

Democratic Ontologies of Knowledge: Importance Should Be a Given and My Ethical Task Is to Intensify It

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, I interrogate ethical and political implications of autoethnography as activism and way of academic life. I indirectly ask, what might democratic ontologies of knowledge produce in Higher Education. I focus on a – more than – refusing to be hemmed – wild – Denzinian performance of autoethnographical writing, the theory of liminality of Victor Turner and the speculative philosophies of Deleuze and Guattari. Liminal moments involve breach, crisis, redress, reintegration, or schism, and is here offered as instances of critical pedagogies in action. And, as I see this, moments of intensities of importance making epistemic authoritarianism in HE visible and painfully affective, keeping me curious, calling me to arms. I write *with* a teacher trainer mystory on a backcloth of a goal-oriented PISA-infused western liberal mass-educational system and welfare state focussed on participation and autonomy. What do we think education can do?

Keywords: axiontology; liminality; epistemic conduct; democratic ontologies of knowledge; polycriticality; activism

My Epistemic Conduct

Performance autoethnography is a blurred genre. It is many things at the same time. It bends and twists the meaning of theatre, drama, audience, ethnography, ethnographer, performer, performance, politics and ethics. In my telling, there is no separation between the writer, the ethnographer, the performer and the world. (Denzin, 2018, p. 1)

I live a growing institutional insecurity about the relevance of action and activism. I live a growing insecurity about the value of knowledge: what knowledge and for whom. I live a growing insecurity about visible learning policies and its productions. It has become – at least in the short term – safer to sit still. And I *can* do that if I want to: being educated, having become to be a good citizen and

teaching people to navigate in a world of majority misunderstandings and bubbles. What if I don't? Epistemic ethics and my epistemic conduct are not just connected to what I do and know, but also to what I don't, un/consciously or not.

In this paper, I interrogate the ethical and political implications of autoethnography as activism and a way of academic life, renegotiating the borders between the two regions of philosophy. Philosophy of educational policies, for example accountability and assessment policies, and philosophy of ethics, for example about inclusion and justice. Often perceived as negotiations between collectivism and individuation. My aim is to affirm the existence of different ontologies and the exigence of learning how to think, in order to escape the tyrannies of perceived opinions, to avoid pedagogical nudging becoming shoving. There are ghosts in the/our/my machineries: difference conceptualized as democratic ontologies of knowledge simultaneously opening and closing, stopping and forwarding me. Flattening conceptualized hierarchies, collapsing criteria, structure, tradition, categories, and definitions: ultimately, my words leave me *with* my own prejudices, which I through autoethnographic writing can continue to reveal and explore further as a constant activist interrogation of my subjective judgements, my ethical onto-epistemic conduct. But never leaving me to it: always urging me to rethink, think repeatedly and again, and loving it even if it is exhausting sometimes and unpleasant. This is the stuff of collective reciprocity and responsibility in education: a constant de-authorized energy of doubtful rethinking. In this way, democratic ontologies activate the ethical task in education, which demands that we/I approach other stories, the other stories, stories about the other and me ... riddles of being, voicing and not, because I must.

I theorize the academy *with* the Deleuzian concept of the *event* because it draws my attention to un/conscious – complex, not binary – liminal moments of sensations and/or affects, attributing subjectivity and potential to all beings, human and nonhuman, and taking the aesthetic to be the fabric that binds all existence. I highlight through writing the entangled contours of in/justice, inequality, equality and quality, unpacking the ways in which our relative locations and historicized, accepted ways of being and knowing conceive of, enact, and normalize “justice” and “quality” – and, ultimately, “learning.” Or, rather, revealing the ethical and political aspects of our epistemic conducts, and, as Fricker (2010, p. 1) so beautifully puts it: “Bringing to light certain ethical aspects of two of our most basic everyday epistemic practices: conveying knowledge to others by telling them, and making sense of our own social experiences.”

In my autoethnographic writing and building on Deleuze and Guattari, I employ speculative philosophy, the function of which is the “intensification of an experience to its maximal point” (Debaise, 2017, p. 86). I place myself in the world as if that is the meaning of life and drift (Fr. *dérive*) along with my students. Every step I take remains in my body as a map to which I am the scale, with consistencies and smells, colours and noises, and the patterns that are formed gradually embrace more and more of the globe, albeit intimately.

