man" in the usual, aggressive Western sense is, if nothing else, unhealthy. To live an ordinary peacetime life in the U.S.—as a recent Army study of the "nervous secretions" of combat soldiers in Vietnam shows—is as bad or worse for your gut, heart and nervous system as facing enemy bullets. But the present fragmented civilization seems on its way out, and what "being a man" means could swiftly change.

Extremes create opposite extremes. The specialized, narrow-gauge male of the industrial age produced—in ideal, at least—the specialized woman. The age stressed the visual over the other

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sionate responsiveness. And yet the basic ideals of maleness and femaleness continued unchanged. It was like a revolution without popular support: a lot of slogans, shouting and confusion, but not much revolution.

The only real attempt at change up until the present turned out to be abortive. Women of feminist persuasion, viewing the action and the power over there in the arena of aggressiveness, specialization and hot competition, tried to take on the attributes of maleness. How ironical! They may have been heading in the wrong direction. When the Victorian novelist George Meredith wrote, "I expect that Woman will be the last thing civilized man," he was unknowingly describing her fitness for the *post-civilized* Electric Age. Where the old technology split people and the world apart, demanded human fragmentation, the emerging technology is putting Humpty Dumpty back together again. It is most doubtful, in the new age, that the rigidly "male" qualities will be of much use. In fact, there may well be little need for standardized males *or* females.

Trying to define a new sexuality in the industrial period, D. H. Lawrence placed his characters against a backdrop of factories, mines, smokestacks. His most successful sexual hero (in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*) was a gamekeeper; he may be viewed as the closest Lawrence could get to the primitive hunter. In a sense, the man of the future will be a hunter, an adventurer, a researcher—not a cog in a social machine. The coming age, linked by all-involving, instantaneous, responsive, electronic communication, may seem more "tribal" or "industrial." The whole business of sex may come again, as in the tribal state, play—freer, but less important.

When survey-takers "prove" that there is no sexual revolution among our young people by showing that the frequency of sexual intercourse has not greatly increased, they are missing the point completely. Indeed, the frequency of inter-

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## FUTURE OF SEX CONTINUED

senses; the fast development of photography, and then movies, helped pull femaleness up from the context of life, of actuality, and make it something special, intense, "hot."

Grotesque and distorted extremes tend to pop out just at the end of any era, a good example being the recent rash of blown-up photographic nudes. The foldout playmate in *Playboy Magazine*—she of outsize breast and buttocks, pictured in sharp detail—signals the death throes of a departing age. Already, she is beginning to appear quaint, not sexy. She might still be possible for a while in a wide-screen, color movie (another hot medium). But try to imagine her, in that same artificial pose, on the intimate, involving, "cool" television set in your living room.

Don't throw away your *Playboy* foldouts, however. Sooner than it may seem possible, those playmate-size nudes may become fashionable as collectors' items, having the same old-timey quality for future generations that cigar-store Indians and Victorian cartoons have for us. This is not to say that nudity is on its way out. On the contrary, it will most likely increase in the neo-tribal future. But it will merge into the context of ordinary living, becoming not so much lurid and sexy as natural and sensuous.

Already, new "sex symbols" poke fun at the super female. Notable among them is the boyish and gentle young model known as Twiggy. Sophia Loren, for example, is to Twiggy as a Rubens painting is to an X ray. And what does an X ray of a woman reveal? Not a realistic picture, but a deep, involving image. Not a specialized female, but a *human being*.

It is toward a common humanity that both sexes now tend. As artificial, socially-imposed distinctions disappear, the unalterable essentials of maleness and femaleness may assume their rightful importance and delight. The lusty Gallic salute, *Vive la différence!*, rings truer about biology than about mores, mannerisms and dress. Even fashion speaks. "Glamour" was a form of armor, designed to insulate, to separate. The new styles, male and female, invite dialogue.

