

# Cultural Studies

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There is no simple answer to the question of how to do cultural studies. Unlike content analysis or ethnography, it is not a research method unto itself. Unlike economics or political science, it is not a discipline unto itself. Instead, it is a radically interdisciplinary form of intellectual and political work that operates both inside and outside academic settings. Though one can find cultural studies textbooks that claim otherwise, there is no such thing as a “cultural studies methodology”—at least not in the traditional sense of the term. Cultural studies has a long history of poaching the research tools and theoretical frameworks it needs from more traditional disciplines, and its choice of research methods is necessarily contextual, pragmatic, and question-driven. The methods it uses are deliberately varied, eclectic, and impure. Different cultural studies research projects may use completely different methodologies—including semiotics, ethnography, discourse analysis, focus groups, historical/archival research, ideological analysis, political economy, and rhetorical analysis (to name just a few)—and individual cultural studies practitioners may use different research methods from one project to the next. For that matter, any single cultural studies research project may draw on multiple methodologies and/or theoretical frameworks, and the good cultural studies practitioner must always be open to the possibility that their research will lead their project into methodological and/or theoretical territory that they did not expect, and perhaps could not even have predicted, at the outset of that project.

Perhaps the best way to explain how to do cultural studies is, ironically, to avoid the “simple” methodological questions: how to interpret media texts, how to conduct fieldwork, how to use an archive, and so forth. These are important questions—and they are not simple at all—but any given one of them will, at best, apply to just a fraction of cultural studies research projects. Moreover, being fluent in one (or more) of these methods is not, by itself a guarantee that the research one does using that method will, in fact, count as cultural studies.

If one’s goal is to do cultural studies, what one really needs to learn is a set of general characteristics and underlying principles associated with the larger project, rather than a particular methodology. Understanding these characteristics and principles, and being able to put them into practice, will make it possible to decide what the proper methodological approach(es) for any given research project will be, while still recognizing that the research one tackles at some future date may require very different methodological choices.

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## Definition

Cultural studies is an interlocking set of leftist intellectual and political practices. Its central purpose is twofold: (i) to produce detailed, contextualized analyses of the ways that power and social relations are created, structured, and maintained through culture; and (ii) to circulate those analyses in public forums suitable to the tasks of pedagogy, provocation, and political intervention (Rodman, 2015, pp. 39–40). Insofar as it is an academic project, it is not necessarily (or even primarily) associated with communication. Instead, it is radically interdisciplinary in nature, and its practitioners can be found across a broad span of the humanities and social sciences. But cultural studies is also not exclusively, or even primarily, academic in nature. It encompasses a broad range of practices—including research, theory, pedagogy, activism, criticism, and art—in ways that make it more akin to political projects such as feminism or Marxism than to traditional scholarly disciplines such as sociology or anthropology.

This is an idealized definition of cultural studies—one that more accurately describes what the project should be than it does the varied range of projects that are undertaken in its name—and it will not sit well with everyone who claims the label for their own work. In part, this is because the label is often used to describe work that is not cultural studies at all: a problem that has helped to foster a great deal of confusion about the sort of work the label actually describes (Rodman, 1997). From the outside, cultural studies can look incredibly loose and unstructured, especially since different instantiations of it do not always resemble each other very much. Positing a hypothetical (but perfectly plausible) sample of four cultural studies books, Meaghan Morris writes:

One [of the four] might be a historical study of sexuality in Ancient Rome, another a policy analysis of broadcasting regimes in South-East Asia, the third a volume of cross-cultural essays on melodrama. In an ideal world, the fourth self-reflexive publication would explain what the first three have in common and why they contribute more distinctively to Cultural Studies than to Classics, Communication, and English. The reality is more fuzzy, though not chaotic; most likely, one of the first three books will reject the disciplinary program of the fourth while the other two criticize each other's methodologies. (1998, p. 79)

Even within the relatively limited context of communication as a discipline—and, to be clear, academic versions of cultural studies are by no means only found within communication—different cultural studies projects are likely to have very different research objects and to use very different research methods.

