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## THE ETHICS OF LINGUISTIC DEMOCRACY IN SCHOOLS AND SOCIETY\*\*

Monolingualism is a curable disease.<sup>1</sup>

The prohibition of minority languages has profound ethical implications that go beyond the standard “English only versus native language” debate in educational research. Debates regarding monolingualism in teaching curricula that focus solely on individual student success fail to consider the larger social contexts in which languages are important vehicles for culture, community and identity – and, by extension, are important mechanisms for validating students’ sense of self and belonging. What is more, the depoliticizing of language education contributes to a dysfunctional democracy by ignoring the undemocratic nature inherent in the denial of the people’s right to be literate in their first languages as well as in English.

In this paper, I argue that academics and teachers who view English-only programs as benefiting minority students are performing what Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* calls “false charity” (45), which encourages students to equate their ‘success’ with a form of assimilation that, despite the student’s achievements in mastering English, is never fully acknowledged by dominant society – a society that will simply continue to view non-White English speakers as well as non-English speakers as ‘other’ when the suppression of their native languages is legitimized. ‘Charitable’ teachers may inadvertently perpetuate the underlying racist and ethnocentric views of dominant society by ignoring this fact and defaulting to English-only teaching as the best way to help students. Instead, one of the ways teachers can challenge embedded racism and ethnocentrism of dominant society is to remove the conditions that privilege academic English as the *only* tolerated language and deny or devalue the use of other languages so that students feel they must ‘give up’ a part of themselves and their community to succeed in the dominant culture.

### 1. Taking Ethics Seriously

Even among liberals and many progressives in the United States, using a language that names academics as *moral leaders* is often considered impolite, and using a language that ruptures unethical perspectives or behaviors within the academy is almost certainly dismissed as deliberately provocative or routinized controversy. Hence, we are conditioned through our membership in the academy to avoid using terms such as “oppressed” which may implicate ourselves in the system of oppression, and are instead encouraged to use euphemisms such as “disenfranchised” or “economically marginal.” The same self-serving contradiction very much informs the liberal approach to human suffering – an approach that positions a person as *ethical*

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<sup>1</sup> This quotation is typically attributed to Carlos Fuentes, though in an interview published in *Times Higher Education* he says he remembered seeing it on a sign in Texas.



precisely through distancing themselves from society's crimes. This approach, according to Freire, is steeped in "false generosity": "In order to have continued opportunity to express their 'generosity,' the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. [Hence] true generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity" (2002, 44-45). The key point to take from this is that redressing injustice means to *change* our approach, redirect our actions, not merely to accept, through our acknowledgement, the conditions that underlie oppression.

Most educators agree that language is central to education. But beyond teaching students the technical mastery of language, educators rarely examine how using language is a fundamentally ethical practice. How words are deployed to 'name' the reality behind the language can make ideology visible, or it can obscure or reproduce ideology. For example, using a euphemistic term such as 'the affluent' can perpetuate a myth of the classless society, in contrast to a term like 'the ruling class,' which provokes questions about power and who is the 'ruled.' Asking such questions about the language we use also demands that we address the importance of *how* and *for what reasons* we teach – to do so in ways that challenge rather than replicate oppressive conditions. In the context of language education, this means not just scrutinizing the content of what is being taught, but supporting the capacity for non-native English speakers and their linguistic communities to exercise agency, in the language of their own choosing. Language teachers and education researchers should remember Edward Said's insistence that intellectuals are those "moved by metaphysical passion and disinterested principles of social justice and truth, [who] denounce corruption, defend the weak, and defy imperfect or oppressive authority" (6) – including our own.

The analysis of the role of language and the ethics of language instruction is very important, especially when terms such as 'ethics' and 'moral' are often banalized by academic discourse. These terms, when they do appear, are usually used as window dressing. The ethical content that should undergird morality is routinely emptied out, leaving us with a carcass best described as moralism without morals. We need to lessen the gulf between academic posturing *and* authentic intervention in the world. How can we speak of morality concretely when we remain gated in academic oases while writing about the oppressed, reducing our activism in the oppressed community to 'tours of the oppressed'? The 'tours' can be later analyzed, narrated, and published, guaranteeing the academic tourists' promotion, tenure, and in some cases, celebrity status. Meanwhile children, the elderly, and other folks in the community remain trapped in hunger, despair, hopelessness – a compromised human dignity that can only be described as sub-humanity.