**W** The Pill makes a woman a Bomb

WHILE BOTH SEXES will probably change, most men will have farther to go than most women in adjusting to the new life. In an unspecialized world of computers and all-enveloping communications, sensitive intuition and openness will win more prizes, if you will, than unfeeling simplistic logic. Right now, it is impossible to guess how many companies are being held together by intuitive and sensitive executive secretaries. Fortunate is the enterprise that has a womanly woman (not a brittle, feminist dame) as a high-level officer. Many forward-looking corporations, especially in the aerospace industry, already are engaged in sensitivity-training sessions for their male executives. The behavior encouraged in these sessions would make a John Wayne character wince: Manly males learn how to reveal their emotions, to become sensitive to others, to weep openly if that is what they feel like doing—all this in the pursuit of higher profits. Sensitivity *works*. The new technology—complex, interrelated, responsive—demands it.

The demands for new male and female ideals and actions are all around us, changing people in many a subtle and unsuspected way. But there is one specific product of modern technology, the contraceptive pill, that can blow the old boundaries sky high. It makes it possible for sexual woman to act like sexual man. Just as the Bomb instantly wipes out all the separating boundaries essential to conventional war, the Pill erases the old sexual boundaries in a flash. The Pill makes woman a Bomb. She creates a new kind of fragmentation, separating sexual intercourse from procreation. She also explodes old barriers between the sexes, bringing them closer together. Watch for traditions to fall.

Romantic Love seems a likely victim. As a specialty, romance was an invention of the late Middle Ages, a triumph of highly in-

dividualistic enterprise. It requires separation, unfulfillment. The chase is everything—the man aflame, the maiden coy. Sexual consummation bursts the balloon of yearning. As in the romantic movies, the significant embrace can hardly be imagined without “The End” printed over it. Indeed, what we have called sex in recent decades may be viewed as the lag end of Romantic Love.

As a way of selecting a spouse, romance (“In all the world, you are the only girl for me”) never worked very well. Back in the 13th century, Boswell may have felt some shock at Dr. Johnson’s answer to his question: “Pray, Sir, do you not suppose there are fifty women in the world, with any one of whom a man may be as happy, as with any one woman in particular?” Johnson replied: “Aye, fifty thousand.” The future may well agree with Dr. Johnson. It is difficult to play the coy maiden on a daily diet of contraceptive pills. And the appeal of computer dating suggests that young people are seeking out a wide and quite practical range of qualities in their mates—not just romance or high-intensity sex appeal. Here, in fact, may be the electronic counterpart of arranged marriage.

The great mystics have always perceived Romantic Love as somehow defective, as a double ego that selfishly ignores other people. Today’s youngsters have a different way of putting it: “Our parents’ generation is hung up about sex.”

**A**s ROMANTIC LOVE fades, so may sexual privacy. Already, young people shock their elders by casually conversing on matters previously considered top secret. And the hippies, those brash pioneers of new life patterns, have reverted—boys and girls together, along with a few little children—to the communal living of the Middle Ages or the primitive tribe. It is not uncommon to find a goodly mixture of them sleeping in one room. Readers who envisage wild orgies just don’t get the picture. Most of the hippies are *not* hung up on sex. To them, sex is merely one of many sensory experiences. It is available when desired—therefore perhaps not so desperately pursued.

Today, sex is returning to the adult world just as childhood is once again becoming enmeshed in grown-up matters. The dream girl or dream guy is becoming as odd an idea as the dream house in a world of integral urban design. Sex is becoming secondary to the young. At the same rate that it becomes accessible, it is cooling down. A couple of teenagers like Romeo and Juliet would now have some of their most dramatic moments deciding on the kind of education they want for their children, plus a second career for Romeo in middle age.