To complicate matters further, even among established cultural studies practitioners, there are long-running disagreements about what it is, where it came from, how it should be done, and who does it. The intensity (and persistence) of such debates is, in part, a testament to one of cultural studies' fundamental characteristics: its relentless self-reflexivity about the nature of its own practice. Done properly, cultural studies tries not to take anything for granted, including its own parameters. Over the past half century, cultural studies has refashioned itself over and over again in order to meet the shifting intellectual and political demands of different historical and geopolitical contexts. As such, the specific types of work that count as cultural studies in a particular time and place will not necessarily look much like cultural studies as it is

practiced somewhere or somewhere else. Even within a particular local context and historical moment, cultural studies has no fixed object of study, no obligatory theoretical or methodological framework, no stable disciplinary home, and no single political agenda. Predictably, this sort of variance in cultural studies' general shape contributes to the broader confusion about what the project actually entails.

Perhaps obviously, cultural studies' willful fluidity makes it difficult to explain clearly to newcomers. It also means that the description of the project provided here unavoidably pushes back against the central conceit of this (or any) encyclopedia: that is, to be a compendium of neutral, objective information about the major methodologies used by communication scholars. Arguably, the most neutral, most objective definition possible for cultural studies would need to acknowledge at least two things: (i) that any definition one might offer will force one to take sides in a series of debates that cannot be resolved neatly, and (ii) that one of the fundamental principles of cultural studies is that knowledge is never neutral or objective.

## **Cultural studies is political**

Politics is not an afterthought for cultural studies. It is a primary, central characteristic of the project. Cultural studies is not concerned with problems that are purely disciplinary in nature (e.g., the need to test or refine a theory that has no purchase outside of academic circles), nor is it interested in finding ways to help the wheels of global capital and/or the nation-state turn more efficiently (except, perhaps, in those rare instances when such goals happen to improve the lives of marginalized populations). Instead, its choice of research projects is rooted in its efforts to intervene in "real world" events as part of a broader struggle alongside and/or on behalf of disenfranchised and/or oppressed segments of the population. As such, any given cultural studies project derives its research topics from the desire to address a serious political problem of some sort: a social injustice that needs to be righted, a major structural or institutional inequity that needs to be challenged, a hierarchy of power that needs to be leveled, and so on.

To be sure, this approach to choosing research topics is not unique to cultural studies, given that scholars from many disciplines aim to analyze and (ideally) help correct some sort of "real world" injustice. What distinguishes cultural studies in this regard is that such a choice is obligatory, rather than optional: there is no such thing as an apolitical cultural studies. In most disciplines, it is possible (and, in some cases, it is the norm) for scholars to pursue research agendas that, by design, are apolitical—or, worse, that aim to enhance corporate profits and/or expand the political power of the state. More significantly, even when explicitly political research in such disciplines is well regarded or highly influential, it is still typically not allowed to define that discipline's intellectual center. One can, after all, find scholars of art, literature, music, and history (among others) who will insist that their discipline is, and must remain, above the fray of partisan politics. For cultural studies, however, such efforts at political neutrality are never an option.

Significantly, the main disciplines that seem to defy this tendency are the various “area studies” fields (women’s studies, African American studies, and the like): that is, relatively new (and thus not so traditional) intellectual formations that arose out of explicitly political projects. Just as significantly, these politicized disciplines first appear at roughly the same time (and for many of the same reasons) as cultural studies: in the 1960s, as part of a larger set of challenges to the established norms (and alleged political neutrality) of U.S. and U.K. universities.

While cultural studies does not have a singular, predictable political agenda, it *is* a self-consciously leftist project. It is concerned with the ways that hierarchies of power manifest themselves through cultural texts, practices, institutions, and policies, and it is driven by a desire to struggle alongside disenfranchised segments of the population for justice, equality, freedom, and democracy. Perhaps paradoxically, given its leftist ways, cultural studies’ political positions are never guaranteed in advance. This is *not* because cultural studies is somehow open to political projects of all shapes and sizes. Rather, it is because “the left” is not an internally consistent set of political positions, and because cultural studies’ shape-shifting nature means that it constantly rethinks its own political positions to match new projects and contexts.