By refusing to deal with the issue of linguistic oppression – when expression in the non-dominant language or accented English speech becomes a means to shame, exclude, and humiliate members of linguistic minority communities – liberal educators often dogmatically pronounce that they 'empower' linguistic minority students and 'give them voice' so long as that voice is in English only. This position often leads to a pedagogy of entrapment: while proclaiming to empower students, educators who go to linguistic minority communities to provide services in English only risk strengthening their own privileged position by shielding themselves from the reality that created the oppressive conditions they supposedly want to ameliorate in the first place. At the same time, liberal educators need to understand that they should not prevent marginalized community members from appropriating the very cultural capital from which they, as middle-class educators, have greatly benefited. In other words, accessing educational content in languages that linguistic minority students' master should not exclude English language acquisition. What educators need to be reminded of is bell hooks's caution that, "it is not the English language that hurts me, but what the oppressors do with it, how they shape it to become a territory that limits and defines, how they make it a weapon that can shame, humiliate, and colonize" (168).

## 2. Language Teaching in America

The dominant cultural discourse of the United States should trigger many instances of ethical outrage. That it does not suggests how academics are too often living examples of obscene moral contradictions: we maintain conviviality while we engage ourselves in a willful process of not seeing, blinding ourselves in particular to our own roles in ignoring or supporting oppressive social conditions. How can committed educators boast of their critical posture at the level of discourse while remaining indifferent, for example, to the real inequality that characterizes the United States? This is inequality on a scale that makes it possible for the top one percent alone to accumulate \$110 trillion dollars while the poor, those lucky enough to have several menial jobs at minimum wages remain locked in human misery, leading President Obama to



state (albeit a little too late in his presidency) that “no one who works full time should ever have to raise a family in poverty” (*The Nation*, 3). Despite Obama’s proclamation, his actions have done little to address the pauperization of large segments of US society in order to grotesquely enrich the oligarchs. This shift can be linked with the economic insecurity of both White middle and lower classes and a strong drift to the right in American politics. It is important that we understand the complexity of this interconnectedness, how being inattentive to economic and political factors not only allows poverty and all its related forms of human suffering to continue, but also exacerbates the racist foundation of our society.

I bring attention to these conditions, ones which are usually routinized as common sense, as a means to set the context for the current assault on languages other than English. This assault has led states such as Arizona, California, Massachusetts, among others, to promulgate laws that make it illegal to teach academic content to immigrant children in their mother-tongue, which is often the only language that they can use to make meaning, the only language through which they can express the complexity of immigrant life and the ambivalence of the soul yearning to make meaning out of a bittersweet existence in the diaspora. Gloria Anzaldúa has said, “if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself” (59).

Educators and policymakers need to move beyond the debate of instruction in “English versus the native languages of students” and factor in the understanding of the mechanized reality that denies most immigrants an institutional linguistic and cultural safety zone to reflect on the tensions, contradictions, fears, doubts, hopes, and dreams which are part and parcel of living in a borrowed cultural existence. This is an existence that is fractured by a perception of oneself as being present and not visible, being visible yet not present. This is a condition that invariably presents itself to the reality of immigrant life – the constant juggling of two asymmetrical worlds, two asymmetrical cultures, and two asymmetrical languages. It is a process through which immigrants come to know what it means to be at the periphery of the intimate relationship between two, almost always antagonistic worlds.

A deeper understanding of the tensions, contradictions, fear, dreams, and aspirations of immigrant life will go a long way to make an enormous difference in the lives of immigrant students whose dreams, aspirations, and desires are often bottled up in a temporary English language barrier. This is *temporary* because we know that, given the opportunity and excellent instruction, all immigrant students can learn English. This human capacity to learn languages involves not only one’s first language but other languages as well. The myth that Americans are not good at learning languages has a great deal more to do with social attitudes than with the biological capacity with which all humans are endowed. In many developing countries even those individuals who have been excluded from schooling and literacy education learn to speak two or more languages. In what is referred to as more developed countries such as Germany and Sweden, most students graduate from high school speaking multiple languages. In fact, in these countries, one would be considered not well educated if one spoke only one’s native language.