Such writing is a pluralistic approach to institutional and epistemic ethics *with* practices of criticism and value-assessment based on systems and structures in our economies and thinking, a treating of problems as scientific epistemological thinking possibilities: ethicality with multiple mothers and fathers, and “curious affection” (McKay, 2018). The preposition *with* connoting all im/possible un/conscious intra-interconnections of different lines of flights. Curious affections urging me, forcing me to write in what I call IAC style. The letter I is for imagination, inquiry and intervention. The A is for artistry, analyses and activism. The C is for creativity, critique eventually citizenship ... We need a new norm and urgency of difference. Importance should be a given and my task is to intensify it, to give to importance all the dimensions that it requires. The importance of an us, you, me, we. Slowly, I inhabit the earth through writing fractured stories becoming all *with* you.

We Don't Punish Pupils Any More...

I am teacher trainer. This day, I visited a small-town high school to supervise some of my students from university during their obligatory teacher training practicum. One of the lessons that I attended was a social studies class in the school's health studies programme. There were 20 students present and on this particular day they worked in groups on the theme of poverty – absolute and relative – and the welfare state. The pupils were organized in groups of five and my students were supposed to move around and mentor the pupils.

As I also moved around, suddenly a pupil asked me if I could help her with answering one of the questions they were supposed to work with in the group. And, of course, I said yes. The question was why and how the welfare system could compensate or work against poverty. Further, if the pupils had suggestions as to what was feasible measurements and interventions.

I started discussing the question with her and the rest of the group. Obviously, it was a very complex question demanding complex answers and we spent some time, about five minutes or so, on what I thought of as a discussion and dialogue. Suddenly the pupil who had approached me originally, exclaimed: “I don't like this type of questions! I want concrete questions that I can answer with a simple yes or no!” Subsequently, I answered: “Oh, but is that possible in this case? Don't you think that wide and open questions like this allow you to construct your own answers and also give you substantial freedom both to choose how and what to answer such questions with?” Her eyes went black and I could see her anger, frustration, disappointment and rejection... Her body jerked, signalling that she was not interested in continuing talking to me.

*... give to importance all the dimensions that it requires.
Nudging avoiding shoving, the/my ghosts...*

Liminal Moments and the Event

If the imperatives of Being have a relation with the I, it is with the fractured I in which, every time, they displace and reconstitute the *cogitanda* of pure thought, the differentials of thought, at once that which cannot be thought and that which must be thought and can be thought only from the point of view of the transcendent exercise. Questions are these pure thoughts of the *cogitanda*. (Deleuze, 1994, p. 199, italics in original)

Performance autoethnographic writing examines such moments of crisis in the culture, liminal moments, suspended in time and also virtual – liminality being a quality of ambiguity and disorientation experienced as a threshold moment between, here, previous ways of structuring knowledges and thinking and new ways of structuring knowledges and thinking. Victor Turner (1986, in Denzin, 2018) offered a theory of liminality and a ritual model of social structure involving breach, crisis, redress, reintegration, or schism (p. 41). But more recently, usage of the term has broadened to describe political and cultural change too. During moments of liminality, hierarchies of all kinds, including those of knowledges, may be reversed or dissolved, creating fluid, malleable situations possibilizing new institutions and structures. I love the thought of mass-education. What I resist is conceptualizing and thinking it through traditional lenses. It is not that long ago that education as an institutionalized activity was for the elite.

The term liminality has interestingly been gradually expanded to include liminal experiences that are more relevant to a post-industrial society. This change highlights the need for the constant reassessment of terminology and more through what I call *polycriticality* (Reinertsen, 2018). This is the practice of seeing education as an ontologizing practice that aims to affirm the existence of different ontologies, for example, higher education as assemblage, as networked real/virtual space. I am not against educational practices like PISA per se. It is potentially unjust not to try to measure quality. I hope, however, that what we measure and how we do it can expand – and PISA can change from within.