Real world events often put the left in a position where the range of values it holds cannot all be served well—and so the left is often forced to choose which of its values to sacrifice (for the moment) in the interest of serving another part of its agenda. For example, the left can (and does) simultaneously champion free speech *and* regulations against hate speech. It simultaneously wants to protect old growth forests from logging companies *and* protect the livelihoods of the loggers whose jobs depend on cutting down those same forests. And so on. To be clear, this is not to claim that the left is somehow inconsistent or hypocritical: simply that it is not monolithic. Knowing that cultural studies operates on the left end of the political spectrum does not make it possible to predict the specific stances that it will (or should) take with respect to any given research project. Instead, cultural studies’ leftist nature represents a commitment to a particular form of political struggle more than it does an adherence to a specific party line or predetermined political agenda.

Cultural studies’ understanding of politics is not limited to the (obvious) spheres of government policy or election campaigns. Instead, it sees politics as something that manifests across the full range of culture and everyday life. In contrast to strands of intellectual and political thought that see culture as a separate sphere from politics (e.g., as something above politics, as something that distracts people from “real” politics, or as an incidental and unimportant side effect of “real” politics), cultural studies sees culture as an absolutely crucial site of and for political struggle. Explaining why he believed that cultural studies needed to pay careful attention to popular culture, and pushing back against facets of the left who argued that “the popular” was not a worthy subject for serious attention (except, perhaps, as a problem to be solved), Stuart Hall famously argued:

Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost *in* that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture—already fully formed—might be simply “expressed.” But it is one of the places

where socialism might be constituted. That is why “popular culture” matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn about it. (1981, p. 239)

Additionally, cultural studies’ interventionist goals mean that it wants its research put to use in the broader world in support of its political agendas. It is not satisfied with simply generating new knowledge or new analyses that only travel within a small circle of like-minded scholars. As Hall put it:

On the one hand, we had to be at the very forefront of intellectual theoretical work because, as Gramsci says, it is the job of the organic intellectual to know more than the traditional intellectuals do: really know, not just pretend to know, not just to have the facility of knowledge, but to know deeply and profoundly ... But the second aspect is just as crucial: the organic intellectual cannot absolve himself or herself from the responsibility of transmitting those ideas, that knowledge, through the intellectual function, to those who do not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class. And unless those two fronts are operating at the same time, or at least unless those two ambitions are part of the project of cultural studies, you can get enormous theoretical advance without any engagement at the level of the political project. (1992, p. 281)

And so, ideally, cultural studies embraces nontraditional outlets for distributing the work it does (blogs, podcasts, etc.), and even when it uses traditional academic outlets (scholarly journals, research monographs), it often aims for a presentational style that is legible to non-academic audiences. Arguably, cultural studies has not always been as good as it should be at fulfilling this part of its mission. Nonetheless, it remains an important and necessary part of cultural studies as an intellectual and political project.

## **Cultural studies is radically contextual**

Most scholars attempt to situate their research in an appropriate context of some sort. Sometimes that context is historical (e.g., analyzing the rhetoric of the Gettysburg Address in the context of the U.S. Civil War). Sometimes it is demographic (e.g., recognizing that an attitudinal questionnaire administered only to U.S. college students will not necessarily tell us anything useful about other segments of the population). Sometimes it is disciplinary (e.g., noting that a particular analysis extends the work of scholar X or fills a gap in the body of knowledge associated with subfield Q). Typically, such contexts are understood to be an objective frame for the research topic at hand: a preexisting backdrop that the good scholar will recognize and name for the benefit of his or her audience.

For cultural studies, however, such questions are never quite so simple, as the relevant context for any given cultural studies project is never “out there” in some obvious and objective fashion (Grossberg, 1995, pp. 12–19). Context is simultaneously something that the cultural studies practitioner *selects* from a range of real world possibilities and something that he or she actively *constructs* (rather than simply finding it out in the world somewhere). This apparent contradiction is, once again, a reflection of cultural studies’ recognition that many of the supposedly objective and/or natural “truths” that researchers invoke are, in fact, no such thing. There are multiple contexts one might plausibly invoke for any given project, and all researchers unavoidably

(if often unconsciously) make choices about which of several plausible contexts is the “right” one to reference for their work.