In future generations, it seems most likely that sex will merge with the rest of life, that it will settle down and take its place within a whole spectrum of experiences. You might not think so, what with the outpouring of sexed-up novels and plays since World War II. But these, like the slickly pictured playmates, bring to mind the death rattle of an era. When a novelist like Norman Mailer contends that man is boxed-in by civilized constraints, he is quite right. But when he goes on to say that the free human spirit can now assert itself mostly through sex and violence, he is being merely Victorian.

The more that modern writers present sexual activity as a separate, highly defined, “hot” aspect of life, the more they hasten the death of SEX. Most “literary” novelists have not yet discovered the present, much less glimpsed the future; which is one reason why so many of the brighter college students have turned to anti-novels and, in spite of its questionable literary reputation, science fiction. Robert Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land*, a popular underground book, tells of an attempt to set up Martian, rather than the usual human, relationships here on earth. In these relationships, what we term sex is communal and multisensual. There is no sharp, artificial distinction between male and female roles. Sex blends with other activities that might be called mystical. And there is even the need for a new word (Heinlein calls it “growing closer”) for this demi-erotic mode of relating. Many

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## FUTURE OF SEX CONTINUED

young people see something of their own aspirations in the Heinlein book and others similar to it. Norman O. Brown (*Life Against Death, Love's Body*) strikes an equally sympathetic response with his thesis that civilized man has even fragmented his physical person. According to Brown, many people can feel sexual pleasure only in the sex organs themselves; the rich sensory universe of the rest of the body has been deadened.

Just as the Electric Age, with its multitudinous communication aids, is extending the human nervous system *outside* the body, it is also creating a new desire for exploration *inside* the self. This inner trip seeks ways to awaken *all* the senses, to find long-lost human capacities, to discover turn-ons beyond the narrowly sexual. One instance of this new drive for depth involvement is the growing national interest in Oriental religion and philosophy; another, riskier, one is increasing use of LSD and marijuana among young people. These drugs, the experimentalists claim, very quickly "blow your mind," which is to say, they knock out the old partitions within the self, allowing new connections to be made. Some theorists also say that the new rock music with psychedelic light effects can aid the inner traveler.

Serious researchers are looking for means of accomplishing even more without the use of drugs. In several centers throughout the U.S., they are working out techniques for awakening the body and senses, especially those other than the purely visual, and for helping people achieve the unusual psychic states described, for example, in the literature of mysticism. The future will likely demonstrate that *every* human being has capacities for pleasure and fulfillment beyond sex that the present barely hints at.

In this rich context, those reports on the death of the American family may turn out to have been premature. Actually, the family may be moving into a Golden Age. With so much experiment possible, marriage may come later in life than ever before. Future family units may not be separated from each other in little capsules, but may join together in loosely organized "tribes." As it is now, the capsular family often has nowhere to turn for advice and encouragement when in need, except to professional counselors or organizations. The informal tribe of the future can provide a sounding board and a source of support for each of its families, far more responsive and more loving than any professional helper.

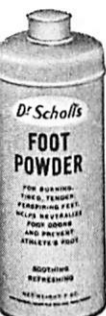
## W Homosexuality may fade out

WITH MARRIAGE COMING later in life, it may also become a more serious matter—perhaps as serious as divorce. Some couples may even wish to write up a legally binding separation agreement (to be revised when their financial and parental situation changes) as a precondition to marriage. Thus, in a sense, marriage becomes "divorce." With all this unpleasant business anticipated and accomplished even before the nuptial vows are spoken, divorce becomes far easier—and probably far less likely. In any case, the divorce rate will probably fall.

Marriage—firmly and willfully welded, centered on creative parenthood—may become the future's most stable institution. The old, largely discredited "togetherness" was based on stereotyped concepts of each family member's role. The new family, integral and deeply involving, may provide the ideal unit for personal discovery, for experiment in the seemingly infinite possibilities of being human. Each new child can provide a new set of perceptions for all the family. Each develops rapidly, urges change in parents and other children alike. It is possible that the family of the future may find its stability in constant change, in the encouragement of what is unique in each of its members; that marriage, freed from the compulsions and restrictions surrounding high-intensity SEX, can become far more *sensual*, that is to say, more integral.