Polycriticality implies training students as critical researchers and/or assessors from day one. Simultaneously personal and political, it is more than merely critique. Teaching them how to manage knowledges and how different knowledges are produced – and what a particular piece of knowledge is worth: when, why and for whom. This is what Denzin (2018) writes about liminal moments and their potentialities: “They open up institutions and their practices for critical inspection. Depending on the goals of the writer, the artistic project is not only aesthetic, it possesses “emancipatory potential” for motivating social change within participants and audiences” (p. 4). Polycriticality is simultaneously a summative

and formative form of assessment, moving both backwards and forwards. But it is also much more, and much more complex, because it appreciates both conscious and unconscious processes, knowing and not knowing, therefore, it is an interiological outside/inside process of self-assessment as system – assessment working as constant breaks with any essentializing notions of spatially bounded territorial units and contents like subjects and objects. Such moments are decentred, deauthorized, and vulnerable. They open up to immanence and as transcorporeal moments of and when a subject cedes her place to a life. Moments of acting oneself as another. Deleuze (1994) writes: “If the imperatives of Being have a relation with the I, it is with the fractured I in which, every time, they displace and reconstitute the *cogitanda* of pure thought, the differentials of thought, at once that which cannot be thought and that which must be thought and can be thought only from the point of view of the transcendent exercise. Questions are these pure thoughts of the *cogitanda*” (p. 199; italics in original).

And to continue theorizing: Deleuze’s philosophy of speculation and/with/in immanence can simultaneously be seen as a philosophy of process and becoming, appreciating multiplicities, otherness and the unpredictable. His concept of the *event* (Deleuze, 1994) resonates with/in moments of liminality. Moments as encounters with/in smooth and striated spaces. Events occurring when something forces our abilities and faculties to communicate their intensive differences between one another, producing a “flash”: a sudden “shock of sensation,” with/in an incommensurability of language and matter, time and space, subject and object creating “distinctive points, privileged instants which always indicate a poly-rhythm” (Deleuze, 1994, pp. 30, 20, 21).

It is a flash of something of value, something important and eternal, a fraction of something, a “line of flight” (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002), qualia perhaps (Reinertsen, 2016). It is a something forcing me – moving me – away from traditional conceptualizations of – here – teaching and learning, self and system/structure, classical images of science and writing aimed at predominantly empiricist conscious knowledge creation and meaning making to a teaching and learning, work/writing and sciences of constant reassessing mattering processes and polycriticality (Reinertsen, 2018b). Producing constant reassessing processes with/in me, and through the concepts of collectivities, reciprocities and responsibilities ultimately mass: Democratic ontologies of knowledge. I stay with it. It stays with me and I am ok with it. Never disappointed or sad. Never a problem. I try again. I IAC write.

Deleuze explores the dark night, the outside of thought. Or rather, he addresses the emergence of thought itself, the event whereby sense is grasped or wrested from a mute, immanent field of sensibility. Producing some sort of imperatives in the form of questions thus signifying our greatest powerlessness, but also that – and here Deleuze is referring to Maurice Blanchot – “blind, acephalic, aphasic and aleatory original point which designates ‘the impossibility of thinking that is thought,’ that point at which ‘powerlessness’ is transmuted into power, that point

which develops in the work in the form of a problem. Far from referring back to the Cogito as a proposition of consciousness, imperatives are addressed to the fractured I as though to the unconscious of thought” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 199; italics in original).

Such events of thought are provoked rather than internally generated, and they are provoked by the “dark precursor” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 124) – the being of the sensible. For Deleuze, provocation of thought is an ethical imperative, yet the dark precursor is dark in relation to thought, to which it is imperceptible, unthinkable (Deleuze, 1994, pp. 236–237). This is the paradox of thinking about that which cannot be thought. To “think” this event means to change the nature of thought, to think affectively. And to underline this, in *Logic of Sense*, Deleuze (1990) refers to events as instantaneous productions intrinsic to interactions between various kinds of forces. An event signifies the internal dynamics of their interactions and as something which is made actual in the state or happening, an event being the potential immanent within a particular confluence of forces.

Democratic Ontologies of Knowledge and my Epistemic Life

It flew right in my face: All, everything already being classed, compartmentalised, gendered and racialized. My answer to her oozing of well educated, well-intentioned, middleclass, political correctness, correctness and institutional authority.