Cultural studies recognizes that any given phenomenon is already connected to a vast range of other phenomena in significant ways, and that selecting/constructing the “right” context for one’s research requires one to craft a compelling narrative that explains precisely why a specific set of connections and relationships is the best (or at least a valuable) one for understanding the research topic at hand. As Stuart Hall (2007) put it:

This wider social formation quest must haunt every individual piece of cultural studies work you do. No study of *Big Brother*, no study of *The Sopranos*, no study of television programmes or any other particular instance of culture is in my view properly Cultural Studies unless, in the end, it is haunted by the question—“But what does this have to do with everything else?” The idea that Cultural Studies is going to answer that question on its own is, of course, ridiculous; it’s not going to answer it; it can’t possibly answer it; it isn’t that kind of thing. But you have to [do] work which allows the problem of articulation to [be] posed, so that this wider question of the social formation can be posed.

While there are some choices that will arguably just be wrong (e.g., understanding the rise of rock ‘n’ roll in the 1950s to be connected to agricultural policies in postwar China), there is still a broad range of choices that are just as arguably right (e.g., understanding the rise of rock ‘n’ roll in relation to U.S. racial politics of the 1950s; or to novel aesthetic choices made by a range of songwriters, performers, and producers; or to deliberate efforts by the record industry to manufacture and capitalize on cultural “fads”), each of which would generate a different analysis and argument.

More crucially, rather than trying to fit its research into preexisting (and broadly accepted) narratives (e.g., contexts that come from received histories and dominant understandings of the topic at hand), cultural studies aims to tell new and different stories that force us to see old phenomena in a different, more productive light. At its best, cultural studies articulates object/context relationships that are verifiably true (i.e., it does not simply invent such relationships out of thin air), but that are also novel enough to avoid simply telling us stories about the world that we (supposedly) already know. Put a different way, there is a classic “figure/ground” problem in play here. Cultural studies recognizes that the act of selecting a specific research object (i.e., a figure) from the vast range of phenomena in the world (i.e., the corresponding ground) is actually a process of drawing boundaries between one’s research object and its context in ways that actually construct *both* the object and its context. Much as one cannot change the shape of an island without also changing the shape of the ocean that surrounds it, choosing a new (or different) context necessarily also changes the parameters of one’s research object—and vice versa.

## **Cultural studies is radically interdisciplinary**

Cultural studies’ relationship to the traditional disciplines has always been complicated. Even if one ignores the facets of the project that are not academic at all, cultural studies



does not belong to any specific discipline, nor is it a discipline of its own. Cultural studies scholars can be found in a broad range of disciplines across the humanities and social sciences, including (but by no means limited to) American studies, communication, education, English, gender/sexuality studies, history, sociology, and theatre. Moreover, any given cultural studies project will span and/or draw from a number of different disciplines in ways that will not necessarily match the range of disciplines connected to some other cultural studies project. Cultural studies has never treated disciplinary or methodological borders as inviolable lines. When a cultural studies scholar approaches a research project, he or she never asks the question, “how would a good communications scholar (or historian, political scientist, etc.) approach this topic?” in order to find the discipline-specific rules needed to delimit the scope of his or her work. Instead, the cultural studies scholar asks, “what do I need to find out in order to answer the questions at the heart of this project?” and then locates and uses whatever methodological and/or theoretical tools are necessary to acquire that knowledge, regardless of which disciplines might claim those tools as their own. Again, Hall’s description here is helpful:

The strategy of the [Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham] for developing both practical work that would enable research to be done in the formations of contemporary culture and the theoretical models that would help to clarify what was going on was designed as a series of raids on other disciplinary terrains. Fending off what sociologists regarded sociology to be, we raided sociology. Fending off the defenders of the humanities tradition, we raided the humanities. We appropriated bits of anthropology while insisting that we were not in the humanistic anthropological project, and so on. We did the rounds of the disciplines. (1990, pp. 15–16)

If his or her project raises questions that can only (or can best) be answered by examining historical archives, then he or she needs to become an archivist. If the relevant questions demand an understanding of how “real” people make sense of the world around them, then he or she needs to draw on methodologies—ethnography, interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, and so on—that do that work. If he or she is a communication scholar by training, but the topic depends on a strong understanding of economics, then he or she needs to learn enough about economics as a discipline to address those questions. And so on.