I provide this short background to highlight the impact of social attitudes on language learning and teaching. I am sure, as Carlos Fuentes and others have observed, that Americans do not suffer from a genetic predisposition toward language that causes the disease of monolingualism. What is operative is the lack of interest in other languages in the United States, and this disinterestedness needs to be understood within the general xenophobia that is currently shaping the national dialogue where language is one of the last refuges where one can practice racism with impunity. In other words, the promotion of ‘English only’ in schools is presented as best for your own good and not as a violation of one’s right to literacy in one’s language. There is a clear connection in the United States between ‘English only’ policy, the anti-immigrant law that legalizes racial profiling, and the closing down of ethnic studies in Arizona.

Against a landscape of language and cultural discrimination, most immigrant students do not feel welcome in US society and in US schools. Hence, teachers who consider themselves agents of change and want to make a difference in their students’ lives need to factor into their pedagogy issues of language and cultural discrimination. If you accept that motivation is one of the most important factors in second language learning, teachers need to critically understand that a society that is so blatantly unwelcoming to immigrants cannot expect these same immigrants to be highly motivated to embrace a culture that, for many of them, particularly immigrants of color, devalues their cultural identity, their language, and too often their dignity.



I always felt perplexed and disarmed when I was struggling with the learning of English in that I wholeheartedly bought into the myth that the United States was a nation of immigrants that offered shelter, equality, and freedom, yet I never felt free to speak in my native language, particularly in institutional contexts. My Capeverdean culture was summarily devalued through the constant pressure to assimilate, which contradicts the very ideals of democracy, equality, and freedom. In other words, it is an oxymoron to celebrate the ideals of democracy in a society that at the same time is pressuring you to stop *being* in order to be recognized. This is a society that tells children, “you are OK so long as you become like the rest of us, accept blindly our values even if these values mean accommodating to racist attitudes and giving up your language and culture.” In fact, there is often very little in school curricula that can enable immigrant students to make sense of the ambivalence of their fractured cultural souls. There is little in the school curriculum that allows immigrant students to recapture moments of their childhood which have been frozen in time and space. On the contrary, what the curricula offers, particularly with the imposition of Common Core, is a forced assimilatory process reflecting society’s dominant values. This process is akin to what Amílcar Cabral viewed as quasi-cultural genocide designed to enable the dominant cultural group to consolidate its cultural and language hegemony, a process that “succeed[s] in imposing itself without damage to the culture of the dominated people – that is, [it] harmonizes economic and political domination of these people with their cultural personality” (12). This is why you will hear proponents of English-only education say that immigrant students can still speak their native language *in their home*, while learning English in schools will ensure their future success. But speaking a language is not equivalent to being literate in that language, and this is no less a form of coercive assimilation.

The sad reality, even when you uncritically assimilate and give up most of your cultural values and speak English flawlessly, is that you are really never accepted as fully American, especially if you are non-White. In other words, the very expectation of assimilation is replete with false promises and limitations – false promises inherent in the myth that suggests that once you give up your culture and language and assimilate, *then* you can become fully American. The limitations are demonstrated by the fact that only people from White European ancestry enjoy the privilege of been called ‘American’ as a marker of their unwashed ethnicity. This entrenched lack of acceptance is normalized in the English convention of using hyphenation when referring to certain non-White cultural and ethnic groups. Hence, it is common usage of the English language to have African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Asian-Americans, among other hyphenated Americans. In contrast, it would be unusual to refer to European-Americans, German-Americans, British-Americans, and Belgian-Americans. The ongoing use of hyphenation reflects and reinforces the continued segregation of non-White ethnic groups. Thus, the same dominant ideology that imposes uncritical assimilation also requires that we become immune to the dehumanization implicated in the use of hyphenation which embodies a cruel cultural and ethnic ranking that shapes and normalizes inequality. The cultural hegemony is so seamlessly imposed that even the victims of the ranking see the process as natural and accept it as commonsense to characterize themselves as such.