What about homosexuality and prostitution? Lifelong, specialized sexual inversion has baffled many researchers. But may it not be

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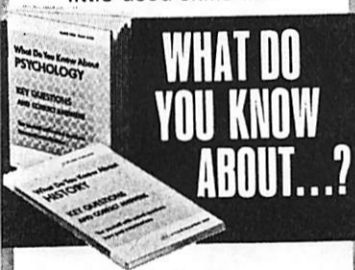
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## FUTURE OF SEX CONTINUED

viewed simply as a response to sexual overspecialization? Just as men in our society are far more specialized than women, so male homosexuality is far more prevalent. To "be a man" in the narrow sense has often proven difficult and dehumanizing. In certain stressful and ambiguous family situations, some young men have not been able to pull it off. So they flip-flop over to the coin's reverse side, the mirror image of hyper-maleness—even more specialized, even more limiting. If a new, less specialized maleness emerges, it is possible that the need to turn to specialized homosexuality will decrease. There is a striking absence of it among the communal-living young people of today.

As for prostitution, if it is the oldest profession (or, if you will, service industry), it is also one of the most ancient specialties—an early consequence of the creation of man-in-the-mass. Armies, merchant fleets, work forces: Men without women demanded Woman, or at least one aspect of her. So long as men are massed and shipped away from home, this female specialist will likely follow. But, like homosexuality, prostitution may also be looked upon as a response to a certain kind of hyper-femininity. When men, as in the Victorian Age and long after, require sexually-inhibited wives, they create an equal and opposite demand for sexually-uninhibited partners-for-pay. As the first requirement fades, so does the second. Already, call girls are becoming game for the aging. The whole notion seems somewhat ridiculous to the young.

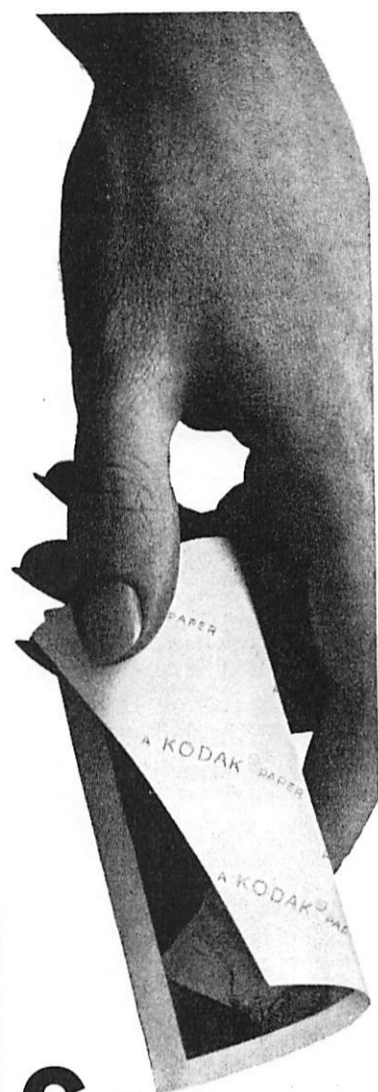
Indeed, the future may well wonder why there has been so much fuss about sex over all these years. Sex may well be regaining some of its traditional cool. It is still a three-letter word, despite the efforts of its four-letter relatives to hot it up. This is not to say the future will be sexless. Far from it, generations yet to come may very well find *all of life* far more erotic than now seems possible.

Those who try to puzzle out any *single* sexual way for the next age will probably find their efforts in vain. Rather, it seems, the future holds out infinite variety, diversity. The search for a new sexuality is, after all, a search for a new selfhood, a new way of relating. This search already is well under way. What it turns up will surprise us all. **END**



LOOK 7-25-67

"... and then when I finally did talk my tribe into learning to read, they read Marshall McLuhan!"



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