I know nothing about her. I do not know her name. Statistically speaking though, I know that in the local community this happened, 15.8% of all children and youth live in relative poverty, but it might not have anything to do with her. At least not in a direct way. I know however that the theme and concepts of poverty let alone learning are not neutral and everyone has a right to their knowing and that they *do* – know, that is. And that is actually all I have *to* know.

This leads me to question our perceived opinions again, epistemic beliefs in – and living, both names and visibility. Our epistemic beliefs in naming, that is: conceptualization, definitions and identity. Further, our epistemic beliefs about the visibility of teaching and learning, and that we seem to think that we know what it is, what it looks like and that it can be contained. At least in my country, visible learning and subsequent assessment theories, for example, those of John Hattie (2008) has had a huge impact on educational policies for years and goal-oriented pedagogies have become the norm.

I left the table in inner turmoil of simultaneous feelings of wonder and resignation over myself, admiration and hopelessness, smiling kindly, perhaps a bit pale, and told her that “of course she could do this the way she wanted to.”

A few days later I used myself as an example of bad practice when I met my own students at university. Or rather, I used myself as an example of epistemic authoritarianism in education, my own, but simultaneously how painfully affective such liminal moments are, keeping me curious however, calling me to arms. But I

cannot guarantee that it will not happen again. Not because I don't want to improve myself or don't want to take on the responsibility that I have as educator. Not because it is too subtle and complex. But because it is a moving target and pedagogical phenomena, and I might not always recognize it when it occurs.

But I can rehearse and train my criticality self through dataphilosophy and performance autoethnographic poetic writing through resistance. Dataphilosophy as these diffractive and refractive processes of *becoming with data* (Reinertsen, 2014) and inter-intra observations through a *wild multiple apparatus of knowing* (Reinertsen, 2016). Enactments of other/self-insights with a combination of critique and creativity. And it is not naïve to hope.

*R/evolutions with/in me
We speak of competent professionals.
What might my competences do and not?
The impeller almost autistically rotates me I rotate it...
My prejudices there for me to thing with, I paradoxically need them*

Curious Affection: Big Mother, Patricia Piccinini (2018)



Big Mother (2005). Photo by the author from Patricia Piccinini's art exhibition "Curious affection" (2018) at Queensland Art Gallery/ Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA), Brisbane, Australia.

Monstrous creatures, imaginary beings, other-than-human and hybrid otherness.... A picture, a poem, a moment blur(ring) distinctions between normal and pathological, self and other is my rehearsal and becoming *with ...* my method. Pictures, poems, moments embodying ontological impropriety, causing thought disturbances, challenging me to review my preconceived ideas and socially enforced relationships with the otherwise embodied (Braidotti, 2018, p. 37). She has become my poem created from what I found in me and productive aporias in moments of liminality. What must education not be? And perhaps then we can ask what we think education can do?

Education as working with iterative processes rather than algorithms. Endeavours to create microcosmos for co-becomings, where glimpses of co-constructions of knowledges can emerge. Allowing for affects and minor gestures to be part of our movements towards collaborative dataphilosophizing for justice. The minor is temporary, unpredictable, incomplete, flimsy, and yet has potential to invent “new forms of existence” (Manning, 2016, p. 2). This brings me to a space of non-positioning and *noological digital models* (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 551). Indirectly, I ask what dissolutions of order can teach us about what kind of qualities and abilities we need to be equipped with and/or acquire as educators for democracy and democratic ontologies of education. Processes of exploring, philosophizing, relating, trying, failing, becoming – together with.

Miranda Fricker (2010) explores territories between epistemics and justice. She homes in on two forms of epistemic injustice, theorizing them as consisting, most fundamentally, in a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as knower. Fricker (2010) calls the two forms of injustice “testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice.” Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s world. Hermeneutical injustice however occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences (Fricker, 2010, p. 1). Testimonial injustice is mainly caused by prejudice in the economy of credibility; hermeneutical injustice is caused by structural prejudice in the economy of collective hermeneutical resources (Fricker, 2010, p. 1).