### **3.The Role of Language Teachers in Dismantling Oppression**

It is always possible to learn English as a non-native speaker and succeed academically, but this success is often tied to the humanity and quality of teachers that one encounters in one’s journey of English learning. I was enormously fortunate that I crossed path with a guidance counselor at Boston English High School when I was a student there who contradicted what I had been told by another counselor: that I was not “college material” and should become a TV repairman. For the counsellor who tried to dissuade me from going to college, that I spoke three languages and I had good grades mattered little next to the folk theory that equated my temporary English language difficulty with my intellectual capacity. Sadly, in the United States, the high dropout rates among Latina(o) students (in some urban schools districts such as Boston, approximately 65% of these students drop out at sixth and seventh grades) demonstrate that the same discriminatory practices along the lines of language, race, ethnicity, gender, and class continue to characterize the culture of most urban US public schools.

I always say that the fact that I am a writer and a professor today is an accident of history in that I was fortunate enough to have met a thoughtful teacher who was critical and could see beyond the stereotypes and status quo. Most of my friends were not as lucky and joined the ranks of school ‘dropouts’ – a euphemism for those students who have been excluded from the school system. That is why I honestly



believe teachers matter, they can make a difference. However, teachers matter to the extent that they have political clarity and the courage to denounce the subtle discriminatory processes embedded in the school system. It is of paramount importance that teachers understand their role in either affirming or disconfirming students' reality. Teachers need to always see themselves as mentors who advocate for the well-being of all students. However, the mentorship role of teachers is difficult to sustain amid the neoliberal regime of high stakes testing and misguided accountability. That is, teachers are under siege in the present moment and consequently often adopt a survival mode that wrongly accommodates to the edicts of the market.

My advice to teachers is that they need to critically understand that they *matter*. However, it is not enough to say that teachers matter. *To matter* means taking on responsibilities beyond the contractual agreement to teach the content area. *To matter* means that teachers become politically aware that not all students are treated in schools with the dignity and respect they deserve. *To matter* also means that teachers realize that beyond the temporary English language barriers of their students, there are always needs, desires, dreams, and aspirations. Teachers need to lovingly reject the dehumanization of high stakes testing and announce that behind each standardized test score there is always a human face who yearns to *become*, and who needs a safe pedagogical space to reflect on the tensions, fears, doubts, hopes, and dreams which are part and parcel of living in a borrowed cultural existence – an existence that is almost culturally schizophrenic. This fractured condition is one that invariably presents itself to the reality of immigrant life – movement between two worlds, two cultures, and two languages that are always marked by asymmetrical power relations. It is a process through which we come to know what it means to be in the contact zone of the intimate yet fragile relationship between a dominant and a dominated cultural world. Hence, our job as teachers is to defend students from the oppressive conditions they face in schools as well as teaching the content that we are charged to teach. Our job and also our duty as teachers includes to constantly protect the dignity of all students so as to prevent them from falling victim to the discriminatory educational bell curve that often parades under the veil of science and democracy.

Under the mantra of science and 'evidence-based' teaching, teachers are often coerced to engage in the social construction of *not seeing* regarding the demonization of immigrants, which is a world-wide phenomenon that manifests differently in different world contexts. In the case of the US, the phenomenon is very evident in the present moment but not necessarily unique or new. What teachers need to understand is that the current assault on the Latina(o) population in Arizona is not dissimilar from the deportation of Roma people in France. Teachers need to be able to connect the dots and see a parallel between closing down ethnic studies in Arizona and preventing the building of a Muslim mosque in a global metropolis like New York City. These assaults are not merely reflections of extremist politicians and groups in a particular country, state, or city. They are part and parcel of a racist ideology that is not confined to the United States but is an insidious global phenomenon. What teachers cannot do is to claim that racism is worse in Europe with frequent bombings of mosques and the constant assaults on immigrants while rationalizing that, although racism remains a problem in their own country, race relations are much better than 'elsewhere.' In the US, you often hear the election of President Obama cited as proof that the US has arrived at a post-racist era. A more honest evaluation of racism both in the US and elsewhere is not merely to compare degrees of racism in different geographical and cultural contexts, but to unveil always the *hidden* structures of racism that inform and give rise to visible outbreaks of racist violence as witnessed in Arizona, France or Germany. Thus, teachers need to understand, as Jürgen Habermas has suggested, how dominant nations have

been roiled by waves of political turmoil over integration, multiculturalism, and the role of 'Leitkultur,' or guiding national culture. This discourse is in turn reinforcing trends toward increasing xenophobia among the broader population. These trends have been apparent for many years in studies and survey data that show a quiet but growing hostility to immigrants. Yet it is as though they have only found a voice.