In practice, of course, few (if any) scholars can embrace this sort of open-ended approach to research in its totality. The interconnectedness of the world, after all, means that any given phenomenon has significant connections to more other phenomena than any one researcher (or even a team of researchers) can hope to grapple with successfully. Nonetheless, cultural studies’ aspirational goal is always to cross those bridges whenever feasible, rather than to shy away from them simply to maintain a “proper” disciplinary focus. The cultural studies practitioner cannot do everything. But s/he should never draw lines around her/his research for the sake of making things “easy” or in order to stay “at home.”

Perhaps obviously, given the earlier description, cultural studies’ brand of interdisciplinarity is hard work (Grossberg, 1995, pp. 25–26). One does not simply add a few quick citations from a neighboring discipline or two to what is otherwise a conventional rhetorical (or sociological, or anthropological, etc.) project. Instead, one needs to

take the core literature, questions, research (etc.) of other disciplines seriously, without simply assuming in advance that the existing limits of those disciplines are sufficient to the task at hand. This means that cultural studies does not simply “poach” methods and theories from traditional disciplines, but that it actually challenges those disciplines’ claims about the scope and nature of the intellectual turfs they call their own. Once more, in Hall’s words:

Serious interdisciplinary work involves the intellectual risk of saying to professional sociologists that what they say sociology is, is not what it is. We had to teach what we thought a kind of sociology that would be of service to people studying culture would be, something we could not get from self-designated sociologists. It was never a question of which disciplines would contribute to the development of this field, but of how one could decenter or destabilize a series of interdisciplinary fields. We had to respect and engage with the paradigms and traditions of knowledge and of empirical and concrete work in each of these disciplinary areas in order to construct what we called cultural studies or cultural theory. (1990, p. 16)

### **Cultural studies focuses on articulations**

Articulation is not a concept exclusive (or original) to cultural studies, but it is crucial to the project’s general understanding of how the world works. Articulation is cultural studies’ way out of the trap of essentialism (Hall, 1986; Grossberg, 1995, pp. 16–19). Essentialism assumes that the major relationships between different cultural phenomena—for example, a text and its meaning, a demographic and a specific political viewpoint—are stable, fixed, and inevitable. It posits, for example, that being a woman (or Korean, or lesbian, or Christian, etc.) involves having a predictable, necessary set of life experiences, personality traits, values, politics, and so on. Part of the appeal of essentialism is how well it seems to recognize and account for many of the differences in the world: for example, if you are White, there are fundamental aspects of what it means to be Black that you cannot know or fully understand because such knowledge and experience is only available to Black people. At the same time, however, essentialism dramatically oversimplifies the nature of the relationships it claims to account for. There is, after all, no singular, universal set of experiences, values, or politics that goes along with being Muslim (or working class, or queer, and so on). Essentialist conceptions of identity inevitably—and necessarily—draw fixed, immovable borders around the populations they aim to describe: normative distinctions that unavoidably exclude people who “fail” to follow the “rules” that supposedly define them. (To be clear, the flaws inherent to essentialism are not limited to issues of identity, though identity politics are one of the most common arenas where essentialism rears its head.)

Cultural studies recognizes that the relationships that essentialism tries to explain are historical, rather than natural—that they have to be (and are) actively constructed—and then reconstructed over and over again, and that process of (re)construction involves articulation: the forging of a connection or relationship that *appears* to be entirely natural when it is no such thing at all. Stuart Hall explains articulation using the example of a tractor-trailer truck, which the British refer to as:



an “articulated” lorry (truck): a lorry where the front (cab) and back (trailer) can, but need not necessarily, be connected to one another. The two parts are connected to each other, but through a specific linkage, that can be broken. An articulation is thus the form of the connection that *can* make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. (1986, p. 53)

One of the major questions that any given cultural studies project attempts to answer is how the articulations that matter most to the research question at hand were created. What historical events produced a meaningful relationship between elements X and Y? What institutional efforts went into trying to fix (or reshape) the meaning of a particular concept or event? Whose interests are advanced (and whose are thwarted) when particular articulations are created and/or reinforced?