I probably wronged her both ways and I can just try to imagine what was, and what happened in this moment with/in her. The limbic system of our brains always also assessing what is good for me or not, as her brain does for her. I had limited possibilities to follow up anything or intervene in or with anything, let alone compensate for anything there and then. I am monster for all I know. Being disciplined in a system and its structures both of us but obviously in different ways. Both knowing however that there are discourses and doxa and sometimes silence and invisibility *is* the knowing and embodied. Learning can never be a visible containable concept and phenomenon. It always takes place in and through the unconscious, thereby establishing the bond of a profound complicity between nature and mind (Deleuze, 2004, p. 165). I don’t know her name. I don’t need to. I

have no name and I don't have to. We are poems. We both perform in tensions between different forms of knowledges critiquing beliefs in the objective or neutral but differently. The goal is unfinished thinking and ongoing constant productions of importance with/in complexity: polycriticality, the de facto end of critique. Rather, axiological processes of becoming writing. It is a new concept. I give it to us both. It is a concept as an act of thought and as a practice reorienting thinking, opening inquiry to new thinking possibilities. I am responsible. It is an outrageous sentence. My knowledges and competences only worth something with us. Big Mother as event questioning my pedagogies, teachings, feminisms, motherhoods, competences... my judgements, what I see and not. What I hope this is not about is a fear of caring, nearness and sincerity...

*Manmachine, manwhoman
Kindness, of hospitality and friendship*

Christine

The concept of the other presupposes no more than the determination of a sensory world as condition. On this condition the other appears as the expression of a possible. The other is a possible world as it exists in a face that expresses it and takes shape in a language that gives it a reality. In this sense it is a concept with three components: possible world, existing face, and real language or speech (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 17).

Her name is a girl's name. She is one of my teacher students. First day of the semester, I called everybody by name one by one to welcome them. She answered *yes, here*, but I could not find her, see her. I did not recognize her as a girl. She sat right in front of me. She is a football player. After three weeks, she asked permission to be absent to attend a *strongman* competition. I did not understand her words and what she asked even if I do know what the strongman competition is. She has lovely teeth and she grows a ponytail. I think of her daily, implications for my pedagogies. The banalities and of what I see and not. How difficult difference is... and its urgencies... How lovely to meet to think with.

IAC writing

My personal experiences
My personal voice
My biography
The personal and my life
The personal and the popular
The personal and societal structures
The societal and political interpretations
The interpretations of academia
The academic structures implemented or not

Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Production of Importance Is My Ethical Task

The life of the individual has given way to an impersonal and yet singular life, which foregrounds a pure event that has been liberated from the accidents of internal and external life, that is, from the subjectivity and the objectivity of what comes to pass: a «homo tantum» with whom everyone sympathizes and who attains a kind of beatitude; or an haecceity, which is no longer an individuation, but a singularization, a life of pure immanence, neutral, beyond good and evil, since only the subject that incarnated it in the midst of things made it good or bad. The life of such an individuality is eclipsed (*s'efface au profit*) by the singular immanent life of a man who no longer has a name, though he can be mistaken for no other. A singular essence, a life.... (Deleuze & Parnet, 2006, pp. 386–387)

The heading right above is a rewriting of John D. Caputo's (1993) book with the title *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with a Constant Reference to Deconstruction*. It happens, obligation, that is, chapters one to ten, number seven being about the “happy event” (Caputo, 1993, p. 120), encouraging me to follow the provocations that come from everywhere in the inquiry that is living and writing: writing self and system simultaneously with/in constant productive aporias and breaks. The un/happy event at the school.

Education needs an/other rationale and poetry. I think we need a new norm of difference. Constantly doubting educators. Silence being deep learning – and wisdom, it seems, has become sitting still.... I question it.... She does, she knows. I do too. Both of us, being neither more nor less than the other. I need to think of problems as just another secular epistemic thinking possibility. Critique, if we continue to use this word, being neither about legitimate or justified criticism per se, but as a form of life or a confirmative immanent critique praxis through a state of virtuality in which one asks questions about quality, sustainability, procedural truthfulness, learning and justice – resisting normative ways of thinking and understanding always. Far from being negative or dangerous this is a chance of creating knowledges through invitational transcurricular pedagogies in different process ontologies and through this with force to form and stimulate exploration and innovation: Positive difference exceeding all categories. My task being/becoming primarily to intensify her rights as knower, not what I want her to know and how. I think of landings on the dark, or far, side of the moon. I talk of her I talk of me.