The challenge for teachers is to understand how the dominant power uses education to partially legitimize economic and political policies that give rise to unbridled racism and pedagogies of exclusion – eventually erupting in violence. For instance, teachers need to comprehend how racism manifests itself in high stakes



testing and the lethal consequences that these tests have in producing a disproportionate number of minority students as school dropouts. For those minority students who stay in school, they are usually sentenced to labels such ‘special needs’ and ‘at risk’ students. Here ‘at risk’ functions as a euphemism for minority students and, by and large, we seldom question “Who is at risk?” and “Who put these students at risk?” What universities and schools generally do is to create programs staffed by ‘experts’ in risk prevention in order to offer a quick educational fix while leaving unexamined the inherent ideology that informs the oppressive material conditions that put students at risk to begin with. These credentialed ‘experts’ in Risk and Prevention programs, who are mostly white, middle-class individuals, are never encouraged in their studies to engage in analysis of ‘at risk’ reality and the ideology that informs it. They are prevented from developing a critical understanding of the interdependence between the ‘at risk’ reality in schools and the socio-economic and socio-cultural contexts that give rise to the ‘at risk’ reality in the first place. By not interrogating the interconnections between the socio-cultural and socio-economic conditions and the label ‘at risk,’ teachers (irrespective of their good intentions) can easily become enslaved by management of the ‘at risk’ students, rather than engaging them as people who already encounter and overcome risks in their lives on a daily basis just to attend school. Programs and experts which focus on labelling students ‘at risk’ may give the appearance that schools are doing something, but do little to prevent these students from joining the ranks of dropouts.

I believe that teachers need to unapologetically embrace the pedagogical principles developed by Paulo Freire, Lilia Bartolomé, bell hooks, Howard Zinn, Henry Giroux, Antonia Darder, and others. These individuals exemplify what it means to be engaged in a humanizing pedagogy. Beyond their specific areas of specialization, they share Augusto Boal’s conviction that “as humans, we are all born poets but institutions interfere to keep us from continuing to be poets.”<sup>2</sup> What makes each one of these educators unique and special is their enormous humanity, their unyielding commitment to social justice, and their courage, as Paulo Freire would say, to denounce the ugliness of the world and announce a world that is more humane. These educators stand in marked contrast with academics whose political project is the constant promotion of their careers which, in the end, make them academicists rather than academics. The academicist’s lack of integrity and humility is sadly found even among progressive and liberal educators who adopt Marxism as a badge of their academicized anti-establishment critiques but refuse, for example, to attend events promoted by the very communities they purport to defend in their writings and public pronouncements.

Take the case when a community organization invited a well-known African-American professor to speak to community members. When the young man who was organizing the event called the professor at his university, he was given the name of his agent who was in charge of scheduling him and was later informed by the agent that the professor’s fee was \$15,000. That is, the professor’s celebrity status which is mostly due to his scholarship on race and his role speaking out against racism’s impacts on the African-American community now charges that community – one which *still* faces the effects of systemic racism in high unemployment rates, poverty, and youth violence – \$15,000 to give a speech. That such self-interest blurs into unabashed ethnocentrism among what I call bourgeois liberals becomes abundantly clear when they proudly proclaim, for instance, to mentor ‘students of color’ (this nomenclature is by its very nature racist in that it assumes that White is not a color, a semantic impossibility for one cannot have colorless White). The invisible Whiteness obscures the biased yardstick against which other colors are measured in their institutions; at the same time, these bourgeois liberals often fail to critique the institutional racism that, on the one hand, enhances their privileges so as to place them in a superior position and, on the other, maintains racialized oppression of some students so they can tout themselves as ‘saviors’ through their mentorship. This false generosity was characterized by Albert Memmi as “charitable racism” (76). It is false to the degree that this type of bourgeois liberal generosity, according to Freire, always “begins with the egoistic interests of the oppressors (an egoism cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism) and makes the oppressed the objects of its humanitarianism [not authentic humanism]” (Freire 2002, 54).