Arguably, articulation happens across any/all forms of cultural texts and practices. For illustrative purposes, however, advertising is a major form of cultural expression where the practice of articulation is particularly easy to see at work. At its core, after all, advertising functions by actively *creating* meaningful, yet *unnatural*, relationships between goods and services (on the one hand) and otherwise unrelated cultural values and target demographics (on the other hand). There are, for instance, no *necessary* reasons why low-calorie lagers should be strongly associated with the practice of watching (in person or on television) professional sporting events and primarily consumed by middle-class, heterosexual men between 21 and 34 years old. Yet these are some of the major articulations forged by advertisements that, both implicitly and explicitly, tell us that watching “the game” is a central feature of everyday life for young, straight men, and that “lite” beer is the beverage of choice for members of that demographic who want to fit in with their peers and be popular.

As the earlier description suggests, articulation is both a thing (e.g., the connection that exists between elements) and a process (e.g., the forging of such connections). Understood as a process, however, articulation is not just something that cultural studies analyzes: it is also a vital part of cultural studies’ practice. It is what cultural studies practitioners do when they transform their research into communicative events of some sort: essays, books, performances, films, and so on—not just in the sense that the practitioner “speaks” the results of his/her research, but also in the sense that s/he *creates* connections between different phenomena in an effort to help her/his audience see the world in a new and (hopefully) better way. In much the same way that good rhetoricians both analyze other people’s use of persuasive language *and* are experts at crafting persuasive language of their own, the good cultural studies practitioner both analyzes the articulations forged by other people and institutions *and* forges them him- or herself in the process of doing and reporting on their research.

## Doing cultural studies

One of the recurring difficulties with trying to explain cultural studies to newcomers and/or outsiders is a sequencing problem. If one begins by trying to explain some of the key characteristics of cultural studies as a project, one necessarily does what this entry has done: that is, to offer up a series of relatively abstract concepts and ideas as a

preliminary sketch of the cultural studies terrain. But this sort of summary of general principles and tendencies frequently leaves readers unsure about what actual cultural studies research looks like.

Alternatively, of course, one could begin explaining the project by describing specific examples of cultural studies “in action.” This sort of approach, however, is mystifying in a completely different (and arguably, more problematic) way. Bracketing the fact that a good cultural studies practitioner would be leery of anything that looked like canon-building, if one begins by pointing to a “canonical” example of cultural studies research such as *Policing the Crisis* (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978), it would be easy for a newcomer to come away thinking that doing cultural studies involves a unique combination of content analysis, Marxist/semiotic media criticism, and a Gramscian re-theorization of how “the state” and political power are structured. But this understanding of the project, accurate though it might be for (a fraction of) British cultural studies in the late 1970s, would not help a newcomer/outsider understand how or why (for instance) Constance Penley’s *NASA/TREK* (1997)—which blends feminist psychoanalytic textual critique, institutional/organizational analysis, and ethnography of a marginalized fan community—is also a “classic” example of the cultural studies project. And neither of these books would help the cultural studies novice understand what makes Janice Radway’s *A Feeling for Books* (1997)—which involves the methodological trifecta of archive-driven historical analysis, ethnography “up,” and quasi-autoethnographic literary textual criticism—is an exemplary piece of cultural studies research as well.

Arguably, then, the most reliable way to learn how to do cultural studies is to immerse oneself in both forms of the project’s literature: that is, the meta-level essays and books that wrestle with the “what is cultural studies?” question (on the one hand) and a broad range of specific examples of cultural studies research (on the other). To be clear, this is *not* an approach that will lead one to “the” proper way to do cultural studies, since there is no such thing. Instead, such an approach will (ideally) give the cultural studies newcomer a clear understanding of the project’s core tendencies *and* a familiarity with the multiplicity of ways that those tendencies can be successfully put into practice—and this, in turn, will make it possible for that newcomer to articulate his or her own version of the project.

SEE ALSO: Autoethnography; Content Analysis, Quantitative; Critical Methods; Critical Theory and Research; Discourse Analysis; Ethnography/Ethnographic Methods; Mixed Methods Research; Representation/Representativeness; Research Question; Rhetorical Criticism; Semiotics; Textual Analysis

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