Mathematics

I have a colleague from another country. He used to be a language teacher. Now he is a teacher of mathematics. In his country, they have strong students in mathematics. In my country we speak of students being afraid of mathematics, or

maybe even lazy or at least evasive of subjects that are demanding to learn. Governmental curriculum policies correspondingly insisting, but it seems with rather meager results. My colleague explains: *You know Anne, in a dictatorship it is quite easy to get students to study mathematics and study hard. In a democracy, students ask questions to why they should learn mathematics or what relevance they see in it for their lives. That is a good thing and not a problem.*

I suddenly realized that my colleague had life experiences with both dictatorships and democracies that I did not – or perhaps – take for granted. The paradox of democratic ontologies of knowledge hence education spot on. The only possible goal being that of unfinished thinking and continuous theorizations and complexity. An ethics in tensions between different forms of knowledges, a criticality against beliefs in objectivity. Even if objectivity is the ultimate goal of our educational efforts. Here I nod to Derrida and deconstruction.

Ontologizing Practices, Epistemic Ethics and Epistemic Justice: Her Resistance and Mine

The great and only error lies in thinking that a line of flight consists in fleeing from life; the flight into the imaginary, or into art. On the contrary, to flee is to produce the real, to create life, to find a weapon. (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002, p. 49)

Why poetics, monsters and now suddenly moonwalking/talking? Because I need help to think otherwise to become a “conceptual personae” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994), or operator: Becoming an educator operating with concepts to intensify our rights as knowers, yours *and_mine*. I also think of this as genre innovations performing possibilities to authorize myself: genre innovation is/as epistemic ethics creating *poetry/moments* (Reinertsen, 2018) as methods to train/practise/rehearse ... me to use my attention maximally. My traditional way of thinking needs a “beating” sometimes to move me. I am a vibrating part of academia, a/my current subjective non-personal project for epistemic justice and education. Discovering own thoughts with/in writing. It is this writing that is reading my own words with maximal attention – and is my contribution. The educational implications I draw from this.

We often say that we live in a postfactual society in which we are critical towards all types of knowledge claiming to be true. Rather than post – I claim that we live in a polyfactual society in which factual knowledge originates from many and different places, is decentred and deauthorized ultimately turning resistance into key elements and subject matter in pedagogy, teaching and learning ... education. The philosophies that I theorize with are those of Deleuze and Guattari’s (2004) philosophy of difference and immanence, *Body without Organs* and the human as a *thinking territory* (Deleuze, 2004, p. 44), in my view normalizing critique, judgement and decision-making. Pedagogy and the tasks for the pedagogues and educators in every case being to discover the libidinous or sublime

speech of the body and its investments at the social area, possible internal conflicts between, relations with and to pre- or unconscious investments at the same area and then again possible conflicts between these, or rather the whole inter-intra-play between machinic desire and the suppression of desire. Pedagogy here education seen as an in-phenomenological accelerating and real non-teleological revolution, body as profession in lifegiving insecurity and resistance. In the field of the speaking subject and the blindspots of autonomy perhaps we can speak of creating a polyconsensus society and critical *Bildung* pedagogies and educations in which we recreate ourselves and our pedagogies, sciences, institutions and systems again and again not to lose force to create on the basis of knowledge.

I just had to change jobs. I could not stay there anymore. All, everything already being classed, compartmentalised, gendered and racialized.... On my first day at the new job, and as I approached the entrance, I noticed a street sign pointing to a place a few kilometres ahead called Breadless. Yes, a place without bread, no loafs of bread. My head started thinking/writing. How come such a name? What history e.g. of poverty might be in such a name? What can become with this name? I don't know the place. I opened my lecture with asking the students about it, but they had no stories. They had not noticed the name, having gone past it for months even years. I need a brain "beating" sometimes to body as profession every step or move. My working doubts constantly luring me into certainty and what ethics must not. The ethical academy, our knowledge cultures, being me, my prejudices.

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