I am on a daily basis reminded of how perceived kindnesses, bereft of contextual knowledge, themselves maintain and embody forms of oppression. Through years of working and collaborating with the educators cited above, a crucial lesson that emerges from their work and their example is the shared conviction that all

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<sup>2</sup> Interpersonal communication between Donaldo Macedo and Augusto Boal, author of *Theatre of the Oppressed*.



educators should remain always vigilant and never allow their work to fall into a false generosity of paternalism. The challenge now is greater, as neoliberalism tightens its grip on the academy, ensuring the prevalence of many bourgeois liberals adopting do-gooder, anti-establishment persona but making sure their privileged position within the establishment – that they denounce at the level of discourse – is never jeopardized. For example, a bourgeois liberal maintains an anti-racist discourse in public while cooperating fully with administrators whose policies do not support affirmative action and work very much against minority students, staff, and faculty. This suggests a not uncommon contradiction that surfaces when liberal educators feel threatened by the legitimacy of a subordinate group's struggle – a struggle that may not explicitly include them and demands that their liberal treatment of oppression be translated into concrete political action.

Paulo Freire, who explained and embodied what it means to be engaged in a humanizing pedagogy, showed us a way to navigate the contradiction. Toward the end of his life, Paulo Freire became increasingly more preoccupied with the expanding human suffering in the world which fueled what he called a just anger – a “just ire,” as he explained in *Pedagogy of Indignation*, was an important and indispensable tool for those who yearn for social justice in order to recapture dignity and avoid falling into cynicism, even when confronted with the inescapable injustice and cruelty unleashed by wars, racism, sexism, classism, and all other forms of oppression (59). While he always insisted on the importance of having a “just ire,” Freire never lost hope that changing the world is possible, no matter how difficult it may be. His yearning for social justice was always manifest, and his eagerness and commitment to fight for social justice and democratic ideals informed and shaped how he was in the world and with the world. What was most transformative for me was how Paulo Freire, through his own way of being in the world and with others, modeled what it means to be a humanist pedagogue, thus providing me with tools to expand my own humanity.

Too many academics continue to go into communities, conduct tests, take their stories, and write up research that simply proves the obvious. Armed with yet another study demonstrating that certain communities are overrepresented in the ‘low performance’ data, policymakers still do not take into account who they are going to teach and under what circumstances. If English is imposed to assimilate students into a “common culture,” to essentially subtract other forms of being and speaking in the world, of expressing and desiring in other languages, it denies students the right to learn about their history, culture, and language. This is a pedagogy of exclusion. No child should be asked to stop being who she is, in order to *be*. Teachers who matter go beyond the liberal approach of merely exchanging experiences as a form of group therapy; they turn that experience into critical reflection and political action. They reject the liberal stance that they need to ‘give’ minorities voices, to ‘empower’ the other. This is a form of paternalism that merely demonstrates the oppressor's power to give and take away voices. Voice is not a gift; voice is a democratic right and, for me, voice is a human right. But we can listen.

What is needed instead is to create linguistic and cultural spaces where submerged voices can emerge in the work done together. Institutions that resist the bureaucratization of the mind and refuse to view teachers as disposable – and, more importantly, institutions that refuse to discriminate against those who speak another language and embrace linguistic diversity with conviction – will be at the forefront of educational transformation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Conditions are needed in which we can reappropriate our endangered dignity, reclaim our humanity, and rethink processes of pedagogy that are more humanizing.

A Freirean humanistic pedagogy is designed to develop structures so that excluded linguistic communities can take their own initiative and chart their own course of action, thus eliminating the need for outside liberal and conservative educators' continued colonialism through ‘English only’ paradigms that often results in the suffocation of other languages. A Freirean educator takes social justice seriously, prepares and works with students in communion with and engaging their communities. While change is difficult, it is always possible to make this world less discriminatory, more just, less dehumanizing and more humane. And to change and transform the world always involves a revolutionary love infused with “just ire,” compassion, passion, and an unyielding hope.

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